



2024 Annual Report

A NOTE FROM THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

It is an extraordinary privilege to serve as your Dane County Executive and to work alongside the exceptional team at our Land & Water Resources Department. Their innovation and unwavering commitment to protecting our environment and natural resources are a source of pride and have established Dane County as a national leader in conservation.



Everyone who calls Dane County home understands the importance of our natural spaces. From rural landscapes, to our chain of lakes, to beautiful parks – environmental protection is part of the fabric of this community. By working together we have made significant progress toward safeguarding our waterways, restoring natural habitats, supporting sustainable farming practices, and addressing the challenges of climate change.

Our dedicated staff continue to lead the way with groundbreaking initiatives like the “Suck the Muck” project, which improves water quality and combats algae blooms, and the “Continuous Cover” conservation program that helps farmers cultivate resilient landscapes while reducing carbon emissions and flood risks.

In 2025, we are doubling down on these efforts, with significant investments to further enhance our lakes and waterways, expand our renowned trail system, and advance renewable energy projects. These initiatives reflect our shared commitment to creating a future where everyone can enjoy clean water, accessible green spaces, and a healthy environment. Dane County is a place where natural beauty and community well-being intersect. This past year we achieved milestones with the completion of Phase 2 of the Yahara River Trail and the start of construction on a recreational bridge connecting Dane County and Sauk County. These investments will provide new opportunities for residents who love to get outdoors.

I am inspired every day by the passion and dedication of our Land & Water Resources team. Together, we are preserving and enhancing the natural treasures of Dane County for generations to come. Thank you for joining us in this important work to ensure our community continues to thrive.

MELISSA AGARD

Dane County Executive

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Looking back on the year is difficult for me as I'd rather look ahead. Yet I can't deny the value in celebrating our accomplishments, learning from past projects, and gauging our progress. In a world where there is never enough time or money to do it all and where project closure can be elusive, it is motivational to see all the heavy lifts that took place.

I'd like to use this letter to share one additional project that Land & Water spent time on in 2024 that you won't see covered further in the report: developing department values and aspirations to strengthen our workplace culture and the experiences that bring it to life. Staff were invited to share their workplace experiences, explore organizational values and aspirations, and identify next steps to put them into action. The best way to serve the public and our county's natural and cultural resources is for our staff to feel heard, supported, and part of a team. Thank you to all who participated, put themselves in vulnerable or uncomfortable positions, documented the project, and believed in it.

Another project worth highlighting—and that you can read more about in this report—was the adoption of the Indian Lake County Park and Halfway Prairie Wildlife Area Master Plan. What stood out in this process was the level of engagement and debate among staff and the public. Unlike many other county departments that handle acute emergencies, our work does not typically involve life-or-death situations. However, this planning process was difficult due to passionate and conflicting views on balancing recreational access and resource preservation. As the county's population grows, we will likely see more competing interests in how we protect and enjoy parkland.

Every person in the Land & Water Resources Department contributed to the accomplishments in this report. We also thank the donors, volunteers, nonprofits, other government units, and elected officials whose support makes it all possible.

LAURA HICKLIN

Department Director



WANT TO KNOW MORE?

 If you see this icon next to a story, click to take a deeper dive and learn even more.

UNLOCKING CLIMATE SOLUTIONS ⓘ

Climate change poses significant challenges to our community, but nature offers powerful solutions. Restoring land to permanent vegetation, such as prairies, increases soil carbon storage, helping to combat climate change.

Our department is leading efforts to measure and monitor changes in soil carbon from local restoration projects. Methods include collecting soil samples to measure soil carbon and using models developed by USDA to predict how the implementation of conservation practices will impact below-ground carbon concentrations. Prairie restorations in Dane County Parks and lands enrolled in the Continuous Cover Program are projected to sequester **3,840 metric tons of CO₂** equivalent (CO₂e). That's equal to the emissions from the annual energy use of 516 homes!

