



Natural Resource Management Department Memorandum

TO: Benjamin Haberthur, Executive Director
FROM: Patrick Chess, Director of Natural Resources
RE: January 2026 Department Monthly Report

LAND MANAGEMENT

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Restoration

Tree & Brush Clearing

Despite cold winter conditions, the Natural Resource Management field staff are right in their element, tackling invasive tree and brush throughout the forest preserves. Major removal projects of buckthorn, honeysuckle, and other brush were the focus for weeks of cold-weather work at Bowes Creek Woods, Kenyon Farms, Fabyan, and Lone Grove Forest Preserves.

Progress was slowed due to warmer temperatures at the beginning of the month. However, contractors also continued their work at Raceway Woods, and Aurora West Forest Preserves.

Seed Preparation & Planting

Staff continued planting seed last month. Our Plant Ecologist, Monika Kastle, creates enhancement seed mix recipes unique for each site. With a combination of purchased seed and seed harvested during the 2025 Seed Team, these seed mixes are broadcasted by hopper or by hand into our preserves. Last month, staff sowed seed at Johnson's Mound and Mill Creek Forest Preserves. By the end of the winter, staff will have planted over 250 of agricultural land back to high diversity tallgrass prairie.

Bison Tours

Staff hosted several bison previews during January, letting various groups experience the herd in the winter before the entrance roads opens to the public in the spring. The bison



Tree clearing work done at Raceway Woods F.P.



Seed mixes prepared and ready to be sown.



Bison are doing well at Burlington Prairie..

continue to adapt well to their new home at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve.

Wildlife

Deer Management Program

The 2025/26 Deer Management program ended on January 18th, with the close of the archery deer season. Participants removed their equipment from the preserves by 1/25. Hunters in our program harvested 73 deer this season. Final harvest numbers by site were: Brunner/FRS (31, 19%↑16), Freeman Kame (23, 43%↑), Lone Grove (3, 57↓), Binnie (3, 25%↓), Needham (5, 66%↑) and Big Rock (9, 40%↓). IDNR is still testing samples for chronic wasting disease at this time, so the number of CWD positive deer is unknown at this time.

Avian Surveys and Studies

Wildlife staff continued to trap and band raptors with the assistance of operations staff. Staff successfully captured, banded and took data from red-tailed hawks, kestrels and one accidental rough-legged hawk catch. Raptor banding efforts this month included recapturing an adult male kestrel at Burlington Forest Preserve. This adult male was one of the parents that raised a clutch at Burlington this past summer.

Staff have also been conducting owl surveys in the preserves. In January we surveyed Fabyan Woods, Hampshire and Big Rock finding a variety of owl species: Northern saw-whet owl, Eastern screech owl, Barred owl and Great horned owl. Additionally, wildlife staff was asked to assist the University of Illinois with an Eastern screech owl study. The project aims to measure screech owl occupancy across an urban gradient and assess how the presence of other owl species may or may not impact the screech owl. Staff has been working to coordinate with other counties to contribute to this study.

Lastly, wildlife staff attended the 2026 Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference at the end of the month.



Rough legged hawk caught in a bal-chatri trap.



Ranger Matt Smith holding a recaptured adult male American Kestrel at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve.