

A field trip guide leads a group of Foundation members at Bong State Recreation Area in 1994.

Connecting people to the wonders of Wisconsin



NATURAL RESOURCES FOUNDATION OF WISCONSIN.

NATURAL RESOURCES FOUNDATION OF WISCONSIN CELEBRATES 30 YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DNR.

Lindsay Renick Mayer

When members of the Natural Resources Board authorized the creation of a nonprofit to support the Department of Natural Resources' work in 1986, they put in place the building blocks for a bridge between private funding and public natural resources. Today, that nonprofit, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, is a leader in providing support for state public lands, waters and wildlife. This year the Foundation celebrates three decades of partnership with the Department of Natural Resources and looks forward to another 30 years of sustaining Wisconsin's impressive conservation legacy.

"We know that Wisconsinites live here because of proximity to millions of acres of public land for camping, fishing, biking or birding," says Ruth Oppedahl, executive director of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin. "Our goal is to continue to be the conduit that channels our citizens' love for Wisconsin into support for the state's precious natural resources. This role is vital to the health of the public lands, waters and wildlife that we all cherish."

Since 1986, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin has leveraged private support to provide \$3.8 million

to the department supporting conservation of rare and endangered species, and management of state natural areas and other state-owned public lands. That support has come through the Foundation's Wisconsin Conservation Endowment, which includes 71 endowment funds valued at \$5.07 million; the C.D. Besadny Conservation Grants Program, which has awarded \$446,800 in small grants to more than 550 projects throughout the state since 1989; and outright program gifts from individuals and various fundraising efforts for state-owned public lands and specific wildlife species. As a result, spe-

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Former DNR employee Steve Vetrano takes a close look at a trout during the Trout Management and Stream Shocking Demonstration field trip in 1996.

cies once considered near extinction are thriving, and the Department of Natural Resources is transforming public lands into healthy ecosystems.

Not just for the birds

Since 1989, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin has provided more than \$1.5 million in direct support of rare and endangered species. These projects include Karner blue butterfly surveys and management, mussel monitoring, American marten monitoring and whooping crane reintroduction. Of those conservation projects that the Foundation has funded, the trumpeter swan recovery program has arguably been the most successful in bringing a species back from the brink.

Between 1987 and 2013, the Foundation provided more than \$238,000 for the DNR's efforts to rear swan cygnets, monitor trumpeter swan populations and rehabilitate injured swans. Only whooping crane reintroductions received more support from the Foundation. With the help of the Windway Capital Corporation, which provided \$42,250 in donated pilot and aircraft services, conservationists were able to collect swan eggs in Alaska and fly them back to the Milwaukee County Zoo. There they hatched in incubators, and then the chicks were placed into a captive-rearing program in preparation for re-introduction.

There are now more than 2,000 trumpeter swans in the state, making Wisconsin a national leader in trumpeter swan recovery. Just 20 years after the species was declared nearly extinct in North America, they were removed from the state endangered species list.

The Natural Resources Foundation has consistently supported bird conservation in Wisconsin, providing more than \$1 million to help care for birds in every stage of life. The Foundation's Bird Protection Fund supports species monitoring and reintroduction, habitat protection, and restoration initiatives.

"Without the Bird Protection Fund and the support the Foundation has provided for birds even before that fund was created, half of the conservation we've been doing in the state wouldn't have gotten done," says Kim Grveles, a DNR ecologist and coordinator of the Wisconsin Stopover Initiative, one of the bird-related projects that receives Foundation funding. "That funding helps us to be one of the leading states in bird conservation. We're recognized as being out in front in bird conservation and the Foundation has played an instrumental role in that."

This land is our land

In addition to supporting species recovery efforts, the Foundation has donated \$1.6 million since 1986 for managing and restoring state conservation lands, helping to ensure healthy habitat for wildlife. Through various endowment funds, such as the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Fund and the Lower Chippewa River Basin Conservation Fund, the Foundation has provided opportunities for individuals and organizations to protect in perpetuity the public places that they love.

In 2004 the Foundation began to raise money specifically for managing state natural areas, which represent the best



The Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin played an instrumental role in the recovery of trumpeter swans in the state by providing support from 1987 to 2013 to swan recovery efforts.

DNR FILE



LINDSAY RENICK MAYER

The Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin worked with DNR to identify more than 55 state natural areas with the greatest management needs and is working to raise needed funds.

of the last remaining vestiges of native plants and animal communities, including old-growth forests, bogs and bluffs, prairies and savannas. SNAs protect more than 60 percent of the state's endangered and threatened species and species of special concern. In addition, 91 percent of the state's endangered and threatened plant species grow in SNAs. Since 2000, the Foundation has donated \$1.3 million to managing SNAs. Today, the Foundation has identified more than 55 SNAs with the greatest management needs and is working to raise private funds to help the Department of Natural Resources accomplish its important work in these places.

"The Foundation has been really good about focusing its fundraising efforts on getting money specifically for land management, which allows us to purchase the right equipment and get boots on the ground to do the restoration work," says Thomas Meyer, a DNR natural areas conservation biologist. "I don't know of any other agency that has this kind of really close relationship with what is effectively a money-raising friends group. The model is wonderful and clearly successful."

Outdoor adventures

Perhaps the Foundation's most successful program to date is its field trip program, which connects thousands of Wisconsin residents every year with the state's diverse landscapes and wildlife. DNR biologists and ecologists often lead these trips, giving them a chance to highlight the importance of their work and inspire an even stronger conservation ethic in participants. Since 1993, the Foundation has coordinated 1,794 field trips for nearly 40,500 participants, often raising extra funds for conservation projects.

"We get so much good contact with the public for a limited amount of effort from DNR staff," says Mike Mossman, a DNR ecologist who has led a number of field trips for the Foundation. "They're high-quality field trips, they're very diverse and they often integrate history, wildlife and management issues. They also highlight partnerships. If it wasn't for the Foundation, this kind of program just wouldn't happen."

Looking ahead

Today, the Foundation has more than 4,000 members, an impressive 80 percent retention rate and is more important than ever before.

"The Foundation will continue to serve as the bridge through which Wisconsin citizens can have an even greater impact on conserving Wisconsin's natural resources," says Camille Zaroni, the Foundation's development director. "Wisconsin has a legacy of being a leader in conservation nationally, from Aldo Leopold to John Muir to the laws that were enacted for clean water and air. Through its leadership, the Foundation will help to preserve that legacy for the next 30 years and beyond." 

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