

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS OUTDOOR SUMMIT



MARCH 28



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
TOUCH OF NATURE
OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTER

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CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, 3/28

8:30AM-9:00AM	Registration & Coffee Service	Freeberg Hall
9:00AM-9:30AM	Opening	Freeberg Hall
9:45AM-10:30AM	Workshop 1	
10:45AM-11:30AM	Workshop 2	
11:45AM-12:30PM	Lunch	Freeberg Hall
12:45PM-1:30PM	Feature Presentation	Freeberg Hall
1:45PM-2:30PM	Workshop 3	
2:45PM-3:00PM	Closing	Freeberg Hall
3:00PM-5:00PM	Open Play/Free Time	



OPEN PLAY & FREE TIME

Join the Touch of Nature team in some free play including the Giant Swing and Pamper Pole.

Sound Healing Session offered by Shawnee Ginger Sol at 3:15 PM.

Community Connections Bar
Sponsored by Backcountry Hunters & Anglers from 3 PM - 5 PM.

A NOTE FROM THE TOUCH OF NATURE DIRECTOR

Welcome to the Southern Illinois Outdoor Summit

This summit began with a simple yet powerful idea: Southern Illinois is a Midwest outdoor mecca, and we have the potential to harness that identity into becoming a true outdoor destination. The opportunities within the outdoor economy are limitless—but it all starts with getting the right people in the room. That’s exactly what today is about.

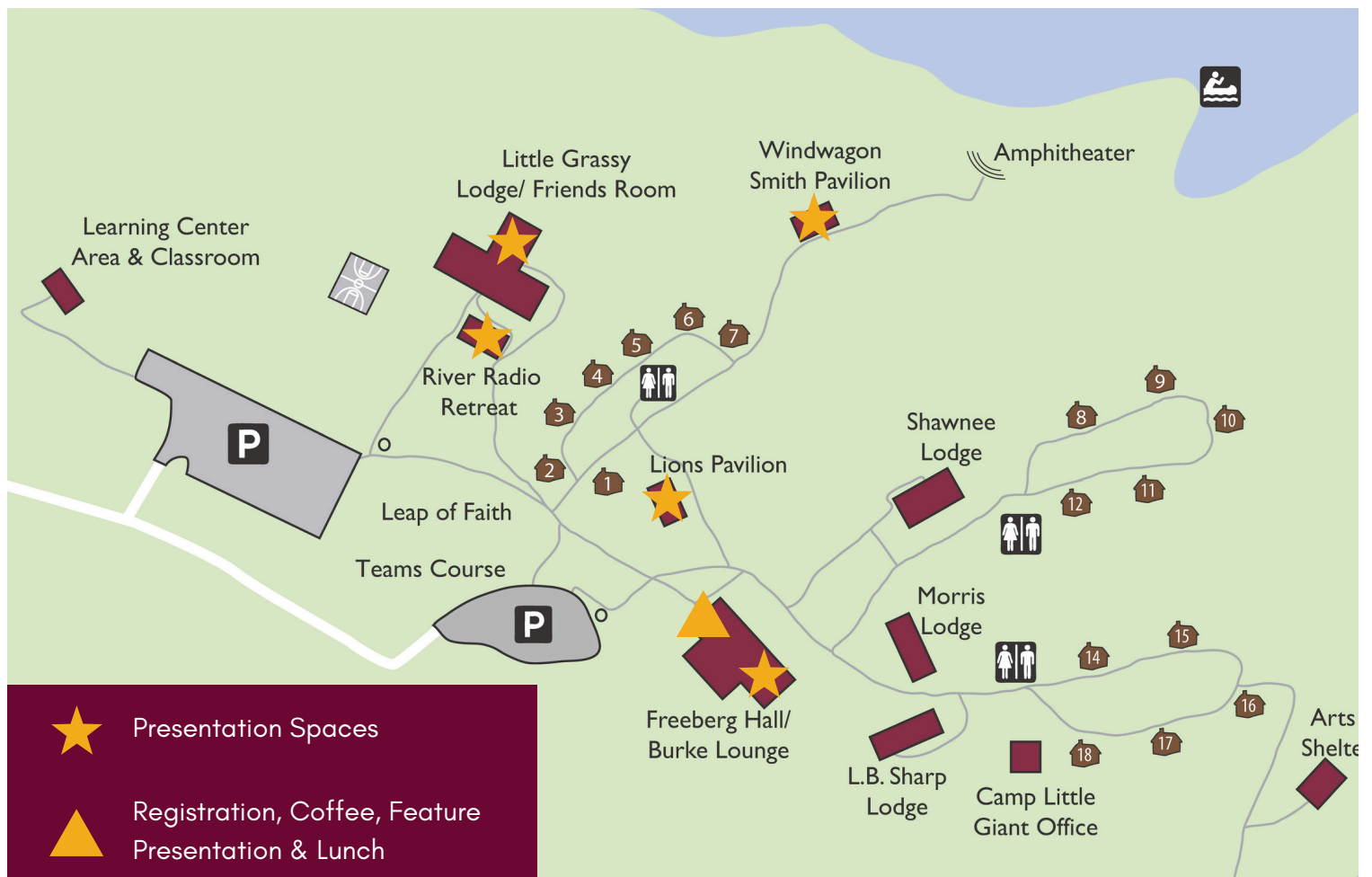
Building a thriving outdoor economy requires a unified vision—one that brings together nonprofits, private businesses, tourism offices, hospitality leaders, outdoor recreation professionals, and everyone in between. This summit is our chance to start the conversation about what that shared future looks like and how we can work together to make it a reality here in Southern Illinois.