This data-driven approach helps staff better understand the potential carbon reductions from specific conservation practices and outline restoration goals needed for Dane County to meet the carbon-neutrality goals outlined in the [Climate Action Plan](#).



Staff utilize a soil probe mounted to a UTV to collect samples to a depth of one meter.



A certified lab analyzes the sample's carbon content to establish a baseline.



Soil clod from a sample collected.

INDIAN LAKE MASTER PLAN

SPOTLIGHT

Staff completed a master planning process for Indian Lake County Park and Halfway Prairie Wildlife Area located in the northwestern part of Dane County. At 791 acres, Indian Lake County Park is one of largest Dane County Parks. This was the first adopted master plan for the park and it will guide future development and management of the park. The planning process evaluated existing cultural, natural, and historical features in the planning area and incorporated public, stakeholder, and staff input to create the recommendations within the master plan.



JENNI & KYLE FISHING PIER

SPOTLIGHT

Staff, alongside Operation Fresh Start participants, reconstructed three fishing piers at the ponds at the Jenni & Kyle Preserve. They replaced all the original decking and railing to improve accessibility and safety. New bathroom doors with electric locks were also added to the shelter.

The Jenni & Kyle Preserve is a 160-acre unique park that is intended to serve children and persons with disabilities. It offers accessible fishing and picnic areas, trails, a wheelchair swing, and a shelter building around two spring-fed ponds containing trout and panfish.



PAVEMENT RESTORATION

SPOTLIGHT

This year, the second phase of pavement restoration was completed at Token Creek County Park. The project reconstructed and repaved the shelter 2 parking area and campground loop. Additional improvements included two new accessible campground sites and accessible access and parking updates at shelter 2, the campground restroom/shower house, and the group camp restroom. Phase 1 pavement restoration was completed in 2022 and included paving the park road from the park entrance to the group camp.



NEW ALL-TERRAIN WHEELCHAIR ⓘ

Dane County Parks took a step toward greater accessibility this year with the addition of an all-terrain wheelchair, designed to help individuals with mobility challenges explore outdoor trails. With heavy-duty treads for navigating uneven terrain, the chair provides opportunities for more people to enjoy the county's natural areas.

The chair was donated by the Foundation for Dane County Parks and is available to check-out and use in the Capital Springs Recreation Area. Staff have also made it available at volunteer events, education programs, and field days to ensure even more people can experience the outdoors.



EXPANDED ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING i

The Lussier Family Heritage Center, a Dane County Parks facility, has transitioned into a full-time education center, offering inclusive outdoor and environmental education programs for all ages and abilities. This transformation has significantly advanced the department's environmental education initiatives. The summer camp program saw remarkable growth, expanding by 600% from the previous year and engaging students aged four to fourteen in exploring Dane County Parks, fostering connections with nature, and deepening their understanding of the environment.

Additionally, the center introduced field trips, the Explorer homeschool series, and Nature in Session programs, which deliver environmental education directly to schools and community organizations.



Last year's numbers included public event tabling. This number is no longer included here.

GET OUTSIDE! i SPOTLIGHT

The Get Outside! program build long-term relationships with community centers to create safe spaces for youth to explore nature through hands-on learning. This year the program added three new community centers: Neighborhood House, Lussier Community Education Center, and Mazomanie.



LAND RESTORATION EFFORTS

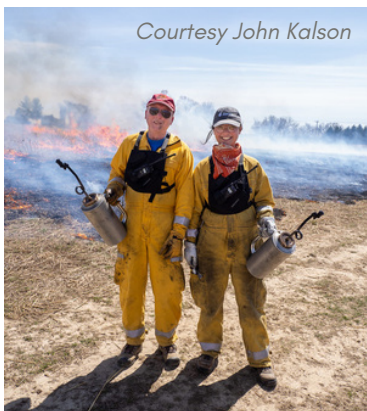
Staff and volunteers are actively restoring **1,100 acres** of land, including prairie, oak savanna, oak woodland, and wetland sites. They are also maintaining **1,600 acres** of land that were previously restored. The programs below help with these efforts.

