



BLACK HILLS  
**PARKS &  
FORESTS**  
ASSOCIATION

# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

"New Foundations Together"

# Our Mission & Vision

## MISSION:

Black Hills Parks and Forests Association supports wonder and exploration through stewardship of **your** public lands.

## VISION:

Black Hills Parks and Forests Association ignites a spark of passion for conserving and sustaining public lands for all generations.

## Letter from the Executive Director

*"It wasn't the summer we planned, but our team made it work."*

Dear Friends,

If I had to describe FY24 in one word, it would be "adaptable." When we learned Wind Cave's elevator would close May 1st for a complete replacement, right before peak season, we knew we had a choice: we could let it define us, or we could get creative. Our team chose **creative**.

We supported virtual cave tours so visitors could still experience Wind Cave. We expanded surface programming. Our staff at the visitor center found new ways to connect people with the park even when we couldn't take them underground. It wasn't the summer we planned, but our team made it work.

And while navigating that challenge, we also launched something remarkable at Jewel Cave: a \$75,000 visitor-facing technology investment that lets visitors who can't physically enter the cave, whether due to mobility, availability, or just a fear of tight spaces, experience the underground world in a completely new way. The VR headsets take you deep into the bat ecosystem. Jewel the AI Caver, a six-foot animated display, answers questions and helps kids with their Junior Ranger booklets. It's the kind of investment that makes you feel like you're building something that matters.

This year we also welcomed 250 new members, bringing our total to over 600. We launched a cash register donation program that collected \$1,900 in its first month. We strengthened partnerships with organizations like SheJumps and trained another 50 volunteer naturalists through the SD Volunteer Naturalist Program.

None of this happens without you. Our federal partners trust us. Our donors believe in us. Our members show up. And our 617 volunteer hours represent real people giving real time to these lands.

Looking ahead, we're searching for a permanent home for BHPFA, one that can grow with us and isn't subject to federal budget uncertainties or historic building restrictions. We're growing our membership. We're expanding our signature programs.

Thank you for being part of this work. See you on the trails!

*Patty Ressler*

Patty Ressler, Executive Director



# 2024 Fiscal Year at a Glance



## FISCAL YEAR 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

BLACK HILLS PARKS & FORESTS ASSOCIATION



### BY THE NUMBERS



Total Revenue  
**\$1,661,190**



Partner Aid Distributed  
**\$189,004**



Federal Partner  
**7** National Parks and National  
Forests & Grasslands



Retail Locations  
**15**



Members  
**600+**



Volunteer Hours  
**617**



### FINANCIAL STRENGTH



Investment Gain  
**\$51,637**



Total Net Assets  
**\$1,501,699**



Contributions  
Received  
**\$205,143**



Q1 Sales Growth  
**+24%**

## The Power of Partnership



### Seven Partners, One Mission:

When you support BHPFA, your gift doesn't stop at one park. It's felt at seven federal partner sites across the Black Hills and western Nebraska, each with its own character and community.

This partnership model is what makes BHPFA different. We're the connector. The National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service focus on protecting and managing these lands. We focus on helping people experience them through education, interpretation, and well-stocked bookstores. One mission, seven places where it matters.

1. **Agate Fossil Beds National Monument**
2. **Black Hills National Forest**
3. **Jewel Cave National Monument**
4. **National Grasslands Visitor Center**
5. **Nebraska National Forests & Grasslands**
6. **Scotts Bluff National Monument**
7. **Wind Cave National Park**

# Partner Site Happenings

## Wind Cave National Park (NPS)

**This year:** New visitor center exhibits, virtual cave tours during elevator replacement, Emergence Sculpture recognized for NPS national award finalist.

## Jewel Cave National Monument (NPS)

**This year:** VR Experience launch, Jewel the AI Caver installation, and their first Artist in Residence program.

## National Grasslands Visitor Center (USFS)

**This year:** Grand reopening July 12, 2024 after renovation, new exterior exhibits including fossil wall and amphitheater, Junior Ranger Days launched.

