

HEMLOCK

COUNTY PARK

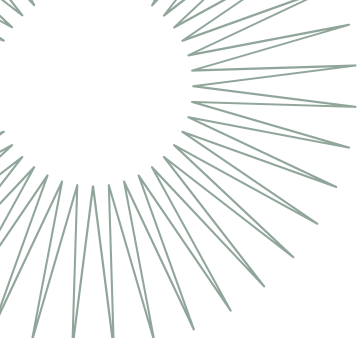


PROPERTY MASTER PLAN
2025-2045



SAUK COUNTY
PARKS + RECREATION

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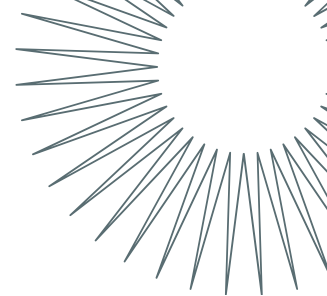
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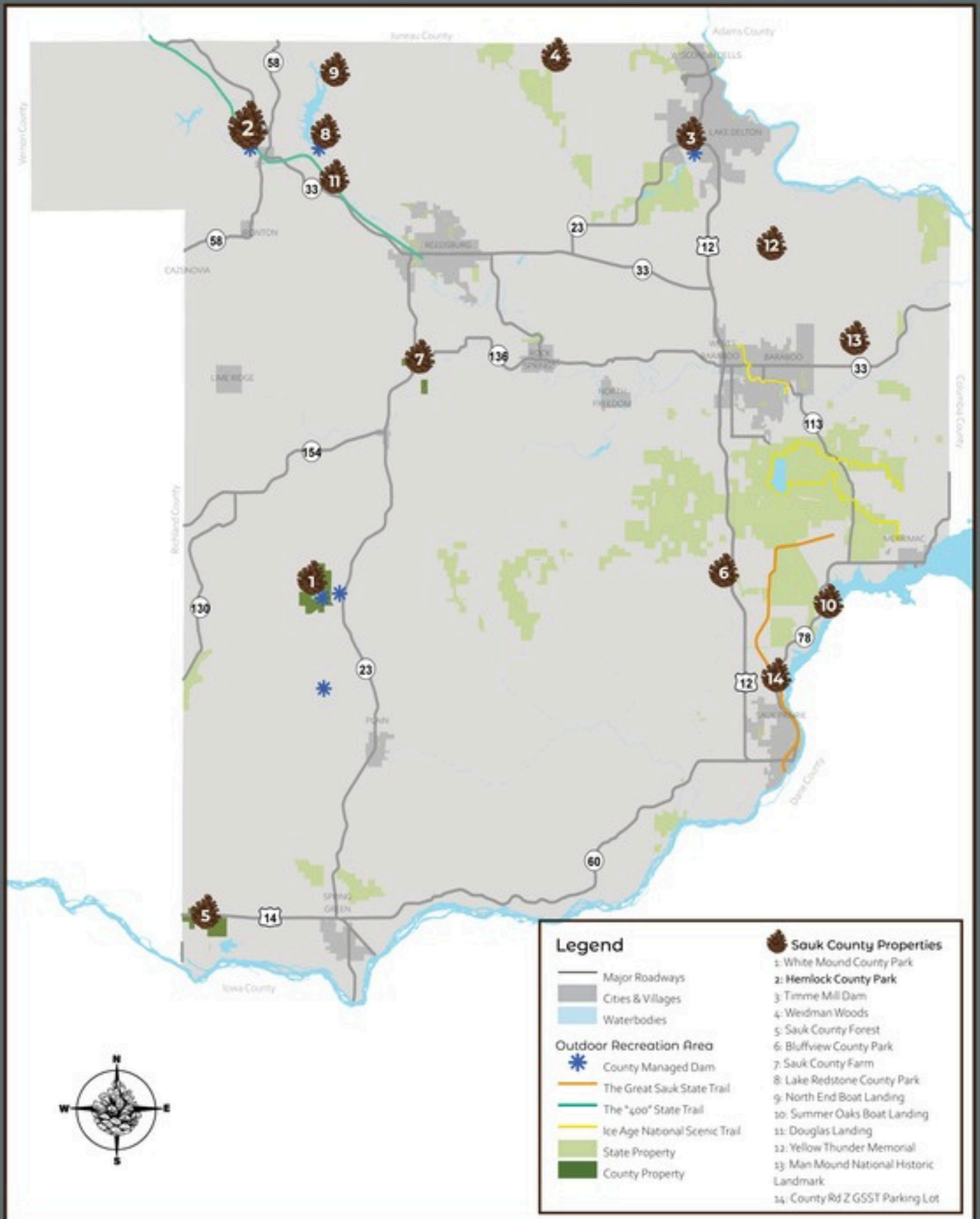
A special thanks goes out to all members of the public who took the time to attend open houses, offer in-person feedback and send written comments. Thank you to the members of the Town of La Valle and Village of La Valle who took the time to speak with staff members and share interests, concerns and ideas for the park.

