



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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IDNR recognizes 2024 outstanding volunteers of the year

Volunteers provide vital support to parks, preserves, historic sites, and Illinois State Museum

SPRINGFIELD – Eleven individuals and organizations have been recognized as 2024 outstanding volunteers of the year for their volunteer efforts on behalf of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).

“IDNR is blessed to have marvelous volunteers, and their work is vital to the operation and upkeep of Illinois state parks, historic sites, state museum facilities, and nature preserves,” **IDNR Director Natalie Phelps Finnie said**. “Volunteering can be hard work, but it’s important work that benefits everyone who enjoys IDNR sites throughout the state. I’m pleased to recognize their extraordinary efforts on behalf of the people of Illinois.”

The 2024 IDNR outstanding volunteers of the year are:

Gary Cope, Collinsville – Cope has been instrumental in the success of interpretive programming at [Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site](#) in St. Clair County. Since 2010, he has volunteered at the site’s Interpretive Center in various capacities ranging from greeting visitors, serving as a docent in the gallery, and captivating visitors with his storytelling. He has given 110 tours and recorded nearly 600 hours of volunteerism.

Kerry Novak, Earlville – Novak has volunteered every Wednesday since retiring as site superintendent at [Starved Rock State Park](#) in LaSalle County in 2019. In 2024 he contributed 125 volunteer hours as a front desk docent who assists the more than 350,000 visitors who stop by the visitors’ center annually.

Bill Lantz, Liberty – Lantz is a committed volunteer who dedicates his vacation time away from his day job to help the [Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site](#) in Coles County prepare for its [Harvest Frolic Fall Celebration](#). He is willing to help in any capacity, including landscape work, repairing tractors, assembling tents, and running the tram at the event.

Robert and Marcia Shelby, West Salem – This husband-and-wife duo volunteer at [Beall Woods State Park](#) in Wabash County. They are dedicated to ecology and conservation through their work for the Illinois Natural History Survey Bird Count, Christmas Bird Count, monitoring barn owl populations, and conducting other surveys. The couple has volunteered countless hours at the park over the past seven years. Their true passion is educating the next generation of naturalists.

Tamina Itani, Chicago – Itani manages up to 190 volunteers covering 70 shifts per week for nine weeks each year to monitor [piping plovers](#) and their nests. Itani has been instrumental in the protection of piping plovers and their habitat, creating educational materials, and establishing conservation partnerships. She has worked with many organizations including the Chicago Park District, while finding the time to create educational materials for children.

Nancy Cottom, Giant City – Cottom has volunteered at [Giant City State Park](#) in southern Illinois for the past eight years. She and her dogs, Arlow and Kelsey, greet visitors at the park and are known as Giant City’s “bark rangers.” She has done everything from answering visitor questions, general office work, and directing traffic with a smile.

Friends of Langham Island, Bourbonnais – This [organization](#) weekly paddles across the waters at [Kankakee River State Park](#) to Langham Island to eradicate invasive species at the site. They complete this task rain or shine, including throughout the winter months.

Menard County Trails and Greenways, Petersburg – This [dedicated group](#) helps eliminate invasive species along the hiking trails at [Lincoln’s New Salem State Historic Site](#) in Menard County in coordination with IDNR. They have contributed more than 1,300 volunteer hours since 2021.

Springfield Civic Garden Club, Springfield – Members of the [Springfield Civic Garden Club](#) have volunteered more than 700 hours at the [Dana-Thomas House State Historic Site](#) in Sangamon County, decorating the house with their floral designs and contributing to the holiday experience at the site. The club has won several national awards for their design themes.

Larry Coultas, Pana – Coultas was recognized as the 2024 International Hunter Education Association-USA Illinois Instructor of the Year. He has been a volunteer [hunter safety education](#) instructor in Christian County for more than 40 years and has educated nearly 3,300 students in more than 115 classes.

Roseann Webb, Peru – Webb volunteers at [Starved Rock State Park](#) on behalf of the [Starved Rock Foundation](#). She greets visitors and previously was a hike leader, contributing more than 2,400 volunteer hours to the park. Her caring nature comes naturally: she is a nurse, a mother of four, and a grandmother of nine.

Photos of volunteers are available upon request by emailing dnr.pio@illinois.gov.

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