

## 2021 USDA Forest Service Eastern Regional Volunteers & Service Awards

In fiscal year 2021, the Forest Service engaged over 65,000 volunteers and service participants across the nation. Together, they contributed over 3.6 million hours valued at \$103 million. The Eastern Region recorded 6,200 volunteers and service participants contributing more than 387,000 hours of service valued at \$11 million. The Eastern Region is proud to recognize these individuals, organizations, and partners for their exceptional work in five categories: Enduring Service, Leadership, Restoration, Cultural Diversity, and Citizen Stewardship & Partnerships.

### Enduring Service

**Group Award Recipient: Frank Roark and Erik Carlson, Superior NF**



Since 2014, Frank Roark and Erik Carlson have dedicated their time and resources to develop and construct a new singletrack mountain bike trail system on Lookout Mountain at the Laurentian Ranger District of the Superior National Forest. In cooperation with the Forest Service, they spearheaded the design, layout, and construction of over 8 miles of mountain bike trails, completing most of the construction themselves with hand tools. They have also independently applied for and secured grants to fund trail development, signs, and mechanized building contractors. Frank and Erik work with Iron Range Off Road Cyclists chapter of IMBA (International Mountain Bike Association) to organize volunteer work groups in trail building and maintenance. This trail

system has become very popular with bikers from around the region and likely would not have happened without the hard work and dedication of Frank and Erik.

*Nominated by Tom Yankowiak*

**Individual Award Recipient: Bill Lane, Wayne NF**

Since 1996, Bill Lane has contributed greatly to the Wayne National Forest as the leader of River Valley Mountain Bike Association’s forest representative for trail maintenance. Bill performs a wide variety of tasks including trail maintenance, volunteer coordination, and logistical support for trail clearing. He volunteers week in and week out all year long demonstrating his work ethic, dedication, and commitment to enhancing recreation opportunities on the Wayne National Forest. Bill started volunteering because he wanted to help improve conditions on the trails that he loves. He also continues to stay current with Forest Service certifications for First Aid, CPR, BBP, and chainsaw. While not volunteering, Bill is an avid mountain biker in the area. If he discovers any down trees on the trail, he takes note and will develop a plan for removal. As one of the longest serving volunteers on the forest, Bill is an invaluable resource and historian to the staff of the Marietta Unit. His long-term commitment and Esprit de corps to the Wayne National Forest exemplifies enduring service values.



*Nominated by Josh Keenan*



**Honorable Mention Group Award Recipient: Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie's**

**Longest Serving Volunteers:** This group includes Cindy Alberico, John Baxter, Bill Bromer, Gayle Crompton, John Field, Marianne Hahn, Connie Heinrich, Richard Hickson, Don Nelson, Espie Nelson, Rita Renwick, and Michael Rzepka. It's outstanding that these twelve devoted people collectively contribute to nearly all mission critical volunteer roles at Midewin, ultimately serving the USDA Forest Service as a whole. Prior to Midewin being officially open to the public, volunteer tour guides invited the public behind the locked gates to interpret the land history. Some of these volunteer-led tours included birdwatching to point out some of the precious and sensitive bird species that inspired the conservation of Midewin's vast, intact grassland areas. Together they have contributed 25 years of mission achievements monitoring wildlife, plants and water, interpretation and serving as tour guides for the Prairie which reveal the remarkable potential for many generations to come. These twelve volunteers have contributed a combined total of 23,100 hours of service during 5,000 service days since 1996. These impressive service records are likely even low due to undocumented service hours in the early years of serving Midewin including prairie restoration, ecological monitoring, cultural heritage projects, and public services.

*Nominated by Allison Cisneros*

**Honorable Mention Group Award Recipient: Don and Terry McMillen, Mark Twain NF:**

Don and Terry McMillen have shown exemplary stewardship through their exceptional volunteer host duties at Silver Mines Recreation Area. They maintain the campground to the highest degree of excellence while having 75 to 100 visitor contacts weekly. They have kept the restrooms sparkling clean, the expansive lawns and campsites beautifully landscaped, and the campers content and coming back. We routinely receive positive comments from visitors about how much they appreciate the efforts of our volunteer host couple. Don and Terry ensure that critical needs of the campers are met, going above and beyond to provide them with all the resources they might need for their stay. Through their own initiative, they've even created a Forest Service approved on-line forum to post St. Francis River information and happenings at the campground. They are on duty at Silver Mines seven days a week, 24 hours a day to provide visitors with the best possible experience. We appreciate them greatly and would like to recognize them for their outstanding effort and excellent work on the Mark Twain NF.