It is a true honor to host this event at Touch of Nature, where our mission is to enhance the lives of all people through meaningful outdoor experiences. This work reflects our purpose, and I couldn’t be prouder to see it take shape here. Let’s collaborate, dream big, and lay the foundation for a stronger, more connected outdoor economy in Southern Illinois.

Welcome, and thank you for being part of this journey.

Brian Croft, Director of Touch of Nature Outdoor Education Center

TOUCH OF NATURE MAP



Piloting Outdoor Recreation Career Pathways for Southern Illinois Youth

Evan Colson, Nolan Hurst, & Phillip Hosfeldt

River Radio Room

Workshop presenters will share a summary overview of the region's economic challenges as well as insights into the economic potential of promoting outdoor recreation in southernmost Illinois. Presenters will then share an introduction to the Vienna High School Community Schooling Initiative and a vision for how this initiative can create an experiential learning and professional development progression for southern Illinois youth to empower them to contribute to the region's economic growth and prosperity. Workshop attendees will have opportunities to ask questions as well as to consider how similar programs could be initiated in their counties.

To Tell the Truth -- about the Shawnee National Park and Climate Preserve

Shawnee National Park & Climate Alliance

Burke Lounge

We will explain why re-designating the Shawnee National Forest as a national park is a win-win for Southern Illinois. Studies, anecdotal evidence and experience show that national parks bring economic benefits to a region. We also believe the re-designation will have a positive environmental impact.

How to Start an Outdoor Guide Business in Southern Illinois

Shawn Gossman

Lions Pavilion

Learn the basics on how to start your own hiking or other outdoor guide business in Southern Illinois.

Outdoor Opportunities: Driving Economic Success in Southern Illinois

Dr. Deb Barnett and Nick Holdinghausen

Friends Room

Southern Illinois is renowned for its natural beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities, which play a pivotal role in the region's economic development. This presentation explores how the outdoor sector serves as a cornerstone for economic growth in Southern Illinois, highlighting key initiatives, success stories, and future opportunities. We will delve into the economic impact of outdoor tourism, the role of local businesses and community partnerships, and the importance of sustainable practices. Attendees will gain insights into how outdoor activities and natural resources can drive economic development, create jobs, and enhance the quality of life for residents. Join us to discover how leveraging the outdoors can unlock new economic potential and contribute to a vibrant, sustainable future for Southern Illinois.

Bridging City Projects to Community Members and Stakeholders

Dena Haun & Eva Fisher

River Radio Room

Join “Deva” Dena Haun & Eva Fisher with the City of Carbondale as they dive into Carbondale’s newest iconic innovative projects; the Southern Illinois Multi-Modal Station, coined by Amtrak officials as “The Jewel of the Southern Line” & the Downtown Entertainment and Events Plaza. These projects serve as our communities' hub of transportation and home stage for the arts and entertainment, designed to foster Carbondale (Tree City) as the launching point to the Shawnee, where in Carbondale...The Path Starts here. Serving the Southern Illinois Region as a multi transportation hub and music paradise- these two projects continue to pave the way for entrepreneurs, arts & entertainment, and commmUNITY residents. This growth in infrastructure stretches beyond downtown- with continuous improvements to Cedar Lake and our bike trails (gaining us a Bicycle Friendly Community award) Carbondale offers an accessible recreational & cultural paradise within City limits for outdoor enthusiasts exploring the Shawnee.

