

DNR accepts ownership of the Rock Island Corridor by Kendra Varns Wallis

Trail enthusiasts celebrated on December 14, 2021, as the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR) took official ownership of the 144-mile Rock Island Corridor. Governor Mike Parson made the announcement at an outdoor ceremony at Rock Island Park in Eldon, a community along the corridor. In his remarks during the ceremony, DNR Director Dru Buntin explained: "With the recent award of the \$2.7 million Economic Development Administration grant and other potential funding through the American Rescue Plan Act, donations, and grants, the Department of Natural Resources is able to accept the Rock Island Corridor today." Missouri Central Railroad Company, a subsidiary of Ameren Missouri, donated the property to the state.

DNR currently owns and operates the Rock Island Spur of the Katy Trail, a 47-mile multi-use trail from its intersection with the Katy at Windsor to Pleasant Hill on the outskirts of Kansas City (see *Heritage*, December 2016). The corridor, which DNR and MSP have actively sought since 1993, not only already provides a cross-state trail experience from St. Louis to the Kansas City area via the combined Katy and Rock Island, but in the future will offer another trail through the ruggedly scenic northern Ozarks. The

development of the new 144-mile section from Windsor to Beaufort in the outskirts of St. Louis will expand the opportunity for outdoor recreation and benefit many rural Ozark communities, including Versailles, Eldon, Eugene, Meta, Argyle, Free-

MoPac Trail in Pleasant Hill. Once this stretch is complete, Kansas City will be directly connected to the cross-state Rock Island and Katy Trails.

The development of the Rock Island Corridor is expected to cost more than \$100 million. During his State of the State address January 19, Governor Mike Parson announced his recommendation to allocate \$69 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to the development of the trail: "More and more people are getting out and experiencing Missouri's great outdoors. And this year, we have an opportunity to solidify this state asset



Director Buntin, Governor Parson, and Mark Birk of Ameren

burg, Belle, Bland, Owensville, Rosebud, Gerald, Leslie, and Beaufort. It will likely also eventually enable an eastern spur to the Katy Trail near Washington to complete a gigantic loop westward along the Missouri River and back through the Ozarks.

On the western end, Jackson County in 2016 acquired 17.7 miles of the Rock Island Corridor stretching from Arrowhead and Kauffman Stadiums in Kansas City south to Lee's Summit, where the trail is now complete. Currently, there is an eight-mile gap called the Greenwood Connector between the southern end of the Jackson County RIT and the

and economic driver and expand tourism. By investing \$69 million dollars to start construction on the Rock Island trail, we can help establish the largest circular rail-to-trail network in the United States and a world-class, one-of-a-kind destination for travelers coming to Missouri...while also supporting businesses and creating jobs." If approved by the legislature, the funding will cover construction of the 78-mile section of trail stretching from Eugene to Beaufort, one of the most expensive segments because of the bridges and tunnels that will require extensive work.

(See "Rock Island" on Page 6)

MPA's 40th Anniversary Challenge

President's message by Terry Whaley

Everyone has a lucky number and for 2022 Missouri Parks Association's lucky number is 40. Hard to believe, but MPA will be 40 years old this year. When MPA was founded in October 1982, the state park budget had been reduced to only about half what it had been in the late 1970s, so one of its prime goals was to advocate for a consistent base of financial support for state parks. In its first year, MPA led in securing a legislative referendum for a citizen vote on a parks and soils sales tax. MPA then turned to educating Missouri citizens, who approved the tax in 1984. Over the past forty years it has been our focus to educate, support and advocate for the Missouri state park system.

While the day-to-day operation of our parks is left to dedicated professionals, there will always be a need for an organization of citizens devoted passionately to defense of the state park system. The Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax has come up for renewal four times since 1984--in 1988, 1996, 2006, and 2016--and each time MPA has been a leader in the citizen coalition educating Missourians about the values at stake in our parks and advocating for renewal by voters statewide. Each time Missourians have responded by a greater margin of support than ever before, in 2016 by 80 percent of votes with a majority in every county in the state.

Year in and year out, MPA educates and advocates for the mission of the park system: to preserve and interpret the best examples of Missouri's natural landscapes and its cultural landmarks and to provide appropriate recreation within these areas. Our book about the system, *Missouri State Parks and Historic Sites: Exploring our Legacy*, is considered one of finest such books in the nation. In our *Heritage* newsletter we strongly support park proposals that fit this mission, oppose those that do not, and call for more robust natural and cultural resource stewardship throughout the system. Our UPOP and Seniors to Parks programs help ensure that children and seniors, especially those from underserved communities, can learn about and enjoy recreation in our state parks. With strong citizen support, consistent funding, and excellent management, our park system today is widely regarded as one of the best in the nation.

Now, in our fortieth year, MPA is challenging our nearly 3,000 loyal members to celebrate the values of our state park system and ensure that MPA continues strong into the future in its support by contributing to our 40th Anniversary Membership Challenge for 2022. Whether you camp in a tent or an

RV, whether you hike, fish, motorboat, or canoe, we challenge you! Whether you eat your fish dinner in the park lodge or grill it on an open fire, whether you visit the parks for some solo time or bring on the family reunions, we challenge you!

We ask you as a member of MPA and a state park user a simple question. Has the Missouri state park system and MPA's support of it been worth a dollar a year to you? If that answer is "yes" then we are asking you for an additional \$40 donation this year, or \$400, or whatever you are able to provide in celebration of our 40th year. Your funds will help ensure MPA's continued support and advocacy for state parks on into the future.

Soon you will receive our official letter asking your consideration for a special 40-year anniversary contribution. On behalf of all past, present, and future leaders and members of the Missouri Parks Association, I thank you for your support.

Steve Nagle 1944-2022

Steve Livingston Nagle, who served as president of MPA from 2013-2017, passed away in Palm Desert, CA on March 23. He was a cheerleader for parks during a vexing time when state parks were besieged in the legislature and suffered low staff morale over the Echo Bluff political controversy, but he was also able to celebrate the successful renewal of the Parks and Soils sales tax and the acquisition of four new parks in 2016.

Born in St. Joseph MO, Steve bounced between Missouri and the West, especially the southwestern deserts, in his early years and throughout his life. Steve was a Vietnam-era veteran, serving at Fort Leonard Wood. After earning an M.A. in Political Science at MU in 1976 he worked several years for the newly-established MoDNR, parent agency of state parks, as a planner and legislative analyst. Moving to California, he worked various public policy and planning jobs for government agencies, then back to St. Louis by 2001 to join the East-West Gateway Council of Governments as director of community planning. After his time with MPA he returned to California to be near several of his five children. Over the years, Steve also had stints on a cattle ranch, in a rock band, in Hollywood, and in his later years he loved playing guitar, banjo, and fiddle and wrote and published songs and poetry with environmental themes. An all-around fun-loving and caring guy. Many will miss him.

Birders Flock to Trail Through Weston Bend State Park By Mary Nemecek

Seated above the Missouri River, Weston Bend State Park provides stunning, scenic views of the river from its wooded trails and overlooks. With bottomland forests, wetlands, upland forests, woodlands, and grasslands, the park is a haven for both resident and migrant species and has long been a favorite for birders. The river is a major flyway during migration and the park's rich woodlands along the bottoms and up to the bluffs provide needed shelter and food. There are few better places in the state to view neotropical migrants.

The park is situated across the river from Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, which protects the largest intact bottomland forest still present on the Missouri River. While the river has been straightened and channelized, looking west from the state park one can gaze upon the fort's bottomlands with a view largely unchanged from the day Lewis and Clark took in the same landscape.

This unique and expansive habitat of the Weston Bottoms anchors the park in the Iatan/Weston Important Bird Area (IBA), which stretches from just south of St. Joseph to Parkville, MO. IBAs are the most critical areas of bird habitat identified in the IBA Global Bird Conservation Program. Even without this distinction, birders can tell you Weston Bend State Park is a gem.

In total over 230 species of birds have been seen in the park. Along

the roads and trails you may see a Pileated Woodpecker, one of the largest forest birds in North America and a nesting species within the park. Their powerful drumming is easily recognizable and can be heard throughout the year.