*Nominated by Melissa Baechle*

## Cultural Diversity

**Individual Award Recipient: Kaila St. Louis, Monongahela NF**

Kaila St. Louis is the long serving Heritage Gardener at the Sites Homestead at Seneca Rocks who has created a unique living history with an authentic rendition of mid-1800s Appalachian life. Each season an estimated 50,000 people visit the old farmhouse, gardens and apple orchard from all walks of life, whether they be local, regional, or international communities. Visitors travel from places like Charleston, WV, Washington, DC, Pittsburgh, PA, Denver, CO and Tokyo, Japan who represent an array of cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds and life styles. Kaila has tirelessly and passionately worked to create a museum and a program that all human beings can connect deeply with, regardless of their own heritage or beliefs.



Regardless of what kind of community or part of the world they come from, the family farmhouse atmosphere Kaila has created speaks to people’s connection to “home” and “home life” on a universally deep level. Kaila has strategically filled the home with authentic period furnishings, tools and décor, expertly landscaped the property and provides a hands-on experience for everyone who visits. Like any region of the United States or the world, the vegetable and herb gardens that Kaila built from scratch and grown in the Sites Homestead Garden are heirlooms to the area. People from all over walk through the rows of herbs and vegetables recalling, for example, their grandmother’s garden in whatever part of the world they hail from. Visiting the homestead garden evokes a warm memory of cultivating their own garden or eating food with loved ones grown from a local farm. The care and attention Kaila puts into the authentic Appalachian-style gardens and apple orchard, along with the period food that she prepares for visitors is a true gift, one that reaches people from varied cultural and personal backgrounds.



*Nominated by Gavin Hale*

**Individual Award Recipient: Dr. Shaneka Lawson, Northern Research Station**

Dr. Lawson’s work with Northern Research Station has tirelessly focused on enhancing Cultural Diversity in several ways. Shaneka designed an 8-week summer in-person immersion program for undergraduate underrepresented students at Purdue University. The students were introduced to aquatic science, forestry, ecology, herpetology, wildlife science and a host of other natural resources disciplines. Shaneka also collaborated with the Purdue University Office of Multicultural Programs (OMP) to teach at a two week summer camp called AgDiscovery. The students participated virtually which introduced them to the type of careers associated with various educational degree programs and she also offered a lecture on wilderness survival. Dr. Lawson collaborated with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and the local Tippecanoe County Library to launch a haiku poetry contest for National Haiku Day. The contest was open to all K-12 grades and was targeted specifically towards schools with a high representation of minorities and minority youth programs. This venture was extremely popular and was featured on



the local news. The haiku topics ranged from nature and forests to the Harlem Renaissance. One winner in the nature category stated that she wants to work for Smokey Bear. A community wide virtual program for K-12. Each event targets diverse populations and focuses on nature and forestry. Dr. Lawson was lead author of a lengthy (32 pages!) manuscript on the history of the experiences of women and minorities in forestry and agriculture for publication. In total, she estimates that she reached 190 students of various ages.

*Nominated by Dr. Keith Woeste*



**Partner Award Recipient: Northern Bedrock Historic Preservation Corps, Chippewa NF, Superior NF, Chequamegon-Nicolet NF**

Northern Bedrock Historic Preservation Corps (NBHPC) is a one-of-a-kind program with a mission to *develop enduring workforce and life skills through service learning in historic preservation and community stewardship*. NBHPC's values of Serving, Transforming, Preserving and Honoring are put into action through its corpsmembers. These are young adults, ages 18 - 25, who are interested in gaining hands-on experience in the preservation trades. They are selected from a diversity of backgrounds for their enthusiasm, desire to learn, and commitment to serve on 900-hour AmeriCorps terms.

Participants are exposed to a spectrum of historic preservation projects and skills, with the goal of finding pathways into the preservation trades. Hitches spent with USFS are often highlights for these young adults who crave hands-on field experience and who genuinely value learning about the professional pathways of the many USFS employees who host these projects. Since 2015, the National Forests of Minnesota both Chippewa NF and Superior NF and recently Chequamegon-Nicolet NF in Wisconsin have



partnered with NBHPC crews to conduct a wide variety of maintenance, construction, and rehabilitation projects on historic USFS recreation and administrative facilities. Over the last three years, 91 NBHPC corpsmembers have dedicated nearly 14,000 hours to preserving historic USFS properties. NBHPC has carried out a variety of projects on historic structures either listed, or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) on several national forests.

