Tony Evers, Governor

Telephone 608-266-2621 Toll Free 1-888-936-7463 TTY Access via relay - 711



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES 2024 STATE REPORT

May 2024

BUREAU OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Staffing

During the calendar year 2023, the Bureau of Wildlife Management started the year with 15 vacant positions or a 19.5% vacancy rate. The Wildlife Management program lost another position in the last biennial budget cycle, and over the last 10 years, experienced a general decline in the number of positions going from 162.5 down to 143 FTE positions currently. These positions ranged from Supervisors to Wildlife Technicians.

Wolf Management Plan

In October 2023, the state Natural Resources Board approved the 2023 Wisconsin Wolf Management Plan (Plan), concluding a nearly three-year long process. The approved Plan provides a comprehensive summary of wolf ecology and management in Wisconsin and outlines a pragmatic vision to wolf management and stewardship. The plan does not include a targeted statewide population size or goal by which to guide management actions. Instead, the Plan recommends utilizing an adaptive management approach. The approach set forth in the Plan is expected to generally maintain statewide wolf abundance and distribution at levels comparable to recent years (overwinter estimates of approximately 800 to 1,200 wolves), while explicitly allowing for fluctuations in local wolf densities, including population reductions as warranted. The full plan is available online on the DNR's wolf management plan webpage.

Sharptailed Grouse Management Plan

Sharp-tailed grouse are managed as a game species in Wisconsin and are listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need due to habitat loss, and other factors that may threaten the persistence of the species including fragmentation of large blocks of open landscape, ecological succession, and conversion of habitats to other uses. In Wisconsin, sharp-tailed grouse exist primarily on a core group of six managed barrens public properties and scattered private lands. Conservation genetics research demonstrating that Wisconsin sharp-tailed grouse have significantly reduced genetic diversity, high levels of inbreeding, and genetic isolation provide additional urgency.

The WDNR Sharp-tailed Grouse Working Group and Advisory Committee were charged with revising and updating the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan, which was approved by the Natural Resource Board in April 2024. The plan's overarching goal is to ensure a managed sustainable population of sharp-tailed grouse in Wisconsin, by implementing landscape level habitat strategies within the Northwest Focus Area.



Greater Prairie Chicken Management Plan

The Greater Prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*, GRPC) is a state-threatened grouse species that historically was present in every county in Wisconsin. Landscape-level land use changes have caused large shifts in the range and abundance of prairie chickens, finally resulting in their isolation in a small portion of central Wisconsin.

The WDNR, in consultation with the public, numerous conservation organizations, researchers and the Natural Resources Board, developed the 2022-2032 Greater Prairie Chicken Management Plan, which was approved in June 2022. Information in the plan includes GRPC biology, threats, an assessment of the 2004-2014 management plan, current management, public use, monitoring, prior and future research, and a plan for future management. Future management will be focused on the Paul J. Olson, Leola Marsh, and Buena Vista Wildlife Areas (BVWA) where GRPC currently exist and the lands between those areas. Highlights of future management include increased habitat management; increased permanent land protections thru acquisitions and easements; collaboration with partners to promote existing and new private lands initiatives; and expand education and outreach efforts.

Elk Management

There are currently two wild, free-ranging elk herds in Wisconsin established through reintroduction efforts. The northern elk herd (formally called the Clam Lake herd) originated in 1995 as an experimental release conducted by the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. A second reintroduction effort established the central elk herd (formally called the Black River herd) in 2015. The Clam Lake and Black River Elk Management Plan Amendment (2012) provided updates to the original management plans and has guided management efforts most recently. Over the last year, work has continued updating the Wisconsin Elk Management Plan, 2024-2034 through the involvement of the WDNR elk advisory committee. Based on current progress on the plan, the intent is to present an updated version of the Elk Management Plan to the Natural Resources Board in 2024 for approval.

Wisconsin has held annual, resident only, limited draw elk hunting seasons since 2018 in the northern Clam Lake Elk Range; new this year hunting opportunity will be expanded into the Central Elk Management Zone near Black River Falls. Based on population models and project herd growth, ~350 animals exist in the Northern Elk Management Zone and 8 tags will be issued. For the Central Elk Management Zone, the population is expected to reach ~180 animals and a total of 4 tags will be issued for this zone.