Forestry | Storms, Drought, and Restoration

This year brought some of the most intense storms to impact south-central Wisconsin in a century, with tornadoes striking as early as February. Combined with years of severe drought, tree losses were significant. Staff continue to address pockets of damaged trees, but the combined effects of drought and storms are accelerating the decline of many species, particularly large, mature trees like oaks.

Over the past decade, Dane County has lost an estimated 12% to 26% of its tree canopy due to a combination of factors, including pests and diseases such as Emerald Ash Borer, Oak Wilt, Bur Oak Blight, and Spongy Moth, as well as stressors like drought, construction, and storms. Some communities have experienced even greater losses, and Dane County-owned lands are no exception. Despite these challenges, staff remain committed to preserving large trees through plant health care programs, which include airspading, decompaction, and vertical mulching, along with an Integrated Pest Management Program. Every effort is being made to protect trees that provide the greatest community benefits.

Even with the significant strain of storm response and a dry fall season, staff and volunteers planted 1,000 new trees and shrubs. Many of these were planted in the Yahara River corridor to restore areas devastated by Emerald Ash Borer. Some locations lost over 90% of their overstory. While more trees are being planted than were lost, it will take 35 to 50 years to fully restore the canopy.



Prescribed Burning | 1,430 acres burned

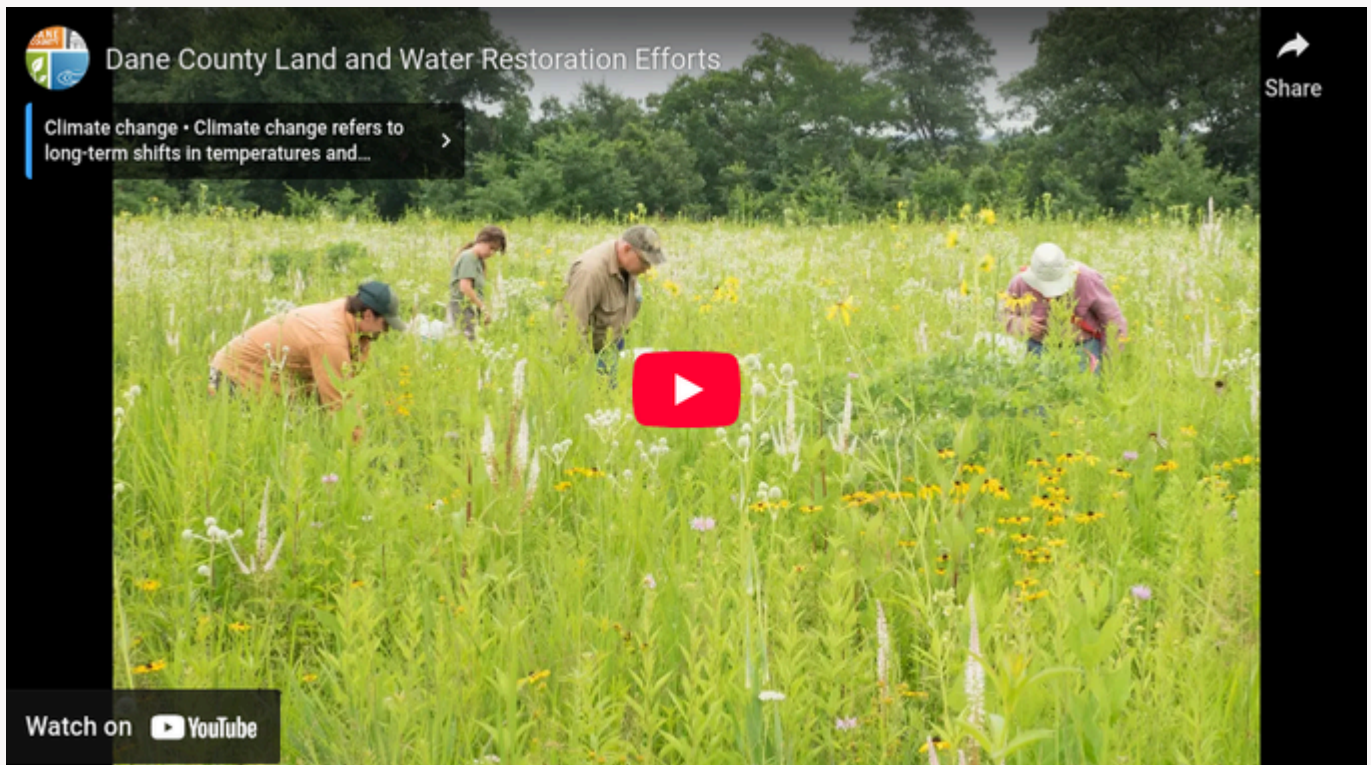
Many ecosystems in Wisconsin rely upon prescribed fire to remain diverse and resilient. Fire combats brush, manages invasive species, and stimulates the growth of native plant species. This year, professionally trained staff and volunteers conducted burns on **1,100 acres** of county-owned land. Another **200 acres** was burned by partner organizations or contractors.

