



HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Missouri Parks Association
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Greg Iffrig and Shirley Wolverson, Guest Editors

New Leadership Team for Missouri State Parks by Kendra Varns Wallis

MPA directors were delighted to hear the news of Laura Hendrickson's promotion to Director of Missouri State Parks from new Deputy DNR Director **Jake Buxton** during the MPA board meeting on January 14, 2025. She had been appointed that same day by newly appointed DNR Director **Kurt Schaefer**.

Former Director **Dru Buntin** remains with DNR as Chief of Water Resources, where he will continue to pursue his passion for major river systems and issues related to the management of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers.

Since 2021, **Laura Hendrickson** served as the Deputy Director of Operations for Missouri State Parks, managing the Business Services Program, Missouri State Parks Regional Offices, and the Visitor Services Program. Prior to that, she spent eight years as the Director of the Ozarks Region of Missouri State Parks, overseeing 25 state parks and historic sites, eight concession operations, and the South Construction unit. She previously held the role of Park Superintendent for 17 years, managing some of the largest and most visited parks in the system, including Prairie, Capital Complex, Pomme de Terre, and the South-Central Management Unit. Longtime park employees Melanie

Smith and Justin Adams joined Laura as her new team of deputy directors.

Melanie Smith was appointed Deputy Director of Resources for Missouri State Parks, effective November 1, 2024. In her new role she oversees the Grants, Recreation and

Katy Trail Tram Tours, and ribbon cuttings.

Justin Adams was appointed Deputy Director of Operations for Missouri State Parks in March 2025. He now oversees the Missouri State Parks Regional Offices, Real Estate, and Land Survey. Justin previously succeeded Laura Hendrickson as Director of the Ozarks Region in 2021, where he led facility operations, concession management, and capital projects.

With extensive experience in the parks system, Justin has served as Deputy Director of the Ozarks Region, Natural Re-

sources Manager for the Southwest Unit, and Park Specialist at Montauk and Lake Wappapello State Parks. His career has included managing events and volunteers, overseeing stewardship and cultural projects, budgeting, stakeholder engagement, and trail development.

MPA welcomes these new state park leaders and looks forward to working with them in support of Missouri State Parks. With this leadership team of seasoned state park veterans, along with talented and dedicated park system staff, the future of Missouri State Parks looks incredibly promising.



DSP Leadership: Justin Adams, Laura Hendrickson, Melanie Smith

Interpretation Program, Natural Resources Management Program, Cultural Resources Management Program, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Visitor Services Program, and the Safety and Wellness Program.

Melanie had served as the Deputy Director for the Northern Region of Missouri State Parks since 2016, working closely with field staff to ensure that the region's 34 state parks and historic sites continued to deliver exceptional service to visitors. She also played a key role in planning and executing events such as Women in Nature programs,

Closing a Chapter: Kelly and McCarty Retire from Missouri State Parks

By Kendra Varns Wallis

After nearly four decades of dedication to Missouri's treasured natural and historic spaces, **David Kelly**, Director of Missouri State Parks, retired on February 1, 2025. A cornerstone of the division for 39 years, Kelly's passion and leadership shaped the division and inspired generations of park lovers and professionals.



Kelly's journey with Missouri State Parks began during his sophomore year at the University of Missouri (MU), when he interned with the division and surveyed visitors at 15 different parks. That early exposure ignited a lifelong commitment to the outdoors and public service. "It was almost like a flip of the switch," Kelly recalled. "I grew up in state parks, and I've always had a passion for them."

After graduating from MU with a degree in parks and recreation, Kelly returned to the division in 1986 as a seasonal employee and was hired full-time in 1988 as a special events coordinator. Over the years, he rose through the ranks, holding key positions in visitor services, marketing, and facilities services. His reputation as a steady and dedicated leader was solidified during the turbulent political and environmental challenges of 2017. At one point, Kelly juggled three critical roles—his regular post as head of facility and visitor services, a temporary position as acting deputy director for operations, and in the absence of a new or interim director of the agency, many essential functions of the director as well, including budgetary matters and other legislative issues in the general assembly—ensuring the division remained steady during a time of uncertainty.