In the bottomland areas during summer, you will find the striking Prothonotary Warbler, commonly called 'swamp candle'. It is one of only two US warbler species



Weston Bend SP Overlook
David Bedan

that nests in the cavities of standing dead trees. Its melodious 'sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet' can be heard along the lower parking lot and train tracks.

This winter it was a trail through the park that held a top treat for birders. The Weston Bluffs trail starts at the southern point of the park and follows the park boundary. The trail is nestled above the river and train tracks moving north below the steep bluffs on the east, eventually ending in the town of Weston.

On December 23rd at 11:15 am a birder on the trail saw one of the

most coveted species in the state: a Townsend's Solitaire. Most non-birders may find it an unimpressive gray bird with a noticeable eye ring and buffy tips to its flight feathers. To birders it's anything but ordinary.

As a bird of the western forests, they are quite rare in Missouri with only around twenty winter records for the entire state. They are a member of the thrush family that includes Eastern Bluebirds

and American Robins. You will typically find the bird either sulking in the undergrowth or perched atop a branch, looking more like a flycatcher than a thrush.

During summer the Townsend's Solitaire is an insect specialist, feeding on spiders, butterflies, moths, and insects. They will 'hawk out'

from a perch to catch their prey, much as a flycatcher does. In winter their diet changes to fruit, especially the berries of juniper trees such as the eastern red cedar. Estimates put their winter consumption of juniper berries at a whopping 42,000 to 84,000 berries.

Along the Weston Bluffs Trail in late December 2021, cedar trees heavy with berries were interspersed among the deciduous trees. About half a mile up there was a small ravine on the west side of the trail leading down the steep hill and flanked by cedar trees on both sides.

(See "Birders" on Page 4)

("Birders " from Page 3)

It was, as one birder put it, "the exact place I would have imagined a Townsend's Solitaire to be." Marked by a faint arrow scratched in the dirt along the trail, this was the spot one could reliably wait for the eventual appearance of the Solitaire either in the ravine below or perched on a branch above the trail. The clear ringing note of its call would let you know of its presence still in the area.

From December 23rd - 27th almost fifty separate reports were logged by



Townsend's Solitaire Paul McKenzie

Missouri birders, some from as far away as St. Louis on the other side of the state and Dunklin County in the bootheel. Attempts to locate the bird after the New Year's Eve/Day winter weather were unsuccessful and it was presumed the bird had moved on.

Despite its short stay, the presence of this rare and secretive bird rippled through the birding community as a wonderful holiday gift. The Weston Bluffs Trail had given birders a real treat this winter and has them looking forward to the promise of rewarding views of neotropical migrants in spring.

For more information on bird species found in the park, visit <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L1479960>. The home pages of Missouri state parks known for good birding have links to eBird along with bird checklists.

Feral Hog Update

In the midst of other good news for state parks comes word that Missouri's Feral Hog Elimination Partnership is showing significant success. After hunting of feral hogs was finally closed in late 2019 on all public lands in Missouri to avoid scattering

hogs and to facilitate trapping of entire sounders (large family groups), the partnership was organized in an incident command structure (ICS) of the sort used for western wildfires to share information and resources and coordinate efforts across some fifteen state and federal agencies, including state parks, and with increasing numbers of private landowners.

The effort, organized on a priority watershed basis, has succeeded in eliminating hogs from nearly fifty percent of the watersheds statewide that were occupied in 2016. Even in watersheds that had seen the heaviest populations and greatest damage, the numbers of hogs taken in 2021 were considerably down from those taken previously, an indication that there are now fewer hogs on the landscape. More than 1,300 private landowners are now cooperating with the partnership, allowing professional trappers to take hogs from their property; this cooperation across boundaries is critical in dealing with such an elusive, nocturnal species capable of extremely rapid reproduction.

Some of Missouri's largest, most rugged, and most iconic parks such as Johnson's Shut-Ins, Taum Sauk, and Sam Baker are in the southeastern Ozark counties of Iron, Reynolds, and Wayne, where the hog problem has been most severe, but state park staff are reporting less hog damage and fewer hogs taken in 2021 than in previous years. About 6,050 hogs were taken from these counties by government trappers and helicopter sharpshooters in 2020 and 4,550 in 2021, taken as a proxy to indicate a decline of about 25 percent in the number of hogs on the landscape. In state parks the decline was likely even greater. Moreover, with increased use of more efficient drones and helicopters for spotting hogs, a tremendous amount of state park, MDC, and other staff time has been saved for other business.

