



SPRING LAKE

NATURE CENTER



To inspire curiosity, stewardship, and connection through hands-on exploration of North Dakota's natural world.

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Our Story

Founded by Lee Lusht as her long-held dream, Spring Lake Nature Center in Williston, ND, is a 501-c3 non-profit organization and the only nature-based science center serving northwest North Dakota. Early planning began in 2023, and the organization has since grown with the guidance of a committed board and broad community support.

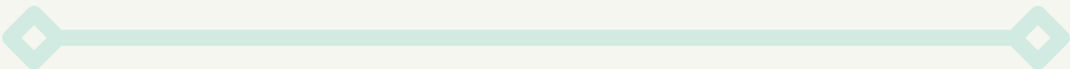
Since its soft opening in early 2026, the center has offered monthly rotating exhibits, hands-on programs, and seasonal activities exploring local ecosystems, fossils, pollinators, and more, all designed to inspire curiosity and stewardship.



Spring Lake Nature Center has grown through the support, encouragement, and generosity of the community. Financial and in-kind contributions have played an important role in helping bring the vision to life. The Williston STAR Fund awarded a community grant to support development efforts, Williston CVB has provided ongoing support, and Western Cooperative Credit Union pledged \$100,000 over three years to help advance the center's mission and programming. Volunteers, local organizations, and community partners have also contributed countless hours, materials, and resources to help create engaging exhibits, programs, and experiences for visitors of all ages.

As the Nature Center continues to grow, the primary long-term goal remains establishing a permanent home in Spring Lake Park — a welcoming community space where people of all ages can gather to learn about, explore, and connect with the natural world. Looking further ahead, future outreach initiatives such as the Prairie Rover could help expand nature-based learning opportunities to schools and rural communities across the region.

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Keepers of the Prairie

What does it mean to be a Keeper of the Prairie? Sometimes, it means knowing the plants and animals that call North Dakota home. Sometimes, it means protecting the places where they live. And sometimes, it means being a kid with an idea—and refusing to give up on it.

That is exactly what a group of Williston students did.

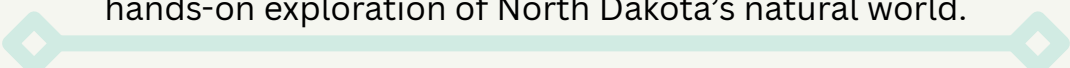
During the 2005–2006 school year, students in Nancy Selby’s sixth-grade class learned that another student in another state had successfully campaigned to make a fruit an official state symbol. When they discovered that North Dakota didn’t have a state fruit, they decided that needed to change, becoming known as “The Chokecherry Kids”.

The students researched native plants from across North Dakota and eventually chose the chokecherry. It wasn’t just a plant they knew—it was a plant deeply connected to the history of our state. Chokecherries had long been an important traditional food for Indigenous peoples of the region and appeared in the journals of Lewis and Clark.

The students wrote persuasive letters to Governor John Hoeven. His response? If they wanted a state fruit, they would need to get a bill through the legislature. So they did. The students convinced Williston State Senator Stan Lyson to sponsor Senate Bill 2145. In early 2007, now seventh-graders, they traveled by bus to the State Capitol in Bismarck. They spoke with lawmakers, answered questions, made their case—and even brought homemade chokecherry jelly to share. On March 29, 2007, Governor Hoeven signed the bill into law. The chokecherry officially became the state fruit of North Dakota.

The story didn’t end when the bill was signed. The Chokecherry Kids went on to become part of a uniquely North Dakota story—one about young people learning about their home, finding something worth celebrating, and using their voices to make a difference. Their achievement continues to be celebrated through the annual North Dakota Chokecherry Festival in Williston.

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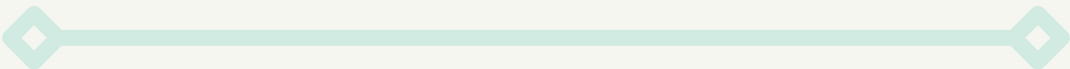


August News Recap cont.

And perhaps that's one of the best things a prairie can teach us: Being a Keeper of the Prairie isn't about how old you are. It's about paying attention. It's noticing the chokecherries growing along the edge of a trail. It's wondering why they're important. It's learning the stories connected to them. And sometimes, it's deciding that those stories are worth carrying into the future. The Chokecherry Kids didn't just help choose a state symbol. They became Keepers of the Prairie. And every generation has the opportunity to become one, too.



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What's Going On In September?

Over the past several months, we've been busy behind the scenes looking toward the future of Spring Lake Nature Center. We've been researching and applying for grants, talking with educators and community partners, and planning how we can continue growing our programs and reaching more people in our community.

One area we're especially excited about is educational programming for schools and homeschool families. We're exploring opportunities for field trips, hands-on learning experiences, and flexible programs that complement classroom learning while giving students the chance to explore nature and natural science firsthand. As we've worked through the possibilities, we've continued to come back to three important pieces: scheduling, a permanent location, and the Prairie Rover. After careful consideration, we've decided that, for now, the best option for our community is to offer select pop-up exhibits and field trip opportunities at Spring Lake Park and in the Keelboat building.

