

THE HERON

Bong Naturalist Association

Spring 2026



Message from BNA President John Davies

Welcome to the 2026 Spring edition of the Heron everyone! This edition is put together by the Bong Naturalist Association (BNA) for our members and the patrons of Richard Bong State Recreation Area (RBSRA).

If you are not familiar with the BNA, we are the official 'Friends' volunteer group for RBSRA. We support this park in many ways. As a Friends group, we are also allowed to sell things within the park, like campfire wood, with the obligation of giving back to RBSRA any profits we earn.

The park is currently coming back to life after a sleepy winter season. The park staff is busy preparing the Sunrise Campground to open. At last notice, that campground will open, not all at once, but with different portions opening throughout April with the intent to be fully open by the end of April. As usual, the Sunset campground is slated to open just before Memorial Day.

The BNA is working very hard this year with park staff to assist in hosting many naturalist-led events, along with doing some property maintenance and improvements. We can always use more help. If you love this park and would like to volunteer here, there are many ways to ask how; but two of the best ways are to contact Emily Cole, DNR Education Lead, and volunteer coordinator or myself, John Davies, BNA President.

Emily.Cole@wisconsin.gov

Bongnaturalistassociation@gmail.com

Come on out and enjoy this 4650-acre hidden gem of a park everyone!

George Molinaro: A Legacy of Public Service and Conservation

Early Life and Education

Upon entering the Molinaro Visitor Center, visitors are greeted by a small plaque that honors George Molinaro. Born in 1902 in Kenosha, he was the eldest of ten children in an Italian immigrant family. Though he left formal education after eighth grade, Molinaro's remarkable achievements led the University of Wisconsin to bestow upon him an honorary doctorate, recognizing his extraordinary impact on the community.

Career and Public Service

Molinaro began his working life as an auto worker, spending forty years at American Motors Company, and helped found UAW Local 72. His dedication to public service was evident as he served as a county board supervisor in 1939, represented Kenosha in the Wisconsin State Assembly for forty years (1946-1976), and became Speaker of the Assembly from 1959 to 1960. In 1961, he took on the role of Bank President at American State Bank.

Legislative Achievements

Molinaro sponsored legislation that improved workmen's compensation and unemployment compensation, established a Uniform Commercial Code, and reorganized the Wisconsin state court system. He was instrumental in creating Hwy 158, establishing a second municipal court, developing a municipal airport, enhancing the harbor, and founding the University of Parkside.

Conservation and Community Impact

His commitment to conservation grew over time, leading him to address issues such as water pollution and recreational uses of waterways. One of his most significant accomplishments was transforming the Bong Air Force Base into a wildlife and recreation center. Molinaro began the campaign in 1962 when the state sought to acquire the abandoned World War II base from the federal government.

Working alongside the League of Women Voters, Molinaro helped establish the "State Recreation Area" designation in 1963. This new legal category in Wisconsin permitted activities that were more diverse than those allowed in traditional State Parks, meeting the needs of both sportsmen and urban conservationists.

Lasting Recognition

In 1974, the Wisconsin Assembly officially designated the land as a recreation area. After Molinaro's passing in 1978, the Molinaro Visitor Center was constructed in 1981 and dedicated in his honor, preserving his legacy for future generations.

Reference: John D. Buenker, "George Molinaro: Labor-Ethnic Politician" in *Kenosha Retrospective*, ed. Nicholas Burckel, John A. Neuenschwander, 1981.



Submitted by Arlene Mcentegart

Shakespeare in the State Parks 2026

Richard Bong State Recreation Area - June 12th
Workshop 5:30pm/Show 7:00 pm

The Summit Players present their 2026 season: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. They will once again visit 18 different Wisconsin State Parks this summer for 19 unique shows! All shows and workshops are presented free of charge. Seating is first come, first served. Wisconsin State Park Admission is required and can be purchased upon entry to the park.