A situation that had seemed almost hopeless three years ago (see *Heritage*, June 2019, p1) now seems on the way to resolution, thanks to highly effective ICS collaboration among agencies, determined park and other agency staff, and engaged MPA members and other citizens, who helped to change the public and political landscape in Missouri on this issue. Complete elimination, however, will be very difficult if not impossible as long as there is organized support for hunting as a "sport." The challenge will be to continue the ICS program, including educational efforts, as long as necessary, and then to maintain legal consequences, vigilance among agency staff, and engagement among landowners and the citizenry for the long term.

Legislative Quicksand

By Shirley Wolverson

Mid-way through the 2022 legislative session, the House had perfected only thirty-eight bills and the Senate but seven. Most of the time was lost to weather delays, legislator absences due to Covid, deadlock among factions, and filibustering about the map to determine Congressional districts--should the GOP be content with the current six GOP seats to two Dems in a state with a 15-point spread between the two parties in the last election or should they reach for seven to one?

The emergency supplemental budget (HB3014) appropriating funds for the rest of FY2022, which the governor had asked to be approved by February 1 in order to provide 5.5 percent cost of living adjustments for dedicated state park staff and other employees (in a state that ranks 50th in salaries), finally came to a vote in the Senate on February 24; the House approved the new version in about five minutes and the governor signed it within hours. The bill also included \$1.8 billion in federal Covid-relief funds for K-12 education that schools had been hoping to receive back in October, as well as funds to study and inventory water, wastewater, and broadband needs statewide, including in state parks.

In **other good news for parks**, the \$60 million in revenue bonds approved by the legislature last spring have now been sold and the first projects for revenue-producing campground and lodging upgrades at Johnson's Shut-ins, Montauk, Roaring River, and Onondaga Cave are moving forward. The governor recommended that most funds for Missouri from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) be spent on one-time costs such as *infrastructure* rather than on recurring costs, hence his generous allotment of \$69 million for the Rock Island Trail (see article on page 1). This would be a significant investment that would jump start trail development and allow communities along the route to seek additional funds for local segments in partnership with the state, thus beginning the flow of economic benefits from the project. The governor's ARPA infrastructure allocations also included drinking water and wastewater upgrades (\$42 million), and broadband improvements in parks (\$9.6 million), positively impacting staff and visitors' ability to access the internet and use park and trail apps.

Eleven Point State Park is again the subject of house bills to authorize its sale, from the same representatives as last year. Rep. Chris Dinkins's HB2483 and Rep. Ron Copeland's HB1972 once again contain legal descriptions for the entire 4,167-acre park while the bill sponsors continue to insist they are

only trying to facilitate the sale of the 625-acre easement bordering the river if DNR loses its lawsuit. MPA Executive Director Kendra Varns Wallis testified against both bills, pointing out the discrepancy and noting that the lawsuit is still pending. The Corrections and Public Lands Committee did not care about those details; they combined the two bills as a house committee substitute and voted "do pass," after which it passed out of the Rules Committee. MPA is monitoring closely to see if it heads to the floor for debate.

The welfare of the people, *salus populi suprema lex esto*, should be the supreme law. The people were given the right more than 100 years ago to pass laws and constitutional amendments through an initiative petition process. Many excellent initiatives passed in Missouri have improved life in our state. Several renewals of the Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax have resulted from initiative petitions, as did the constitutional amendment that created the Conservation Commission. MPA is paying close attention to a new threat to the initiative process. Recently, citizens have noticed that some initiatives they petitioned for and voted to approve have either been eviscerated by the legislature or sent back to the people for another vote because legislators did not agree with the result of the people's vote. Numerous bills have been filed this session in both the house and senate to make it more difficult or impossible for the people to petition in the future. Changes proposed in House bills include requiring signature collecting in all eight (currently six) congressional districts, increasing the number of signatures required, increasing the vote required from a simple majority to 2/3 of the votes cast, and making different requirements for constitutional amendments proposed by initiative of the people than for those proposed by the legislature. Even more insidious is one that would require a majority of the registered voters to vote in favor for it to pass. Since often fewer than 50 percent of registered voters vote in an election, it would require more votes to pass than there are voters participating, rendering citizen petitions often impossible to pass. MPA recommends that you contact your representative and senator and ask them NOT to weaken the citizens' voice.