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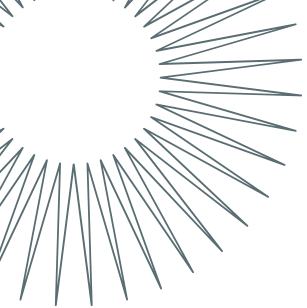
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Sauk County Parks & Recreation







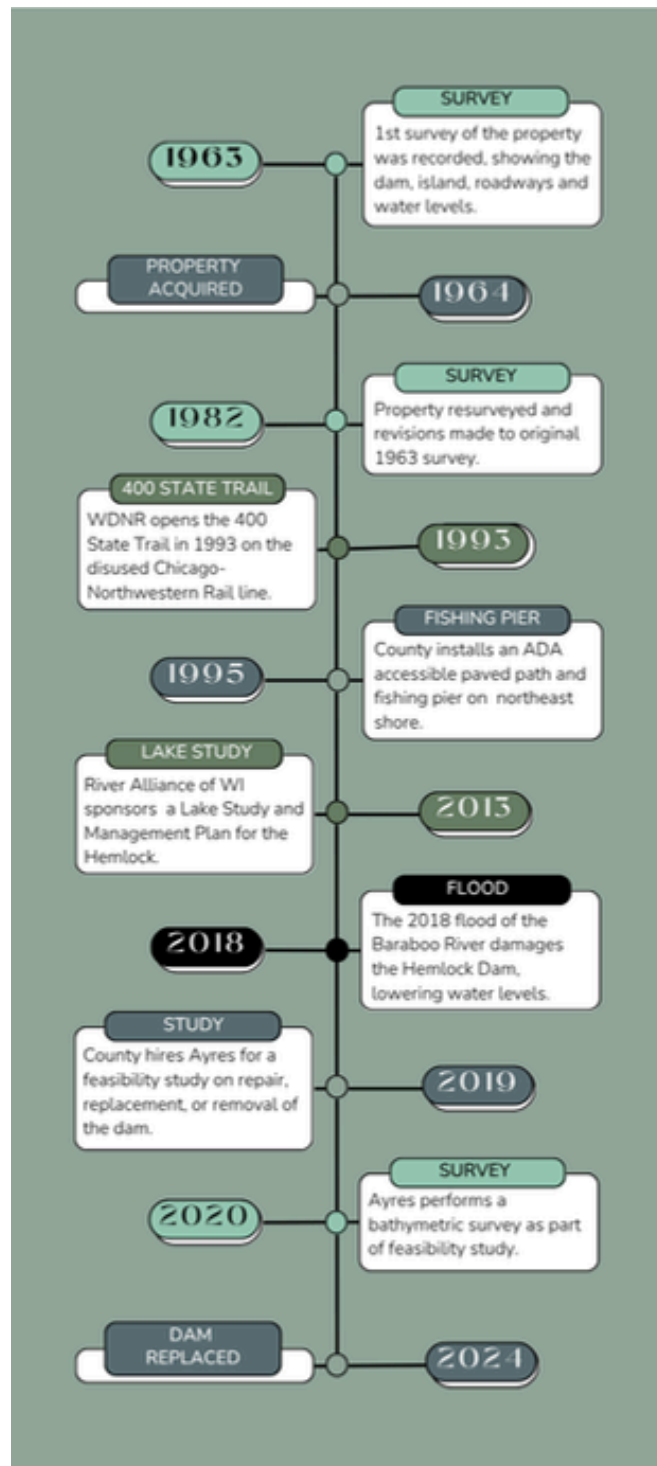
INTRODUCTION

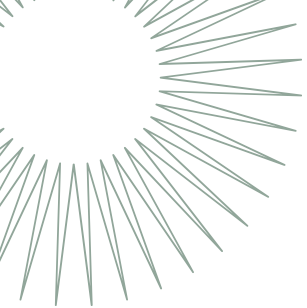


Hemlock County Park is a 72-acre park with a dammed slough of the Baraboo River located approximately ½ mile north of the Village of La Valle in Sauk County, WI. The property features extensive bird habitat in the form of the shallow 13-acre floodplain slough, sandstone outcrops, persistent emergent/wet meadows, sedge meadow, deciduous and pine forest. This property has been cherished by local citizens through the decades not only for the wildlife habitat, but the recreational opportunities provided by the dammed slough. In 2018, the dam was significantly damaged from a flood. In response to that damage, Sauk County removed the remaining stop logs in the dam, which lowered the water level to reduce potential further damage. This provided an opportunity to reimagine the use and amenities available at this property.

Currently, the property is relatively rustic with few amenities and aging infrastructure. The following plan has been created through a seven-year process, first a five-year process to replace the dam and an additional two years of master planning. With the assistance of the local community, citizens, Town and Village officials, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), the Hemlock County Park Master Plan was created. The plan consists of three main goals: expand trails throughout the property and improve access to recreational activities; conserve, restore and support unique or sensitive habitats and species; and, improve general park infrastructure and amenities.

