Winter 2026 Newsletter



Welcome, Sydney Waters!



The new Natural Resources Coordinator, Sydney Waters (pictured with Cache River Conservation Pioneer Max Hutchison), organized a grand reopening of the Wetlands Center for Saturday, January 10th. Over 400 people attended the event which included information tables from many local organizations, including the Friends of the Cache River Watershed. Children of all ages enjoyed the craft activities and live reptiles, while adults learned from organizations as varied as the Little Grassy Fish Hatchery, the Southern Illinois Audubon Society, the Illinois Extension Center, and many others.

Come by and meet Sydney, learn from the many exhibits, and walk the trails to see the pollinator gardens, a variety of birds, and other wildlife. The Henry N Barkhausen Wetlands Center is now open to the public from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Thursdays through Mondays. Closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays. (Photo by Jonathan Voelz)

Upcoming Events

Location: Henry N. Barkhausen Cache River Wetlands Center, Cache River State Natural Area, IDNR, 8885 State Route 37 South, Cypress, IL

Contact: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, phone 618-657-2064, email Sydney.Waters@Illinois.gov.

January 2026

Saturday, January 30: *Coffee on the Cache* - Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

Saturday, January 31**:** *Who Stays, Who Goes* - Winter Wildlife Craft and Storytime, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 2:00–3:00 p.m.

February 2026

Saturday, February 14: *Otters Love to Play* Story Hour and Valentine Craft, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 1:30–2:30 p.m.

Saturday, February 21: *Attracting Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds to Your Backyard Pollinator Garden,* Presenter: Kim Rohling, 10:00–11:00 a.m.

Friday, February 27: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

Saturday, February 28: *Reintroduction of Alligator Gar to the Cache River Watershed,* Presenter: Mark Denzer, 10:00–11:00 a.m.

March 2026

Saturday, March 14: *Amphibians* Program and Optional Hike, Presenter: Tony Gerard, 10:00 a.m.

Friday, March 27: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

Late March (TBD): *Herb Gardening for Pollinators,* Presenter: Kim Rohling (tentative)

April 2026

Saturday, April 4: *Butterflies and the Plants They Need* Presentation, Survey Information, and Optional Hike, Presenters: Anne Parmley, Mary McCarthy, Pat Dunbar, 1:00 p.m.

Friday, April 24: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

May 2026

Friday, May 27: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

June 2026

Friday, June 19: *Plantable Paper Lab* (Seed paper workshop), Presenters: Anne Townsend and Erin Garrett, 10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Friday, June 26: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

July 2026

Friday, July 24: *Magnificent Moths Event,* 10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Friday, July 31: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

August 2026

Thursday, August 27: *Which Grass Is Which?* Grass Identification Workshop, Presenter: Erin Garrett, 10:00- 11:30 a.m.

Friday, August 28: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

September 2026

Friday, September 27: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

Date: TBD September: *Fall Birding Migration Tailgate*, 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

October 2026

Sunday, October 25: *Boo at the Slough!*, 1:00–3:00 p.m.

Friday, October 30: *Coffee on the Cache* – Community Roundtable, Host: Sydney Waters, Natural Resources Coordinator, 9:00–10:00 a.m.

November 2026

Date TBD Late November: *Wooly Worm Presentation/*craft/story hour, Presenters: Anne Townsend, Erin Garrett, Time TBD.

No Coffee on the Cache this month due to the holiday

December 2026

Thursday, December 3: *Wreath Making Workshop*, Presenters: Anne Townsend and Erin Garrett. 1:30–3:00 p.m.

No Coffee on the Cache this month due to the holiday

Please watch for the latest updates on these Facebook pages:

Friends of the Cache River Watershed and Cache River State Natural Area.

Muskrats: Mammals with a Big Role in Cache River Wetlands by Mark Denzer



When people think about wetland conservation along the Cache River, muskrats are rarely the first species that come to mind. Often misunderstood or overlooked, these small, semi-aquatic mammals quietly shape some of the most valuable habitat in southern Illinois. Through their feeding and lodge-building behavior, muskrats help create the conditions that many wetland birds rely on during migration, breeding, and daily foraging.

Muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*) are native to the Cache River watershed and spend much of their lives in shallow backwaters, often referred to as sloughs. As they feed on cattails, reeds, swamp rose, water lilies, and other emergent plants, they open pockets of water within dense vegetation. At the same time, they pile cut vegetation into large lodges that rise above the water's surface. These changes transform uniform wetlands into a patchwork of open water and cover—ideal conditions for a wide variety of wildlife.

