

Nature's Notebook

WINTER 2025-2026



table of contents

Out in the Field.....	1
Phenology Feature.....	2
Featured Programs.....	3
Year End Updates.....	4
Play the Preserves.....	4
Community Connections.....	5

phenology feature

Frosty Explorations: Your Forest Preserves in the Wintertime

The Forest Preserves of Winnebago County is dedicated to protecting, conserving, enhancing and promoting Winnebago County's natural heritage for the environmental, educational and recreational benefit of present and future generations.

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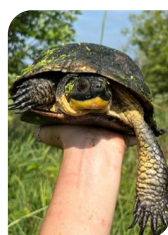
Smoother sumac
(*Rhus glabra*)
by Jen Boeke ▶

out in the field

An Exciting Year for Turtle Research

It was another successful season for FPWC's Blanding's turtle monitoring program!

Established in 2024, this program allows Wildlife staff to track Blanding's turtle populations and their movement through the preserves, which offers valuable insight



A newly marked male turtle.

into habitat use, nesting sites and overwintering areas. This information helps staff make wildlife management decisions to better support populations of Blanding's turtles, which are an Illinois state-endangered species.

Highlights from this year's program include:

- **Four** new Blanding's turtles were marked.
- **Three** of the four newly marked turtles were the first ever captured and marked at their preserves.
- **One** previously marked female was tracked during her nesting foray, which helped identify key nesting habitat at the original turtle trapping site (pictured right).



Front Cover: Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) by Julie Smith
Back Cover: Sugar River Alder Forest Preserve by Kayla Lindquist

If the recent record snowfall has proven anything, it is that winter is here to stay! Although it can be tempting to hibernate all winter long, the conditions that this season provides offer a unique opportunity to experience your preserves in different ways.

Winter Recreation

With snow comes the chance to try a new hobby! Cross-country skiing or snowshoeing, for example, are great ways to explore the breathtaking scenery of the winter landscape regardless of the amount of snow on the ground.



Looking for something a little smoother? The paved paths at Blackhawk Springs, Headquarters and Kishwaukee River Forest Preserves are plowed throughout the season!

Winter Residents

The bright backdrop of snow and bare tree branches also heighten visibility, making winter an ideal time for birding and wildlife viewing.

In the woodlands, watch for winter songbirds like dark-eyed juncos, tufted

titmice and northern cardinals. Raptors are also easier to spot this time of year. Look for bald eagles in areas with open water and tall trees, or scan open grassland habitats for red-tailed hawks and kestrels. If it proves to be a particularly cold winter, you may even spot a less common visitor—the rough-legged hawk—which migrates south from the arctic!

And birds aren't the only animals that stick around through the winter. American beavers and North American river otters remain active year round in rivers and wetlands, and red foxes and white-tailed deer can be found in grassland and woodland habitats.



Winter is a magical time of year. We hope this inspires you to break out your snow boots, snowshoes or cross-country skis and experience the winter wonder of your forest preserves!

Be Prepared!

- Check weather conditions before venturing out.
- Pack food, water and first aid essentials.
- Check preserve gate closures at www.winnebagoforest.org.



◀ For a complete list of programs, visit
www.WinnebagoForest.org/Events.

featured programs

Thursday Restoration Work Days

Thursdays | 9:00 a.m. | Locations vary

Email volunteer@winnebagoforest.org for more details.

Join the effort to restore your forest preserves! FPWC's weekly restoration work days are a great opportunity to help with important restoration work like invasive species removal and give back to your preserves.

Tools provided but please dress for the weather.

◀ Red-breasted nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)
by Courtney Celley / USFWS



January Guided Bird Hike

Wednesday, January 14 | 8:30 a.m.

Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden, Rockford

Search for winter residents while FPWC Wildlife Biologist Liz discusses how to identify birds by their appearance and calls, as well as helpful birding technology and nature journaling!

Winter Tree & Shrub ID Hike

Thursday, January 29 | 10:00 a.m.