That year, he was officially appointed Deputy Director of Operations, a position that would serve as the launchpad for his eventual promotion to Director. His leadership was instrumental in navigating the system through COVID-19, which saw record-breaking visitor numbers and renewed interest in outdoor recreation.

Under Kelly's guidance, the division responded by planning significant expansions in 22 state parks, funded by revenue bonds over five years to meet rising

demand. From enhancing internet access to improving trail systems and amenities, Kelly was always focused on how to best serve Missouri's citizens. He often credited his success to the people around him. "Most of our parks operate with just a handful of full-time staff and an army of seasonal workers," he said. "Their commitment and talent are what make this system thrive." Kelly's deep experience across all three of the division's focus areas—natural resource preservation, historic preservation, and recreation—gave him a uniquely holistic perspective. "I've learned something different at every level," he noted. "It took me 30 years to visit all 93 state parks and historic sites, but I cherished every moment."

As he steps away from the director's desk, David Kelly leaves behind a stronger state park system. From seasonal intern to Director, his story is a testament to what a lifetime of purpose-driven work can build. Thank you, David, for 39 years of passion, leadership, and stewardship of Missouri State Parks. They are better because of you.

Ken McCarty retired on December 31, 2024. The longtime director of MSP's Natural Resource Management Program, Ken's visionary leadership helped shape Missouri's park system into a national model of ecological restoration and stewardship.



As a highly respected landscape ecologist, Ken has devoted almost four decades to the protection, restoration, and management of the state's natural resources. As chair of the Missouri Natural Areas Committee (MoNAC) since the early 2000s, he oversaw the addition of 28 new natural areas to the state system—expanding it by over 30,000 acres. He also directed the stewardship of 38 designated Natural Areas, increased the number of Missouri Wild Areas in Missouri State Parks such as the recently recognized Bryant Creek Hills, and enlarged others. All of this protects and safeguards these important resources for the enjoyment and experience of future generations.

From restoring tallgrass prairie and oak savanna to reviving complex wetland and fen systems, his work spans nearly every ecosystem in the state. Notably, he led the groundbreaking ecological restoration of Johnson's Shut-Ins following the catastrophic Taum Sauk Reservoir failure—demonstrating unmatched commitment, ingenuity, and ecological knowledge.

(See "Closing a Chapter" on Page 4)

2025 Legislative Session and Special Budget Session

By Shirley Wolverson

While controversial issues swirled around the Missouri General Assembly, Missouri State Parks fared well this year. It was disappointing to see the session end abruptly without passage of the capital improvements budget bill before the constitutionally mandated deadline of May 9. This bill, **HB 19**, was only partially addressed during the special “extraordinary” session called by the governor. A new version, **SB 1**, includes \$13 million for new construction projects in state parks and \$20 million for various Department of Conservation initiatives, including fish hatchery improvements. SB 1 passed both the Senate and the House and was signed by the governor on June 16, 2025.

During the regular session, Missouri State Parks requested, and the governor and senate concurred with, the following items that were approved by both house and senate and are awaiting the governor’s signature:

A *conveyance* bill, **HB 105** sponsored by Rep. Jeff Vernetti (R-123), that allows the transfer of the Lee C. Fine Memorial Airport, located in Lake of the Ozarks State Park, to the City of Osage Beach that has managed it for 20 years. MPA approved a resolution in 2024 endorsing the transfer – under the condition that if the City decides to decommission the airport (which is unlikely) the ownership of the airport should revert to the state park system. This condition does not appear in the bill; however, MPA will encourage its inclusion in the deed documents. (Signed 7/2/25)

Sunshine law exemptions were included in **HB 145 & 59** for (1) individually identifiable customer information of visitors who make a camping, lodging, or shelter reservation in a state park and (2) the specific location of a plant or animal species considered endangered, threatened, critically imperiled, imperiled, or vulnerable when the known location may cause the species to be at an increased risk of peril. **HB 59** from Rep. Sassmann (R-61) was included in the bill by Rep. Falkner (R-10)

Invasive species continue to pose a significant threat across the state, and Missouri’s state parks are no exception. Natural resource stewardship practices—such as prescribed burning and detailed documentation—are essential tools in managing their spread. Because invasive plants do not remain confined to where they are introduced, they frequently encroach on protected areas like state parks. A newly passed measure aims to address this issue: **SB 105**, sponsored by Senator Bernskoetter (R-6) and handled in the House by Representative Sassmann (R-61), prohibits the sale of certain invasive plant species, helping to safeguard our parks.