Sauk County acquired this property in 1964 when a group of landowners sold their land for the purpose of creating a park. Hemlock Slough was a natural oxbow lake of the Baraboo River, which had been dammed since prior to 1900 by the Chicago Northwestern Railroad Company when they channelized a portion of the Baraboo River and built the embankment through a section of the floodplain. This embankment separated the natural oxbow floodplain from the main Baraboo River channel, except for an opening along the southern edge of the slough. After the property was acquired in 1964, the County constructed a dam and water control structure along the embankment, raising the level of the water in the slough and removing it from the natural fluctuations of the Baraboo River. In the early nineties, the railway line was converted into a limestone bike and pedestrian pathway through the use of Rails-to-Trails state funds and in 1993 the WDNR opened the 400 State Trail which runs along the southern boundary of the park.





Throughout the years, the property was maintained to allow recreational water access. The County installed an ADA accessible paved path from the parking lot to an accessible fishing pier on the northeast shore of the lake in 1995. This pier provided fishing access for many visitors until its removal in 2024 when the structure became unsafe due to age. The dam originally constructed on the property was designed to hold water 4' (four feet) above the stream bed, increasing the recreational opportunities available on the floodplain lake. At some point in time someone added another stop log in the dam to raise the water another 1.5 feet above what the dam was designed for. In 2018, a 100-year flood event overtopped the dam, causing failure. Through a five-year process with local citizens, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Town of La Valle and Sauk County, restoration discussions concluded with replacing the dam with a smaller structure that was finished in 2024.



PROPERTY INVENTORY

Habitats

Hemlock County Park is comprised of unique, varied habitats from its namesake hemlock relic to the wetland and Baraboo River slough complex. For the purposes of this master plan inventory, the property is divided into three distinct habitats: the slough and wetland complex, forest, and the hemlock relic.

