

FRIENDS *Connection*

THE NEWSLETTER OF FRIENDS OF KICKAPOO VALLEY RESERVE • (608) 625-2960 • kickapoofriends.org • Volume 21, Issue 1

KVR Director Jason Leis: Back to His Roots

For Jason Leis, becoming Executive Director of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve is part of a decades-long career that began with weed whipping and pit toilet maintenance. Growing up in nearby Cashton, Jason, who goes by Jake, knew he didn't want to work in an office. "Outside – that's where I wanted to be all the time." His love of the outdoors led him to UW Stevens Point, where he studied Natural Resource Management and spent summers as part of the grounds crew at Wildcat Mountain State Park.

After graduating, Jake joined the Marathon County Park Commission, helping to patrol 60 parks near Wausau. One of numerous seasonal jobs, the Marathon County job ended on the eve of gun season. He spent the day removing unauthorized hunting blinds and returned home to find a Cashton police officer waiting for him with a job offer. "I thought, well, I don't have a job right now because I just finished it." Thus began ten years in law enforcement, first as an officer in Cashton, then in Westby, and finally in the Vernon County Sheriff's Department.

While he wasn't stuck in an office, after working nights for ten years, Jake wanted to get back to his roots, and the Kickapoo Valley Reserve needed a Property Manager with knowledge of environmental law enforcement. "Before that I was managing some family-owned land, about 160 acres, trying to apply what I had learned in college to that, but then you get to the Reserve, it's 8,600 acres and where do you start?" When he joined the Reserve in 2004, the Visitor Center was still under construction. Jake and two other field crew took turns hauling two push mowers around in an old pickup, racing to maintain campsites and canoe landings. In those early days, there was no time to do much besides keeping the grass mowed.

The addition of staff and equipment allowed them to build trails and tackle invasives. The KVR has over 50 miles of trail between bike, horseback, and hiking paths, but when Jake came on board, much of it could not be sustainably maintained. One of the new



additions was a trail builder, and Jake also attended trail building school. The crew spent ten years transforming steep, rugged paths into winding rambles that follow the natural features of the land. It takes longer to get to the top now, but one appreciates the journey.

After 20 years, Jake knows a thing or two about the Reserve, but he insists that he does not know everything. Still, two decades of hands-on experience has given him an idea of what's important, and what maybe isn't so important. Among the important things are the people. Being happy to come to work is another. Land stewardship and conservation top the list, and Jake will kick off his time as Executive Director by creating a pollinator habitat together with the Ho Chunk Nation,

which will be responsible for 150 acres of land. KVR staff will replace 40 acres of weed-ridden fields with native flowers, grasses, and milkweed. They will also reforest six acres of land previously used for farming with money raised from tree sponsorships, and anyone wishing to donate can purchase an oak to be planted on their behalf or someone else's. Rather than plant saplings, which need time to established themselves, staff will haul 90 eight-foot red and white oaks two miles from the road and up the ridge where they will be surrounded by existing growth.

All of this hard work doesn't keep Jake from enjoying the Reserve. "I feel like I've seen most of it, but every now and again you come around a corner and think, 'Boy, I don't remember being here...' Or you see some of the neat microclimates where it's cold or it's damp... or there's a valley with some exposed rock and just a little pool of water and you're not sure how it got there." His favorite hike is the Blackhawk Rock Trail, where he can look out over the Reserve from above. After two decades with the KVR, he may have done a little bit of everything, but for Jake Leis, there's still a lot more to see.

Erin Stiverson is a technical writer who lives with her wife outside Viola.

In 2023, Friends Made it Happen!