Chronic Wasting Disease – Surveillance and Management Efforts

In 2023, statewide CWD surveillance was focused on annual areas of interest, disease assessment, disease detection and hunter request testing for deer harvested anywhere in the state. A total of 17,329 deer were sampled and tested for CWD statewide during the 2023 surveillance year (April 1st – March 31st) with 1,586 positive detections, primarily within the endemic area in southern Wisconsin. CWD was also detected in wild deer in Jackson, Polk, Trempealeau and Waushara counties for the first time during the 2023 deer season along with additional wild positive detections in other CWD-affected counties.

The department continued the CWD automation effort, allowing hunters to submit data associated with CWD samples through their Go Wild account. Utilization of the electronic data submission option continued to increase with 19.4% of all sampled deer in 2023 having data submitted through the online form compared to 17% in 2022. During the nine-day gun deer season, there were 237 total CWD sampling locations available to hunters, including 176 self-serve kiosks (13 enrolled in the Adopt-a-Kiosk program). In addition to CWD sampling opportunities, the WDNR advertised a total of 155 carcass disposal locations statewide, including 77 dumpsters in the Adopt-a-Dumpster program, 45

dumpsters hosted by the department and the remaining disposal options administered by private companies or municipalities.

Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP)

In 2023, Wisconsin's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) undertook a full program review. This process culminated in the development and approval of a comprehensive program plan aimed at increasing the partnership between DMAP members and the program, expanding the program's scope, and improving alignment between the program's offerings and its member needs.

Despite working through a program review and ceasing advertising, participation in DMAP continues to grow. Since 2020, the amount of land enrolled in DMAP has increased by 48% and the number of participants by 68%. This growth has resulted in more than 505,000 acres and 3,300 people receiving technical advice and resources on private land deer herd and habitat management. In 2023 alone over 44,000 acres received on-site visits and management plans from DMAP staff, a 60% increase from 2022. Of the individuals who received DMAP site visits in 2023, over 90% reported that their DMAP participation not only encouraged them to do habitat management but made them more likely to implement management. Continuing DMAP members were 7.5x more likely to have implemented 3+ management practices and 2.5x more likely to be working with cost-share programs than new members.

Public Lands

In 2023, Wildlife Management acquired 2,095 acres within property project boundaries for over \$4 million with various monies, including Knowles-Nelson Stewardship, Pittman-Robertson and NAWCA grant funding. The 1,800-acre acquisition at Princes Point Wildlife Area in Jefferson County was a joint effort between NRCS to secure a wetland reserve easement and DNR to purchase the remaining value of the land for the full range of public access and recreation. Wetland restoration, spearheaded by Ducks Unlimited, begins the fall of 2024.

The Voluntary Public Access & Habitat Incentive Program and the Turkey Hunter Access Program provide almost 40,000 acres of public access on private lands through leases with 200 + Wisconsin landowners. This program is made possible by the Federal Farm Bill. WDNR has received grant funds 3 times in the last 10 years to continue this vital program for public hunting, fishing, trapping and wildlife observation. The current grant expires June 30th, 2024; we are hoping the next Farm Bill provides significant funding for this program across the nation. In 2023, WM hosted the first ever Volunteer Meeting & Award Ceremony, celebrating and acknowledging the collective 17,400 hours and \$423,371 of funding donated or raised in the last two years to support the state's fish and wildlife areas from over 35 Adopt Groups and 12 Friends Groups.

BUREAU OF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Adaptive Management Plan for Panfish

In 2016, Wisconsin began an experiment to study the effects of 3 reduced bag limits on bluegill and black crappie size structure on 94 lakes where overharvest was a concern. From 2020-2023, biological data were collected, and stakeholder evaluations were conducted. In 2023, we analyzed data from these evaluations and began planning next steps. Size structure improvements were most dramatic and consistent in lakes that were assigned the most restrictive regulation of the 3 tested: a daily bag limit of 15 panfish with no more than 5 of any species. Stakeholders included those who participated in focus groups on a subset of study lakes, those who received surveys while visiting a study lake, and a random sample of all Wisconsin anglers – all groups generally supported the use of reduced bag limits to improve size structures, although a notable number of anglers still would prefer liberal bag limits. Staff are now preparing a final report, recommendations, and a set of rule changes following up on the results.