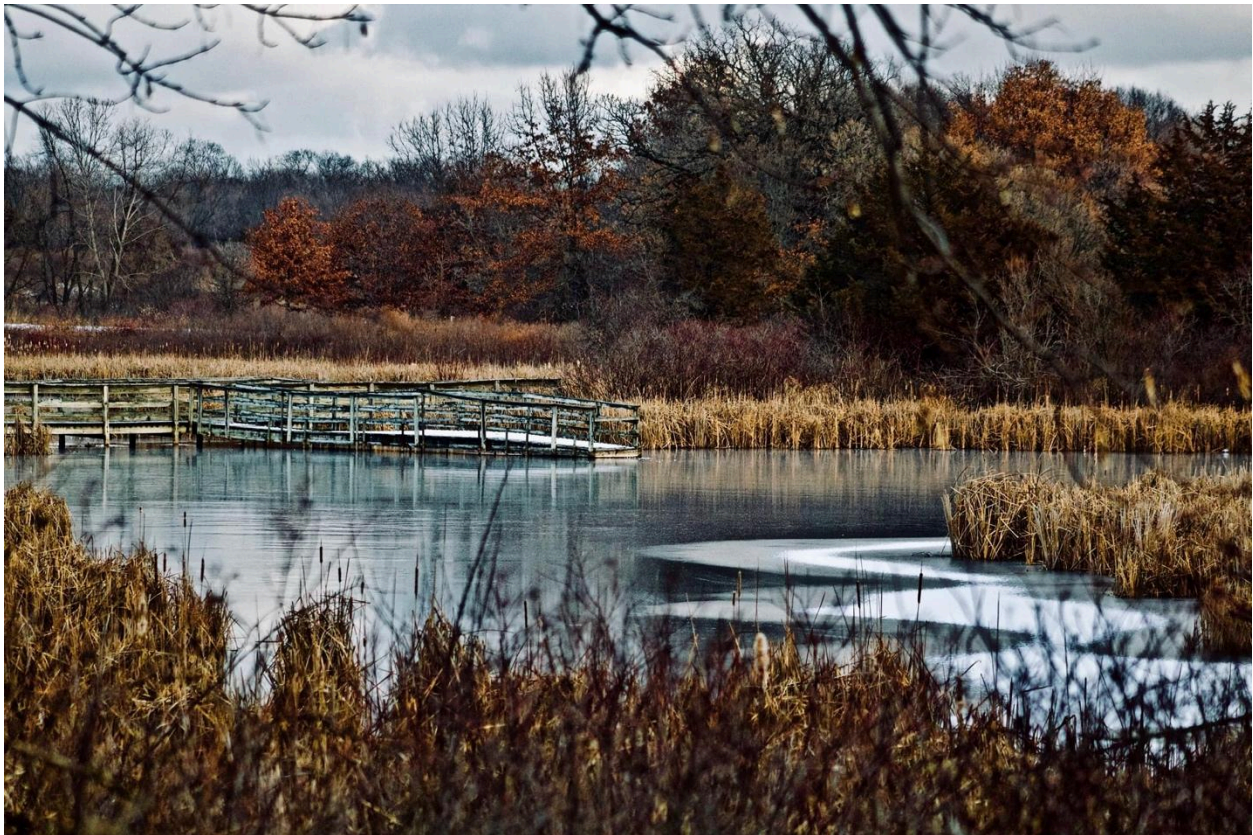
THOUGHTS FROM CAROL *(BNA Volunteer Coordinator & Event Coordinator)*

Remember back in school, in science class, we opened our text books (laptops weren't invented yet), and we learned about the atom? The nucleus surrounded by electrons and energy bonds, how it all fit together to make matter? The BNA is like that, we have the nucleus of the board and chairs, the volunteers, members, friends being the nucleus and electrons all working together to form a viable group of activists working together for the park's benefit. Some of the electrons are more active than others; some enter and leave the orbit to help with specific areas of interest, others are orbiting around every week, and some are like Pluto, way out there, but the nucleus keeps going in a singularity for objectives like the land purchase, invasive species removal, accessible bird viewing blind, butterfly enclosure, assisting the DNR's long range plans; we all fit together to make it matter. The BNA atom has plenty of charm (that's the unit of energy of a quark, a sub-atomic particle). We have an organization that has a generosity of talents, education, abilities, time, and charm! When we plan on an event we have the usual electrons show up, ready and able to donate and do, but we do need more new particles. All particles that haven't been around are encouraged to renew their activities, even if it's just to sit and enjoy being social with old acquaintances. On the calendar for events will be monthly astronomy and live animal demonstrations, Knee High Naturalist; Bubbles and Breezes, Crane Count and NASA week in April, Ryan Meisel performance in July, Shakespeare in the park and recognition picnic TBD, Master Naturalist in August, Eco Halloween in October, in between there will be workshops, hikes, surveys, Adopt a Highway, many projects to start and finish. Please be an active particle this year!

