



MINNEOPA

MESSENGER

Newsletter of the Friends of Minneopa State Park

No. 37, April 2007

Harriet Mason, President 934-3253
[there is no president-elect]
Tom Weigt, Treasurer 387-3617
Gordon Herbst, Secretary 625-8393

Tim Pulis, ex-President 388-7622
Mary Hollingsworth, Board Member 947-3908
[two board members still needed!]
Minneopa State Park 389-5464

Friends of Minneopa State Park • 20499 555 Lane • Mankato, Minnesota 56001

Steve Kittleson, DNR Wildlife Specialist! – Don't Miss the Spring Meeting

The spring meeting of the Friends of Minneopa will be held on **Thursday, April 19, 2007, at 7 p.m.** in the Police Annex Community Meeting Room at 1004 Belgrade Avenue in North Mankato, the usual meeting room for the Friends.

Stefe Kittleson, wildlife specialist for the DNR, will present the program on the subject of shallow-lake ecology. These prairie lakes abound in this region, including Swan Lake, the famous bird mecca in Nicollet County.

Refreshments will be served as usual. We hope to see you there!

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Manager's Corner

By Park Manager Howard Ward

Managers Corner

As of April 2, 2007 we have one seasonal staff person back from seasonal layoff. Greg has been working hard all winter long to rehabilitate the leg he fractured last spring and is looking forward to returning to his normal role of lead maintenance person. It also looks like we will be having two vacancies to fill. With that and moving to a new web based camper registration and point of sale system it promises to be a **[see Manager, p. 2]**

President's Message

By Harriet Mason, President of the Friends

Spring seems to have come rapidly this year. Perhaps the United States Congress knew that when they decided that we should set our clocks ahead three weeks earlier than in years past. I urge you to take advantage of the early season and added hour of daylight to visit Minneopa State Park. The park changes rapidly as the weather warms and you will find changes every time you visit.

I also urge you to become active in the Friends of Minneopa State Park organization and join us for our four meetings a year, open and free to the public. The meetings are normally held on the third Thursday of January, April, July and October. Notice of meetings is published in the Mankato Free Press. The programs are varied, hoping to appeal to as many people as possible. Often the park manager attends to give an update on current activities and answer questions.

The Board of the Friends of Minneopa State Park meets monthly. Presently, there is an opening for a board member and also an opening for President-elect (who will be President next year). If any of you are interested, please let us know. Many of you have asked what the board does and what to expect if they volunteer. We do the normal things a board would do. We plan the meetings, **[see President, p. 2]**

[Manager, from p. 1] challenging summer with lots of staff training to complete under short time frames.

Many of you may have read about the Division of Parks proposal to prohibit park users from bringing in their own firewood unless purchased from an approved vendor. This is an attempt to control the spread of the Emerald Ash Borer, which is spreading westward and wiping out millions of ash trees across the country. Exact details of the legislation are still pending. One of the complicating factors resulting from this is that I may be forced to find a new firewood supplier and those are difficult to come by in this area. Please help spread the word that anyone bringing in firewood from non-certified vendors will be asked to turn it over to park staff for immediate disposal.

Latest word on the trailer dump station is that construction will begin this fall. While the design and specifications are nearly completed it was necessary to push the start date back to allow time for Division archaeological staff to survey the impact area.

Many of you may have noticed how badly torn up our road into the campground is. With continued high use of our camper cabin throughout the winter that road receives a fairly high volume of traffic. Once things dry up I intend to hire a contractor to blade it, but that comes at a cost of \$90.00 per hour. If any of you have connections with someone willing to do the work at a reduced rate as a community service project please give me a call.

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[President, from p. 1] including choosing a topic and scheduling the speaker. The board also deals with membership and publicity issues and plans the spring open house, which will be held June 3 this year. Individual board members communicate often with park managers, trying to keep abreast of issues that concern the park and its visitors.