Stakeholder engagement informing the public and key stakeholders will occur in 2024 and 2025. If approved, rule changes will go into effect in 2026 when the experimental regulations are set to sunset.

Brook Trout Reserves

Brook trout are the only stream trout native to Wisconsin, which has an estimated 21,000 miles of suitable cold-water stream habitat. Since the 1990s, climate-driven changes have contributed to tougher conditions for brook trout. Adult densities and successful reproduction are both declining. Around the year 2050, over 15,000 miles of currently suitable habitat is projected to become unsuitable based on temperature changes. Fisheries Management and our partners are taking significant steps to confront this challenge: 1) landscape level planning to identify the most resilient brook trout systems (Brook Trout Reserves); 2) classifying the threats and developing management strategies to address them; 3) collaborating with partners on Conservation Planning and Implementation; and 4) stepping up communication and outreach.

In 2023, the Bureau of Fisheries Management is now stepping up communications and outreach efforts. We built a Brook Trout Reserves Webpage and a companion Story map that are under final review for public release. We began working on a proposal for EPA-GLRI funding (now successfully secured in 2024) to collaborate with USFS staff, FWS staff, county highway department staff, external partners, and local township governments to identify and prioritize barriers to the movement of native brook trout, plan, and implement appropriate aquatic connectivity actions within 23 sub watersheds (HUC_12) of Brook Trout Reserve #41, Oconto/Peshtigo River Headwaters (Wisconsin's largest Brook Trout Reserve). These projects will promote aquatic connectivity for brook trout and preferred conservation practices in the face of a warming climate.

In 2023, the Fisheries Management Program submitted a proposal to seek authority to buy fishery management easements from willing landowners among 28 of the 42 Brook Trout Reserve subwatersheds in the North Central Forest region. These easements aim to protect the stream and its riparian zone and provide public access (except hunting and trapping). Here the department intends to acquire forest management, development, instream habitat, and agency trapping rights along riparian areas. Easement widths will typically range between 66 feet and 300 feet from each stream bank.

Inland Trout

In 2023, Fisheries management staff completed 77 trout habitat improvement projects on 53 streams totaling just over 68 miles. Of the 77 projects completed, 9 restored aquatic connectivity, 10 were intensive instream habitat projects, 51 involved vegetation management along the riparian corridor, 1 focused on beaver management, 4 conducted property habitat inventories, 1 stream crossing installation and 1 dredging project. Staff also conducted 435 rotational trout surveys on 178 streams and 282 trout trend surveys on 172 streams to assess Wisconsin's inland trout populations.

Great Lakes

In 2023, Lake Superior staff have been working on updating both lake trout and cisco quotas on Lake Superior to continue our strong management of native species. They completed a fish passage project on Nebagamon Creek that comprised of removing an old railroad earthen berm over the creek and re-establishing a culvert less run of the river. This will benefit native fish movements in this important creek which is a tributary to the Bois Brule River. Lake Michigan staff continue to work with stakeholders on a commercial harvest of lake trout in Lake Michigan. Since the conclusion of stakeholder meetings in early 2023, department staff have been working on various aspects of the issue

and will be ready to begin writing a scope statement for the commercial harvest of lake trout in mid-2024. In 2023, we completed our fishing assessments for both <u>Lake Superior</u> and <u>Lake Michigan</u>.

This is the second year of using electronic sport trolling reporting application for reporting effort and catch information on Lake Michigan and Lake Superior is underway. Charter captains successfully entered over 12,000 trips into the system in 2023. Updates to the report form were developed in the winter and were available to the captains as the spring coho salmon fishery got underway. This regulation change helped reduce staff time required to enter data from paper forms and helped collect more accurate and timely data.

Fish Contaminants Program and Consumption Advisories

The Fisheries Management Program continues to monitor contaminant levels in fish from waterbodies across the state but the bulk of the resources for the contaminants program are currently focusing on locations with known or suspected contamination issues, primarily related to PFAS (perand polyfluoroalkyl substances) contamination. As we understand more about the impacts of this class of contaminants on human health, the Program has been dedicating most funds allocated for contaminants monitoring to PFAS. Between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023, the Fisheries Management Program, in consultation with the Department of Health Services, have issued multiple fish consumption advisories across the state. In 2023, we were preparing to publish a new version of the Choose Wisely advisory publication (for release in early 2024).