A 6.8% *salary increase* for uniformed park rangers, and *radios* for the rangers that are adequate for communicating during emergencies with other first responders, were included in the budget along with \$540,000 for *fencing* along Rock Island Trail State Park. (Signed 6/30/25)

A proposal to purchase 1,600-acres along the Elk River in McDonald County was first introduced in 2024 by Rep. Dirk Deaton (R-159) but was vetoed by the governor at the time (see *Heritage*, October 2024). The initiative was reintroduced this year by Rep. Deaton, now serving as Budget Committee Chairman. The \$19 million appropriation to purchase, plan, design, and construct a park on this land was in the current DNR budget (**HB 6**), with \$15 million from general revenue and \$4 million from the park sales tax fund approved by the legislature. Governor Kehoe line-item vetoed \$7.5 million on June 30; although there is a veto session in September, MPA is uncertain whether the remaining funds will be sufficient to purchase the property.

Initiative petitions and constitutional amendments once again drew legislative attention, with several bills introduced to raise signature requirements or increase the threshold for passage. These efforts did not advance. However, a new provision was enacted that changes the process for drafting summary statements—the language that appears on the statewide ballot. In cases of dispute or appeal, the Secretary of State will now have up to three chances to revise the summary before the courts may step in to write their own version, which remains subject to appeal.

Missouri State Parks emerged with several key successes during the 2025 legislative session. As legislation now awaits the governor’s final approval, MPA will remain engaged to ensure that the interests of Missouri’s parks—and the people who cherish them—are well protected and supported.



MPA Members Attend State Park Advocacy Day April 2nd

2024 MPA Annual Meeting

By Kendra Varns Wallis

The 42nd Annual Meeting of the Missouri Parks Association took place October 25-27 at Bennett Spring State Park. The event kicked off on Friday afternoon



Ha Ha Tonka SP Guided Hike with a guided hike at Ha Ha Tonka State Park, led by park staff. This was followed by a reception that evening at the Bennett Spring State Park Dining Lodge, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. A highlight of the reception was a special gathering of state retirees who shared entertaining stories from their time working in Missouri's state parks.

On Saturday, Director David Kelly delivered the annual State of the State Parks Address, updating the membership on the many positive developments within the park system. Hayley Schnaath, park specialist, gave an insightful historical presentation celebrating the 100th Anniversary of Bennett Spring State Park. In the afternoon, attendees had the option to participate in a park tour, learn fly fishing techniques from expert Jim Rodgers, or enjoy a kayaking experience with Park Superintendent Gabe DuMond. The day concluded with a delicious dinner at the park's dining lodge.

The weekend wrapped up on Sunday morning with the annual members meeting and a board meeting. The board elected the following MPA officers: Deb Schnack is returning as President, Kelley Brent is the new Vice President and Kurt Gretzinger is the new Secretary. Dennis Wilhelmi is continuing as Treasurer. MPA extends a big thank you to the park staff, as well as long-time park concessionaires Jim and Carmen Rodgers, for their warm hospitality.

Make your reservations now for the 2025 MPA Annual Gathering, which will be September 19-21 at First Missouri State Capitol SHS and Edward "Ted" and Pat Jones-Confluence Point State Park. You'll find the registration materials and full schedule in this issue of *Heritage*.

UPOP Spotlight

By Kathleen Kapayou

The Green Center in St. Louis has proudly partnered with the Missouri Parks Association and Missouri State Parks to host the St. Louis Region's Underserved Populations Outreach Program (UPOP).

This June, fifth and sixth graders from the Jennings School District spent two weeks exploring and learning about the ecosystems and history of Missouri.

Within a one-hour drive from their school, students can walk along a tall grass prairie path at The Green Center, explore creek life at Dr. Edmund A. Babler State Park, hike in a forest along the Meramec River at Castlewood State Park and learn about how Missouri became a state at First Missouri State Capitol SHS. Classroom lessons come to life outdoors in this program; students can have hands-on learning experiences every day about the natural world around them.