Birds Thrive in Muskrat-Modified Wetlands

This balance of water and vegetation, often called hemi-marsh, is especially important for birds. Secretive wetland species such as sora and Virginia rail depend on shallow water interspersed with dense cover, allowing them to move and forage while remaining hidden from predators. During spring and fall migration, these birds frequently use Cache River wetlands where muskrat activity has created natural openings in thick cattail stands.

Wading birds also benefit from muskrat-shaped wetlands. Great blue herons and green herons are often seen hunting along channels and open edges created by muskrat feeding. In quieter sloughs, black-crowned night-herons—an Illinois endangered species—use these areas to forage, taking advantage of shallow water



and abundant prey. American bitterns and least bitterns, both species of conservation concern in the state, rely on the mix of cover and open water that muskrats help maintain.

Waterfowl are another group that respond strongly to these conditions. Blue-winged teal, common migrants through the Cache River watershed, prefer slough habitat for feeding and resting. Wood ducks use nearby wooded wetlands and flooded bottomlands, while relying on open water and edge habitat for brood rearing. Even familiar species like mallards benefit from the increased habitat diversity muskrats create.

Beyond Birds: A Hub for Wildlife

The influence of muskrats extends beyond birds. Turtles bask on lodge tops, amphibians use the shallow pools formed by muskrat activity, and fish move through open channels created in dense vegetation. Even small mammals and predators interact with muskrat-modified wetlands, contributing to rich and complex food webs that make the Cache River one of Illinois' most biologically diverse watersheds.

Yes, muskrats do eat fish, along with other small aquatic animals like frogs, mussels, and crayfish, but fish and meat make up only a small part of their primarily vegetarian diet. Their main food consists of aquatic plants such as cattails, water lilies, bulrushes, and sedges, including roots and rhizomes. When plant foods are scarce, muskrats will supplement with small fish, freshwater clams, snails, frogs, salamanders, and crayfish. They will also feed opportunistically on crops like alfalfa, corn, or clover.

Amazing Adaptations for Wetland Life

Muskrats are highly adapted to life in water. Their ears and nostrils close automatically when submerged, and they can chew underwater without taking in water thanks to a specialized lip structure—similar to beavers. They can remain submerged for up to 15 minutes, thanks to a reduced sensitivity to carbon dioxide buildup in their blood. Muskrats also possess a circulatory adaptation called regional heterothermia, which reduces heat loss from their feet and tail while protecting those extremities from frostbite during harsh Illinois winters.

Conservation Lessons from Muskrats

For conservationists and wetland managers, muskrats offer an important reminder that healthy ecosystems are dynamic. In the Cache River watershed, supporting natural processes—including the work of muskrats—can help sustain high-quality habitat for species of conservation concern. Rather than being viewed as a problem, muskrats should be recognized as quiet partners in wetland restoration.



As Friends of the Cache Watershed continues to assist in efforts to educate, protect and restore this unique landscape, understanding the role of species like the muskrat helps tell a larger story: sometimes the most effective conservation work is already happening, hidden among the cattails and backwaters of the Cache.

(Photos by Tony Gerard and the Friends of the Cache River Watershed)

Who Am I? (Answer on page 10)



I typically live floating on still backwaters throughout the Cache. In the summer I'm green and not that noticeable, but during the winter I often become pink or red and add a splash of color to otherwise drab winter scenes. I'm a super-fast growing plant that has a lot of potential uses for humans. I could even help combat climate change. I bet I'm not the kind of plant you think I am. Do you know me? *(Photos by Tony Gerard)*



From my 3x5 Notebook—February 2026 by Susan Post

Michael and I usually venture to the Cache around Valentines Day. During the day we head to some of our favorite spots—Crab Orchard NWR, Mermet Lake and Heron Pond—looking for ducks and maybe an early spring migrant. In the evening, we cruise the backroads with the windows open. What are we doing? Listening for the American Woodcock. I have discovered this winter trip corresponds to when I first hear the birds in Illinois.



I have not always been attuned to this bird. Yes, in college I had to read Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold. In Sky Dance, Leopold writes about the bird's dance and its relationship to the lengthening days. I just read words and hoped I remembered enough to answer questions on a test. It wasn't until I was recording a radio program where I was talking about spring happenings that I paid attention. I had to mimic the woodcock's call on air. Hummm, I had never heard the bird or if I did, I did not know what I was hearing. How do I PEENT, if I have not heard it? Luckily a friend had a bird tape. I listened and practiced. I got through the radio spot without embarrassing myself, but I now had a goal, I have to hear this bird in the wild.

Imagine my surprise on hearing the *familiar peent* as Michael and I are getting ready to check into the Metropolis Holiday Inn during one of our February sojourns. Finally, I had heard this illusive bird. It has now become part of our late winter ritual of listening and looking for the bird (heard last year on February 11 at the Holiday Inn) in the Cache. To me it signals the days are finally longer with spring on the way.