Walking in Bong

By Tom Klaus

“In every walk with Nature, one receives far more than he seeks.”- John Muir



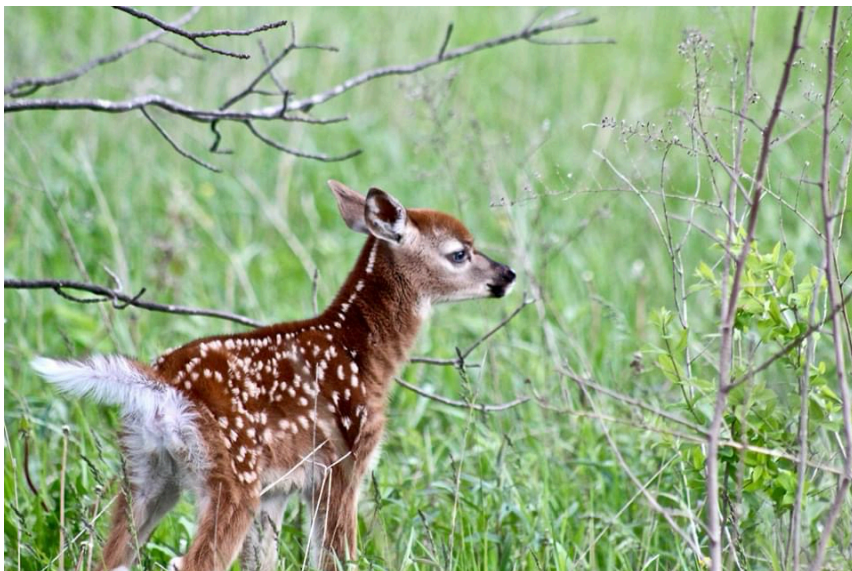
It has always been in my nature to seek out nature. Every step in nature leads to a new experience I've never had before, even if I've walked that trail a hundred times, for it is never truly the same trail. If you look close enough, you discover endless wonders. Out of all the places I've traveled, my wandering spirit keeps coming back to Richard Bong Recreation Area.

You can walk down any trail and find something wondrous. Each season brings a chance to explore something new. In springtime, the migratory birds return from their long journey. The first sound of the frogs chirping. Summertime is spent down by the beach where you grill out and soak up the rays. Camping is a must here. On a good night, the sunsets here rival those at any big National Park. Fall brings the crunching and rustling of leaves, reminding us of colder days ahead.. The colors are worth a pause to reflect on the beauty of nature. There is beauty in winter here as well. A fresh snowfall reveals every detail of you look close enough. Don't forget to do some ice fishing.



I have a healthy obsession with photography. If there is one place I have photographed more than anywhere else, it would be here at Bong. Probably thousands of photos if I counted. Bong is a great place to be a photographer. A seasonal stop for many birds and a home to many other critters. Each time I've set out on a trail, I've been pleasantly surprised.

One of my favorite experiences is stumbling upon a fawn on the south side of the lake. Mom was on the other side of the small waterfowl pond. She was worried, so, I told the little guy to "stay hidden" and carried on down the trail.



On many of my hikes, I find if you are quiet enough, you can stumble upon the deer hiding in the brush.



The oak trees here are old teachers of the woods. I find myself studying each branch and trunk the way most would study a book. Tales of times past and the ever flowing march of times past written on each tree. Some of my favorite trees reside here at Bong.



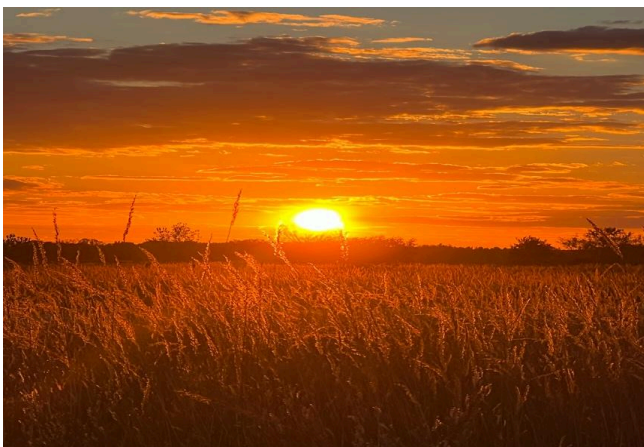
This old tree is naturally photogenic and catches the eye on every hike.