Seed Collection | 3,100 lbs. seed collected

Volunteers, staff and partners collected and processed **3,100 pounds** of seed from **180 native species** with an estimated worth of over **one million dollars**. This seed will be used to help restore and increase biodiversity in **300 acres** of prairie, oak savanna, and oak woodland habitats. A small amount of seed was also used to support the department's Free Native Plants program and distributed for free to the community at eleven local libraries.

SPOTLIGHT

Take a brief look into a number of ways staff and volunteers work to conserve and restore our land and water resources.



MASTERMIND DINNER FOR FARM WOMEN

Conservation staff hosted a Mastermind Dinner for 32 farm women at Schumacher Farm Park in Waunakee, supported by the Natural Resources Foundation and American Farmland Trust. The event highlighted the vital yet often overlooked role of farm partners in conservation decisions. Keynote speaker Annaliese Wagner (The Modern Farm Chick) inspired participants to amplify their voices, while a Rainfall Simulator demonstrated the impact of soil health, using soil from a local participant's farm. The evening featured locally sourced food and drinks, fostering connections and underscoring the attainability of sustainable land-use practices in our communities.



YAHARA RIVER SEDIMENT REMOVAL ⓘ

When floodwaters struck in 2018, the county began a multiyear Yahara River Sediment Removal project to remove built-up sediment from the river bed to reduce the risk of future flooding and improve water flow in the Yahara Lakes. The sediment is being removed using both mechanical and hydraulic dredging equipment.

In 2024, the crew removed **63,333 cubic yards** of sediment from the mouth of the Yahara River in Lake Kegonsa upstream to Dyerson Rd. To date, **191,200 cubic yards** of sediment has been removed from the Yahara River as part of this project.

MANAGING AQUATIC PLANTS FOR HEALTHY LAKES

Dane County's Aquatic Plant Management (APM) program helps balance recreational lake use with ecosystem health by managing aquatic vegetation and lake levels. Each Madison lake follows an approved APM plan that guides where and how plants are harvested. Staff monitor plant growth and direct harvesting crews to ensure effective management.

The county prioritizes cutting and removing invasive species like Eurasian watermilfoil while preserving native plants that support aquatic life, compete with nuisance algae, and help keep the water clear. However, when native plants become overly abundant and interfere with recreation or river flow, they are selectively harvested according to the APM plan.

In 2024, crews removed an impressive **8,229 tons of aquatic plants** from the Madison Lakes and Yahara River. This amount of plants accounts for a removal of **4,699 pounds of phosphorus**—a key contributor to nuisance algae blooms—from the lakes.

In addition to large-scale harvesting, staff provided bi-weekly barge pickups, collecting lake-generated plants and debris that shoreline owners gathered at their docks. This service was made possible through support from the City of Madison, City of Middleton, City of Monona, Town of Westport, Village of McFarland, Lake Waubesa Conservation Association, and Friends of Lake Kegonsa.