(Photo by Michael Jeffords)

Invaders! Leopard Slugs by Tony Gerard



I have a confession to make – I like slugs. Always have. Something about their slow, mellow lifestyle and those eyestalk tentacles just makes them appealing to me. We have several slugs species around here, both native and exotic. The most obvious ones, at least at my house, are the European Leopard Slugs. *Limax maximus* is their scientific name, meaning, in Latin, *biggest slug*. It's appropriate because they can reach over seven inches in length. The Leopard slug name comes from their spotted appearance, although they can vary a lot, and some appear almost solid gray or brown.

Leopard slugs have been inadvertently introduced all over the world, often being transported in plants or on produce. In the US they were first noted near Philadelphia in 1867.



As exotics go Leopard slugs don't seem to cause that much damage that we know about, although the state of Florida lists them as an agricultural pest. They are omnivores, and their major food source seems to be dead plants and fungus. I once found a leopard slug feeding on another dead leopard slug I'd inadvertently stepped on the night before. And speaking of feeding on other slugs- leopard slugs do that as well. They sometimes act as predators on other slug species, chasing them down at hair-raising speeds (for a slug anyway) of 6 inches per minute!



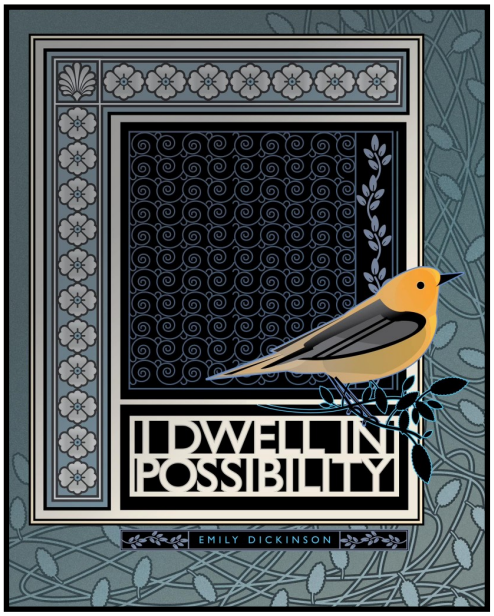
Almost all slug species are hermaphroditic (having organs of both sexes), so mating basically involves exchanging sperm. The courtship of Leopard slugs differs from most other slug species- it is elaborate and weird! Courtship begins by the slugs circling and licking each other, sometimes for hours. The pair will then seek out some elevated place such as a tree limb and then, entwined together, lower themselves on a thick string of mucus. They evert their white translucent mating organs from their gonopores (openings on the right side of the head), entwine these organs, and exchange sperm while spiraling down. Afterward each cam lay hundreds of eggs. Young Leopard slugs take about two years to mature and typically live 2.5 to 3.5 years.

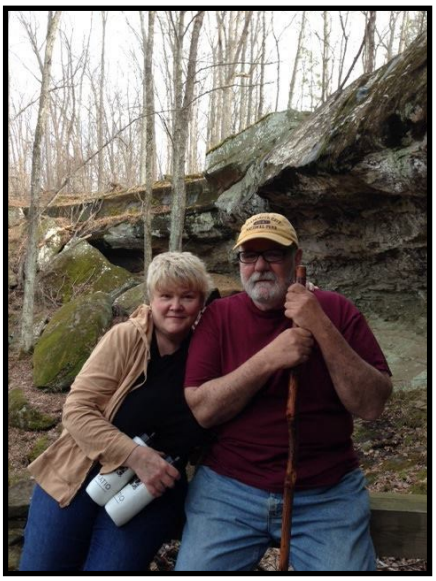
Leopard slugs are almost always found near human habitation — usually in lawns, gardens, cellars and in other damp areas. They are not gregarious. During the day they hide under rocks, fallen logs or some similar damp crevice. At night they come out to feed. Individual slugs seem to show a particular fidelity, usually returning to the
particular crevice or chink in which it has established itself. I like that idea also, that the Leopard slugs I see on my porch are the particular individuals that have chosen to live at my house. *(Photos by Tony Gerard)*