Slough

The Hemlock Slough is a 13-acre dammed lake hydraulically connected to the Baraboo River. The slough was originally an oxbow lake, wetland complex created by overflow of the River. Today, the slough is contained by the 400 State Trail and a dam reconstructed in 2024. The slough is shallow with some deeper pockets up to 7-feet and has panfish, largemouth bass, and northern pike. There is a small clearing on the northern shore, surrounded by pine trees and offering a shady seating area overlooking the slough. Through this clearing is an accessible paved path leading from the parking lot to what was once the fishing pier. There was access to the water via a boat launch and ADA fishing pier, both of which at the time of this plan are now defunct. With the installation of the new dam, the water level is not high enough to use the boat launch and the fishing pier was removed for safety reasons. The slough is nearly overwhelmed with aquatic invasive plants such as Eurasian milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) and curly leaf pond weed (*Potamogeton crispus*) which can cause issues with both native species and maintainance of the dam. The DNR also considers the slough impaired due to excess algal growth and phosphorus levels caused by the shallowness of the water and surrounding land practices. In 2013, the River Alliance of Wisconsin sponsored the Paired Lake Study and Management Planning Project (Appendix C) through a large-scale lake planning grant, which provided an in depth look at water quality and species located within the slough.



The slough is part of the large wetland complex on property and contains an island in the middle of the lake with a dike connecting it to the rest of the park. The complex is made up of emergent/wet meadow narrow-leaved persistent and nonpersistent wetlands. This means that there are herbaceous plants above the surface of the water and soil, and some persist throughout the seasons and some fall beneath the surface and will decompose over winter. This includes plants such as cattails, sedges, grasses and possibly bulrush stands, and can support many migratory waterfowl and grassland bird species. As parts of the wetland remain dry throughout most of the year, this may allow for paths to be mowed through sections of the island.

Forest

There are approximately 38 acres of forested land in the park consisting of both pine and deciduous trees. Deciduous tree species include silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*) red oak (*Quercus rubra*) and american elm (*Ulmus americana*). The majority of the deciduous trees are located along the northeast section of the property which has a steep hill and valley, along with a rocky outcrop. This habitat also supports plants such as trillium, a threatened plant which can be found in hardwood forests, commonly near bodies of water such as Hemlock County Park. Located on the hillside surrounded by pines, is a mobile service tower owned by the County. The tower has a separate access road off the driveway but there is an old service road leading from the clearing north of the lake through the forested area which may be utilized for future trail building.





Hemlock Relic

Hemlock relics are considered an imperiled habitat in Wisconsin and globally, primarily due to the restricted range and particular conditions in which they grow. The typical habitat consists of steep, damp ravines with sandstone escarpments, such as those along the Baraboo River and as located in Hemlock County Park along the southeast section of the slough. These conditions create a cool moist environment, allowing particular species to thrive. The dominant trees are eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), white pine (*Pinus strobus*), and paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*). These are all present within the park, along with other commonly found species such as clubmoss (*lucidula*), spinulose wood fern (*Dryopteris carthusiana*), and rose-twisted stalk (*Streptopus lanceolatus*).



White Pine Needles



Rock Clubmoss

The regeneration capability of the forest and particularly the hemlock in the park have decreased significantly over the last couple decades due to a heavy deer population in the area. At the time of this plan, the hemlock relic lacks an understory and midstory of juvenile trees to replace the mature trees. Also, with severe weather, older specimens have toppled, opening the tree canopy and encouraging faster growing species. Unless active management is performed to lessen the pressure of the deer grazing and allow juvenile trees a chance to mature, the hemlocks will slowly be lost, and possibly other species which are found in cohabitation.



Wildlife Surveys:

As part of the planning process, wildlife surveys were conducted by biologists to inventory species utilizing the property and monitor areas of the property that may be more sensitive to infrastructure improvements or park users. Three types of surveys were conducted on the property: an acoustic bat survey, monthly point counts for forest interior birds, and wetland bird fixed plot monitoring. The results of these surveys can be found in Appendix A. Significant species that should be mentioned though include the Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*), Little Brown Bat (*Myotis lucifugus*), Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), Belted Kingfisher (*Megasceryle alcyon*), Blue-winged Teal (*Spatula discors*), and the Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*).



Immature Belted Kingfisher
Credit: Jack & Holly Bartholmai / Macaulay Library



Female Blue Winged Teal - Jay McGowan / Macaulay Library



Dam outlet at Hemlock County Park



North shore of lake



Property Infrastructure

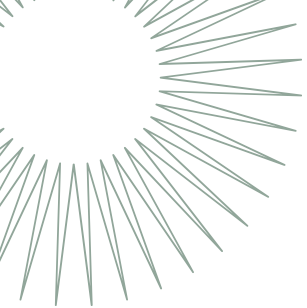
At the time of this plan, infrastructure in the park is limited with the dam being the major infrastructure on the property. After multiple years of discussion with WDNR, the water levels are designed to be maintained at 891 feet in elevation. The property is accessed from Dutch Hollow Road by a long, 1,450-foot-long paved driveway, ending at the half acre parking lot on the north shore of the slough. There is currently no electrical or potable water available on the property, however, there is an old artesian well that is not in use and requires testing and possible capping. Off the parking lot, there is a single vault toilet that is often mistreated. The park is designated as a carry in, carry out property with no trash receptacles on site. On the northeast side of the parking area is a grassy lawn with a slight slope surrounded by woodland that could be utilized for additional infrastructure. There are picnic tables located on the north shore of the slough and on the grassy lawn adjacent to the parking lot. The park has signage at the entrance identifying it as part of the County Park's System and a sign identifying the original property owners at the entrance to the paved pathway which is in disrepair.



PLANNING PROCESS

The planning and reimagining of this property started in 2018 when the dam failed. Through the five-year dam restoration process there were a number of possible outcomes, including removing the dam altogether, replacing with the same size dam and the ultimate outcome of replacing the dam with a smaller structure. The outcome and use of the property was discussed with a viable fishery being recognized as a priority. Master planning was officially launched for the property in the spring of 2023 after the decision to replace the dam was finalized. During that year, staff met with local officials to discuss the planning process and to inventory the property for immediate needs and studies. This launched the wildlife surveys which began in 2024 and are scheduled to continue for bird and wetland species monitoring after the plan has been completed.

After the dam construction was finalized in the summer of 2024, staff waited for water levels to stabilize and citizens to experience the park with higher water levels once again. An open house was held at the La Valle Town Hall on November 14th of that year to gather input from citizens, community groups, and local officials. The open house had several stations including: park facilities, trails, bridges and boardwalks, fishing, water and hunting access, vegetation, and bird species. Attendees were provided with a map and history of the property. Staff were available at each station to discuss possible ideas for the property and hear from citizens. It was reiterated that access to the water and improving the fishery was a priority for the community, also prioritized at that event was gaining access to the 400 State Trail and improving amenities such as restrooms and seating. Citizens were provided with a history timeline of the park and a property map in which they could mark their comments (Appendix D) Feedback from the event was utilized to draft goals and action items for the property.



A draft of the plan and property goals with prioritized implementation was presented to the public at an open house on June 16, 2025. There, priority-based stations presented to the public on proposed goals and improvements allowing for small group discussions. The draft plan was also available online for public comment. The draft plan and timeline of events were well received by members of the public.

Property stakeholders including surrounding property owners, community officials, recreational groups, community groups, and interested citizens were notified directly of all events and drafts of the plan throughout the planning process as well as general promotion of the events through social media, public postings, flyers, and email subscription services.

The plan was presented to the Land Resources and Extension Committee on August 14, 2025 and approved by the Sauk County Board of Supervisors on August 19, 2025.