Teachers participate in the program with their students, and one stated that the program "enables children to become familiar with different types of wildlife in their natural habitat through exploring nature in rare and beautiful



2025 UPOP at Dr. Edmund A. Babler SP

forms. [They] explore and discover creativity and problem solving while fostering communication skills as children learn by doing and experiment with ideas in nature." Children's comments included: "Now spending more time outside gets me more excited than I did before."

UPOP is made possible by our generous members! To contribute to the 2025 program, click here <https://missouriparksassociation.org/donate>

("Closing a Chapter" from Page 2)

Ken's influence extended beyond the field, as he mentored a generation of stewards, developed park-wide protocols, and instilled a culture of responsibility for natural resources at every level of the park system.

Following his retirement, the search for a successor led not far from home. In February 2025, **Chris Crabtree**, a respected ecologist and longtime member of the MSP team, was named the new Director of the Natural Resource Management Program.

Chris' history with MSP dates to his early roles as a seasonal naturalist and maintenance worker at Prairie SP. Since joining full-time in 2008, he has led ecological initiatives in the Ozark Region and across the state, including glade and woodland restoration, prescribed fire program development, and biological surveys at state parks like Big Oak Tree and Shepard of the Hills.

With Crabtree at the helm, MSP is poised to continue its proud tradition of sound natural resource stewardship.

Park Briefs

Locust Creek Covered Bridge SHS. Locust Creek Covered Bridge was successfully relocated on February 26, 2025, to its new home at Pershing State Park. Built in 1868, the 151-foot-long bridge once spanned Locust Creek along Route 8, one of America's first transcontinental roads. In 1930, after cars replaced horse-drawn wagons, Route 8 was replaced by U.S. Highway 36 and the bridge no longer served its intended purpose. The road across the bridge isn't the



New location at Pershing SP

only thing that changed. Most of Locust Creek's channel was straightened after World War II, leaving the bridge to cross a dry creek bed. The bridge became increasingly vulnerable to damage due to the instability of the watershed.

The consensus was that the bridge, one of four remaining covered bridges in Missouri, must be saved by relocation. Moving an historic structure from its original site affects historic value, however historic preservation officials agreed to maintain its historic site designation. It was a huge challenge to physically move the more than 150-year-old structure; however, with detailed planning and great skill it now rests at its new location, once again spanning Locust Creek.

Montauk State Park. The historic flooding on November 4, 2024, caused an estimated \$4-6 million in damage to Montauk State Park. Months after the devastating flood at the headwaters of the Current River, the park reopened to guests at the end of February. While the park reopened in time for opening day of catch-and-keep trout season, the park looked somewhat different. The Montauk Mill, a key landmark, suffered significant flood damage, with water rising up to a foot on the main floor. Extensive restoration is needed to restore the historic Mill, and it will likely remain closed throughout 2025. Layers of sand remain throughout the park, covering the grass and encroaching on the woodlands. Recently completed Revenue Bond work on Campground Loop 4 was extensively damaged. The reopening of Montauk State Park marked an important milestone in the recovery process, allowing visitors to once again enjoy the park's natural beauty and recreational offerings.

Wild Areas. In 1977, DNR launched a special program called Wild Areas to protect limited and increasingly rare outdoor resources within state parks. On December 31, 2024, Bryant Creek Hills Wild Area was designated as the thirteenth Wild Area in the Missouri State Parks system. It is in the northeastern part of Bryant Creek State Park, near Ava, and spans the forested hills and hollows between Bryant Creek and Highway N. This pristine, undeveloped area is charac-

terized by mature oak-pine forests, fern-lined hollows, weathered sandstone outcrops, small spring-fed streams, wet-weather waterfalls, cane breaks, and towering bluffs overlooking the clear waters of Bryant Creek. Another notable Wild Area is the Goggins Mountain Wild Area, located within Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park. This 5,000-acre area was expanded on April 9, 2024, to include an additional 800 acres, bridging the gap between the Goggins Mountain Wild Area and the Bell Mountain Wilderness (9,143 acres) in the Mark Twain National Forest. Together, the state park and national forest now contain nearly 15,000 acres of continuous wilderness, making it the second largest such area in Missouri, after the Irish Wilderness, which spans 16,277 acres near Eleven Point SP. (For more information about Wild Areas in Missouri see *Heritage*, July 2023).