## Black Hills National Forest (USFS)

**This year:** Junior Forest Ranger programs, "Singing In the Hills" campground music series, Black Hills Sports Show outreach.

## Agate Fossil Beds National Monument (NPS)

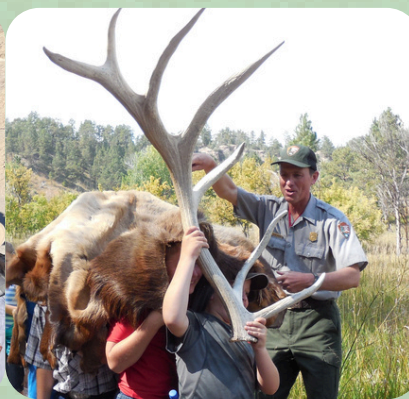
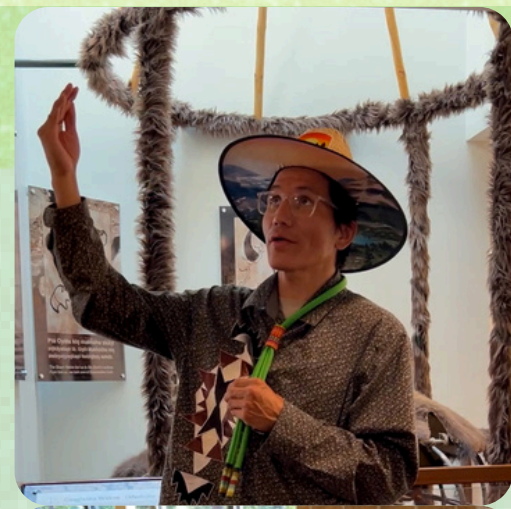
**This year:** Distance learning program reaching international audiences (including a college paleontology class in India), Lakota cultural programs, Great American Campout.

## Scotts Bluff National Monument (NPS)

**This year:** Christmas on the Prairie holiday event, William Henry Jackson watercolor prints framing, Nebraska Humanities speaker series, costumed interpreter.

## Nebraska National Forests & Grasslands (USFS)

**This year:** Wilderness Volunteers pollinator garden project, volunteer programs, Western Nebraska Visitor Guide outreach.