Hononegah Forest Preserve, Rockton

Identifying trees and shrubs in the winter can be daunting! In this walking program, you will learn how to use other parts of the tree like bark, fruits, leaf scars, and branching patterns to identify trees and woody plants even after they have lost their leaves.



North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) by Mike Budd / USFWS ▲

Snowshoeing Excursion with Rocktown Adventures

Saturday, February 7 | 1:00 p.m.

Kieselburg Forest Preserve, Roscoe

Enjoy winter with a fun and unique outing in a beautiful setting as we head out to Kieselburg Forest Preserve for a snowshoe hike with Rocktown Adventures!

This is a 1.5–2 hour adventure starting with basic instruction (how to put on and take off snowshoes, selecting the proper snowshoes, how to get up from a fall, selecting a comfortable stride for walking and stomping, and turning around).



year end updates

Annual Wall Calendars

FPWC's annual wall calendars are now available! Pick yours up at the FPWC Administrative Office during regular business hours. A limited number of calendars are also available at:

Winnebago County Extension Office

1040 N. Second St, Rockford, IL 61107

Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden

2715 S. Main St, Rockford, IL 61102

Natural Land Institute

320 S. Third St, Rockford, IL 61104

Severson Dells Nature Center

8786 Montague Rd, Rockford, IL 61102

Camping & Shelterhouse Reservations

Save the date! Campsite and shelterhouse reservations for the 2026 season open online on **Monday, February 2, 2026.**



Bald eagle
(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
◀ by Paul Lindquist

play the preserves

Looking for
a last minute gift?

Stop at the main office
or call 815-877-6100 to
purchase a gift card!

Annual Passes Now On Sale!

Purchase online, over the phone at 815-877-6100, or in person at the Headquarters Administrative Office.

★ Save an additional \$100 with
our Refer-A-Friend program!

	BEFORE APRIL 1	AFTER APRIL 1
Premier Pass (RESIDENT)	\$835	\$860
Premier Pass (NON-RESIDENT)	\$860	\$885
Player Pass (RESIDENT)	\$635	\$660
Player Pass (NON-RESIDENT)	\$655	\$680



LEARN MORE

community connections

Burpee Museum of Natural History

Scales, Tails, & Imagination Expo
Saturday, January 10, 2026

Lights Out @ Burpee
Friday, January 23, 2026

PaleoFest
Friday, March 6–Sunday, March 8, 2026

Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden

Snow Moon Tranquility Walk
Saturday, January 31, 2026

**Rooted in Rockford:
Art & Tree Science Exhibit**
Through May 31, 2026

American goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*) by Courtney Celley / USFWS ▶



Macktown Living History

January Q&A Session
January (Date TBD)

February Reenacting 101
February (Date TBD)

Spring Clean at Macktown
Sunday, March 22, 2026



Macktown Forest Preserve by Rob Clark

Natural Land Institute

Dark Sky Bonfire & S'mores Open House
Wednesday, January 21, 2026

**Wander at the Wetland: Full Moon
Snowshoe & Hike 2026**
Monday, February 2, 2026

2026 Annual Dinner
Thursday, March 19, 2026



Pam Schultz

Severson Dells Nature Center

Science Saturday: Animal Paw Prints
Saturday, January 3, 2026

Science Saturday: Sensory Science!
Saturday, February 7, 2026

Walk With U

2026 Schedule Coming Soon!
<https://rockford.medicine.uic.edu>



explore your preserves

discover the nature of life...



Pileated woodpecker, Blackhawk Springs Forest Preserve by Jason Hardin

11,639 acres • over 100 miles of hiking trails • 3 campgrounds • 3 golf courses
...endless possibilities

Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) ▶

contact us

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www.WinnebagoForest.org

5500 Northrock Drive
Rockford, IL 61103



Go.WinnebagoForest.org/Preserves



save the date

Fabulous Frogs
with Master Naturalist Connie McIntosh
Thursday, March 26, 2026

Hooked on Fun Kid's Fishing Derby
with Muskies Inc.-Flatlander's Chapter
Saturday, June 13, 2026