Revenue Bond Project Update. Following the completion of new lighting at Onondaga Cave State Park (see *Heritage*, October 2024), six other revenue bond projects have been completed. Johnson's Shut-Ins has six new cabins available that are managed by the concessionaire. The campground at Big Lake State Park now offers 28 campsites with sewer, water and 50-amp electrical service (full hookups) following major renovations. Roaring River State Park has completed improvements to Campground 3, adding full hookups and a new shower house, and the campground reopened for guests in February 2025. Table Rock State Park improvements to Campground 2 include full hookups for 22 campsites; the renovated campsites are now available. In Dr. Edmund A. Babler Memorial State Park, 35 renovated campsites now offer full hookups. Montauk SP Campground Loop 4 reopened with full hookups. See <https://mostateparks.com/revenue-bonds> for more information about all 28 revenue bond projects.



Table Rock State Park Campground

Conceptual Development Process. Conceptual development plans (CDPs) guide the future use and development at each state park and historic site. There are five phases of the CDP process: data gathering, drafting, public feedback, finalizing the plan, and implementation. Echo Bluff, St. Joe, and Harry S. Truman State Parks, Missouri Mines SHS, and Watkins Woolen Mill SHS and State Park are in various CDP stages; the final CDPs for Sappington Cemetery SHS and Sappington African American Cemetery SHS in Arrow Rock are now available. The public is encouraged to provide input and review survey results on the CDP page at <https://mostateparks.com>.



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July 2025

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Christopher “Kit” Bond – RIP

By John Karel

On May 13, 2025, former Missouri Governor (1973-1977 and 1981-1985) and U.S. Senator (1986-2011) Christopher “Kit” Bond, passed away at the age of 86. Since then, he has been widely eulogized as an effective civic leader on behalf of his home state and nation, who could and did reach across party lines to benefit his constituents. Members of MPA, and all who care about Missouri State Parks, should be aware of the pivotal role Governor Bond played, especially during his second gubernatorial term, in revitalizing and stabilizing the financial support of our park system.

Readers of MPA’s state park book will recall that the late 1970s and early 1980s were crisis years for Missouri state budgets, including for state parks. Governor Bond was an essential leader in addressing this crisis, doing so through two major initiatives.

The first dealt with the backlog of unmet capital improvement needs that had been building up for decades. State park issues were matched by parallel needs across most state departments, and Governor Bond took the lead in working with state legislators to craft a large statewide bond

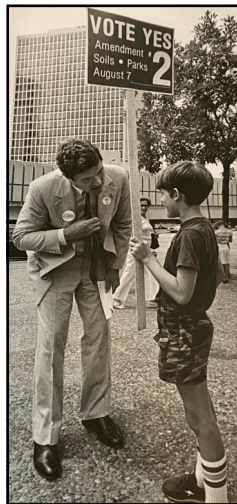
issue, dubbed the Third State Building Fund, to address these issues. At first, many legislators saw no need to include state parks in this program, but Bond and his administration insisted that they be included. The result, after passage in 1982, was the eventual appropriation of millions of dollars for state park infrastructure work, the most important such capital investment since the federal support during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Capital needs are cyclic, and we now need another round of significant investment, but the improvements provided by the Third State Building Fund were of historic importance, and benefit us to this day.

The other was annual appropriations for ongoing operations of the park system by the General Assembly. These funds had fallen to dangerously

low levels by the early 1980s, creating a funding crisis that is also described in the MPA book. It was a perilous and dramatic time. It led for one thing, however, to the founding of the Missouri Parks Association; for another, it resulted in the proposal for a new and renewable state tax, the Parks and Soils Sales Tax, which combined dedicated funding for state park operations and for soil and water conservation projects.

An initiative petition was created and signatures gathered for this constitutional amendment that required a favorable statewide vote of the people of Missouri. It was on the ballot in August of 1984, as Amendment #2. Governor Bond endorsed this ballot measure and campaigned for it. His support and bipartisan popularity were crucial to it passing on August 7. To this day, funds from this tax constitute the core – 75% – of our state parks operating budget.