Dam Challenge Starting Line Volunteers
(left to right) Karen Theis, Julie Hoel, Laurie Erikson and Carla Giles



Volunteer Gardeners Pizza Party (back to front, left to right) Maureen Hysel, Barb Monroe, Jan Gremban, Sharon Miessner, Sally Colacino, Barb Sarnowski, Joan Kent, Louise Muller; Jean Beck, Karen Theis, Peggy Pasker, Julie Hoel, and Pat Fisher



Holiday Happening Fellowship
(above) Julie and Gill Hoel renew memberships; (top center) Christie Homstad and Phil Farley; (top right) Marcia Bader and Sharon Miessner; (right) KVR Director Jason Leis, Patty Kinsey, Steve Brandl sell holiday wreaths



Winterfest Friends at Work! (top left) Jan Gremban; (top right) Greg Waslick; (right) Sally Colacino and Margaret Farley

FRIENDS EVENTS

Check the KVR website for updates:
www.kvr.state.wi.us/Events.

Highway Clean-Up Party

Saturday, April 13

Meet at the Visitor Center for orientation and safety equipment. Go to the KVR or Friends websites, or Facebook, for exact times. Rain date is Saturday, April 20.

National Trails Day

Saturday, June 1

Enjoy guided hikes or walk on your own. Check the KVR website for details. Rain or shine!

Friends Appreciation Event

Friday, June 14

At the La Farge Park Shelter. Time and details to be announced.

Old Hwy 131 Trail History Vehicle Tour

Thursday, July 4 Noon-4 pm

Open house at the KVR: Enjoy a leisurely drive on Old Hwy 131. One-way traffic from south to north – to enter, follow Seeleyburg Rd. to Corps Rd. Stop in the Visitor Center for refreshments.

Garden Walk

Check KVR or Friends websites for date and locations.

Annual Photo Contest

Entries Due Sept. 1-Oct. 11

Submit photos of the KVR at the Friends website, www.kickapooofriends.org.

Pasta Supper

Friday, Oct. 4

Dam Challenge

Saturday, Oct. 5

Volunteers are needed for both events. Mark your calendar now to be part of this great event.

Board Election

Tuesday, Oct. 15 5 pm

Friends members are welcome to attend.

Holiday Happening

Saturday, Dec. 7

Check KVR or Friends websites for time and details.

Friends Make Wonderful Volunteers

There is a volunteer activity at the KVR for everyone's interests!

Fun on the Ground If you like to play in the dirt, consider joining the volunteer gardeners who maintain the Star Valley and headquarters gardens at KVR. We garden 5:30 to 6:30 pm every other Tuesday, weather permitting, and then adjourn to the back deck for socializing. Join us! Contact Louise Muller at mullerlouise15@gmail.com to learn this year's start date.

Gardening not a good fit? Help control invasive plants, collect native seeds, clean up along trails and adjacent roads, monitor or maintain a trail, update the KVR on river conditions are a few outdoor options.



...In the Kitchen Bake cookies and other desserts, prepare foods for events, be a grill master, help set up or serve, or be part of the clean-up crew.

To learn more, visit the [volunteer portal](#) on the KVR website or call (608) 625-2960.

...Or in the Water! Become a stream steward and take samples to monitor water quality – see page 6 for information.



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

We wish a warm welcome to the following new members!

(September 1, 2023 – March 31, 2024)

The Friends are grateful for all renewing members. Your continued support keeps the KVR's education programs strong.

Steven Bentz
Warren Buckles
Heather & Craig Hindle
Will Huth
Jan Kasperbauer
Rebecca Manski
Derek & Sarah Moran
James O'Brien
Jillian Ritchie
Chuck Thomas
Dagmar Truckses
Lisa Vatland
Joe Wawrzaszek
Gina Wendt

Garden Walk Organizers Named, and Local Gardens are Needed



Friends of KVR will sponsor a Garden Walk for the fifth year – if willing gardeners are located! Board members Pam Saunders and Margaret Farley are 2024 organizers.

Share Your Garden or Suggest a Neighbor's Spot Gardens are needed for a

July date. Viroqua gardeners have shared the fruits of their labors with appreciative folks for the last two years. This year, we'd like to bring it back to the LaFarge/Ontario/Hillsboro area, and we hope some of you will step forward to offer your place, or recommend someone whose garden you admire.

Friends of KVR provide signage, maps and volunteers to greet visitors. Want to find out more? Contact Pam at pam.saunders123@gmail.com or 608-637-3928.