*Nominated by Gavin Hale*

## Restoration

**Partner Award Recipient: Poplar Bluff Trails Coalition (PBTC), Mark Twain NF**

Formed in January 2021, the Poplar Bluff Trails Coalition is a 501c3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to plan, promote, build, and maintain trails in the greater Poplar Bluff, MO area. PBTC has quickly become a key US Forest Service partner. Due to a significant wind event in May 2020, many trails on the Poplar Bluff Ranger District of the Mark Twain National Forest had many trees blown down. With the key staff positions on the Forest being vacant for several years, many trails on the district were in serious need of maintenance such as logging out down trees, brushing back vegetation from the trail corridor, installing signs and repairing facilities at trailheads. PBTC volunteers answered the call to action. Through its new "Trail Stewards" program, the group has restored more than 54 miles of trail and brought these trails up to the standard outlined in each trail's Trail Management Objective (TMO). In addition to the 54.7 miles of trail on the district this group maintains, they also provide stewardship of 4 trailheads and provide much needed deferred maintenance work such as painting benches, kiosks, and picnic tables, securing fire rings to prevent theft, and extensive dumping and litter clean up on Wolf Creek Road in 2021.



*Nominated by Jon Breithaupt*

**Group Award Recipient: Federally Threatened Orchid Recovery Volunteer Team, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie**

In 2021, Sally Wieclaw and Mike Rzepka made a significant contribution to the recovery efforts of the federally threatened eastern prairie fringed orchid (EPFO). This orchid, *Platanthera leucophaea*, is a sensitive species in part due to habitat loss, however, lack of pollinators is also a concern. In previous years, monitoring the EPFO population involved collecting metrics such as plant height, number of leaves, and number of flowers. Hand pollination was also conducted, but time only allowed a handful of plants to be pollinated each year. This year, in coordination with US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), who manage the orchids' recovery,



the decision was made to concentrate on hand pollination in an effort to increase seed production and thus population numbers in years to come. Because of Sally and Mike's experience with rare and sensitive species monitoring with the Chicago Botanic Garden's Plants of Concern Program at Midewin, they were specifically requested to join the FS, USFWS and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) staff that came together to hand pollinate these lovely plants. Volunteers and staff painstakingly collected pollinia (pollen sacs) from the flowering orchids on the end of toothpicks. After pollen was collected from an

individual plant, it was transferred to the stigma of another plant, essentially doing the work of a pollinator. These two volunteers each bring their own flavor to monitoring days by keeping the atmosphere lively and conversations flowing which makes the prairie even more vibrant. Sally and Mike's dedication to Caring for the Land and Serving People, in particular rare plant monitoring, botany-related programs, and mentoring others at Midewin NTP is a remarkable contribution that provides momentum to the Forest Service mission.

*Nominated by Allison Cisneros*

**Leadership**

**Individual Award Recipient: Gillian Field, Hoosier NF**

Gillian Field, a member of MC-IRIS (Monroe County-Identify and Reduce Invasive Species), reached out to Hoosier National Forest staff in 2020 about Japanese stilt grass which is an invasive annual grass she saw on the Hayes Trail. When told that herbicides were not allowed in the Charles C. Deam Wilderness, she proposed a partnership project: volunteer hand pulling of the invasives along Hayes and Grubb Ridge trails. Gillian then took the lead and created an online volunteer sign-up for workdays, complete with automatic reminder emails, for the MC-IRIS website. In the Fall of 2020, volunteers accomplished 133 hours of invasive removal in 9 workdays. Evidence of this initial effort was seen the following year with native annuals inhabiting some of the areas that were previously infested. Building on the success of 2020, Gillian returned to the project in 2021, adding another trail (Pate Hollow). She suggested one workday on each of the three trails in the Spring, to map and pull other invasives (garlic mustard, multiflora rose). Additionally, Gillian scheduled 13 fall workdays to continue work on the Japanese stiltgrass. Volunteers contributed 205 hours removing invasives from 9.5



miles of trail in 2021. Gillian's endless energy and positive outlook created a group of volunteers that input 338 hours of service work that could not have been accomplished by Forest personnel in the two years. Her dedication and perseverance mean this project will continue the Hoosier National Forest in the future to help inspire volunteers to be stewards on other public and private lands as they learn how to identify and treat invasive species.