Stocking

Fisheries staff raised and stocked over 6.2 million fish during 2023. We are working with private aquaculture facilities to both purchase and make available surplus fish for stocking on the landscape. We are currently working on a project to drill a new well at the Les Voigt State Fish Hatchery that will add water redundancy and capacity for fish rearing. Since our current facility does not have enough water to efficiently use the current structure, we are drilling a well and testing it for capacity and water quality prior to developing additional infrastructure to deliver and use the potential new water. Depending on the water available, we may pursue the use of recirculation aquaculture technology at Les Voigt to efficiently use available water resources.

Walleye Plan

The DNR's Walleye Team is now in the implementation phase of an updated Walleye Management Plan completed in 2021.We have already made progress by setting up a GovDelivery list to stay in touch with and provide updates to stakeholders. Additionally, we have generated a list of Walleye fishing guides that we can consult with. We conducted a Summer 2023 workshop to discuss Walleye restoration strategies with key partners and completed a regulation toolbox review and update. Members of the state Walleye Management Team were selected to attend a structured decision-making workshop at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, WV in January 2024. The workshop will focus on incorporating the resist-accept-direct climate adaptation model into structured decision-making, and the Walleye Team hopes to develop a process with stakeholders on how to adapt future Walleye management decisions in Wisconsin under uncertain climate-influenced scenarios.

In 2023, fisheries staff completed its third (of a planned five or six) rounds of making population estimates in lakes that have been part of the Wisconsin Walleye Initiative, a program in which WDNR is stocking fall fingerling Walleye in more than 300 lakes statewide. The fisheries program will be examining how much contribution the fall fingerling walleye have to adult populations, assessing why stocking is successful in some places and not others, and endeavoring to determine optimal stocking rates based on the type of lake receiving stocked Walleye. The program will also be looking to identify those adult populations that were created from stocking that are now successfully naturally reproducing at a level that could sustain the population without additional stocking.

OFFICE OF APPLIED SCIENCE (Wildlife and Fisheries Research)

The Office of Applied Science (OAS) provides original research and consultation services on priority fish and wildlife management and conservation needs. The OAS team of research scientists, biologists and technicians work to supply the agency and stakeholders with objective, applied science to support decision making. OAS staff lead multiple research projects and leverage resources through collaboration with universities and other government agencies. OAS research is published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, in DNR technical reports and provided through customized products to support the work of agency committees and decision makers. Below are some highlights of ongoing and new research projects and initiatives within OAS.

Decision Science

OAS provides tools and resources to assist FWP programs in making conservation and management decisions through our decision science sub team. Decision science draws from multiple scientific fields, including economics, psychology, and mathematics, providing a framework to support transparent, robust decision making. Using decision science tools, such as Structured Decision Making, we can evaluate how well outcomes will meet objectives and help decision makers weigh options. Recently, OAS completed two decision science consults in collaboration with the Wildlife Management Program (CWD response plan update) and Fisheries Management Program (Fisheries Strategic Plan). The decision science team is working on two new projects: Wildlife management strategic plan and Walleye management in the face of climate change.

Snapshot Wisconsin

Snapshot Wisconsin is a partnership to monitor wildlife year-round using a statewide network of trail cameras. The project provides data needed for wildlife management decision support. It is also a unique opportunity for individuals, families, and students to get involved in monitoring the state's valuable natural resources. Over the past eight years, the volunteer-based Snapshot Wisconsin trail camera network has become an important source of wildlife monitoring information. Data collected by Snapshot Wisconsin is used to document species presence, estimate reproductive rates, age structure, estimate population sizes, and ultimately inform hunting quotas and permit levels for harvested populations. With nearly seven million deer detections in the database, Snapshot Wisconsin is a unique resource that has contributed and will continue to contribute to a wide range of deer research topics and better-informed deer management decisions.