RELATIONSHIP TO COMMUNITY PLANS

Hemlock County Park is a significant natural resource with a potential for expanded conservation efforts and recreational opportunities. Both the Village and Town of La Valle recognize the park as a resource to their community and make note of recreational potential in their comprehensive plans. In particular, the Town's policy within their plan recommends collaboration with the County to expand the Park and enhance the Park. As part of the overall Sauk County Parks system, the plan meets the following objectives as outlined in the Sauk County Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORP):

- Development Of County Park System
 - Develop Master Plans for Sauk County Properties
 - ADA Accessibility
- Resource Management and Stewardship
 - Community Education
 - Improved Ecosystem Quality
- Partnerships
 - Intersect With Other Units of Government and Nongovernment Organizations (NGOs)
 - Consider Multiple Outcomes When Planning for Cross-boundary Recreation
- Economic Development & Tourism
 - Improve Access to Waterways





GOALS

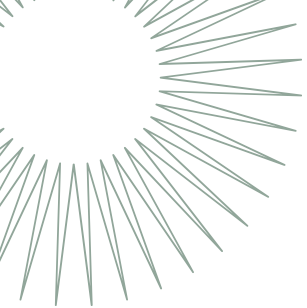
The following goals and action items have been developed to guide the evolution of Hemlock County Park, funding and implementation. Some of these items are strategies that will continuously be enacted throughout the plan, such as partnerships, and water quality monitoring, while infrastructure-based items have a proposed installation timeline. In the implementation section of this plan, action items are broken into three priorities of development for infrastructure or amenity improvements. An overview map is included in Appendix B noting possible locations for future amenities.

☉ **I: Improve general park infrastructure and amenities.**

II: Conserve, restore and support unique or sensitive
☉ **habitats and species.**

III: Expand trails throughout the property and improve
☉ **access to recreational activities.**





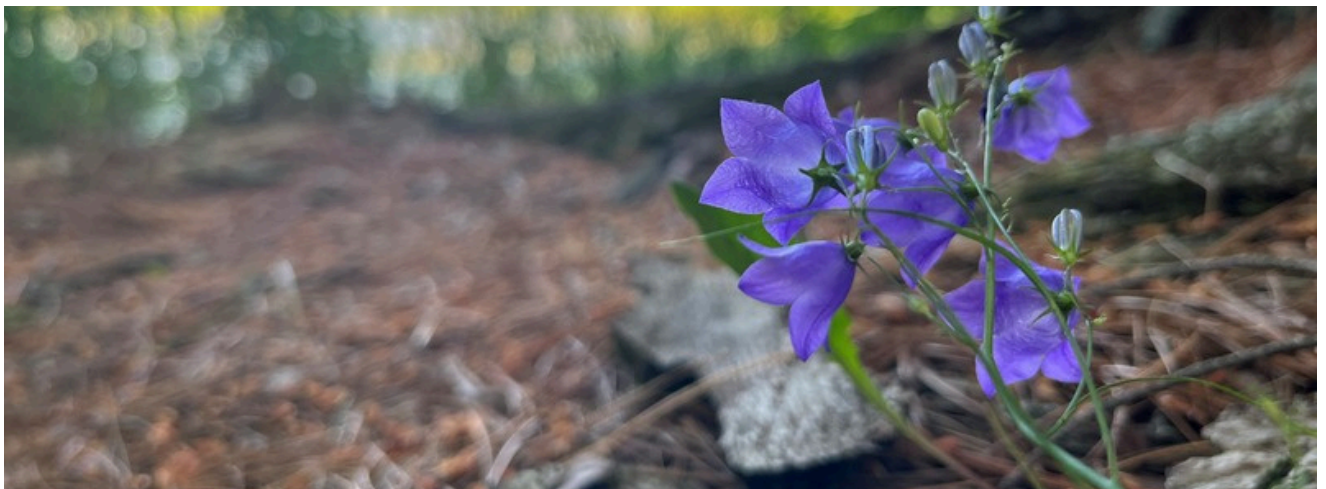
I: Improve general park infrastructure and amenities.

