



River Bend
NATURE CENTER

2024 Annual Report

**Inspiring curiosity, respect
and care for nature.**



1000 Rustad Road
Faribault, MN 55021

507.332.7151
www.rbnc.org

rbncinfo@rbnc.org
f [RiverBendMinnesota](#)

2024 Report

Dear Friends of River Bend Nature Center,

We are pleased to provide you with an update on our work in the following pages of our 2024 annual report.

2024 was another amazing year for River Bend Nature Center. Staff, volunteers, and friends of River Bend came together to set new records and strengthen our role as one of the region's premier environmental educators and greening leaders. A few years ago, the community came together to co-create a strategic plan to guide River Bend's work for the next generation. By following that plan, we made 2024 a banner year—one that would have made our founder, Orwin Rustad, and other River Bend trailblazers we've lost along the way very proud.

Going into 2024, River Bend had the wind at our backs. We brought together a coalition of public and private funders, enabling us to expand our work into more schools and communities than ever before.

In 2024, we helped other agencies across the region adopt an "Outdoor Bill of Rights," expanded youth educational programs, introduced new populations to career paths in environmental stewardship, and launched our first-ever interpretive plan to improve the visitor experience. These efforts helped River Bend earn national recognition and support from organizations like the Trust for Public Land, the National League of Cities, and the USDA Forest Service.

Our work to build a more meaningful, lifelong connection with nature for everyone also manifested itself through significantly expanded conservation efforts. Today, more of our acreage than ever is cared for through comprehensive, multi-year conservation and restoration efforts. Beyond that, we began the first steps with the Trust for Public Land and our neighbors, Bill and Maggie Hein, to restore over 40 acres of agricultural land to a public trail

network and critical habitat for threatened and endangered species of plants and animals along the Straight River.

While 2024 was an amazing year, this report is being released in July 2025—at a time when we are also facing new uncertainties. Shifts in federal policy have put a significant amount of River Bend's financial and human capacity on uncertain footing. As we are beginning to do more and more significant work across the region, we're facing the prospect of doing it with less and less. More important than federal policy changes, we continue to mourn the losses of pillars of River Bend's community of supporters in 2024 and into 2025. River Bend has always been a coalition of neighbors, conservationists, volunteers, and FRIENDS. We share in the grief of these losses and, like you, wonder how we'll manage in their absence.

We're so grateful to have impacted the lives of thousands of people in and around Faribault—people from all walks of life and all corners of the globe—by inspiring curiosity, respect, and care for nature.

Thank you to the incredible River Bend staff, board members, funders, and volunteers who made 2024 an amazing success.

Dust Dienst
Board Chair

Brad Bourn
Executive Director



Programs & Engagement

In 2024, our programs and engagement staff pushed their capacity to the limits, serving new communities and building pathways to nature for people from across the region and around the world.

Beyond the highlights on the next page, we nearly doubled our programming partnership with Faribault Public Schools and created a new partnership with Owatonna Community Education to deliver robust out-of-school time programming throughout the school year—now with two of the largest districts in our region. We also advanced internal and community-wide efforts to make nature more accessible for everyone. In 2024, we made long-overdue ADA improvements to the nature center, including automatic doors and expanded access to our outdoor track chair, allowing more individuals with physical disabilities to experience River Bend.

At the same time, we increased program accessibility for people of diverse backgrounds and income levels by expanding free offerings, holding the line on fee increases for paid programs, and partnering with Faribault Public Schools to make River Bend a summer meal site—providing healthy breakfasts, lunches, and snacks for youth in need.

We've also positioned ourselves well for 2025. With support from the Minnesota Historical Society and the National League of Cities, we completed River Bend's first-ever site-wide interpretive plan and led regional efforts among environmental educators and green space providers to adopt the Faribault Region Outdoor Bill of Rights. These resources will help River Bend and our partners offer better, more inclusive outdoor programming for all.



A More Welcoming Nature Center



PROGRAM ENGAGEMENT

Public Program Attendees: 1,905

School Field Trip Attendees: 7,256

Program Outreach (held off-site): 2,805



ANNUAL VISITORS TO RBNC

We've been investing in visitor count methodology and estimate more than 100,000 visits to River Bend each year.



VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

River Bend is fortunate to have a solid support group of 89 active volunteers who gave over 5,653 hours in 2024.