This tax requires periodic renewal, and MPA is now preparing for another renewal campaign, with a statewide vote in 2026. As we prepare for that campaign, we should pause in recognition and respect for those, like Gov. Bond, who led the way in framing the relative fiscal security we cherish today.



*Gov. Christopher Bond 1984
L.T. Spence, St. Louis Post Dispatch*

MPA 43rd Annual Gathering
First Missouri State Capitol State Historic Site
September 19-21, 2025

Plan now to attend the 43rd Annual Gathering of the Missouri Parks Association! We'll kick things off Friday afternoon with tours of the First Missouri State Capitol State Historic Site, followed by an evening opening reception. Saturday's schedule includes the annual *State of the State Parks* address, a presentation by the Director of the State Historic Preservation Office, and an afternoon field trip to Edward "Ted" and Pat Jones – Confluence Point State Park, followed by dinner. Sunday morning will conclude with the annual members meeting and a board meeting.

Hotel Accommodations

A block of rooms has been held for our group at: **Country Inn & Suites by Radisson**, Historic District, 1190 South Main Street, St. Charles, MO
Book your room using this link: [Hotel Booking Link](https://www.choicehotels.com/reservations/groups/pe97a6?checkInDate=2025-09-19&checkOutDate=2025-09-21&ratePlanCode=BQHNZY) (https://www.choicehotels.com/reservations/groups/pe97a6?checkInDate=2025-09-19&checkOutDate=2025-09-21&ratePlanCode=BQHNZY)
Or call (636) 206-3460 and mention the **MO Parks** group name for the block rate.

***Reservation Deadline for Hotel:** August 30, 2025

***Registration Deadline for Meals:** September 15, 2025

Friday, September 19th at First Missouri State Capitol State Historic Site, 200 South Main Street, St. Charles, MO 63301

3:00 – 5:00 pm – Registration and Tours of First Missouri State Capitol State Historic

5:00 – 7:00 pm - Opening Reception at First Missouri State Capitol State Historic Site (Heavy Hors d'oeuvres and Drinks)

Saturday, September 20th

Breakfast on your own

Meeting Room at OPO Startups-117 South Main Street, St. Charles, MO 63301

8:30 - 9:00 am - Registration (Coffee Provided)

9:00 am - Welcome to MPA 43rd Annual Gathering (Deb Schnack, MPA President)

- Preserving Missouri's Past: An Overview of the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) (Dawn Scott, SHPO Director)

10:15 am - Break

10:30 am - State of the State Parks Address (Laura Hendrickson, Director of Missouri State Parks)

12:00n - Boxed Lunch

1:30 – 4:00 pm Afternoon Fieldtrip – Guided Tour of Edward "Ted" and Pat Jones-Confluence Point State Park

– Self guided visit to Audubon Center at Riverlands

Historic Downtown St. Charles

6:00 – 7:30 pm – Dinner (confirming location)

Sunday, September 21st

Breakfast on your own

Meeting Room at OPO Startups-117 South Main Street, St. Charles, MO 63301

8:30 am - Annual meeting of members (Coffee Provided)

9:30 am - Quarterly meeting of MPA board of directors (all are welcome to attend)

12:00n - Adjourn

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Flat Rate Registration with Event Counts for Planning

Name(s) _____

#Persons _____ @ \$75; Total: \$ _____ (includes all meals, activities, and tours)

Address _____

Phone _____ Email(s) _____

Special Dietary needs (indicate) _____

Event Counts: Activities and Meals

#Persons _____ Tours of First Missouri State Capitol State Historic Site (Low Physical Activity)

#Persons _____ Fieldtrip and Tour of Edward "Ted" and Pat Jones-Confluence Point State Park (Low Physical Activity)

#Persons _____ Friday Night Reception

#Persons _____ Saturday Lunch

#Persons _____ Saturday Dinner

Make check payable to Missouri Parks Association and mail with form **postmarked by September 15th** to Missouri Parks Association, P.O. Box 8531, Kansas City, MO 64114. For questions or link to online registration, email: kendra.wallis@missouriparks.org