We continued to sustain the Snapshot Wisconsin volunteer network through FY23 with 1,870 volunteers monitoring 2,000 cameras. We strategically recruited volunteers in counties where the proportion of filled survey blocks was less than 25% and achieved this goal in 45 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. At the end of FY23, volunteers had collected a total of 80.6 million photographs, donating 17,331 hours of their time in the process. Valued at federal minimum wage, these donations total over \$125,000.

Beaver Influence on Coldwater Stream Habitat and Trout Populations

American beaver plays a complex role in the dynamics of low-gradient streams of the Upper Midwest, especially where dams alter important habitat for trout. For this reason, the control of beaver to maintain free-flowing conditions in select coldwater streams has been a core part of the WDNR management of Brook Trout and Brown Trout. However, beaver control on trout streams is often misunderstood, with deeply divided opinions among both the public and managers, leaving many unanswered questions concerning the science behind the control program. Calls for research to address management needs were included in recent WDNR management plans for both beaver and trout. In 2018, the WDNR initiated a study to measure the effects of beaver dams on coldwater stream habitat and trout populations in different ecological regions and beaver management zones across Wisconsin. A key approach to this study is the experimental manipulation of beaver management. Beaver control was removed from 24 free-flowing streams to allow for recolonization and dam building, and beaver and beaver dams were removed from 1 stream to restore free-flowing conditions. Though still in its early stages, this study has begun to fill the gap in our knowledge about how beavers influence habitat quality, trout population attributes, and fish community structure in Wisconsin's coldwater streams in different ecological regions of the state. For example, stream temperature along with trout abundance and productivity seem to be greatly influenced by site conditions.

Assessing Wisconsin Waterfowl Harvest Breeding Derivation Using Isotope Ecology

Determining origins of waterfowl is important for understanding the strength of migratory connectivity and establishing appropriate management and conservation strategies (Hobson 1999). In Wisconsin, waterfowl harvest management has historically been influenced in part by an assumption that hunters primarily harvest ducks that breed, or were hatched, within the state. For example, harvest derivations using band recoveries for mallards suggest that approximately 70% of mallards harvested by Wisconsin hunters are derived within the state (T.W. Arnold, unpublished data).

Using mallard, ring-necked duck, and wood duck feathers collected from known-origin birds in Wisconsin and hunter-harvested wings submitted to the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) Flyway Parts Collection Survey or 'Wingbee', our objectives are to: 1) evaluate Wisconsin waterfowl harvest derivation using isotopic origin assignment methods and compare isotope- and band-derived origin approaches, and 2) assess if there are temporal differences related to origin for early- versus late-harvested individuals. To make comparisons between isotope-derived and band-derived origin assignments, we obtained banding and encounter records from the US Geological Survey's Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL). For our initial analysis of band-derived origins, we focused on mallards as they are the most commonly harvested duck species in Wisconsin and considered BBL data from the most recent 10-year period (2012–2021). We retained records of mallards banded during pre-season banding operations (June-August) and harvested by hunters during the subsequent hunting season in Wisconsin (i.e., direct recoveries). We determined the origins of 2,038 direct band recoveries. Most mallards harvested in Wisconsin were banded within the US (95.6%) and originated locally (89.2%). Future work will expand the direct band recovery assignments to wood ducks and determine whether origins of mallards and wood ducks harvested in Wisconsin varies by age, sex, latitude, and season date.

Evaluating Creel Survey Efficiencies for Recreational Fisheries

Recreational fisheries are a significant economic driver in Wisconsin, with millions of anglers generating billions of dollars of economic activity each year from fishing the Great Lakes, large rivers, and inland lakes and streams (American Sportfishing Association 2020). Creel surveys conducted at fishing access sites to measure recreational fishing effort, catch, and harvest are a vital component of successful fisheries management. However, performing creel surveys on large water bodies like the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River or for large numbers of disparate lakes and streams can present significant logistical and financial challenges. Additionally, several attributes of the recreational fishing sector. Typically, intensive angler intercept survey methods have been employed to obtain multiple observations on a limited number of water bodies each year, allowing for relatively precise estimates of fishing effort, catch, and harvest for particular water bodies of interest. However, making inferences from a subset of water bodies to a larger population of water bodies can be challenging given the heterogeneity of recreational fisheries across the lakes and streams and within the Great Lakes and across large rivers.