## FY24 Partner Aid Distribution

**\$189,004 total**

- National Park Service: \$157,070
- U.S. Forest Service: \$31,934

# Resilience & Growth

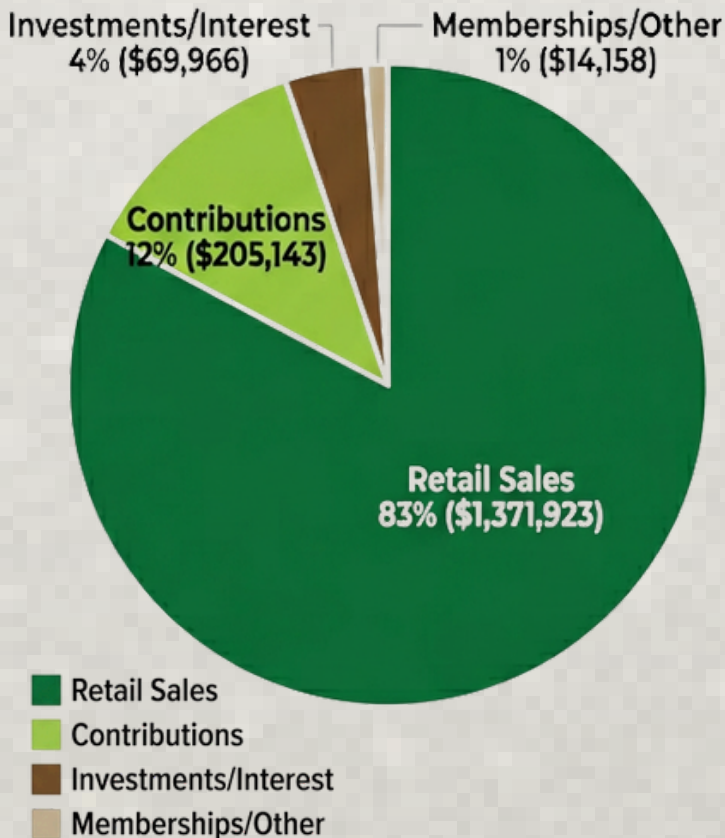
## Thriving Through Challenge

FY24 tested us. On May 1, 2024, Wind Cave closed its elevator for a complete replacement and modernization project. No cave tours through the entire peak summer season. For an organization where Wind Cave is our largest partner site, that's a significant disruption.

Here's what we did: We adapted. Rangers developed virtual cave tours using LIDAR technology from a former park employee. We expanded surface programming so visitors still had meaningful experiences. Our store staff became experts at helping people understand why the closure mattered and what they could still do at the park.

*The numbers tell a story of an organization that didn't just survive, but **GREW**.*

## Where Funds Come From:



## Financial Performance (Audited)

### Revenue

- Total Revenue: \$1,661,190
- Retail Sales: \$1,371,923
- Q1 sales grew 24% over prior year
- Contributions: \$205,143 (including \$76,000 in donated facilities)

### Assets

- Total Net Assets: \$1,501,699
- Investments: \$413,945
- Investment Gain: \$51,637 (12.5% return)
- Cash and Equivalents: \$644,908

### Stewardship

- Independent audit completed by HintonBurdick, PLLC
- Clean audit results
- Cost of goods maintained at 47-50% margin
- Aid carryover reduced 15% (partners spending funds on programs)

## Membership Growth

Over 600 members now support BHPFA, with 250 new members joining since January 2023. Each member is someone who believes public lands matter enough to put their money behind it.

The Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup event raised \$15,000 and brought in 12 new memberships in a single weekend. The Giving Tuesday campaign funded family outdoor programming. Local businesses like Mt. Rushmore Brewing Company and Custer Beacon partnered with us through our Helping Hands campaign.

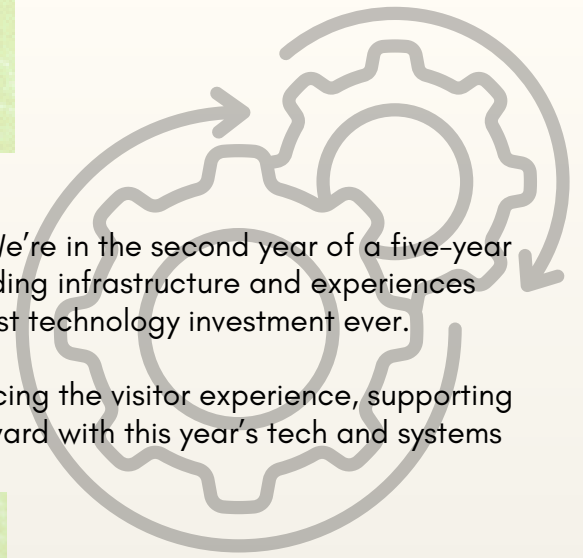
# Investing in Tomorrow

## Building for the Future

BHPFA has been around for over 75 years, but isn't stuck in the past. We're in the second year of a five-year strategic plan, our "Trail Guide" to our path into the future. We're building infrastructure and experiences that will serve visitors for years to come. This year, we made our largest technology investment ever.

**The plan's strategic priorities:** promoting public awareness, enhancing the visitor experience, supporting our partners, and taking care of our organization were all moved forward with this year's tech and systems investments.

## Jewel Cave Visitor Technology Investments



**Investment:** \$75,000 (a portion by Adopt-a-Bat program donations, the rest funded by BHPFA)

**Installation:** June 2024

### Jewel: The AI Caver

The Jewel Cave visitor center is now host to two digital experiences that help visitors learn more about the park and surrounding area. "Jewel" is a six-foot animated display that answers visitor questions. The system draws from a knowledge base of NPS and BHPFA documents to give accurate answers.