LOWER YAHARA RIVER TRAIL PHASE II AND FISH CAMP COUNTY PARK IMPROVEMENTS

Dane County Parks completed Phase 2 of the popular Lower Yahara River Trail. The new 1.6-mile segment is an asphalt paved trail with 4,200-feet of boardwalk through wetlands and a 90-foot bridge over Door Creek. The trail begins at the historic fish net houses located in Fish Camp County Park and extends east along the northern shore of Lake Kegonsa into Lake Kegonsa State Park. Viewing platform bump-outs offer visitors a chance to stop and enjoy the scenic views of the lake and wildlife. The trail segment in the state park was completed in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Accessible fishing and boating improvements were added at Fish Camp County Park to provide more opportunities for Dane County residents and visitors to enjoy the outdoors, regardless of age or ability. A new accessible floating kayak launch, walk-in kayak ramp, and accessible fishing pier were added to complement upstream landings at McFarland’s Jaeger Park and Babcock County Park.



NEW WEST WAUBESA TRAIL ⓘ

A new 1-mile shared-use trail connects the Lower Yahara River Trail in William G. Lunney Lake Farm County Park to the Waubesa Beach neighborhood in the Town of Dunn. The trail is a paved asphalt trail through prairie with two sections of wetland boardwalk and a short section of crushed limestone trail along the western shore of Lake Waubesa. The trail offers bicyclists and pedestrians a safe off-road alternative to Lake Farm Road.



GREAT SAUK-WALKING IRON TRAIL ⓘ

RAILS TO TRAILS CONVERSION

Dane and Sauk counties are currently working on design and engineering plans to construct a 500-foot multi-use trail bridge over the Wisconsin River. Check out this short video for an overview of the project and what is to come in 2025-2026.



DANE DEMO FARMS ⓘ

Dane Demo Farms is a network of five Dane County farms demonstrating innovative conservation practices to improve water quality and soil health. This partnership, the first of its kind in the Mississippi River basin, is working to advance conservation efforts and engage the agricultural community in sustainable practices. This year's highlights include:

Planter Clinic: In collaboration with partner organizations, Dane Demo Farms hosted a well-attended planter clinic at the UW-Arlington Agricultural Research Station. Over 75 farmers participated in discussions led by a panel of six experienced farmers, who shared insights on planter setup and adjustments. Experts from UW Extension provided technical presentations and industry representatives showcased planter attachment equipment.

Field Day: The network's first on-farm field day was held at Ripp-Vale Farm in Black Earth, where farmers, consultants, and agency staff observed cover crop demonstrations, discussed strategies for improving soil health, and checked out research findings from on-farm trials. The event also featured an aerial seeding demonstration using drones.

Network Expansion: Two new farms joined Dane Demo Farms, expanding the network to five. These farms represent a mix of dairy, grain, and beef operations, showcasing a variety of conservation practices across different soil types and landscapes. All five farms have established research plots, setting the stage for continued data collection and innovation in the 2025 growing season.



LAND ACQUISITIONS

459 ACRES PERMANENTLY PROTECTED

Sugar River Wildlife Area, Town of Verona (80 acres)

Connects approximately 1,000 acres of continuous public land for wildlife habitat and public recreation. It is located in between the former 625-acre Duerst farm which the County purchased in 2023 and the existing 300-acre Madison School Forest.

Dane County Conservation Fund Grants Awarded to:

Driftless Area Land Conservancy, Town of Primrose (31.4 acres)

The acquisition of this intact oak woodland within the Southwest Grasslands project area preserves a portion of declining forest habitat providing bird and wildlife habitat while also providing public recreation.

Southern Wisconsin Bird Alliance, Town of Christiana (348 acres)

A mixture of cool-season grasses, woods and restored prairie, this large parcel will provide habitat for pollinators and birds such as bobolink and dickcissel, while also providing recreational and educational opportunities for the public.