Uncharted AI: Discovering New Peaks in Travel Planning

Dr. Niki Davis

Burke Lounge

Generative AI is reshaping how people plan and experience travel—but is your organization ready for this shift? In this workshop, we'll uncover how travelers are using generative AI to craft personalized itineraries and how that is transforming marketing in the tourism industry. But AI isn't flawless, and knowing its limitations is just as crucial as leveraging its strengths. You'll learn strategies to ensure your organization remains relevant in this new landscape. Through real-world examples using generative AI, and actionable insights, you'll leave with the tools to navigate and thrive in this evolving world of AI.

Stream Access in Illinois - Muddy Waters Tour

Drew Kazenski

Lion's Pavilion

Public access to Illinois streams is limited by Illinois law. Currently, we have only "legal" access to 2% of streams designated as public by the State. The remaining 98% of Illinois streams are private, including the moving water flowing in them. Learn what Illinois BHA is doing to advance legislation in Springfield to bring Illinois law in-line with Federal law to allow "legal" access to more Illinois streams and rivers. Updating Illinois law will allow us to access and care for one of our most crucial natural resources: water.

WORKSHOP 2

Friday, March 28, 10:45 am–11:30 am

Tourism Audits for Outdoor Recreation Economies: Evaluating and Enhancing Your Community's Assets

Dr. Katie Dudley

Friends Room

This hands-on workshop equips participants with the knowledge and tools to conduct tourism audits, enabling their communities to make informed decisions about tourism development. Attendees will explore key topics such as assessing community assets, understanding competition, and balancing economic growth with the preservation of cultural and environmental resources. Using real-world examples, participants will learn how tourism audits have been successfully implemented to guide sustainable growth. The session will also cover how to translate audit findings into actionable recommendations that enhance tourism efforts while fostering community pride and self-sustaining systems. Attendees will leave with a customizable template to assess their location's strengths and opportunities, empowering them to proactively shape their tourism future.

It's not just Fishing! Opportunities and Explorations for learning and engagement with youth!

Mark Denzer

Windwagon Smith Pavilion

Fishing can provide a great opportunity for you and your students to learn so much more than just catching a fish! What does fishing mean to you? Is it boring? Is it peaceful? Is it exciting? Is it a competition? It can provide so much more than just the obvious. Join the IDNRs Natural Resource coordinator Mark Denzer as we circle up and discuss the unique and diverse opportunities fishing can provide in the world of outdoor education!

LUNCH

Friday, March 28, 11:45 AM –12:30 PM

Lunch is brought to you by SI NOW

Freeberg Hall

Toasted Roast Beef & Swiss Cheese Sandwiches

Butternut Squash Soup

Salad Bar

Toasted Turkey & Swiss Cheese Sandwiches

Tex-Mex Black Bean Soup

Those with reported dietary restrictions should inform Touch of Nature staff as they move through the service line.

Transforming the Landscape of Outdoor Recreation



Join Matt Green, Chris Geden, and Brad Kovach of the St. Louis-based nonprofit River City Outdoors (RCO) for a presentation that explores the evolving landscape of outdoor recreation. In this session, you'll learn about the challenges and opportunities facing the outdoor community today. Discover how RCO and its initiatives - including a Gear Lending Library, Outdoors for All Micro-Grants, and the Gateway Outdoor Expo + Summit - are breaking down barriers, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a love for nature across diverse communities. Whether you're an outdoor destination, community-based organization, or outdoor professional passionate about connecting people to planet, this presentation will equip you with insights and inspire you to make a meaningful impact in the world of outdoor adventure.

Stewarding the Land: The Past, Present, and Future of Touch of Nature's Land Management Plan

Dr. Charles Ruffner

River Radio Room

Discover the history and ongoing efforts behind Touch of Nature's land management plan. This presentation explores 15+ years of conservation, habitat restoration, and partnerships with groups like the Illinois Native Plant Society and Shawnee Audubon Society. Learn how collaborative efforts enhance biodiversity, recreation, and education, and discuss best practices for preserving natural spaces.