Volunteers will be needed for this event; contact Margaret (vivoadesso@gmail.com) or Pam to learn how you may help out.

Look for a PBS Wisconsin Life segment featuring the KVR airing in November!



Erica Cronk, executive assistant at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, shows off her baby girl Grace who was born during the holiday season. She and her husband John are enjoying the addition to their household, and she will return to the Reserve after her family leave.

The Joys of Forest Schooling

Each season at Forest School brings such joy to students and teachers alike. They revel in the transformation of the world around them, where no two days are exactly alike. Recently, on a day when spring burst forth with sudden brilliance, the kindergartners marveled at the sight of what seemed to be a sandhill crane and a goose engaged in a lively argument over a prime nest spot. Then, as they observed from the water's edge, they were captivated by a beaver diving and surfacing over and over.



First and second graders have been reading *My Side of the Mountain* and studying the winter (and spring!) adaptations of animals, and writing to their pen pals in Nicaragua while delving into the fascinating realm of bird migration. The Oaks classroom acquired an amaryllis shoot and kept close track of its rate of growth, witnessing its full bloom in a mere three weeks!

Meanwhile, the Hickories (4k), amidst their hard work of play and social learning, are planting seeds that they will eventually transplant into the school garden so they can

gather all the vegetable and flower bounty come summer and fall.

At Forest School we choose the magic of wild encounters and the work of helping our children learn the skills to notice and marvel at the natural world around us. We choose to see play and exploration in nature as the pillars of childhood that will build a network of adults committed to preserving and protecting the world we all care about.

*Jonel Kiesau, Leadership and Planning Coordinator,
Kickapoo Valley Forest School*



Forest School Facility Plans on Hold

Planning for future Kickapoo Valley Forest School facilities is in a holding pattern pending receipt of some information from state and local agencies regarding feasibility of relocation of the KVFS campus to a different site on the KVR, said Jonel Kiesau, leadership and planning director.

"This year the school has 60 students total with about 15 in each classroom," she said. "We have two blended first and second grade classrooms that use the Prairie Springs buildings, and the Kindergarten is in the Visitor Center classroom. The 4K class is at the La Farge school and students spend their days in the village park and the large school garden. Next year we'll grow to include third grade which will most likely be housed at the district, and students will go on lengthy field trips to local natural areas several times per week."



Pollinator Habitat Improvement Project

With the support of Friends, the KVR is transitioning 30 acres to pollinator habitat. These areas will consist of flowers and other shelter plants and managed to provide important year-round habitat for native species of bees and other pollinators. Volunteers began collecting seeds last fall, and native seeds will also be purchased in the coming weeks.

To highlight this project, a Pollinator Paragon will be installed below the large windows south of the Visitor Center. This mock prairie will feature the same plants as in the habitat improvement areas, with an information kiosk to provide pollinator education. Volunteers are welcome to participate in this project!

Students Learn with World Class Artists

Seventy high school student artists took part in the Creative Communities Student Art Experience held at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve on March 8.

The KVR Friends sponsored the event in which students met and worked with world class artists, spending the day sharing, learning, teaching and networking around a variety of art mediums.

Four local high schools participated in the event. Participating artists were: Buzz Balzer, oil painting; Jen Rehberg, watercolors; Ann Butera, fabric arts making stitch book journals; Theo Parrish, needle felting; Emje McCarty, comics; Daryl Skrupky, colored pencil; Mike Koppa, collage; Dianne Johnson, mixed media design; and Mike Martino, sculpture.

Creative Communities Canvas Auction Celebrated Night Sky

The “Nocturnal” theme of this year’s Creative Communities Canvas auction drew 291 entries ranging from starry nights to wide-eyed owls. Proceeds from the on-line auction support stewardship projects and educational programs at the KVR – more than \$3,100 was raised. Thanks to all of the contributors and bidders!



New in the Gift Shop

Chubby Books! The KVR Friends gift shop has added children’s books for ages 2-5 on a variety of nature topics.