Currently we are trying to keep up with the saga of the DM&E Railroad, especially regarding the impact of its expansion on the park. We are concerned that rail construction and the increased number and speed of trains will affect visitors and the natural resources. This is a pertinent issue because the DM&E runs the entire east-west length through the park, past the campground, dissecting parklands. Like many of you, we scanned the newspapers for our information. We were fortunate to have New Ulm regional park personnel attend a board meeting and give us some details about what we might expect. Individuals from the board have also contacted the DM&E engineers who are planning the expansion. They assure us that we will continue to be able to pass under the railroad bridges and access the floodplain areas of the park. The board will continue to stay vigilant on this and other issues with the hope that the park will remain a positive and delightful experience for all.

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The Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota

There is one non-governmental organization above all others that works for the benefit of the state parks: the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota (PTC). They lobby in St. Paul for the parks and they take private money received in dues and donations and use it to help our parks.

The PTC Annual Report for 2006 shows a proud record of achievement, in particular buying valuable lands adjacent to parks and reselling at cost to the DNR (\$1.3 million in four different parks). As a private entity the PTC is able to move fast and get properties when they come on the market. Minnesota parks and trails and the citizens who use them are the winners!

DM&E Setbacks

Most everyone probably knows that the DM&E Railroad, whose tracks run straight through Minneopa, failed to get the government loan they had been counting on. It seems clear that our new Congressman Tim Walz and the House of Representatives played a part in this by standing up and insisting that Congress should have the power to review any such loan. Under that pressure the federal agency decided that the DM&E bailout did not make sense, that is, it was a bad financial risk. This does not mean that the railroad project is dead, but it has hit a big bump in the road and now must find private financing instead. And there are some signs that private lenders do not like the DM&E project very much.

Meanwhile the notorious DM&E safety record (already the worst of any railroad in its class) is not improving. March was a bad month, with two serious mishaps along the line. On March 14 a DM&E train derailed about a block from the South Dakota State Capitol in the center of Pierre, SD. No one was hurt, but the shock has led to formation of a citizens group and to calls to review the city's partnership agreement with DM&E. The other incident occurred on DM&E's subsidiary line IC&E on March 17, St. Patrick's Day, in Lake City, MN. In this case toxic anhydrous ammonia leaked from a car and about 100 people had to be evacuated from the neighborhood, some complaining of nausea and headaches.

So how bad can it get? Are the doctors paranoid, or is there a real danger of train mishaps right next to the Mayo Clinic? The DM&E's record in March is not encouraging.

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Here We Go Again – the Rambling Editor

I have said before that I believe admission to State Parks should be free. And I am going to say it one last time: the public should not have to pay to enter a public park. How much does it cost to go to Sibley Park? What is the price of admission to county parks like Rapidan Dam or Seven Mile Creek? You pay nothing to get in, which is exactly the right amount. After all, they are our parks.

Why are those public parks different from the State Parks? I think it is because the people who run the local parks live here and know that people resent having to pay to go to a park that is supposedly public. I certainly hear this often about Minneopa. I suggest we go over to Minneopa and I hear back, "Yeah, and how much are they charging now?" But if the decision makers are in St. Paul, a little removed from real public opinion, they can adopt principles like "pay as you go." It sounds reasonable until you see how it works out for the State Parks. And the amount collected from entrance fees isn't that much, a drop in the bucket of the overall State Budget. I think State Park entrance fees are a public relations disaster: we are losing a lot, both resentment from those who find the fee unacceptable either financially or in principle and loss of the good feeling and shared commitment that open, free public parks create. So forget the money -- let's open up the parks!

I suppose I am asking to be written off as a lunatic when I say there are more important things than money, even in managing the State Parks. Isn't the Dow-Jones average a measure of progress? Isn't bigger better? More money must mean more success, more happiness, doesn't it? Well, maybe not. The US Census showed that median household income in the US went up from \$37,000 to \$45,000 in 1974-2003, while a simple survey of "happiness" (one question: are you very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy) showed that in those same years Americans recorded a decline in "happiness." Gross domestic product, the overall economic indicator, has increased nearly 10 times since the 1950s, but it seems that people are less satisfied with their lives today than they were in the 1950s. So what does this have to do with the State Parks?