The Importance of Outdoor/Environmental/Conservation Education

River to River Environmental Education Providers

Burke Lounge

Land management agencies, environmental education, conservation and recreation organizations, and educational institutions have been working to educate the public generally, and on SI landscapes for decades. Often first on the expendable list when agencies cut budgets, and last to be given support, educators have, in the face of consistent change, worked to do the best job within our means to make an educational impact on individuals and groups toward best user practices. Working to connect humans to landscapes to better understand them, and to create a sense of care and responsibility for the places they enjoy. Six members from RREEP (River to River Environmental Education Providers), from six organizations, share their experiences and thoughts on the importance of education, regarding the responsible and ethical use of lands and waters. Facing the reality of an increasing user base while front-line education and enforcement resources are diminishing.

Reframing Leisure Culture: Shifting Mindsets and Building Infrastructure for Community Wellness

Lindsay and Tim Stockhecke

Friends Room

Leisure culture is essential to community wellness, but negative mindsets often hinder its potential. This workshop identifies barriers such as viewing leisure as non-essential and stigmatizing therapeutic recreation. Participants will explore strategies for reshaping attitudes, creating inclusive alcohol-free experiences, and developing emotional infrastructure through tourism storytelling, immersive experiences, and collaborative marketing. By addressing the gaps in leisure culture, attendees will learn how to design initiatives that enhance health, sustainability, and community connections.

WORKSHOP 3

Friday, March 28, 1:45 pm–2:30 pm

Your Climbing Area Is for Sale—Now What? The Holy Boulders Case Study

Phillip Carrier

Lions Pavilion

In 2012 the future of public access to the Holy Boulders was critically threatened when it was listed for sale. Illinois Climbers Association quickly scrambled to put the pieces together needed to complete the purchase and secure permanent access. This presentation will explore how over the last 12 years the ICA created and grew an annual climbing competition, fundraised over \$250,000, purchased another property, and learned to be land managers in the process.

PLAYTIME

Friday, March 28, 3:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Shawnee Ginger Sol - An Immersive Sound Workshop

3:15 PM – 4:00 PM Lion's Pavilion

Rain Location: River Radio Room

Join Dena Nichole, founder of Shawnee Ginger Sol, for an immersive workshop exploring the transformative power of sound healing and breathwork. Rooted in holistic wellness and inspired by nature, music, and community, Dena's work fosters deep connection, self-discovery, and energetic balance.

This workshop will include an introduction to Shawnee Ginger Sol curated experiences & guide participants through an immersive sound bath experience. This intentional workshop will use the healing vibrations of crystal singing bowls, Koshi chimes, ocean drum and a planetary moon gong. Through breath awareness, meditation, and sound immersion, you will learn how frequency and vibration influence the nervous system, support relaxation, and enhance overall well-being. No experience is necessary- feel free to bring a mat, blanket, or any props for added comfort.

Giant Swing and Pamper Pole - High Adventure

In Front of River Radio Room

Weather Permitting

Community Connections Bar

Brought to you by Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

River Radio Room

Rain Location: Freeberg Hall

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

BRAD KOVACH

Brad is the Deputy Director of River City Outdoors and the founder of Terrain Magazine, an outdoor recreation publication based in St. Louis. He is a writer, editor, content director, and creative project manager with 25 years of experience working across multiple media platforms. Brad's favorite outdoor activities include mountain biking, canoeing, trail running, and hiking. He regularly participates in area races, where you are more likely to find him next to the beer tent than on the podium. Brad was recently named the Conservation Communicator of the Year by the Conservation Federation of Missouri.

DR. CHARLES RUFFNER

Charles M. Ruffner, Ph.D., specializes in old-growth forest ecology and fire history in his research and teaching, and is deeply engaged in service with professional and community groups at multiple scales.

Charles' SIUC Fire Dawg crew works closely with local agencies, landowners, and interest groups to reintroduce prescribed burning to forests and prairies of the Central Hardwoods region. He currently serves as an Illinois Nature Preserves Commissioner, and held recent leadership roles with the Oak Woodlands and Forest Fire Consortium and the Illinois Prescribed Fire Council. Charles leads study abroad groups to Ireland, Scotland, and Bavaria and completed two overseas sabbaticals in Ireland and Afghanistan. His involvement with farmers and foresters across the developing world includes work with both military and civilian personnel in Venezuela, Panama, Afghanistan, Dominican Republic, Lithuania, and Morocco.