This study aims to determine whether creel survey efficiency can be improved by combining a model-based approach and reallocation of sampling effort spatially and temporally to minimize bias and

maximize the precision of the resulting estimates of recreational fishery metrics for the Great Lakes and inland lakes and streams in Wisconsin. The hypothesis is that by incorporating empirical predictive models, reduced-sampling-effort schemes can improve creel survey efficiency without considerable losses in accuracy and precision.

Spawning Dynamics of Northern Pike and Muskellunge

In Wisconsin, muskellunge are an immensely important native species economically and culturally to both the general public and tribal communities. However, a closely related species, the northern pike which is native to the region but not to every waterbody, has been introduced to many native muskellunge-only systems. These introductions have coincided with declines in muskellunge populations potentially indicating a flip in system configuration from highly desired muskellunge dominated to undesired northern pike dominate. Yet, in some instances these two species appear to coexist without one dominating over the other. Knowledge of the spawning behavior and interactions between these two species will provide managers with options for managing muskellunge - northern pike systems in different ways depending on their goals. This study seeks to provide that knowledge so managers can decide what strategies may be necessary to meet their goals, be they coexistence in relatively even abundances or dominance by one species over the other.

BUREAU OF NATURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION

Wisconsin Wildlife Action Plan

During 2023, the bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation (NHC) continued to build on numerous conservation efforts for species at-risk, as well as habitat management for some of the most critical habitats in the state. Revising the Wisconsin Wildlife Action Plan was a major focus starting in 2023 and continuing into 2024. Over one thousand species were evaluated (ranked) using NatureServe methodology and other methods to draft the initial list of "Species of Greatest Conservation Need". Work has continued in 2024 to develop the remaining materials needed to satisfy the eight required elements of the plan which will be finalized in 2025. The species ranks were also the first step in kicking off the process of updating Wisconsin's list of threatened and endangered species; since this list is codified in administrative rule, it will be a three-year process to complete.

Habitat management

Habitat management continues to be critically important to maintain habitat for species at risk. NHC staff conducted prescribed burns on nearly 7000 acres of high-quality natural communities. Field staff also controlled Invasives species on 6400 acres.

- NHC Ecologists completed 246 SGCN surveys and offered 55 field trips or presentations highlighting rare species, and natural communities protected on State Natural Areas.
- The department continues work to monitor and conserve the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly, including efforts to maintain its habitat on state lands, as well as work with more than 50 public and private partners to minimize impacts during a variety of activities. The population currently appears stable in Wisconsin where it can be locally highly abundant, but it is rare and declining in most other states where it still exists.
- Wisconsin continues to play an increasingly important role for **wood turtle**. The bureau documents populations, so they can be protected and has continued work to restore and protect several important nesting areas.

- The bureau continues to monitor winter **northern long-eared bat** populations and works with several university researchers who are testing ways to reduce impacts of white-nose syndrome, including vaccine trials. These efforts are part of our larger efforts to monitor and conserve bats, along with providing training for people who would like to help bats through education or on-the-ground efforts.
- Little brown bat numbers have increased significantly at all three of Wisconsin's largest hibernation sites for the second year in a row. Two of these sites hold populations numbering in the tens of thousands. Both sites experienced their eighth year of WNS infection in winter 2022-2023, had initially dropped to around 20% of their original population, but the past two winters saw a rebound in numbers by thousands of individuals. Despite this positive update, most of Wisconsin's 200 hibernation sites are still not showing signs of growth.
- Wisconsin appears to be a <u>stronghold</u> for **rusty-patched bumble bee**. Through recent work by the department with the help of many volunteers, rusty-patched bumble bee has been found in 46 counties since 2018.
- **Connecticut warbler** has declined at an alarming rate across its range and is currently known from only one breeding location in Wisconsin. The department is working with partners in Bayfield County to attempt to restore summer habitats, along with other conservation efforts with partners in neighboring states and provinces. Connecticut warbler is also a long-distance migrant and spends its winters in South America where habitat destruction is a major concern, so Wisconsin is collaborating with staff from other states and countries through a partnership created to conserve winter and stopover habitats. NHC continues active participation in AWFA's Southern Wings program, including limited financial support for the Neotropical Flyways Project, where possible.