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- St. Olaf College students worked on trail accessibility assessments and writing components for a nature center master plan
- An interpretive plan for River Bend to streamline information and display designs with accessibility as a top priority was funded by a grant from Minnesota Historical Society and Age Friendly MN.
- Program Partners include Faribault Public Schools, Northfield Community School, St. Olaf College, Somali Community Resettlement Services, Rice County Environmental Services, Clean River Partners



ACCESSIBILITY UPGRADES

Automatic doors were installed and a track chair was purchased for visitors to use on the trails for free!

Outdoor Career Pathway Initiative

In the face of climate change and growing populations locally and globally, the demand for forestry and natural resource professionals is projected to rise in the coming generation. These fields offer strong opportunities for gainful employment, and while Faribault is a wonderful community, many residents are currently unemployed, underemployed, or living on low incomes. At the same time, River Bend Nature Center has ongoing conservation needs—and some of the best conservation educators in the region.

Given all these factors, it made perfect sense for us to partner with Faribault Public Schools and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to launch our Outdoor Career Pathway Initiative in 2024.

Funded by a DEED grant, the program allows participants to earn a wage while building new skills and gaining industry-recognized credentials in natural resource management and environmental education—all through meaningful service to River Bend and the broader community.

Learning, Exploring, Growing



The work began in 2024



THE FIRST COHORT

Our Outdoor Career Pathway Initiatives officially launched in February 2025, enrolling 10 participants—a major milestone in our mission to engage and empower individuals in the environmental and conservation field. Participants receive paid, hands-on training while earning industry-recognized certifications such as the Minnesota Master Naturalist, US Forestry Service based Chainsaw Safety, First Aid/CPR and OSHA 10.

In addition to certifications, participants took part in unique, hands-on experiences like maple syrup production, prepping and repairing trails for this year's Fun Run - fun, practical ways to build land stewardship skills. One participant even presented at the South ABE Spring 2025 Regional Event and secured a position with the Minnesota DNR.



OF THE 10 PARTICIPANTS:

- Provided 2984 hours of natural resource management work for River Bend while learning natural resource and job readiness skills
- 7 completed the program
- 4 gained additional hours at their current jobs
- 3 left early because of increased earning opportunities
- 2 enrolled in ELL courses at Faribault Education Center
- 1 obtained employment outside the environmental and conservation field



THE SECOND COHORT

We are currently running our second cohort this summer, with six participants actively involved. In this cohort, we created two advanced Environmental and Conservation Fellowships allowing very promising participants the opportunity to learn more advanced skills while providing additional program support to River Bend's environmental education team.

After a promising launch of the program we've received additional grants from the U of M, the Minnesota Environmental Trust Fund, and the Department of Natural Resource to continue the program and improve our evaluation methodology through 2027.

Environmental Stewardship

Arguably one of the most important things we do at River Bend is steward the natural resources in our care. Over the decades, extreme weather and invasive species like buckthorn, wild parsnip, and emerald ash borer (EAB) have gradually taken hold. Natural resource work that River Bend's founders and trailblazers once managed with volunteers now requires extensive, multi-year management plans to preserve critical habitat and recover from impacts like EAB.

For the past seven years, we've been methodically planning and carrying out this work. Today, more acreage than ever is under long-term restoration, allowing us to secure added funding and better leverage community volunteers.

In addition to fighting invasive species, we've expanded protected lands. Throughout 2024, we worked with the Trust for Public Land and our neighbors, Bill and Maggie Hein, to begin restoring over 40 acres of agricultural land along the Straight River to critical habitat. We also took steps to reduce our own climate impact through investments in renewable energy. Thanks to support from the City of Faribault, we added a rooftop solar array projected to generate 120% of the electricity River Bend uses each year.

Conservation & Restoration



743 Acres and Counting



ACTIVLY MANAGED

- Over 750 acres of land total
- 187 acres in active restoration



GRANT FUNDING FOR MANAGEMENT

- \$100,000 in state grants over the next three years
- Over \$54,000 directly invested in 2024



GRANT FUNDERS

- Conservation Partners Legacy Funds
- Carl and Verna Schmidt Foundation
- Conservation Reserves Programs
- Xcel Energy Foundation