CHRIS GEDEN

Chris is passionate about the communities he serves and building access to and appreciation of nature and the outdoors. In his role as Director of Community Engagement at River City Outdoors, he leads efforts to build relationships and foster partnerships with community stakeholders, promoting communication, collaboration, and programming, primarily among youth and underserved communities. He is a past winner of the Lee Redmond Citizen's Award from the Missouri Chapter of the American Fisheries Society. Chris loves to swim in the ocean and paddle on the Mississippi River and also enjoys camping and fishing.

DR. DEB BARNETT

Dr. Deborah Barnett earned both her doctoral and master's degrees in Workforce Education and Development (WED) at Southern Illinois University (SIU) Carbondale and holds a bachelor's degree in business administration. Deb proudly serves as the first Executive Director for SI Now, a 17-county Southern Illinois regional economic development initiative. Prior to joining SI Now, Dr. Barnett served as the Director of Business Incubator Programs at SIU's Office of Innovation and Economic Development where she grew the incubator to capacity with a wait list for the first time in its 30-year history. In addition to her work in higher education, she has ten years of experience as a small business owner and has held roles in workforce training, elementary education, and ministry-related service. Dr. Barnett has served on a number of teams to advance economic development and regional growth initiatives. As a lifelong resident of southern Illinois, Deb is passionate about contributing to collaborative efforts to advance the region she serves.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

DENA HAUN

Dena Haun is the City of Carbondale Tourism and Special Events Coordinator! She is a Saluki that holds a master's in education from SIU where she focused on Recreation Administration. Dena's experience includes 10 years in outdoor education management and hospitality at SIU's Touch of Nature, Event Director for the Shawnee Cave Amphitheater, and a small business owner- Shawnee Ginger Sol hosting yoga/ Sound Healing to adventurous souls. Dena is passionate about bringing people together through events and experiences and is excited to foster that passion to the city to enhance community engagement and Southern Illinois Tourism!

DREW KAZENSKI

Drew Kazenski is the Chair of the Illinois Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers. He grew up in rural central Illinois and was raised from the beginning with a deep understanding and respect for hunting, fishing and conservation. As an avid hiker, hunter and fly fisherman; he has had whitetails make him tremble in Illinois, chased Merriam turkeys in South Dakota, and landed West-slope Cutthroats in Montana, all due to public land and conservation efforts before him. Drew believes if you are consuming or taking you should do some part to give back, one of his reasons for joining Backcountry Hunters & Anglers. Drew encourages everyone to find away to give back to the land we all consume from.

EVA FISHER

Eva Fisher, Public Relations officer for the City of Carbondale is a graduate of the SIU musical theater program. Eva spent her first decade out of college traveling as a theater artist. 2019 brought Eva back to Southern Illinois working on her own music. As an independent artist she did her own PR for years, which led seamlessly into her new career as Public Relations Officer for Carbondale. Born and raised in Southern Illinois, she has a deep love and connection to this place- enjoys adventuring through the Shawnee with her partner Max & enjoys all that life in Carbondale.

DR. KATIE DUDLEY

Dr. Katie Dudley discovered her love for the outdoors while studying journalism at SIU Carbondale and spending summers working at Yellowstone National Park. She has since worked in tourism and outdoor recreation across 10 states, from guiding whitewater rafting trips to teaching as a college professor. She earned a Ph.D. in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management from Clemson University, and her work has been recognized by the Travel and Tourism Research Association and the American Association of Geographers. Passionate about sustainable tourism, Katie helps communities diversify their economies while preserving their natural resources and local identity.

LINDSAY & TIM STOCKHECKE

Lindsay and Tim Stockhecke co-own Deliciously Ordinary, a creative agency rooted in art, recreation, and leisure therapy principles. Lindsay, with a bachelor's in Speech-Language Pathology from San Diego State, has a background as a CADAC, using art and recreational therapy to inspire growth and connection. Tim holds a BA in Art Education and an MS in Therapeutic Recreation from SIUC, where his award-winning thesis was published in the Medical Journal of Therapeutic Recreation. Together, they integrate creative storytelling, floral design, events, and tourism with a focus on fostering community wellness and meaningful engagement.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

MARK DENZER

Mark Denzer has worked in the field of outdoor education for almost 30 years! He has served as a guide in 5 different states and founded his own Canoe/Kayak guide service & rental company (Cache Bayou Outfitters Inc.) 15 years ago. In 2024 he joined the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as Natural Resources Coordinator/Interpreter at Little Grassy Fish Hatchery where he designs exhibits, gives tours, and coordinates special events. His outside passions away from work are ancestral living skills and home remodeling.