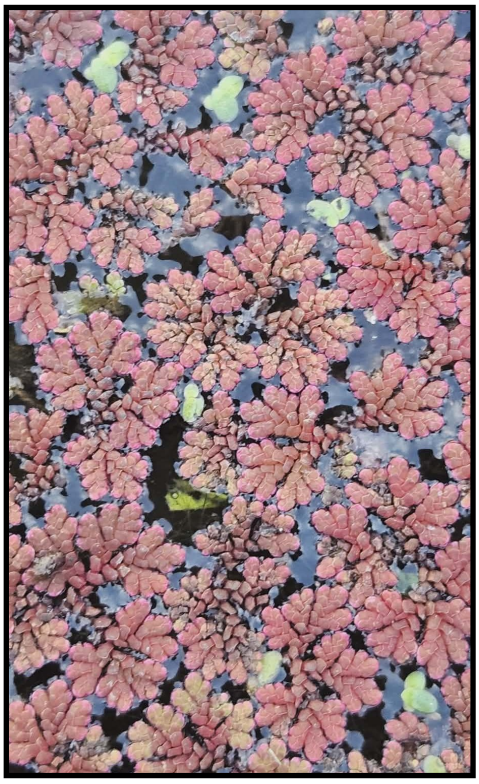
John Havlik Sept 1950-Jan 2026

John, and his late wife Paula, served as board members of the Friends for many years. Before moving to southern Illinois John taught graphic design. Most of the most popular Friends t-shirts, and the current Friends logo, were John's creations. He will be missed.





Answer to Who Am I? (From page 6)



I'm Azolla- at least that's my genus name, but lots of folks call me Mosquito fern. That's right, I'm a fern! I come in a couple of different species which are hard to tell apart. I'm host to symbiotic cyanobacteria that fixes atmospheric nitrogen into a form usable by plants and animals. In Asia I have been used for centuries to make high nitrogen compost. Some farmers have found feeding me directly to their livestock really increases growth. Scientists have even suggested I'd be a great food for Martian colonists because of my protein content- which is almost equal to soybeans! Have you ever heard of the Arctic Azolla Event? Some scientists now believe I played a major role in cooling Earth's climate about 50 million years ago. Want to know the details? Check out theazollafoundation.org.

(Photo by Tony Gerard)



Pictured from left to right are Friends of the Cache River Watershed Board Members Tammy Horn (co-membership/pollinator gardens), Anne Parmley (newsletter editor and co-membership/pollinator gardens), Lori Armstrong (treasurer/Friends store) , Tony Gerard (chairman), Jonathan Voelz, Shawn Gossman (webmaster), Sharon Voelz (secretary), and John Wallace. At far right is Mark Denzer, Volunteer.

All Friends Board Members can be reached at friendsofthecacheriver@gmail.com.

(Photo by Jonathan Voelz)

The Good Guys - Native Plants by Anne Parmley



Now is the time to broadcast native plant seeds in your pollinator garden. Most native species cannot germinate without cold-moist stratification. Some seeds require 30 days and some require 60 days of stratification. In the winter the ground freezes, thaws somewhat, freezes again, and thaws again. This repeated cycle lets the seeds sown on the top of the ground fall into the soil. When spring arrives



and the soil reaches the ideal germination temperature, the seeds sprout.

In our 15-acre pollinator field, we try to burn one-third of the field each year. That year I sow extra seed directly on any bare ground that I can find as I walk through the field. I always add my two favorite annuals: *Rudbeckia hirta* (black-eyed Susan) and *Chamaecrista fasciculata* (partridge pea), as well as some of the perennials that need to be replenished. This year so far I have also sown *Echinacea purpurea* (purple coneflower), *Eryngium yuccifolium* (rattlesnake master), and *Pycnanthemum muticum* (clustered mountain mint). *(Photos by William Parmley)*

Please join us! The Friends have provided significant support for a wide range of efforts to protect, restore, and enhance the Cache River Watershed's natural wonders and to spread the word about the Cache's many educational and recreational opportunities. With your help, we can do so much more!

As a Friend of the Cache, you'll receive our newsletter, invitations to members-only events, such as the popular annual Moonlight Paddle, a 10-percent discount on all Friends Store items at the Wetlands Center, volunteer opportunities, and more. *One such volunteer opportunity is helping with the pollinator gardens. We will have a cleanup day in early April (when temperatures stay consistently above 50°F to avoid harming overwintering insects). Details will be announced later.*

Become a Friend of the Cache River Watershed

☐ $15 Individual ☐ $50 Contributing ☐ $250 Sustaining

☐ $25 Family ☐ $100 Supporting ☐ $1000 Lifetime

☐ New Member ☐ Current Member

Name_____Date_____

Street Address_____

City_____State_____Zip_____

Phone_____Email_____

To remain budget and environmentally friendly, most communications are by e-mail.

☐ Check here if you need to receive information by U. S. Mail.

All contributions are tax-deductible. Please make checks payable to Friends of the Cache River Watershed and mail to 8885 State Route 37 South, Cypress, IL 62923.

OR go to our website: friendsofthecache.org and click "join" to become a friend online.