*Nominated by Cheryl Coon*

## Citizen Stewardship and Partnerships

### Partner Award Recipient: City of Van Buren, Mark Twain NF

Watercress Recreation Area (Watercress) is located within the city limits of Van Buren, MO along the banks of the Current River. The recreation area offers both day use and overnight camping and is the “city park” of Van Buren. In the spring of 2017, southern Missouri was affected by a significant multi-day rain event with many rivers experiencing severe new flooding records. Water levels at the Watercress were 8 feet above the previous high-water mark set in 1904. The infrastructure damage at Watercress was devastating including the day use portion of the recreation area which offered pavilions, flush toilets, electricity, and river access. All but the river access was destroyed or in need of significant



reconstruction. The Watercress is an important economic driver to the community. There was a significant outcry by the citizens of Van Buren that a reduction of amenities at this location was detrimental to the city. The Mayor and the Council Members of the City of Van Buren met with the District Ranger, Matt Dillon and Zone Recreational Manager, Ed Sherman to develop options. First, the City of Van Buren entered into a Volunteer Agreement with the MTNF to help with the removal of piled debris left behind from the flooding event and brushing of overgrown areas. A few months later,

a Challenge Cost Share Agreement was established so that the City of Van Buren could aid in the maintenance of Watercress. The City of Van Buren provided both workforce and other resources to help maintain Watercress. The determination and motivation of the City has helped tremendously to reduce annual maintenance costs and refocus funds on the deferred maintenance and rebuilding of the infrastructure. All reoccurring maintenance has been absorbed by the city and significant time and energy has been spent restoring the utilities.

*Nominated by Matt Dillon*

### Group Award Recipient: Silver Anniversary Outreach Volunteer Team, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

The Silver Anniversary Outreach Volunteer Team Bill Bromer, Thomas Coyne, Carol Ference, Bill Glass, Marianne Hahn, Connie Heinrich, Pam Hunte, Frank Ibarra, Ron Kapala, Arthur Pearson, Sally Planic, Gail Pyndus, and Penny Vanderhyden contributed over 1,000 volunteer hours to assist staff in the planning and activities which engaged 16 USDA Forest Service partners and seven communities in honoring a quarter-century of restoration, recreation, research and education and agriculture at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. The team raised awareness of the mission through celebrating the 25 years since the Illinois Land Conservation Act established Midewin NTP. This team’s collective efforts supported a wide range of public





outreach in educational and celebratory ways. Research and photos were essential in creating a dedicated Silver Anniversary website featuring a timeline, which generated over ten percent



more visits to the website and new engagements on Facebook and Twitter. Visitors spent more time on each page absorbing the extensive and exceptional research and stories. Anniversary awareness was also increased with volunteer support to design banners along a local community roadway and at Midewin’s Headquarters. These activities generated positive news coverage and internal newsletter stories produced by both partners and the USDA Forest Service. Despite challenging times, the volunteer support in celebrating Midewin’s Silver Anniversary resulted in many innovative and safe activities for 16

partners, seven communities, and beyond. Thousands of people connected with nature and the USDA Forest Service mission.

*Nominated by Veronica Hinke*

**Group Award Recipient: Great Divide Ranger District Campground Hosts, Chequamegon-Nicolet NF**

A group of six dedicated campground hosts volunteered on the Great Divide Ranger District. These outstanding campground host volunteers helped support our mission to host at 6 of our 7 campgrounds on the district. These hosts range in years of experience from one to seven years. They stay and volunteer at our campgrounds without most of the creature comforts such as running water or septic access. With their efforts, we are able to provide a higher level of maintenance and a more rewarding experience for users. These campground hosts collectively contributed 3,032 volunteer hours, worth an estimated value of \$86,533 in FY 2021 alone!

They have volunteered themselves to being at the campgrounds assisting with managing and posting incoming reservations. They spend numerous hours cleaning facilities, painting, repairing, mowing, weed whacking, and other jobs that help preserve the beautiful campgrounds on the District. Just as important, these hosts are also on site at our campgrounds when users have questions/issues about the campgrounds, where to get supplies, what type of site they are looking for, and what other recreation opportunities are available. They hand out FS brochures and maps for the forest and surrounding communities. They assist us when we have enforcement issues in the campgrounds and help us keep an eye on the campgrounds and facilities when we cannot be there. Collectively they have significantly increased the level of coordination and engagement from the past years. Overall, they help engage the public during times when forest users need it most, building public and private support for the FS mission, and helping visitors with the overall recreational experience that our campgrounds and public lands can provide.



*Nominated by Chris Geidel*