Look for more fitted short-sleeved T-shirts for women, and water and coffee mugs engraved by La Farge students in Industrial Arts Class, said director Louan Hoffer. And maple syrup and honey, which are always favorites.

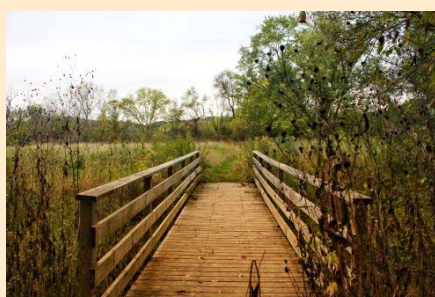


2023 Friends Photo Contest Winners

Of 95 submissions, 12 finalists were selected by a panel of experts. These winners were chosen by popular vote. Visit the Friends’ website to enjoy all of the 2023 entries, as well as photos from previous years: www.kickapoofriends.org.

Submit your photos for the 2024 Photo Contest to the Friends website Sept. 1-Oct. 11. Twelve finalists will be selected and displayed on the Friends website, and votes for Best of Show can be made at the Visitor Center throughout November. Winners are announced at Holiday Happening Dec. 7.

2nd Place: Grace Nemec,
“Modern Nature Trails”



1st Place: John Rummel,
“Kickapoo Valley Reserve
Campsite K”



3rd Place: Caleb Uhe,
“Splash of Sunshine”

Come Along on a KVR Nature Walk!

Frog Walk Tuesday is underway, and **KVR Plant Lookers** resume in May along the **Cut-Off Trail**.

Frog Walk Tuesday began on March 19, and will continue through July 16. Tuesday evenings feature a short “frog walk” to participate in Single Wetland Frog Monitoring on behalf of the WI Frog and Toad Survey. Walks start 15 minutes after sunset (check sunset tables). Meet and park at the south gate of the Old Hwy 131 Trail. We will walk to the ponds just north of Bridge 18 to hear and identify the species of frogs calling. Additional night sounds may be heard, and look for starry skies, too.

Total distance is one-half mile and the event lasts about an hour. Attendance is open to anyone interested in identifying frog calls, or any others who might want to take a short walk with people who are interested in frogs. Heavy rains and/or thunderstorms will cancel the walk, yet a light rain is ideal for frogging.

KVR Plant Lookers will use Cut-off Trail for the 2024 season, meeting the second Saturday of each month, May through September. Walks begin at 9 am. (Park on Cut-Off Rd. south of the intersection with Cty P and just past the bridge; the trail is on the left.)

Cut-Off Trail begins with a shrubby wetland, a few wet cliffs, and upland forest (if we get that far). There are two creek crossings, so some wet to mesic species. Anticipated plants include: skunk cabbage, marsh marigold, purple fringed orchid, mosses, polypody and other ferns, eastern hemlock, paper birch, speckled alder, Japanese hedge parsley, columbine, harebell, heliborne orchid, reed canary grass, oak, maples, swamp saxifrage, white pine, and a bunch of others I will not tell... “secret plants” only for those who



Green Frog (*Lithobates clamitans*)

attend. Plant walks generally last about two hours.

KVR Trail Passes are required for attendees on either walk; contact the Reserve at kickapoo.reserve@krm.state.wi.us or (608) 625-2960 for information. For more information on the walks contact Ben at bencj24@hotmail.com.

Ben Johnston, WI Frog and Toad Survey and Rare Plant Monitoring Program Volunteer



Stream Water Quality Volunteers Needed

The Water Action Volunteer (WAV) Program is a network of stream water quality monitors. WAV volunteers measure temperature, turbidity, and other factors once a month, from May to October.

Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) serves as regional coordinator, providing equipment, reagents and guidance. VSN is recruiting folks to take part in the 2024 WAV program. Sampling is best with a minimum of two people. However, a mess of friends, family or neighbors, scout or youth groups, or other organizations are ideal. Get together, splash a bit in the water, collect some data, have a picnic... **Weister Creek, between 24 Valley and CTY P, would be a great water monitoring location for KVR Friends.**

Visit wateractionvolunteers.org for more information. Questions, sign ups and/or requests for equipment can be sent to Ben@Valleystewardshipnetwork.org.

