



Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame Foundation, Inc.

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NEWS RELEASE

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2026 WISCONSIN CONSERVATION HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

William Lunney, Keith McCaffery, and Neil Payne

The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame (WCHF) Foundation, Inc., is pleased to announce the April 2026 Induction of William Lunney, Keith McCaffery, and Neil Payne. “Our 2026 inductees have established lasting legacies in Wisconsin and continue to have a far-reaching impact across many areas of conservation. We are grateful for their numerous contributions and are thrilled to celebrate each of them on April 21, 2026.” said WCHF Foundation President Marco Mascitti. Each of these individuals will be inducted into the WCHF on April 21, 2026 in live ceremonies held virtually and free for the public to attend, donations are appreciated. For more information visit: <https://wchf.org/2026-induction-events/>

INDUCTEE BIOS

William G. Lunney:

William G. Lunney has embodied a lifetime of service to the public and to the conservation of Wisconsin’s lands, waters and wildlife. From the first success in 1969 helping to save regionally significant wetlands Dunn’s Marsh and Upper Mud Lake Wetlands, to the recent creation of the historic multimillion dollar Private Foundation to support Dane County Parks, Bill has been the energy propelling many local and statewide conservation successes.

He helped co-found state and local conservation organizations including the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, Friends of Capital Springs State Recreation Area, Foundation for Dane County Parks, and Groundswell Conservancy. He served in board leadership roles with Wisconsin Chapter of Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, Friends of Wisconsin State Parks, and Gathering Waters Conservancy. As Parks Commission Chair for 30 years, he guided Dane County Parks system from 3,500 to 19,000 acres, was instrumental in supporting state parks and land trusts, helped form the public strategy for re-authorization of the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program, and protected key conservation areas including Lower Waubesa Wetlands and Monona Wetlands.

In honor of his innumerable contributions to conservation throughout our state, Bill received myriad recognition. Dane County dedicated the William G. Lunney Lake Farm Park in his honor, and he received the State Lifetime Achievement Award from Gathering Waters, Statewide “Friend” Award from the Wisconsin Parks and Recreation Association, Lifetime Achievement Award from Groundswell.



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His indelible impact on conservation by raising public awareness has been celebrated in the words of many including Howard Mead, former publisher of “Wisconsin Trails,” who said, “Bill is one of the most significant voices for conservation since Aldo Leopold,” and the Wisconsin State Legislature, which cited “He has had a profound legacy as conservation leader statewide.” His life and contributions serve as a living embodiment of Wisconsin’s proud legacy of conservation.

Keith McCaffery:

Keith McCaffery was nominated for the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame for his extensive contributions to deer management and conservation in Wisconsin. McCaffery has dedicated his career to the science-based management of Wisconsin’s deer population, significantly impacting conservation practices. His research established the significance of summer deer habitat to winter survival and productivity, influencing management practices nationwide.

The new focus on deer summer range especially changed habitat management priorities in the upper Midwest. He developed values for specific forest types and guidelines for defining management goals for forest composition. He became a builder and principal apologist for Wisconsin’s deer population monitoring and harvest management system. He has authored 100 professional reports and publications and 58 popular articles on deer management.

Keith’s formative years and education laid the foundation for his lifelong commitment to conservation and wildlife management. He was born in Stanley, WI, with early exposure to nature through local lakes and woodlots and family hunting and fishing. He helped raise 1,400 pheasants for a local Rod & Gun Club at age 11, trapped muskrats while in junior high, and worked on a farm for portions of two years while in high school. He was the only “city kid” in the agriculture class, his freshman year. His dad was also active in conservation committees in Chippewa County and often assisted local Conservation Wardens.

Keith was active in the Scouting program from Cub Scouts to Explorer. He was active in high school activities, including band and student council, and developed a passion for science. He was the president of the Luther League at his church. He attended St. Olaf College and the University of Minnesota, earning a B.S. and master’s in forestry with a minor in wildlife management. He was active in extracurricular activities, including Crack Drill Squad, Skating Club, and Rifle Team at St. Olaf, Forestry Club, and VP of U of M Archery Club. He served in the Army National Guard, attended Wisconsin Military Academy, and was a detachment commander in the National Guard 724th Engineers.