Our goal is to provide meaningful experiences where people can explore nature, ask questions, and engage with the natural sciences. To make that vision possible on a larger scale, we're continuing to focus our fundraising efforts on the Prairie Rover, our future mobile nature center and classroom.

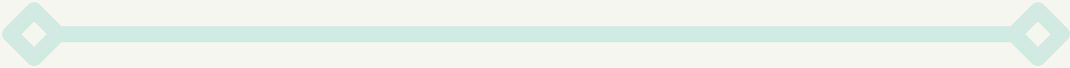
In the meantime, we're looking at ways to keep learning and exploring happening at Spring Lake Park. Some possibilities include guided field trips exploring the park and its wildlife, birthday experiences, and pop-up exhibits and activities.

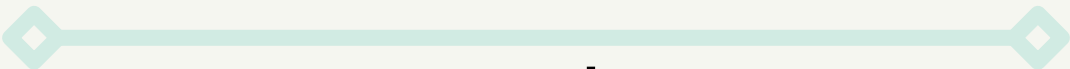
Since the Keelboat building is shared with other organizations and vendors throughout the winter months, our programming will be scheduled around those uses as well.

We would love to offer even more opportunities—such as community bird-watching groups, nature clubs, and additional hands-on activities—but there are only two of us working behind the scenes to make everything happen! That's where you come in. If you're interested in leading a club, helping with an event, sharing a skill, or simply volunteering your time, we would love to hear from you.

We're building this together, one opportunity at a time. If you have an idea for a program or would like to help make one happen, reach out and let's make it happen!

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Future Endeavors

Keepers of the Prairie

Every organization reaches moments when experience helps shape the road ahead. For Spring Lake Nature Center, this is one of those exciting moments. Our first season of pop-up exhibits at the Keelboat gave us an opportunity to test ideas, welcome families and students, build partnerships, and learn what works best for our growing organization.

It also helped us better understand what will be needed to make the Keelboat a long-term home for Spring Lake Nature Center. While we remain excited about its future possibilities, there are still improvements and logistics that need to be addressed before the space can support the consistent, year-round access our programs require.

Rather than slow our momentum while that work continues, we're taking what we've learned and moving forward with the Prairie Rover.

The Prairie Rover will be a fully mobile nature and STEM learning center designed to travel to schools, rural communities, libraries, parks, festivals, and events throughout western North Dakota.

Our goal is ambitious: raise \$1.2 million to design, build, equip, and get the Prairie Rover rolling within the next 24 to 36 months.

And we're already on our way.

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our supporters, Spring Lake Nature Center has raised more than \$180,000, much of it earmarked toward bringing the Prairie Rover to life.

The Prairie Rover will be more than a vehicle. It will be a traveling place of discovery filled with interactive exhibits, hands-on science, natural history, and experiences connected to the land we call home. From prairie ecology, wildlife, and water to geology, agriculture, paleontology, and energy, the Rover will bring the story of western North Dakota directly to the communities we serve.

This is where our Keepers of the Prairie come in.

Keepers of the Prairie are the people, businesses, organizations, and communities who believe every child deserves the opportunity to explore, question, discover, and better understand the place they call home.

In the coming months, we'll offer opportunities to help bring individual pieces of the Prairie Rover to life, from major interactive exhibits and learning stations to educational materials and hands-on experiences.

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Future Endeavors

Our long-term vision of a permanent Spring Lake Nature Center has not changed. The Prairie Rover gives us an opportunity to keep growing now, expand our reach, and build an even stronger foundation for that future. With the help of our Keepers of the Prairie, we plan to turn a \$1.2 million vision into a Nature Center on wheels and get it rolling across western North Dakota within the next 24 to 36 months.

Where curiosity takes root and imagination takes flight.

The below picture is a visualization of the Prairie Rover as an idea and inspiration. Artwork may differ on actual bus.



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Featured Plant

Chokecherry

As we head into fall, we're turning our attention to one of North Dakota's most familiar native fruits: the chokecherry.

Chokecherries grow throughout North Dakota and have long been part of the prairie landscape. They provide food for birds and other wildlife, while their fruit has been gathered and used by people for generations. Today, chokecherry jelly, syrup, and other recipes remain a familiar taste of the Northern Plains.

But the chokecherry holds a special place in North Dakota history for another reason.



On March 29, 2007, the chokecherry officially became the state fruit of North Dakota—thanks to a group of Williston sixth graders who decided that North Dakota needed one.

A Name With a Story

The name isn't particularly mysterious—or particularly flattering!

Fresh chokecherries are famously astringent.

That dry, puckering sensation is where the common name comes from. There are plenty of stories of younger siblings and cousins

being convinced to try the sour little fruits by older kids who knew exactly what was coming.

But once prepared, the fruit becomes a much more familiar prairie treat. And there's a good lesson hidden in that name: sometimes you have to look a little closer to appreciate what you've found.

The story of the Chokecherry Kids is one we think is worth remembering. Being a Keeper of the Prairie doesn't necessarily mean doing something grand. It can begin with noticing the world around you, asking questions, learning its stories, and deciding that those stories are worth carrying forward. A group of Williston students did exactly that.