The trail behind the Molinaro Visitor Center is the perfect hike for those with little adventurers. You can even read a story as you walk. Don't forget to stop at each activity station to have some

fun. The trail leads down to Vern Wolf Lake where you can find all sorts of wildlife. Geese and ducks are some of the common sightings, but if you're quiet and observant enough, you can see some of the more rare sightings. Bald eagles, once a rare sight, show up every so often to surprise you. Most of the time, too quick to snap a photo, but the experience is unforgettable. My son and I try to hike out here every day if we can, when the weather is decent, he doesn't mind a few rain puddles though. Someday when he is old enough, I hope to take him fishing at the kids fishing pond but for now he practices his rock throwing.



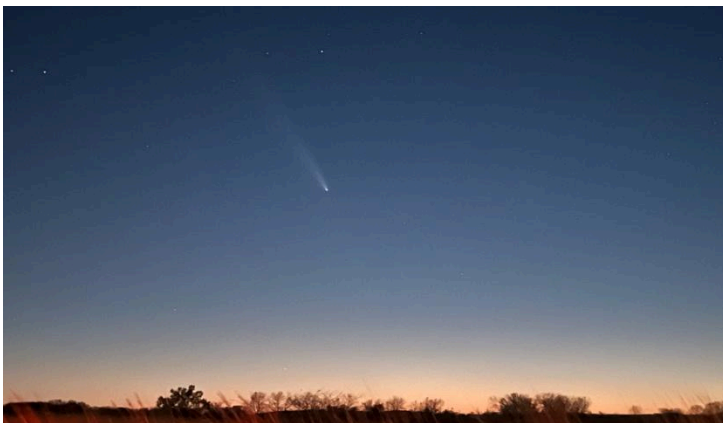
For many years now this place has been like a second home to me. Camping, fishing and grilling out at the beach are the common favorites but when the noise of the human world becomes too loud, I find a sanctuary among the trail and comfort in the skies. Some of the best sunsets I've witnessed have been here.



In fact some of my most memorable sky watching moments have been at Bong. Back in May, 2024 the Aurora Borealis was visible overhead. This was a bucket list experience I thought I'd have to travel to Alaska for, but I got to do it here...I'll never forget that moment.



Speaking of moments I won't forget...In October that same year, a rare sight for anyone,



Comet Tsuchinshan-Atlas was an unexpected surprise in the dusk sky over Bong. How cool is that?! I hope to have many more adventures and experiences like this with family and friends.

I could ramble on and on about my adventures at Bong, but as with most things in nature, it's best when it's experienced. Every walk is a new experience and leaves you with a renewed sense of wonder. So, get yourself a Wisconsin State Park Pass, get out here and experience nature at Richard Bong State Recreation Area.

Nature Explore Family Club 2026 Bong State Recreation Area

Nature Explore Family Club at Bong is for 5-10 year old children and an adult (or car pool group with one adult) to enjoy outdoor experiences. The activities will connect families with the outdoors and each other, while introducing them to a variety of natural spaces. Siblings are welcome to attend. In each session, we will explore a different theme. Class topics will be selected from the National Nature Explore Classroom research-based, field-tested resources.

Registration is appreciated, sign up for one or all sessions.
Phone 262-878-5601 to register.



Meeting five Thursdays, Starting June 18, 2026. Come for one or all sessions. 10:00 – 11:30am

Meet behind the Visitor Building at Gathering 2 of the Nature Explore Classroom.

The Nature Explore classroom areas are dedicated to movement and music, open play, dirt and sand digging, building, gardening, messy materials, climbing and crawling, water exploration and nature art.

June 18 YOUR VERY OWN ADVENTURE AND ANIMAL SIGNS Go for a walk in nature and use your imagination to create a story from animal signs.

June 25 LEAF SHAPE ADVENTURE Use your senses to learn more about leaves. Take a walk and collect leaves that are interesting to you.

July 9 WHAT CAN YOU SEE IN A CLOUD? Learning to calm ourselves is important for all of us.

July 16 WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL TO YOU? Take a walk and enjoy everything around you. Pay close attention...

July 23 COLORS IN THE WORLD Let's see how many colorful items you can find outdoors. Take a walk and look closely.