Rare Plant Monitoring Program

The bureau continues to invest in its volunteer Rare Plant Monitoring Program. The volunteers had many highlights from across the state in 2023. Fifty-two volunteers submitted a total of 178 reports from 39 counties, over half of the counties in Wisconsin. Some volunteers submitted one report and others up to 20. All these efforts play a significant role in helping us understand the state of rare plants in Wisconsin and inform how we might conserve them. One volunteer documented a plant, northern wild senna (*Senna hebecarpa*), that hadn't been seen in 50 years in Wisconsin. NHC is partnering with the USFWS to support a coordinator position for the <u>Southern Driftless Grasslands</u> project, an effort designed to accelerate grassland conservation in southwest Wisconsin.

<u>Climate Adaptation</u>

The bureau continues to work on numerous on-the-ground climate adaptation projects. The Natural Resources Foundation sponsored the <u>creation of a film</u> based on the Spur Lake Restoration Project. Bureau staff are part of the Spur Lake Working Group that includes representatives from Sokaogon Chippewa Community, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, and Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. This project is aimed at restoring manoomin (wild rice) at a culturally important State Natural Area. The bureau also hired a fulltime Marketing & Communications Specialist in 2023 to help tell our stories and engage more people with our work including potential donors to the Endangered Resources Fund.

BUREAU OF PARKS AND RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Visitation and Annual Admission Sales

The Wisconsin State Park System (WSPS) continues to experience elevated visitation and camping reservations in 2023 compared to 2019 (pre-covid) levels, with an increase of 15% and 31% respectively. Parks and Forests remain instrumental for public health and wellness; the WSPS strives to provide opportunities for visitors to engage in outdoor activities and make our properties accessible and welcoming to all visitors. Sales of Annual Admission passes have risen 42% since 2019 (pre-pandemic) to 2023, with a total of 491,931 Annual Passes sold during the 2023 season.

	2023	2022	2021*	2020	2019					
Sticker Type	Quantity Sold	Quantity Sold	Quantity Sold	Quantity Sold	Quantity Sold					
Resident Annual	269,523	263,658	297,070	294,392	200,149					
Resident Reduced Rate Annual	67,961	67,961 66,574		70,997 39,735						
Non-Resident Annual	66,152	62,862	77,226	103,326	43,502					
Senior Annual Total Annual Stickers Sold	88,295 491,931	81,459 474,553	81,935 527,228	63,845 501,298	53,271 347,151					
*Reduced admission pass sales season due to COVID restrictions										

Electronic Payment Kiosk Expansion

In the past year we have added 29 new electronic payment kiosks bringing the total number to 40 kiosks at properties around the state. These new kiosks can dispense an admission sticker at the time of purchase. This new feature will be available at the beginning of the summer in 2024. In addition to purchasing Annual Admission Stickers online through Your Pass Now, visitors can now purchase daily admission passes. Annual state trail passes can also now be purchased online and are available in an electronic version that can be added to Google or Apple Wallet apps on their phone for proof of purchase. All these new customer service options provide for additional opportunities for visitor's ease of access and to enjoy their visit to a State Park System Property.

Camping Program

Interest in camping remained high in 2023. The number of camping nights purchased remained steady, with a 2% increase from 2022, and a 30% increase from 2019. Campsite occupancy was especially high between Memorial Day and Labor Day, with weekends booked at a statewide occupancy rate of 94%. Electric sites were particularly in demand, fully booked for the weekends and 80% on weekdays. Devil's Lake State Park had the highest number of bookings (21,322), but due to longer stays, Peninsula had the most camping nights purchased (60,465) and brought in the most revenue from camping (approx. \$1,860,000). The 2024 peak season is likely to be equally as busy, with more than 320,000 nights already purchased for stays between Memorial Day and Labor Day 2024. System-wide campsites are already 54% booked for the 2023 peak season.

	Camping Nights by Calendar Year									
	2019	2020	% Change 2019-2020	2021	% Change 2020-2021	2022	% Change 2021-2022	2023	% Change 2022-2023	
Camping Nights Purchased	450,624	478,800	+6%	608,132	+27%	580,327	-5%	589,446	+2%	

Staffing

Over the last year, four Property Supervisors, twelve Park Managers, and twelve Park Rangers were hired. While these hiring actions help put staff in vacant positions, many of these fills were internal transfers or promotions, so the program intends to continue to request additional authorization to fill vacancies as soon as funding becomes available. There are currently 18 vacant positions out of 201 total authorized FTE, representing a 9% vacancy rate. Due to spending authority, the WSPS is unable to fill all authorized positions.