- Ask Jewel about the cave, about local wildlife, about BHPFA programs.
- Type your question on the tablet or just speak.
- Jewel also helps kids work through their Junior Ranger booklets.

*Rangers appreciate having a tool that handles common questions so they can focus on deeper conversations with visitors.*



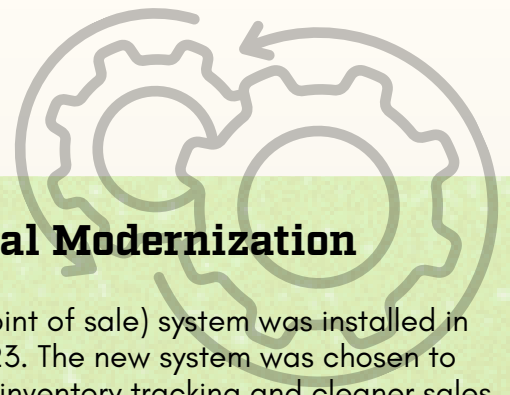
### Virtual Reality Experience

**What it does:** Visitors are taken on an immersive 360-degree journey through the cave using Oculus Quest 2 headsets. The narrative focuses on the bat ecosystem (which is why Adopt-a-Bat funds helped pay for it) and gives visitors a real sense of the underground environment. Viewers learn information not discussed on cave tours.

**Why it matters:** Some visitors can't physically take a cave tour. Mobility issues. Claustrophobia. Or simply no tickets available on a busy summer day. Now they have another option. They can put on a headset and still experience something meaningful.

*The VR experience and "Jewel" were both developed by TimeLooper. Visitor surveys have been very positive for both experiences!*

# Investing in Tomorrow



## Operational Modernization

A new POS (point of sale) system was installed in December 2023. The new system was chosen to provide better inventory tracking and cleaner sales data. Internet connections were installed at every location to make it work.

Digital Content & Data Manager (March 2024) Jason Gray moved from Nebraska Area Manager to a newly made role handling online media, ecommerce, and data analytics. By June, website traffic was up 40% on page views and Facebook reached 62,800 accounts with 300 new followers.

Retail Operations Manager Melonie Rymer brought 23 years of retail experience, including three years at Mt. Rushmore Society. She visited every BHPFA location, refreshed products, and distributed new operating manuals.



## Looking for a Home

Throughout FY24, the board explored options for a permanent BHPFA headquarters. Right now, we operate out of federal facilities, which has limitations. We're subject to federal budget shutdowns and space is tight.

There's a good reason **"Improve existing work spaces and expand to new work spaces for our employees and volunteers"** is a key goal in the BHPFA Strategic Plan. We want a home that can expand with the organization. This search continued through the year, with the board evaluating several options. Not finding just the right place, the search continues!

## Volunteer Impact

Our volunteers provide an invaluable service to BHPFA and our partners. Here is just a small taste of the immense volunteer impact:

Total hours contributed by volunteers in 2024:

**617 hours**

Programs/Projects include:

- Wind Cave Ambassador program
- Wilderness Volunteers stewardship projects at Bessey District and Black Elk Wilderness
- SD Volunteer Naturalist graduates contributing across the region.



# Breaking Barriers

Public lands  
belong to everyone!



## Opening Doors to Public Lands

Public lands belong to everyone. But not everyone feels welcome, knows where to start, or can afford to participate.

## BHPFA is working to change that!

### SheJumps Partnership

*This year we launched a new partnership with SheJumps, a national nonprofit focused on getting women and girls outdoors.*

#### Jump Into Winter Film Series

- (November 2023 - January 2024) Monthly screenings at the Custer Beacon featuring women in outdoor sports. Raffle prizes from Terry Peak, Scheels, and Chubby Chipmunk Chocolates.

#### Getting Started Workshops

- Lost Cabin Brewing in Hill City hosted sessions on backpacking basics and climbing fundamentals. Practical information for women who want to try something new.