What can we do? MPA's Legislative Committee monitors the hearings in the state House and Senate as well as floor debate, and Executive Director Kendra Varns Wallis either submits written testimony on behalf of MPA or testifies in person at the hearings. MPA members can get to know their state representative and senator, let them know the importance of Missouri state parks and historic sites--and be ready to contact them when alerted to an urgent issue needing action!



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(“Rock Island Corridor” from Page 1)

An additional \$500,000 from the Rock Island Endowment Fund for the initial work of securing the corridor during the remaining months of FY 2022 has already been approved in a supplemental appropriations bill (HB 3015) signed by the governor on February 25. Another \$1 million from the Endowment Fund for additional work in the coming year is included in a budget bill still being debated. The legislature approved establishment of the fund in 2019 to hold private donations for the trail resulting from an ongoing campaign by the Missouri State Parks Foundation (see *Heritage*, October 2019).

In order to get a head start on planning for the new park, state park staff hosted a series of three public information meetings in Versailles, Owensville, and Freeburg in January. These well attended sessions were coordinated with community assessment meetings for local officials to learn about grants and other resource and partnership opportunities for their segments of the trail. MSP staff will continue these assessments with every community along the corridor as part of the planning and development process. Park officials reported that the meetings were overall positive, with strong support from citizens and communities along the corridor.

Since development of the trail will occur over a number of years, with each segment of the corridor having different features, challenges, and costs, it is important to develop strong community support and partnerships. The funding proposed in the budget is great news, provided it wins approval by lawmakers, but fundraising and private/public partnerships will still be needed to complete the trail. Donations can be made online through <https://www.missouristateparksfoundation.org>.

Park Briefs

Kinloch Exhibit at Missouri State Museum. State Rep. Raychel Proudie of Ferguson posted in Facebook recently that she was "feeling proud at Missouri State Museum."

She said she was "absolutely THRILLED to see the #Kinloch Exhibit" in the museum in the State Capitol, which is managed by Missouri State Parks as itself a state historic site. Kinloch was a thriving Black community that became Missouri's first all-Black incorporated municipality, then decades later was depopulated to make way for expansion of the St. Louis airport, many of its former inhabitants ending up in nearby Ferguson to the north. For more information see <https://kinlochmo.org>, and then go to see the exhibit.

Conservation Day at the Capitol, April 6. Why not go to see the Kinloch exhibit on Wednesday, April 6, and also attend Conservation Day on the third floor of the rotunda? This event sponsored annually by the Conservation Federation is a day for conservationists from all their affiliates, including MPA, to come to the Capitol to see each other and visit with their legislators about the issues of the day. MPA and dozens of other conservation organizations will be there with informative displays and legislative information, and we can help you get in touch with your own representative and senator. What a great way to get a look at our magnificent capitol in action.

Seniors to Parks at First State Capitol. If you go to Conservation Day and the Kinloch exhibit on April 6 and you are a senior, likely retired, what better way to round out this dose of Missouri history in our bicentennial year than to participate in MPA's Seniors to Parks on Tuesday, May 10, from 10am to 4pm, at First State Capitol State Historic Site along the Missouri River in St. Charles, the first seat of government for our brand new state 200 years ago. The day will be full of tours, crafts, demonstrations and other activities, including Dutch oven cookery, lunch, and maybe even a tour on Katy Trail in the MPA tram. It would be a wonderful way to spend a May day largely outdoors, and a great opportunity to introduce another one or two of your senior friends to state parks and MPA, and maybe even encourage them to become MPA members. The event is free, but you will need to register by Tuesday, April 26 by calling 636-940-3322, so park staff know how many people to prepare for.