<https://www.facebook.com/bongnaturalistassociation>



John Davies – Volunteer of the Year, Park and Rec, 2026

At the BNA/volunteer meeting on March 25th, the DNR and BNA/volunteers celebrated John Davies' receipt of the 2025 Volunteer of the Year award for the DNR Parks and Recreation Management division. At the celebration, Emily Cole presented John with two plaques honoring the wonderful contributions that John has made to the BNA and RBSRA. Below is the narrative that Emily submitted to the DNR awards selection committee. Please read it and be amazed at all John has accomplished. And...if you see John, be sure to say thank you!

John Davies

∞ Dependable ∞ Eager ∞ Committed ∞

From the moment John Davies began volunteering for our property he was someone who stood out. He started as a “jack of all trades” accomplishing any and all maintenance projects available. As a former electrician for Nestle – John’s expertise in a variety of maintenance fields has been extremely valuable. He is also a Wisconsin Master Naturalist and Wisconsin Bat Ambassador and has piloted the bat conservation initiatives at our property – including installing and maintaining several bat houses and starting a bat monitoring program. This has also led to new night hikes and public bat monitoring programs. In order to better support the property, John has even attended DNR chainsaw certification classes and utilized his own equipment to better serve our property (including lending his personal tools, chainsaw, mowers, and tractor for various projects.)

John’s initiative and drive to support the park is unmatched. His first-year volunteering was marked by an incredible initiative to quickly complete any project he felt was within his skill set. He would consistently seek out new maintenance projects to help with – never needing to ask what he should do, but instead finding a current problem, determining a solution, seeking out proper approvals, and then quickly completing the project. (Often donating his own one or supplies to make the project happen.)

Since his beginning as a park volunteer, John has attended almost every weekly volunteer workday, and on days that are not workdays, I consistently find him around property completing projects that we have previously discussed. I have depended on his presence to complete various electrical, woodworking, and exhibit maintenance projects over the last few years. At the beginning of this year, the president of our Friend’s Group was rolling off, with no successor in place. When John heard that this was a possibility and all the repercussions of an open board president position – he immediately stepped up to run for president and protect the Bong Naturalist Association. Despite his greater interest in hands-on projects, and his hesitation about the administrative work involved – he made the choice to sacrifice time spent on the maintenance work he loves, in exchange for the administrative work we desperately needed. This was a huge gift to our property and the BNA.

Though his humble nature may cause him to claim otherwise – John has been an exceptional president for the Friend’s Group. He has made strong efforts to help ensure the DNR and BNA are on the same page and working together as a team. He has worked hard to align the group more directly with park administration’s vision. One of his goals includes finding ways to spend additional monies made by the BNA and funnel it directly back into larger park improvement projects. John has completed endless hours of administrative work and STILL has managed to find time to complete many hands-on maintenance projects as well!

John Davies has gone above and beyond to serve Richard Bong State Recreation Area each and every year he has volunteered – but this year he has shown an even larger dedication and commitment to our Friend’s Group and the RBSRA property. This year alone, John has given over 550 hours of volunteer time to the property (and I suspect his hours are slightly under-reported!) John Davies is an exceptional asset to the property and should absolutely be recognized for his extraordinary service to the DNR and BNA.



Emily Cole presenting 2025 Volunteer of the Year award to John Davies.

Knee-High Naturalist Program -- 2026
Bong Naturalist Association (BNA) at
Richard Bong State Recreation Area

- ☺ This recurring **monthly program** (except December) is held on a Thursday from 10:00 – 11:30 am. Meet at **Shelter 1**.
- ☺ If you have a large group, varied ages or any special circumstances, then please email the BNA at bongnaturalistassociation@gmail.com so that we can prepare to accommodate your group.
- ☺ Knee-high Naturalist is for **3–5-year-olds** and a grown-up in their life. Siblings are welcome. Our goal is to provide environmental education through stories, crafts, hiking and playing outdoors.
- ☺ We always plan to be outside, so please dress accordingly! Program will always go on, but sometimes the topic will change due to weather issues.
- ☺ Programs are free, but you need a State Park admission sticker.

Date	Topic
January 15, 2026	Wonders of Winter
February 12, 2026	Owl Babies
March 12, 2026	Fox and Friends
April 9, 2026	Cranes and Egrets
May 14, 2026	A Time to Grow
June 11, 2026	Around the Pond-Frogs
July 9, 2026	<u>Flutterfly</u> & Hungry Caterpillar
August 13, 2026	It's a Fishy Day
September 10, 2026	Seed Safari
October 8, 2026	Bats and Spiders
November 12, 2026	Turkey Tales

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