CONSERVATION PARTNERS

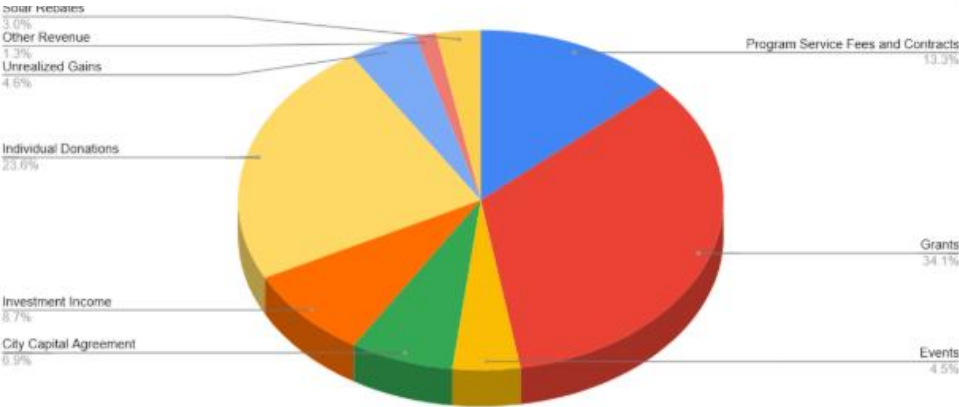
- MN Department of Natural Resources
- US Forest Service
- MN Zoo
- Trust for Public Lands
- AmeriCorps-Ampact



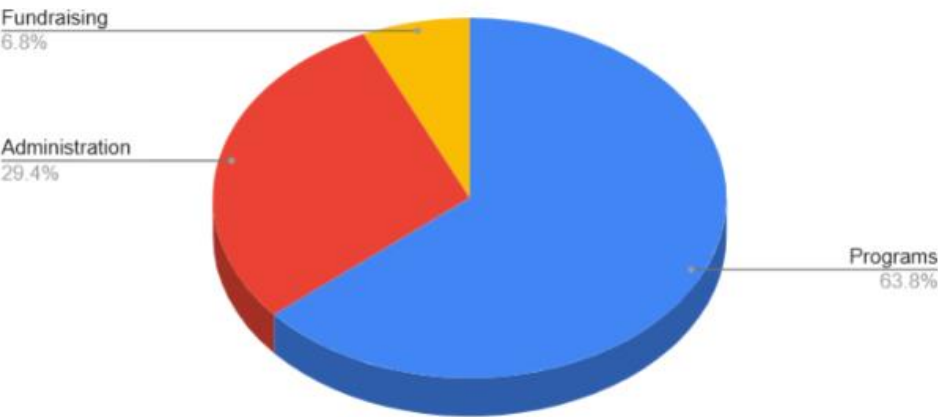
EXPANDING OUR REACH

In 2024, River Bend was able to begin new conservation activities on 67 acres, bringing the total acres in active management to 187 acres. \$100,000 in grants were awarded to be distributed across three years directed to preserving habitat for multiple rare species.

2024 Revenue



2024 Expenses



Revenue 2024	
Total Regular Revenue and Support	\$832,828
Total Endowment (unrealized) Gains	\$40,222
Total Revenue, Support, and Gains	\$873,050
Expenses 2025	
Program	\$498,695
Management and Admin	\$230,171
Fundraising	\$53,087
Total Expenses	\$781,953
Total Net Revenue	\$91,097
Total Assets Jan 1, 2024	\$1,660,262
Total Assets Dec 31, 2024	\$1,751,359

*Our 2024 audit will be complete in Q3, 2025. These numbers may change slightly. River Bend’s public financial statements are available by request and posted on our website.

Inspiring curiosity, respect, and care for nature





Board of Directors

Dustin Dienst, *President*

Sarah Hammer, *Vice-President*

Karen Zeller, *Treasurer*

Abby Malmanger, *Secretary*

Mandy Barnes, *City Council Liaison*

Jessica Kinser, *City Administrator*

Cindy DeSormeau

Patrick Mader

Erica Jakes

Nort Johnson

Tom DeMatteo

Patrick Schaefer

Greg Simons

Ibrahim Khalif

Former Staff & Board Members Serving in 2024

Tom Spooner, *City Council Liaison*

Staff

Executive Director

Brad Bourn

Associate Directors

Quanda Arch, Outdoor Career Pathways

Katy Anderegg, Administration

Molly Dulka, Programs & Engagement

Brittany Smith, Env. Stewardship

Program Coordinators

Matt Johnson & Morgan Heier,

Randy McMeekin

Naturalists

Kate Ford, Leah Inman

AmeriCorps Members

Caitlin Juvland (Jan-Dec)

Dan Heinen (Jan-Dec)

Andrew Flicek (June-Dec)

Nick Smoczyk (August-Dec)

Evelyn Rosas (August-Dec)

Autumn Pozniak (October-Dec)

Julia Gates (Jan-July)

Dennis Wilcox (Jan-July)

Io Harris (June-August)

Lucy Paschke (June-August)

Thank you for supporting River Bend Nature Center