#### "Get the Girls Out"

- Jewel Cave (March 2024) Our contribution to International Women's Day drew over 30 women and girls to the monument for guided hikes, cave tours, and a story trail.

#### Discover Climbing Course

- (June 2024) Partnership with Sylvan Rocks climbing guides. A full morning learning to climb.

#### Sunrise and Sunset Hikes

- Group hikes at partner sites including Rankin Ridge Trail at Wind Cave for National Trails Day.

#### Wild Skills Day Camp

- Wind Cave NP, girls ages 8-14, partnered with Custer SAR for first aid, naturalist hike, firebuilding, and ranger talk.



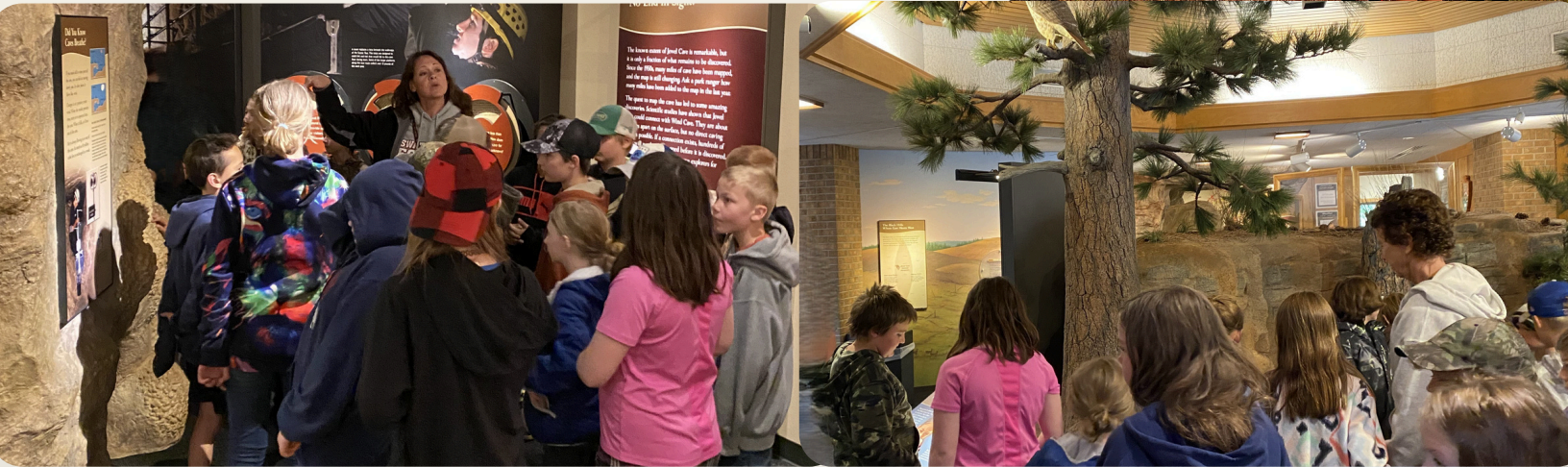
# Breaking Barriers

## SD Volunteer Naturalist Program

This year's 4th cohort launched with 50 participants. Tuesday evening classes starting in March made it possible for working adults. Graduates go on to share nature connections across the region. They're force multipliers, trained to reach audiences we'd never reach on our own.

## Open OutDoors for Kids (OOK)

A National Park Foundation grant to Jewel Cave expanded classroom visits and field trips for the 2023-2024 school year. Through this grant, an intern was hired specifically to support OOK program delivery. It also funded transportation to help schools get to the monument.



## Free Public Programs

Throughout the year, BHPFA offered programming with no cost barrier:

- Nature Connection workshops at Whitney Preserve and Bismark Lake
- BHNH Moon Walks
- Animal Tracking workshops at The Trailhouse
- Public Lands Trivia Night at Custer Wolf
- Adventures in Nature programs at Wind Cave
- Christmas on the Prairie at Scotts Bluff



## Cash Register Donation Program

A simple idea, a long time (and lots of paperwork) coming: ask visitors at checkout if they'd like to donate to their park. We launched mid-May at NPS sites.