Administrative Code Updates: Management of Department Lands

The Wisconsin State Park System is in the process of making updates to Administrative Code NR 45. The Public Lands Team (PLT), which includes representatives from all land managing programs, Legal, and the Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection, is leading the initiative. The initial request for comment resulted in over 400 proposal submissions from staff. Topics covered in the rule package include camping, reservations, and fees; drones; animals/pets; vehicles; noise; alcohol; and removal/damage to flora and fauna. General housekeeping modifications have also been made, along with adjustments to language to improve readability and understanding. The package is currently with the Wisconsin Legislature for final approval. Enactment of the revised Code is anticipated for July 2024.

Capital Development

Implementation began on the largest capital development budget for the program in history, topping \$110 million in funding/projects. The capital development backlog continues to exceed \$1.0 billion however program staff have been working to develop projects for consideration in the 25-27 budget.

Statewide Accomplishments

Check Out Wisconsin State Parks at Your Library was very popular, and the program continues to grow with the 2024 Phase. A partnership was established with Black Folks Camp Too to increase diversity among WSPS visitors and staff. By utilizing the "Unity Blaze" campfire symbol, the WSPS will show its commitment to "treating everyone, everywhere equally". Most staff have completed the initial training and quarterly training will start in the Summer of 2024. Universal Recreation – Program staff built on an existing universal recreation program Open the Outdoors by implementing several additional all-terrain wheelchairs, beach wheelchairs and adaptive kayaks. This was done through a funding initiative with several partners, grants, and state funding. Several new adaptive kayak launchers and accessible fishing pier upgrades were also completed.

DIVISION-LEVEL ROADMAP INITIATIVE

The Fish, Wildlife, & Parks Roadmap Action Plan, developed in 2021, serves as an umbrella from which the six programs with the Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) Division can collectively work to advance three key focus areas: Relevancy; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and Employee Engagement. In 2023, the Wisconsin DNR's FWP continued work on the Roadmap Action Plan by establishing division-level teams tasked with providing recommendations to agency leadership. These teams also established annual work plans with clear deliverables and timelines to ensure continuous progress and engagement in the three focus areas.

FWP remains committed to science-based conservation and recreational work while also addressing priority emerging needs such as climate change. Those key priorities remain and are addressed in each program's strategic direction or plan. FWP has adopted six vision statements to support the roadmap goals and future desired state:

- We foster a sense of community and become a provider of choice for the outdoor opportunities and recreational resources that Wisconsin's diverse citizens and visitors value and seek.
- Our programs anticipate, recognize, adapt, and respond to changing societal trends, customer preferences, and "here and now" demands; continue to use the best available science and technology for effective decision making.
- Wisconsin citizens understand, value, and support what we do through ongoing political advocacy, diverse partnerships, sustained volunteer efforts, donations, and sustainable financial support.
- Our traditional user group and constituents take pride in their relationship with and support of our core activities and responsibilities, while also supporting efforts for growing our customer base through existing and future programs.
- Our staff recognize, understand, and reflect the diversity of our customers, Wisconsin's citizens, and visitors. We interact in culturally appropriate ways with a diverse range of customers who are comfortable participating in Department programs, providing input for decision-making, accessing Department properties, and enjoying the recreational opportunities we provide.

Throughout 2023 and the first half of 2024, our Roadmap teams have held several in person meetings and have continued implementing their work plans. In May 2024, the Fish, Wildlife and Parks division leadership team conducted an annual review of the roadmap initiative and each division team's work plan progress. Several updates were warranted due to agency organizational changes, and opportunities for collaboration between the three teams were identified. Subsequently, the decision was made to update the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Roadmap, retitling it the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Relevancy and Engagement Plan, and restructure the division level teams from three teams to two teams. The two teams will include a Relevancy Team with continued focus on broadening our engagement with non-traditional stakeholders and underrepresented communities as well as a Belonging and Engagement Team that will continue building a workplace culture that is welcoming and inclusive.