Sugar River Wildlife Area, Town of Verona



Driftless Area Land Conservancy, Town of Primrose

CLEAN SWEEP EVENTS

Staff partnered with the Dane County Department of Waste and Renewables and four Madison Area Municipal Stormwater Partnership communities to host on-site Household Hazardous Waste Disposal Events at the [Clean Sweep facility](#). Residents of the Town of Burke, Town of Blooming Grove, Village of Cottage Grove, and Village of McFarland received a limited number of vouchers to dispose of waste free of charge.



The goal of these events was to encourage residents to properly dispose of unused household hazardous waste and increasing awareness of Clean Sweep as a year-round resource. More than **13,000 pounds of hazardous waste** were collected at these events and it was several residents first time using the Clean Sweep facility.

LAND CONSERVATION PROGRESS

Staff worked with farmers and landowners with the implementation of agricultural conservation practices to reduce soil erosion and protect water quality. This year, between county, state and federal sources, more than **\$2,800,000** was allocated to landowners to help with these projects.

Some highlights this year included:

- **257 acres** enrolled in the Continuous Cover Program which provides funding to help convert traditional row-cropped fields to continuous vegetative cover.
- **116,663 feet** of livestock fencing installed to help protect waterways and implement rotational grazing systems.
- **10,900 acres** enrolled in the Cover Crop Program, which provides funding to keep a living vegetative cover on the ground to help prevent erosion, build soil health, and reduce runoff.
- **593 acres** of land with new Nutrient Management Plans.
- **18 items** (such as no-till drills) purchased as part of the Soil Health Equipment Program which helps offset the cost of equipment used to address resource concerns, such as soil health or water quality.

DANE COUNTY AGRICULTURAL WETLAND MITIGATION BANK

One of the first agricultural wetland mitigation banks in the state was established at Cherokee Marsh Wildlife Area in a collaborative effort with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Agricultural wetland mitigation banking is a tool for farmers and natural resource managers to maintain no net loss of wetlands resulting from impacts from agricultural activities. It involves the restoration of wetlands in one location to mitigate farming impacts to wetlands in another location. The project restored 31 acres of wetland and prairie adjacent to the Yahara River through drain tile removal, drainage ditch decommissioning, and planting native vegetation. Mitigation credits will be available to local producers in the 2025 growing season.



EROSION CONTROL & STORMWATER MANAGEMENT

Staff issue erosion control and stormwater management permits and perform site inspections to ensure that these permits are being followed. This year, staff performed **3,416 site inspections** and took **39 enforcement actions**.

Urban Water Quality Grant Recipient Profile

The City of Stoughton was awarded grant funding in 2022 for a new Riverfront Hydrodynamic Separator and the project was completed in 2024. The Separator will provide a 13% sediment reduction, 9% phosphorus reduction, and will capture floatable debris headed for the Yahara River.

EXPANDING ACCESS TO NATIVE PLANTS



Dane County continues to expand access to native plants through partnerships and community programs. Some of these efforts include:

Bringing Native Seeds to the Community

This year, we partnered with **11 local libraries** to provide free native plant seeds for residents to at home. Volunteers and Operation Fresh Start crews collected and processed the seeds and each library organized volunteers to package the seeds.

Plant Dane Native Plant Sale Celebrates 20 Years

This year, **35,372 low-cost native plants** were ordered through the Plant Dane native plant sale. In addition, 32 residents from five different communities attended one-on-one Rain Garden Coaching Sessions and more than half of the participants installed rain gardens or downspout gardens following their session.

Supporting School and Community Projects

Through the Free Native Plants Program, we distributed more than **7,300 native plants** to local school and community groups. These plants were grown by dedicated volunteers or donated by community members thorough the Plant Dane plant sale. Since the program's launch in 2016, more than 43,000 plants have been distributed.

Empowering Residents to Install Native Gardens

A Native Gardening Workshop provided **880 native plants** to 55 households, offering pre-made garden kits or personalized design sessions with staff and volunteer experts.