**First month results:** Over \$1,900 in donations. Wind Cave alone collected \$1,100.

*It turns out people want to give back. They just needed someone to ask.*

# Financial Summary

## FY24 Financial Summary

Independent audit completed by HintonBurdick, PLLC  
Statement of Financial Position (October 31, 2024)

### Assets

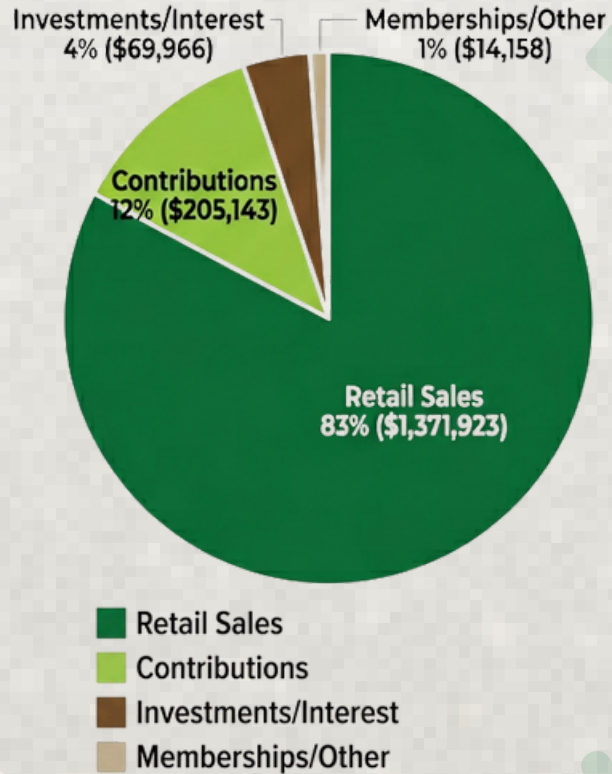
Category	Amount
Cash and cash equivalents	\$644,908
Investments	\$413,945
Accounts receivable	\$1,948
Prepaid expenses	\$21,736
Inventories	\$270,177
<b>Total Current Assets</b>	<b>\$1,352,714</b>
Property, plant and equipment (net)	\$200,114
Investment held for endowment	\$25,139
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$1,577,967</b>

### Liabilities and Net Assets

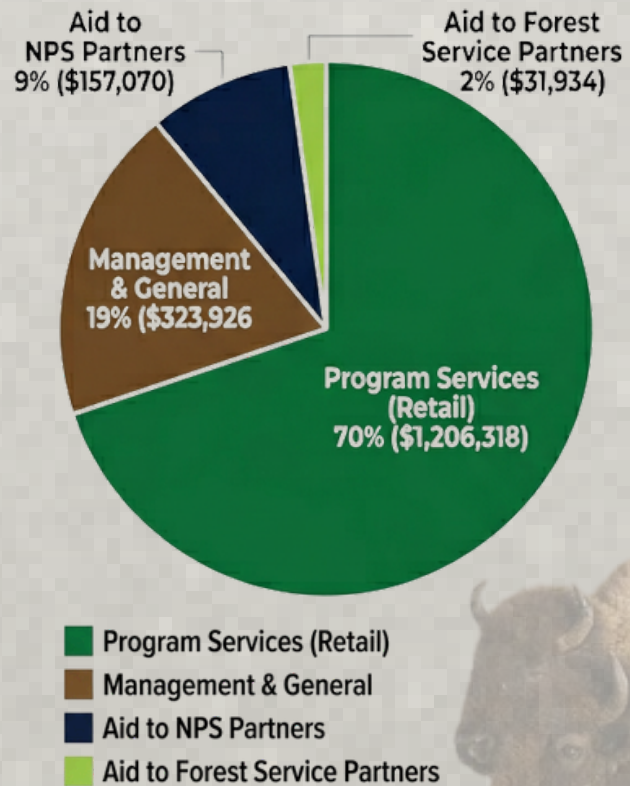
Category	Amount
Accounts payable	\$30,808
Accrued expenses	\$45,460
<b>Total Liabilities</b>	<b>\$76,268</b>
Net assets without donor restrictions	\$1,141,847
Net assets (board designated)	\$116,585
Net assets with donor restrictions	\$243,267
<b>Total Net Assets</b>	<b>\$1,501,699</b>