Summer Camp Registration Open

Kickapoo Valley Reserve offers summer fun activities for kids ages 2-18.

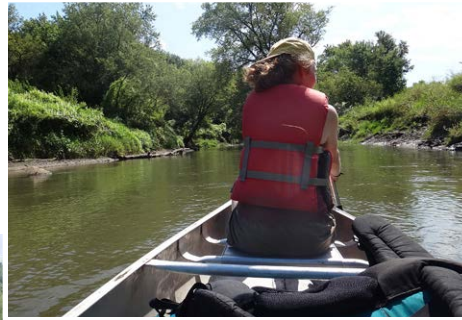
These will include canoeing, swimming, hiking, games and crafts, said Maggie Schultz, KVR education coordinator. In addition, she said kids will learn naturalist skills such as identifying plants, animals and bugs.

Camps with available space when this newsletter was prepared include Forest Friends, Kinder Camp, Wonder Wanderers, Nature Nuts, Wild Worlds of Plants, Camp Kickapetal, Incredible Insects, Black Ghost Fly Fishing Camp and New Waterways Camp.

Registration forms are updated to note when camps are filled, and when a waiting list is

available. If enough children sign up for a waiting list, staff will try to offer a second session. For more information visit <http://kickapoovalley.wi.gov/education/summer-camp>.

To learn about available scholarships, contact Schultz at (608) 625-2965 or maggie.schultz@wisconsin.gov.



Everyone is welcome!
Take part in activities to recognize KVR trails, including a guided Sunrise Hike to Blackhawk Rock and guided Starry Froggy Night Hike along Old Hwy 131 Trail.

Descriptions of self-guided trails and information on how to reach them is available at the Visitor Center. Trails include covered bridges, prairies, Weister Creek, rock shelters and geology.

NATIONAL TRAILS DAY

Sunrise to Starry Skies

**On Saturday, June 1
the KVR is full
of activities!**

Tree Sponsorships

The KVR's Tree Sponsorship program introduces native trees back to the landscape of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve while honoring people who care about preserving and protecting the Reserve.

Trees in this program will be protected, maintained, cared for and monitored by KVR staff and volunteers. Each tree will receive an ID number and its location will be recorded with GPS. A database with the name of Sponsor/Memory/Honor, tree location, species, and date planted will be archived at the KVR.

Sponsorship costs and tree species vary. Any donation amount is appreciated. Trees will be planted seasonally in conditions favorable for transplant health.



**Welcome spring
and jump into a
Friends' volunteer
activity. You will
make a difference,
and make new
friends too!**

Earth Day is a Week-long Celebration, April 20-27

Weeklong activities include:

Garlic Mustard Gathering. Everyone is welcome to participate. Local student groups and other volunteers help remove this invasive species from the landscape. During this stewardship event in 2023, volunteers removed over 500 pounds of garlic mustard plants from the KVR landscape.

Roadside Cleanup Pitch in! Stop by the Visitor Center for trash bags and safety vest. Each participant receives a gift for helping clean up the roadways in and around the KVR.

Sign the Earth Day Tapestry Anyone participating in Earth Day activities is invited to sign the KVR Earth Day Tapestry that will be on display in the Visitor Center during the month of April.



Earth Day events on Saturday, April 20:

Earth Day Poetry Contest for youth in Grades 3-8. Poets of Merit are selected and invited to read their poems at 2 pm.

Children's Activities 3 pm on the deck.

Naturalist-led Spring Hike 3:30 pm

Zero Waste Potluck Meal 5 pm at the KVR Visitor Center. Bring your own plates, cups, utensils, cloth napkins and a labeled dish to pass. Pack it in, pack it out!

Froggy Starry Stroll at 8 pm. Take in the sights and sounds of twilight on a guided hike from the Visitor Center.

Sips and Stars with telescopes on the deck.

KVR's Earth Day Celebration is free and open to the public. For more information, go to <http://kvr.state.wi.us/Events/Calendar>.