They learned about a plant growing in their own state—and then used what they learned to make history. Who knows what the next generation of Keepers of the Prairie might discover?

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Featured Plant cont.

Chokecherry

Did You Know?

- Chokecherry's scientific name is *Prunus virginiana*. It is native throughout North Dakota and can grow as a small tree or large, suckering shrub.
- The chokecherry became North Dakota's official state fruit in 2007. The legislation was signed into law on March 29 of that year.
- Wildlife appreciate chokecherries, too. The plant provides food and cover for wildlife, making it an important part of the prairie landscape.
- Fresh isn't necessarily best! Chokecherries can be dry and astringent when eaten fresh, but they are commonly prepared into jellies, jams, syrups, and other foods.



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Prairie Kitchen: Chokecherry Jelly

One of the best-known ways to enjoy chokecherries is chokecherry jelly. North Dakota State University Extension provides tested recipes for preserving chokecherries, including versions using liquid or powdered pectin. Their powdered-pectin recipe uses 3½ cups of chokecherry juice, 4 cups of sugar, and one 1¾-ounce package of powdered pectin.

Important: Chokecherry pits contain a cyanide-forming compound. Do not crush or grind the seeds. For safe preparation and complete canning instructions, follow an established food-preservation recipe from a trusted source such as NDSU Extension.

Chokecherry Jelly

- 3½ cups chokecherry juice
- 4 cups sugar
- 1 (1¾-ounce) package powdered pectin

Stir pectin into the juice. Bring the mixture to a rolling boil over high heat, stirring constantly. Quickly add the sugar. Return to a full rolling boil and boil for one minute, stirring constantly.

Remove from heat and skim off any foam. Pour into hot, sterilized half-pint jars, leaving ¼ inch of headspace. Cover with two-piece lids and process according to current tested water-bath canning instructions.

For the complete recipe and current canning instructions:
[NDSU Extension – Jams and Jellies from North Dakota Fruits](#)



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How to get involved:

Want to volunteer?



We would love to have you involved! While we don't have immediate openings right now, we are always looking ahead and would love to connect with folks who want to help us grow. Here is what is on the horizon where we could use a hand:

- **Pop-Up Events:** Helping out when we host our park activities, birthday events, and exhibits.
- **Getting the Word Out:** Spreading the news about what is happening at the Nature Center and helping us connect with the community.

- **Committees:** We are also getting ready to form a few committees, like a dedicated fundraising group! While these are still in the planning stages, we'd love to hear if you would be interested in helping

If you are interested in helping with events, spreading the word, or jumping onto a committee, drop us a line and let us know what you're passionate about!

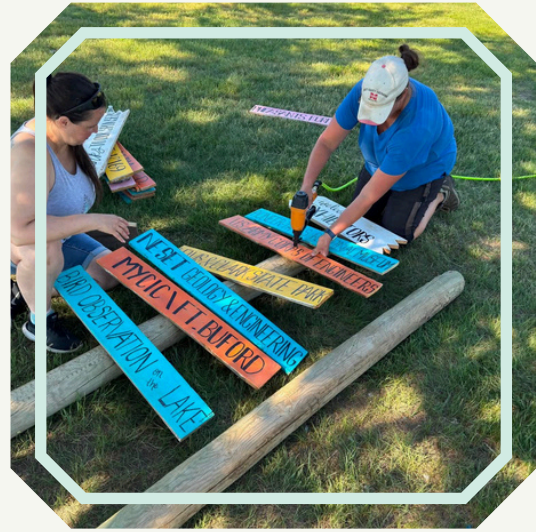
Future Opportunities

As Spring Lake Nature Center continues to grow, so do the opportunities to become involved! We are building future community programs and activities such as bird watching groups, nature walks, hands-on learning experiences, family activities, seasonal exhibits, and more.

Right now, we are still in the exciting stage of building and discovering what our community is most passionate about and volunteers will play a huge role in helping shape that future. Some opportunities may be short-term event help, while others may grow into recurring groups or programs led by community members who simply love sharing their interests with others.

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How to get involved cont.



As we look toward fall programming and future expansion, we are especially interested in connecting with people who are passionate about:

- Bird watching
- Prairie plants and gardening
- Nature photography
- Hiking and outdoor exploration
- Science and hands-on learning
- Family-friendly community activities
- Environmental education
- Local wildlife and conservation

Many of our future programs will only be possible through community involvement and volunteer support. If you have ideas, interests, or would like to help us grow, we would love to hear from you!

To get involved, visit our website at www.springlakenaturecenter.org or sign up through PointsApp at pointsapp.org/orgs/9094 to join our volunteer team.

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How to Donate:

Donations are a vital part of how the Nature Center continues to grow. Every contribution, big or small, helps bring new exhibits, events, and festivals to the community and supports exciting future projects like the Prairie Rover.

Another meaningful way to give is through in-kind donations — this can include goods, services, or volunteer time to help us make our programs and events possible. Every gift makes a difference!

<https://givebutter.com/BZh6be>

Thank You!!!!

A big heartfelt thank you to our sponsors, trailblazers like you that make this possible



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