I think these trends indicate that our policy makers have focused too much on quantity – economic growth and a richer way of life, and not enough on quality – a more satisfying way of living. How many people move into a big home or buy a new car and find that their life is not happier? How happy are the lottery winners in the end? What if some of the money designated for economic growth were redirected to improving amenities, raising the quality of life? Improving the air and water, or *putting more funds – including free admission – into our beautiful State Parks?* I would be "very happy."

Note: the views expressed in this column are the editor's personal thoughts and do not reflect the views of the Friends of Minneopa or the Minnesota DNR.

Our Good Neighbors

Minneopa is a great state park. It can be an inspiration, a peaceful retreat, and a place to study nature. We are lucky to have this park close by. It is also good to know that there are several other Minnesota State Parks within a short distance of Mankato that offer a variety of features that are suitable for a one-day visit or a camping trip.

Our closest neighbor is **Flandrau State Park** in New Ulm, about 30 miles west on Highway 14 or 68. Flandrau is unique in its close relationship with the City of New Ulm. Some of the park is within the city limits, and the sand-bottom swimming pool is like a city pool (it was built with funds raised by the public). The main natural feature of the park is the Cottonwood River. Flandrau is about as large as Minneopa was before the recent acquisitions. There are eight miles of good trails along the valley. At the entrance you may meet an old friend: the park manager is long-time Minneopa assistant manager Gary Teipel and his assistant is Craig Beckman, who held the same job at Minneopa a few years ago. Say hello to them.

Sakata Lake State Park is just east of Waterville along Highway 60, about 30 miles from Mankato. The Sakata Trail runs directly through the park, making the campground a good base for bike riders, roller bladers, and other trail users. The park is on Lake Sakata and has a public boat access plus canoes for rent. You can paddle many miles from here in either direction – the Cannon River runs in one end and out the other. There are also five miles of trails through the hardwood forests featuring huge old white and bur oaks.

Fort Ridgeley State Park is a historic site from the Dakota uprising of 1862. It is located off Highway 4 about 50 miles from Mankato (take Highway 14 west to Sleepy Eye, then north on Highway 4). This is a small park that was nearly closed a couple of years ago, but it is well worth visiting. Some of the historic buildings of the fort where the soldiers and Dakota fought are preserved and the history is well documented with signs and maps. There is also an interesting wooded, hilly golf course

associated with the park. And Fort Ridgeley Creek is said to contain some hard-fighting trout!

Not to tarnish the image, but I must recall this story. We once had a spring picnic on a grassy slope above Fort Ridgeley Creek and were enjoying the warmth and sunshine when I found a tick crawling up my leg. Then another, and another, and suddenly they were everywhere...we had put our blanket down on top a tick nest! The memory is a little hazy, but I think that before it was over we removed around 100 ticks from ourselves and the dogs. But it's a great park!

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Calendar of Upcoming Events

Woodcock Viewing: Thursday, May 9, 8 p.m. at the prairie side parking lot, Merrill Frydendall in charge.

Bird Banding: Saturday, May 19, Merrill will be mist netting birds and banding them from 7 a.m. to noon near the prairie side parking lot, welcome to drop by any time.

Annual Minneopa Bird Count: On Saturday, June 2, 7-11 a.m. starting from the prairie side parking lot, all welcome, Brand Frentz in charge.

Annual State Park Open House: Sunday, June 3. All day admission to the park is free! The Friends will have a display table and plan to offer guided tours. Watch the *Free Press* for announcements of the specifics.

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The Minneopa Messenger, 20499 555 Lane, Mankato MN 56001, is edited by Brand Frentz, who is responsible for any unattributed material. If you have comments or questions or want to submit material, call Brand at 947-3268.