MATT GREEN

Matt is the Executive Director of River City Outdoors and has spent his career working with small businesses and the public sector to develop collaborative, place-based initiatives and policies that improve residents' quality of life and foster a sense of community pride. He is a consensus builder with over a decade and a half of experience in community development, public policy, and small business management. Matt is a lifelong St. Louisan who loves city living but relishes every opportunity to get lost in nature. He is an avid runner, paddler, and mountaineer, having climbed 56 of Colorado's 58 Fourteeners.

NICK HOLDINGHAUSEN

Nick Holdinghausen has always been dedicated to Southern Illinois, first as a trusted voice in weather and now as a driving force in regional growth. For 13 years, he kept residents informed as a meteorologist at WSIL, working his way up to chief meteorologist. In 2023, he was ready for a new challenge—one that would allow him to shape the future of the region he and his family call home. He joined Southern Illinois Now in June 2023, now playing a key role in identifying and developing prime sites for business expansion and relocation in the 17 southernmost counties in Illinois. His ability to connect with people and communicate complex ideas makes him a vital force in economic development. From forecasting storms to forecasting growth, Holdinghausen remains committed to making Southern Illinois the best place to live, work, and do business.

DR. NIKI DAVIS

Dr. Niki Davis, Professor of Practice and Director of SIU's Hospitality, Tourism, and Event Management program, has professional roots in destination marketing and event planning. A former President of the International Society of Travel and Tourism Educators, she demonstrates exceptional leadership in shaping the future of tourism education. Niki is dedicated to preparing students for the digital future of the industry and regularly incorporates technology into her teaching. Passionate about travel and tourism, Niki actively collaborates with local organizations to bolster tourism in Southern Illinois. Her work exemplifies the vital connection between academia and real-world industry development.

NOLAN HURST & EVAN COULSON

Camp Ondessonk's Nolan Hurst and Evan Coulson are bringing over 30 years of combined outdoor recreation program administration and positive youth development experience to design and deliver recreation career pathways in support of this initiative. All three are passionate about helping the next generation build and benefit from a robust outdoor recreation economy in Southern Illinois.

ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

PHILLIP CARRIER

Phillip Carrier is an outdoor professional with over 15 years experience working with nonprofits to increase recreation opportunities in Southern Illinois. He has actively worked to foster and sustain cooperative relationships between user groups and federal, state and local land managers. With a focus on rock climbing, mountain biking, and trail stewardship projects, impacts of his work can be found at Jackson Falls, Holy Boulders, Ferne Clyffe, Giant City, Lake Glendale, Cedar Lake and Kinkaid Lake.

PHILLIP HOSFELDT

Phillip Hosfeldt, Dean of System Programs for Vienna High School, is leading the approach for integrating a Community Schooling model into existing curricular strategies to holistically enhance the development of career ready youth from our rural southernmost Illinois communities.

RIVER TO RIVER ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROVIDERS

The River to River Environmental Education Providers group was established for environmental education professionals across southern Illinois to gather on a regular basis and share upcoming and ongoing work they are doing in their own agencies. Through this effort we are able to better coordinate our events and programs, network about new, curriculums, initiatives, funding sources and opportunities, and strategize to do the most, and best work we can do through cooperation. The group is associated with the Environmental Education Association of Illinois, but group members have no requirements to EEAI, and speak only for themselves and their agencies.

SHAWN GOSSMAN

Shawn Gossman, otherwise known as Hiking with Shawn has 3+ years experience in guided hiking and itinerary planning.

THE SHAWNEE NATIONAL PARK AND CLIMATE PRESERVE

The Shawnee National Park and Climate Alliance is dedicated to bringing a national park to Southern Illinois. We want to see a national park created out of public land in the region. We are in the process of building support among private and public entities.

NOTES

EVENT SPONSORS



TOUCH OF NATURE SPONSORS



SAVE THE DATE

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE SOUTHERN ILLINOIS OUTDOOR SUMMIT 2026?

MAKE SURE TO SCAN THIS QR CODE AND SIGN-UP FOR UPDATES.