Indicator	Value
Program Services	81% of expenses
Management & General	19% of expenses
Current Ratio	17.7:1 (strong liquidity)

### Where Funds Come From:



### Where the Funds Go



# Thank you!

Every achievement in this report happened because people **showed up**.

**PARTNERS** trusted us to represent them well.

**DONORS** believed their money would be used wisely.

**MEMBERS** renewed year after year.

**VOLUNTEERS** gave their time when they could have spent it elsewhere.

## Our Federal Partners

National Park Service

- Wind Cave National Park
- Jewel Cave National Monument
- Scotts Bluff National Monument
- Agate Fossil Beds National Monument

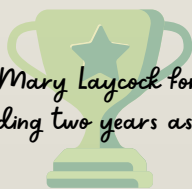
U.S. Forest Service

- Black Hills National Forest
- Nebraska National Forests & Grasslands
- National Grasslands Visitor Center

## Our Board of Directors

- Jamie Ladenburger, President
- Julie Brazell, Secretary
- Dr. Andrea Serna, Treasurer
- Joann Sutton
- Dr. Jennifer Fowler
- Dave Mertz
- Kyla Wright
- Barb McCartney
- Sarah Wedge
- Mary Laycock

*Special recognition to Mary Laycock for 10 years of board service, including two years as President.*



## Community Partners

- SheJumps
- Wilderness Volunteers
- Sylvan Rocks Climbing School
- Custer Beacon
- Lost Cabin Brewing
- Custer Wolf
- The Trailhouse
- Ohgeezdesign



## Our Members

Thank you to our 600+ members whose support sustains our mission year-round.

## Our Volunteers

Thank you to the volunteers who contributed 617 hours in 2024. Your time matters.

## Our Donors

Thank you to everyone who contributed to our mission in FY24. Your generosity funded interns, programs, and the technology that will serve visitors for years to come.

## Our Team

Thank you to our dedicated staff across all partner sites who show up every day to connect visitors with public lands. And to our year-round team who keeps the mission moving all four seasons:

- Patty Ressler, Executive Director
- Melonie Rymer, Retail Operations
- Andrea Fountain, Education & Volunteer Manager
- Jason Gray, Digital Content & Data Manager
- David Guerin, Nebraska Area Store Manager
- Kristine Bannister, Wind Cave Store Manager

# Looking Forward: FY25 and Beyond

## Our Goals for FY25



### Growing Our Community

We're aiming to increase membership by 20%. We'll improve our systems and make it easier for people to join and renew.



### Finding A Home

We're actively searching for a permanent BHPFA headquarters to allow for growth, long-term sustainability, and organizational independence.



### Expanding Our Reach

We want to grow BHPFA-branded programming. More signature events. More visibility. More ways for people to connect with public lands through us.



## Ways to Support our Mission and Vision



### Donate

Your gift reaches seven partner sites across the Black Hills and western Nebraska as well as BHPFA programming like what you read about this year.



Donate today:  
[blackhillsparks.org/donate](https://blackhillsparks.org/donate)



### Become a Member

Join 600+ members who sustain our mission year-round. Members receive early access to program registration, invitations to special events, discounts at our retail stores, and the knowledge that they're part of something bigger.

Join today:  
[blackhillsparks.org/membership](https://blackhillsparks.org/membership)



### Volunteer

Join our community of volunteers. From Ambassador programs at Wind Cave to stewardship projects in the wilderness, there's a place for you.

Learn more:  
[blackhillsparks.org/volunteer](https://blackhillsparks.org/volunteer)