NEW VOLUNTEER PORTAL LAUNCHED

This year, more than **2,500 volunteers** dedicated over **55,300 hours** to our parks, demonstrating the community's strong commitment to conservation and stewardship. Managing such a large volunteer network comes with unique challenges, but a major step forward was the launch of our new volunteer **MyImpact portal** in May.

Since its launch, over 720 volunteers have registered in the system, logging more than 5,000 self-reported hours. Staff and volunteers coordinated over 440 activities and events through MyImpact, contributing a total of 12,308 hours.

Tracking records, certifications, and schedules for a growing volunteer base is no small task, but the portal has streamlined these processes. It has also given our Volunteer Program staff more time to work directly with volunteers in the field. While we continue refining the system, its impact has already been invaluable.

SPOTLIGHT

Check out this overview of the Dane County Parks volunteer program and the number of ways volunteers work to conserve and restore our park lands.



Friends of Dane County Parks Grant Program

This year, Dane County provided over **\$13,800** in matching grant funds to Friends Groups for capital projects on county parkland. Staff also partnered with the Foundation for Dane County Parks on the Collaborative Grant program to help fund educational programs, small projects, and equipment for volunteer workdays. Over **\$6,000** in grant funding was awarded for five different projects in 2024 through the Collaborative Grant Program.

The Foundation for Dane County Parks, Inc.

Through the generosity of park supporters, the Foundation provided **\$329,815** in funding and services to Dane County Parks in 2024! This substantial investment has enabled Dane County Parks to continue to expand youth programming and improve park accessibility. The Foundation is committed to supporting youth programs like Get Outside, Learn To, and Junior Naturalists, because they provide invaluable outdoor learning experiences and help young people foster deeper connections with nature and the county's beautiful parks.

The Foundation is also committed to increasing access and inclusion for all people in our community, regardless of background or physical abilities. Making sure our parks are accessible is a top priority, and private contributions play a pivotal role in future improvements at Fish Camp County Park, Mendota County Park, and other Dane County Parks. The Foundation is excited to announce a new program, Adopt-An-Acre, to support future prairie restoration efforts in Dane County Parks.

The Foundation extends their heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you who have supported Dane County Parks. Your belief in the power of parks is enriching the lives of countless individuals. Thank you! To learn more about how your support of the Foundation for Dane County Parks is making a difference, please visit the Foundation's website.



AWARDS & RECOGNITION



Dane County Parks received the “Connie Ferris Baily Cornerstone Award ” from Operation Fresh Start for providing time, leadership, and financial support to help expand their work.



Dane County Parks received the “Conservation Partner of the Year” from Wisconsin Ducks Unlimited which recognizes significant conservation contributors.



Madison Area Municipal Stormwater Partnership, in partnership with Dane County Waste and Renewables, received the “Recycling Excellence Award-Special Events Category” from Wisconsin DNR for Clean Sweep events.



Adam Alves received the “Richard Rideout Distinguished Service Award” from the Wisconsin Arborist Association for his influence, inspiration and never ending ability to advance students, education, workforce development, community outreach, urban forestry management, conservation, and so much more. Adam is the youngest recipient to receive this honor.



Dane County Parks received the “International Society of Arboriculture Gold Leaf Award for Outstanding Landscape Beautification Award” at the Wisconsin Arborist Association annual conference for a partnership project that planted trees in the Village of Dane - a community with the lowest canopy coverage in the state.

WELCOME NEW FULL-TIME STAFF!



Leah Kleiman
Land Restoration Specialist



Eva Ferrari
Park Ranger



Mitch Maier*
Arborist



Bridget Behan*
Arborist



Summer Thorsten*
Park Ranger



David Rowe
Lake Management
Supervisor

**Previously worked for the department as an LTE*

The following existing full-time staff were hired into new roles: Jim Pugh (Mechanical Repair Worker)

RETIREMENTS

- Roland Arndt, Mechanical Repair Worker
- Chris James, Park Planning Manager

Thank you for your many years of service!