

MISSISSIPPI RIVER NEWS

FALL 2023 / WINTER 2024



Embracing New Leadership: Welcoming Ellen Leroy-Reed

Tucker Blythe, Superintendent, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

As we anticipate the transition between seasons, we want to recognize the opportunity and joy that comes with change along the river and in the community around us. This summer, the National Park Service along with our nonprofit partner, the Mississippi Park Connection (MPC), experienced a change in our leadership team and welcomed Ellen Leroy-Reed as the new executive director of MPC.

Ellen is an enthusiastic and experienced conservation leader who most recently served as the executive director of the Friends of the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve near Jacksonville, Florida, where she led the effort to grow their community engagement, volunteer and youth programs, and partnerships.

Ellen also brings over twenty years of fundraising, financial management, and nonprofit operations experience to the position. Her strengths lie in public lands partnership, executive leadership, communication, and storytelling. As an experienced strategic planner, Ellen brings a breadth of skills to develop and support the multi-faceted public/private partnerships MPC has been known for.

From Ellen: “I am delighted to join Mississippi Park Connection and its esteemed team of nonprofit professionals who are diligently working to build a community of support around the Mississippi River. I look forward to working with National Park Service staff, volunteers, our donors, and many partners who share a passion for protecting and enjoying the river.”

I am eager to work with Ellen to protect, preserve, and enhance the nationally significant historic, cultural, natural, and recreational resources of our 72-mile river corridor. Welcome, Ellen!


Superintendent
Mississippi National River and Recreation Area


Executive Director
Mississippi Park Connection



Embarking on a Journey in the Heart of the Twin Cities: Unlocking Membership at your National Park

Ze Thao Sengsoulichanh, Development and Communications Manager, Mississippi Park Connection

Each person's connection to the Mississippi River is unique, be it a cherished memory by the river, the pride of catching a fish, or quiet moments under a large cottonwood tree. Joy awaits you by the river.

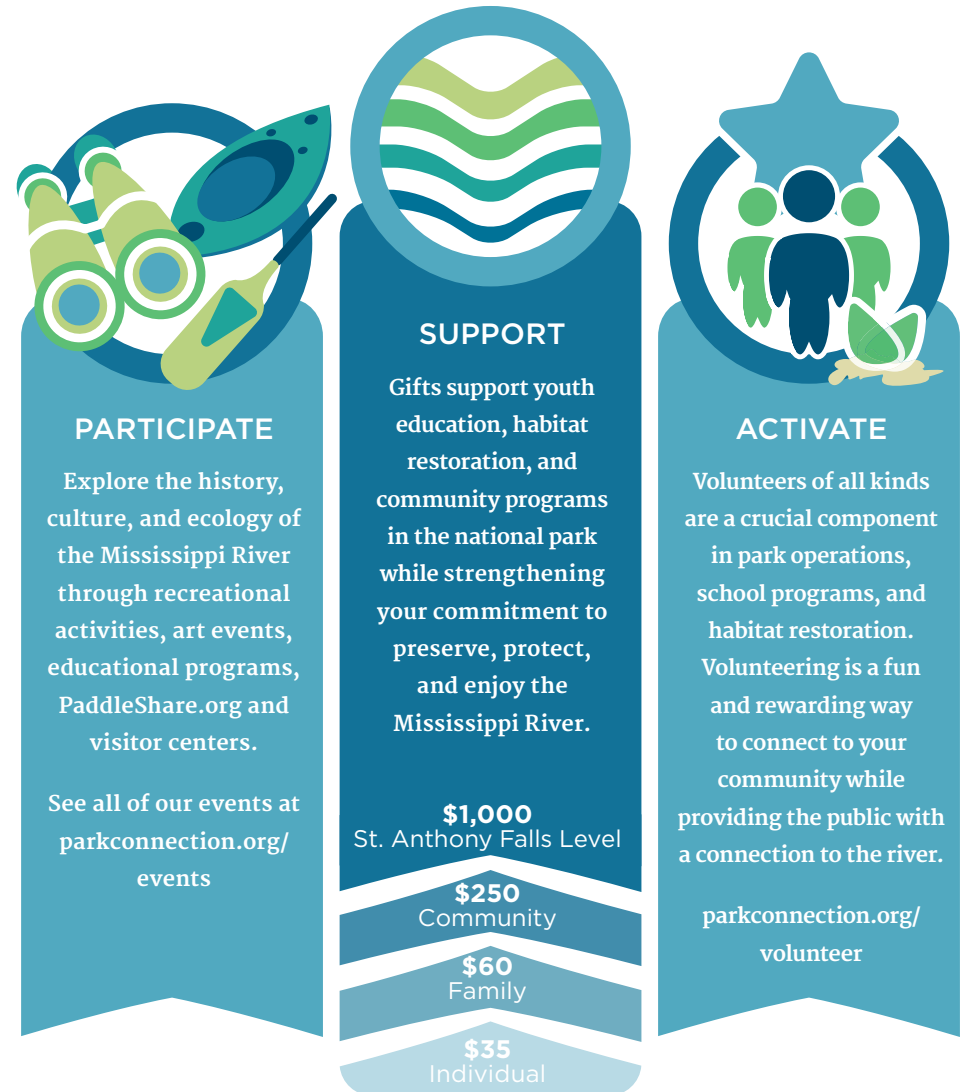
The Mississippi River's beauty, captivating landscapes, and endless adventure have drawn families and individuals to the only National Park dedicated to this river—the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA)—the world's fourth-longest river.

Members support the livelihood of the river every day! You are:

- Connecting thousands of kids with outdoor learning
- Restoring habitat along the river
- Preserving historic and culturally significant landmarks that tell the story of the Twin Cities

Individual membership starts at \$35, family at \$60, including additional household members. Membership perks include member-only events like guided hikes, behind-the-scenes tours of the working river, meet and greets, discounts on Mississippi River Paddle Share, retail purchases, recognition in our annual report and more! We invite you to embark on a journey filled with discovery, connection, and stewardship.

Ways to Get Involved



Bison Prairie

Scott Hagen, Natural Resources Specialist, Dakota County



Photos Courtesy of Shannon Montante

Spring Lake Park Reserve is a 1,097-acre park that is west of Hastings along the Mississippi River. This beautiful park is made up of a mosaic of forested ravines, oak woodlands, savannas and prairies and has been stewarded by indigenous societies for at least 8,000 years. Wildlife of the park is varied and rich, including many species of migrating and breeding birds; small mammals such as shrews and mice; several species of bats; multitudes of invertebrates such as rusty patched bumble bees and leadplant flower moths; reptiles and amphibians such as red-bellied snakes and tree frogs; and large mammals such as whitetail deer, fisher, and badger and now bison.

Eight bison were released into the park in the fall of 2022 and are roaming their new home in the 150-acre Bison Prairie. Bison were a keystone species throughout North American prairies and were an integral part of the prairie ecosystem that is missing from most prairies across the continent.

Dakota County has partnered with the National Park service and Mississippi Park Connection to enhance these prairies with native flowering prairie plants with high pollinator value which will enhance the habitat for several pollinator species, including rare species such as rusty patched bumble bee, leadplant flower moth and regal fritillary along with many more common pollinator species. These projects will help bring these prairies back to what they had been in the past prior to European settlement.

By the 1880s, over 30 million buffalo had been slaughtered and buffalo were nearly exterminated. At the Medicine Lodge Treaty Council of 1867, the great Kiowa chief, Satanta noted, “A long time ago this land belonged to our fathers but when I go up to the river I see a camp of soldiers, and they are cutting my wood down, or killing my buffalo. I don’t like that, and when I see it my heart feels like bursting with sorrow.”
(Smits, Western History Quarterly)



Creating More Inclusive Outdoor Spaces: A Case for BIPOC Affinity Programs

Tamara Few, Program Coordinator and Ze Thao Sengsoulichanh, Development and Communications Manager, Mississippi Park Connection

Natural sites like the Mississippi River offer beauty, peace, and healing. Public lands are intended to offer an escape from the stressors of daily life and provide opportunities for respite, physical activity, and connection with nature. However, not all individuals have equal access to experiences in these outdoor spaces. For Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, the outdoors can often be unwelcoming or even unsafe. The need for safe and inclusive spaces prompted Twin Cities nonprofits and park departments to create BIPOC affinity programs.

Representation Is Important

BIPOC individuals seeing themselves in outdoor spaces and their cultures reflected in park history signals belonging.

Increasing diversity in outdoor leadership creates inclusive policies. Mississippi Park Connection aims to:

- Center BIPOC belonging and safety outdoors
- Bridge partnerships for diverse expertise
- Include diverse environmental knowledge
- Build BIPOC outdoor communities
- Increase BIPOC leadership representation

Historical Exclusion

Systemic racism and exclusion mar the history of outdoor spaces in the United States. Segregated parks, the Saint Paul Rondo neighborhood's displacement, redlining in North Minneapolis, and forced removal of Tribal Nations denied BIPOC groups nature access, fostering alienation.

Expanding Affinity Groups Fosters Belonging

Mississippi Park Connection is expanding affinity programs for veterans, the LGBTQ+ community, and people with disabilities.