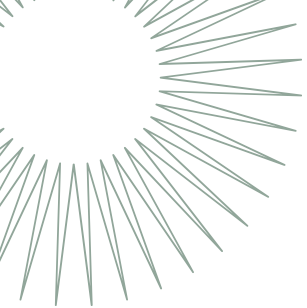


- Construct all amenities to ADA accessible standards and construct accessible pathways to all amenities.
- Construct a gathering area with a shelter, picnic tables, grill and electrical hook-up.
- Install modest playground equipment.
- Install a new well and pump house for potable water.
- Park hours will be from 6:00 am to 11:00 pm with dawn to dusk lighting.
- Remove and replace restroom facilities.
- Expand seating in the park with picnic tables along the shore and benches in the wetland complex.
- Stripe the parking lot to mark ADA, truck and trailer, and regular parking stalls.
- Install hammock posts along the shore of the slough and within the gathering area.
- Consider winter road maintenance when staffing and funding allows.
- Consider the installation of an entrance fee as infrastructure is improved on-site.
- Continue to work with local police force for park monitoring.

II: Conserve, restore and support unique or sensitive habitats and species.

- Promote bird roosting through the installation of cavity nesting boxes and perches.
- Develop a forest management plan to conserve the existing tree canopy and regenerate hemlock species.
- Support regeneration of hemlock stand by installing exclosures to protect seedling and juvenile trees from deer.
- Improve water habitat through installation of turtle platforms and fish logs.
- Request expanded fish stocking and change to fishing regulations regarding size and quantity limits.
- Continue to work with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) on water quality monitoring.
- Consider the purchase and installation of aerators in the lake to increase dissolved oxygen.
- Expand educational opportunities at the park through the LRE Department and in partnering with the community.



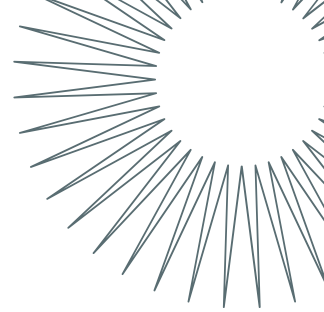


III: Expand trails throughout the property and improve access to recreational activities.



- Dredge deeper areas of the slough to create larger fishing pockets and to increase lake surface area with reduced aquatic vegetation that reaches the surface.
- Construct a boardwalk and/or walking trail through the wetland complex with bump outs for fishing and wildlife viewing.
- Construct a new ADA fishing pier at the northeast shore of the lake.
- Renovate the launch to allow for canoe and kayaks.
- Construct a bridge between the 400 State Trail and wetland complex that allows for bike and pedestrian traffic.
- Create an eastern woodland trail with access to rock outcroppings, hemlock relict and possible additional connection to the 400 State Trail.
- Create a northern forest loop trail.
- Install educational signage, with marked trails and a property trail map available online and/or in person.
- Archery only hunting will be allowed throughout the property. No trapping will be allowed.

IMPLEMENTATION



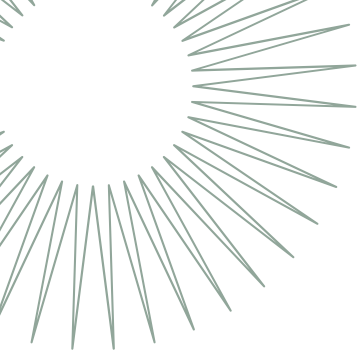
The implementation of this plan has been divided into three priority areas of implementation. The timeline is suggested and is subject to change based on budget, staff time, and community involvement. Priority one for the property is concentrated on expanding access throughout the park and establishing management strategies for the sensitive habitats on site. The subsequent priorities build upon Priority one through expanded infrastructure and amenities.