Improving access, representation, and safety fosters outdoor spaces where all benefit from nature's nourishment. It's a collective effort vital for the betterment of the Mississippi River and Twin Cities' green spaces.

Contact bipocevents@parkconnection.org to learn more.

Thank you to Hennepin County Green Partners for supporting the publication of this BIPOC in the Outdoors article and our affinity programming.

Photo Courtesy of Lee Vue



Beaver-tastic Research: Monitoring the Mississippi's Busy Builders for a Brighter Ecosystem

Jayne Willard, Biological Sciences Technician, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

We are in the second season of a 3-year beaver monitoring survey across the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. Motion sensor cameras are set up near about a dozen beaver lodges spanning Dayton to Hastings to observe these hardworking semi-aquatic creatures. The camera footage helps estimate the park's beaver population, assess their local environmental impact, and inform beaver management.

Beavers chew down trees to build vital structures like dams and lodges. Despite their somewhat clumsy land movements, due to their 70lb weight and unique physical features, they excel in water. Their dam-building creates ponds and benefits other species like fish and birds.

The survey examines how North American beavers affect park tree species, guiding comprehensive management for cottonwoods, eagles, beavers, and others. This study is funded through a grant from the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).



Jayne Willard,
Biological Sciences Technician, NPS



A camera trap captures beaver grooming on top of lodge during 2022 Beaver Survey

Find volunteer opportunities at parkconnection.org/volunteer



OCTOBER 2023 - APRIL 2024 EVENT CALENDAR

M = Member Early Access **V** = Volunteer Opportunity **F** = Fundraiser Event

- OCTOBER**
 - 7 The Big Sit! @ Mni Owe Sni / Coldwater Spring
 - 14 Fall Fossil Hike with a Ranger @ Shadow Falls Park
 - 29 Fall Hike with a Ranger
- NOVEMBER**
 - 4 Fall Hike with a Ranger
 - 9 Lunch n' Learn: Beavers @ Kellogg Square **V**
 - 11 B.A.R.K. Ranger @ Mni Owe Sni / Coldwater Spring
 - 12 Fall Hike with a Ranger
 - 14 Volunteer Appreciation Night **V**
 - 16 Give to the Max Day @ parkconnection.org **F**
- DECEMBER**
 - 9 Working River Tour @ Minneapolis Public Works **M**
 - 16-31 Junior Ranger Programs @ Mississippi River Visitor Center
- JANUARY**
 - 6 Winter Hike with a Ranger
 - 18 Working River Tour @ District Energy **M**
 - 20 Winter Hike with a Ranger
 - 27 Tree ID workshop @ Mni Owe Sni / Coldwater Spring **V**
- FEBRUARY**
 - 3 Winter Hike with a Ranger
 - 8 Fireside Chat with Tucker Blythe @ Kellogg Square **M**
 - 17 Winter Hike with a Ranger
- MARCH**
 - 2 Winter Hike with a Ranger
 - 14 Working River Tour @ District Energy **M**
 - 16 Winter Hike with a Ranger
 - 30 Welcome Back the Herons @ Marshall Terrace Park
- APRIL**
 - 13 Working River Tour @ Minneapolis Public Works **M**
 - 20-28 National Park Week
 - 27 Junior Ranger Day @ Mississippi River Visitor Center
 - 27 Saint Paul Citywide Spring Cleanup **V**

All events are subject to change, so please check our full calendar for up-to-date information and to register at parkconnection.org/events. We hope to see you out on the river!

To be added or removed from the mailing list, please contact info@parkconnection.org or call 651-291-8164. To contact the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, visit nps.gov/miss or email miss_info@nps.gov. Photos in this newsletter courtesy of the National Park Service and Mississippi Park Connection, unless otherwise noted.

Celebrating Megan Doerr: 2023 Big River Teacher Award Recipient

David Kappelhoff, Education Coordinator, Mississippi Park Connection

Megan Doerr’s dedication to fostering a love for the natural world led to her being selected as the Big River Teacher Award recipient for 2023. For 26 years she has gone beyond traditional classroom boundaries, designing innovative curricula that champion the blending of subject matter while encouraging experiential learning at Frost Lake Elementary School.



Megan’s colleagues note her dedication to outdoor experiences and highlight her empathy-driven teaching style. The infectious enthusiasm her students bring toward learning mirrors the open-mindedness instilled by this approach toward education. Megan’s confident, professional, and wise demeanor encourages students to actively engage with nature through hands-on methods. This approach often includes field trips within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area where students are given multiple opportunities to use their inquiry skills within natural surroundings.

The Big River Teacher Award recognizes Megan’s contributions and commitment to her students. It also recognizes her passion and advocacy for inclusive education. She is an outstanding educator who is leaving an enduring mark on the river community. Let’s celebrate her achievements and the profound impact teachers like her have on shaping future generations.

Megan’s Frost Lake Elementary class at Crosby Farm Regional Park.



Fall’s Charm: Boundless Learning Opportunities

Johnna Austin, Education Specialist, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

Fall is my favorite season because of the colorful leaves, cooler weather, and the start of field trip season! We’re thrilled to provide various opportunities for students to enjoy. With the changing leaves and cooling temperatures, the Mississippi River transforms into a classroom.

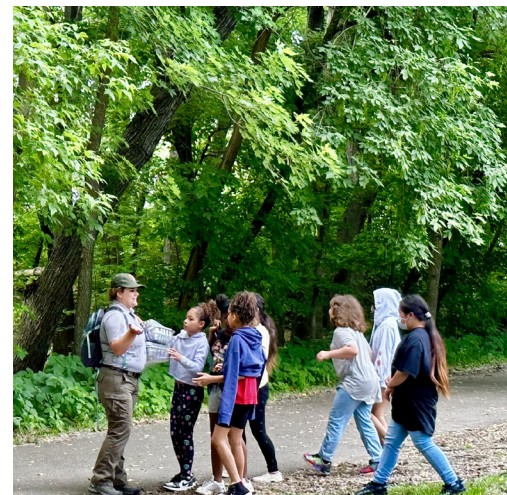
From embarking on river boats and canoes to riverside explorations, diverse field trips provide countless avenues for discovery.

Take Me to the River, introduces students to shelter and fire building, orienteering, and a geology-based hike. Beyond the fun, this trip nurtures teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership, fostering essential life skills.

Big River Journey adds another layer of wonder. Students cruise the Mississippi on paddleboats, engaging with hands-on stations that span bird watching, river otter habitats, and more. Even as winter blankets the landscape, learning doesn’t stop. **Winter River** unfolds at Fort Snelling State Park, offering snowshoeing, winter tree identification, and insights into animal tracks.

With virtual classroom visits in winter and the invigorating **Winter River** field trip, education knows no bounds. As someone fortunate enough to share my passion for the Mississippi River, I am reminded every day of the privilege it is to inspire students.

You can support student learnings by making a gift at parkconnection.org/donate.



DAYTON

RAMSEY



MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL RIVER AND RECREATION AREA

SITES ALONG THE RIVER

- 1 Mississippi West Regional Park
- 2 Mississippi Gateway Regional Park
- 3 Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park
- 4 River Park
- 5 Manomin County Park
- 6 North Mississippi Regional Park
- 7 Mississippi Watershed Management Org.
- 8 Boom Island Park
- 9 Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam Visitor Center open during summer months
- 10 Stone Arch Bridge
- 11 Mill Ruins Park
- 12 Bohemian Flats Park
- 13 Minnehaha Regional Park
- 14 Mni Owe Sni / Coldwater Spring
- 15 Hidden Falls-Crosby Farm Regional Park
- 16 Historic Fort Snelling
- 17 Fort Snelling State Park
- 18 Pickerel Lake / Lilydale Regional Park
- 19 Harriet Island Regional Park
- 20 Mississippi River Visitor Center Located at the Science Museum of Minnesota
- 21 Wakáŋ Tipi / Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary
- 22 Indian Mounds Regional Park
- 23 Pig's Eye Regional Park
- 24 Lions Levee Park
- 25 Riverside Park
- 26 Pine Bend Bluffs SNA
- 27 Grey Cloud Dunes SNA
- 28 Spring Lake Park Reserve
- 29 Hastings Riverfront
- 30 Great River Road Visitor and Learning Center (WI)

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SAINT PAUL

MINNEAPOLIS

MINNESOTA RIVER

HASTINGS





MISSISSIPPI PARK CONNECTION

Discover your river

Mississippi Park Connection is the official nonprofit partner to the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. We seek to enrich the life of the river and the lives of all who experience the national park through youth education programs, environmental stewardship volunteerism, and outdoor community engagement events.



The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area is a 72-mile national park, binding together more than 85 state, regional and local parks from Anoka to Hastings. The purpose of the 54,000-acre river park, established by Congress in 1988, is to preserve, protect and enhance the significant values of the waters and land of the Mississippi River corridor.

Edited by Lily Jones, Ze Thao Sengsoulichanh
and Anna Waugh
Cover photo by Shannon Montante
Printed on Minnesota-milled, chlorine-free recycled
and recyclable paper with 10% postconsumer material.

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