TASK	PROJECT SCOPE
ONGOING	
Bow Hunting	Property will remain open for bow hunting as regulated through Ch. 10 of the Sauk County Code of Ordinances.
Fishing Limits/Stocking	Staff will continue to work with the WDNR on establishing appropriate fishing limits and stocking when necessary.
Water Quality Monitoring	Monitoring of the water quality is encouraged to continue indefinitely.
Educational Events	Staff will seek and encourage opportunities for educational events on the property and will work with community partners.
ADA Standards	All amenities will be constructed and maintained to ADA standards whenever possible.
Winter Road Maintenance	Discuss assistance for winter road maintenance with Town.
Park Monitoring	Collaborate with County and local patrol for monitoring at the property



TASK	PROJECT SCOPE
PRIORITY I: 1 to 5 Years	
ADA Fishing Pier	Install a new ADA fishing pier/ water overlook off the north shore.
Boat Launch Renovations	The boat launch will be extended out further into the lake to allow use by small watercrafts. Permit through DNR.
Lake Dredging	Dredge natural deep pockets of the lake, particularly near the shore and future boardwalk to improve the fishery and reduce aquatic vegetation.
Eastern Woodland Trail	Create a trail with access to rock outcroppings, hemlock relict and possible additional connection to the 400 State Trail.
Northern Forest Loop	Create a trail through the wooded northern hillside with views of rock outcroppings and possible overview of the lake.
Mowed Trail Through Wetland	Repair the dike connecting the island to the parking area and mow a path through dry areas of the wetland with possible access to shoreland fishing areas.
Trail Signage & Property Map	Create trail signage as trails are installed and develop a property map for availability online and in person. Install property rules and map on sign near main trailhead.
Install Picnic Tables and Hammock Posts	Install picnic tables hammock posts along north shore of lake.

TASK	PROJECT SCOPE
PRIORITY II: 1 to 10 Years	
Shelter & Replacement Restrooms	The vault toilet will be removed and suggested replacement are portable toilets with visually appealing screening. A small shelter should be constructed that fits approximately 4 picnic tables and connects to a grill area.
Bridge to the 400 State Trail	Construct a bridge between the island and 400 State Trail that connects either to a boardwalk or mowed trail.
Boardwalk Through Wetland	A full boardwalk or sections will be constructed through the wetland to allow pedestrian and bike traffic between the park and 400 State Trail.
Playground Equipment	Install a modest playground near shelter.
Expand Seating	Install benches in wetland area and along north shore where able.
Potable Water	Drill a new well and install a water pump or drinking fountain.
Stripe Parking Lot	Stripe parking lot for ADA, trailers and regular vehicles. Provide ADA parking near shelter, restrooms and entrance to north shore.
PRIORITY III: As funds are available.	
Forest Management Plan	A forester will be engaged to inventory the woodland and create a management plan that encourages hemlock regeneration and maintaining the tree canopy.
Hemlock Exclosures	Exclosures of varying sizes will be constructed around open canopy areas and mature hemlocks with active management to prevent deer grazing and promote maturation of seedling and juvenile hemlocks.
Cavity Nesting Boxes	Construct cavity nesting boxes in forested areas to promote nesting of owls and other birds.
Raptor Perch	Install a raptor perch on the island.
Turtle Platforms & Fish Logs	Install turtle platforms and fish logs to improve habitat.



Appendices

A: Wildlife Surveys

- Acoustic Survey & Data Analysis
- Forest & Wetland Bird Point Counts

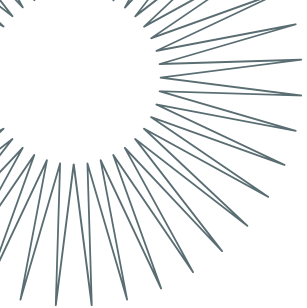
B: Property Maps

- Development Overview Map
- Water Resources Map

C: Paired Lake Study and Management Planning Project

D: Open House Public Comment Maps

E: Sources



SOURCES

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