Keith’s professional career focused on deer management, leading to significant advancements in wildlife conservation practices. He began his career in 1963 with the Wisconsin Conservation Department, focusing on forest cover types and deer relationships. He developed deer population monitoring methods and oversaw statewide surveys on deer demographics. He also served as Forest Wildlife Research Group Leader and retired as State Deer Biologist in 2000 after 37 years.



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Keith continued to contribute to conservation efforts even after retirement, demonstrating his commitment to wildlife management and public service. He volunteered as a deer expert for the DNR for 20 years post-retirement, maintaining office hours and assisting with research. He authored numerous articles and provided public education on deer management. He also engaged in community service, including serving on the Rhinelander City Tree Board.

Keith's work has had a profound impact on deer management policies and practices, benefiting both wildlife and the economy. His research led to sustainable deer harvests exceeding 200,000 annually, generating \$25 million in license sales. He contributed to a joint publication effort that became the first long-term deer management policy in the U.S., influencing wildlife management goals well into the future. He was recognized for his contributions with multiple awards from DNR management bureaus, and outside groups, including a unique commendation from the Assembly Natural Resources Committee and a Distinguished Service Award from The Wildlife Society.

Keith's nomination is supported by peers who recognize his significant contributions and leadership in deer management. Dr. Scott Craven, a Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame inductee, highlights the challenges of deer management roles and Keith's ability to educate and lead in a politically charged environment. Dennis Voigt, Scientist Emeritus, Wildlife Research and Development, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, said, *"Keith was like the CEO of all the deer researchers and managers in the Midwest. His experience was exhaustive, and yet he was always humble about his knowledge. His long-term data record was the envy of all."* Keith McCaffery significantly contributed to the development and success of Wisconsin's deer management program, earning recognition for his expertise and dedication. Wisconsin's deer herd is valued at over a billion dollars, factoring in hunting, viewing, and meat supply. McCaffery focused on deer population dynamics, movements, and herd health throughout his career. He worked on forest habitat management for various species, including grouse, and was known for his strong work ethic and sense of responsibility.

McCaffery is highly regarded in the conservation community for his extensive work and influence in wildlife management. He was a charter member of the Wisconsin Chapter of The Wildlife Society (TWS) and served as President in 1976. He also served as an officer of the Midwest Section of TWS. In 2001, he received the Wisconsin Award for significant contributions to wildlife management. McCaffery authored numerous issue briefs and advocated for forest regeneration and sustainable management practices. His research and techniques in population estimation and habitat assessment have been pivotal in establishing Wisconsin as a leader in deer management.

McCaffery has played a crucial role in mentoring young wildlife biologists and educating the public about deer management. He shared his knowledge and experience with graduate students and professionals, emphasizing the importance of scientific data in wildlife management. McCaffery's professional habits and principles have influenced many in the conservation field, including unwavering devotion to deer health and commitment to evolving science. He has been a reliable leader in TWS and actively participated in discussions on deer management policies.



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McCaffery's legacy in deer management continues to influence current practices and policies in Wisconsin. He is recognized as the living institutional memory of Wisconsin's deer management programs, with detailed recollections of hunting seasons and management strategies spanning over three decades. Recent discussions among County Deer Advisory Committees often reference McCaffery-era management practices, indicating his lasting impact. Despite retiring from his volunteer role, he remains active in deer hunting and conservation advocacy and continues as a member of TWS and Wisconsin Green Fire, demonstrating his ongoing commitment to wildlife management.

Reviewing their life together, Keith said, "I met Josie during Freshman Week at St. Olaf College, and it stuck. As of this year, we have been married for 64 years. She helped in the field with some of my early habitat studies (when that was permitted), and we have since raised two children who are now on opposite coasts (CT and CA). We are both active in our church congregation. Josie has been a part-time office secretary, teacher, committee chair, choir member, and women's group leader. I have been the congregation secretary and president multiple times, choir member, lay liturgist, communion deacon, and lesson reader. I am currently on the City Tree Board and Vice Chair of a county political group that favors public education, the environment, and social justice. Josie has been a great partner and has enabled me to do what I've done and hope to continue to do. I couldn't have it any better."

Neil Payne:

Neil F. Payne's life and career reflect a deep commitment to wildlife conservation and education, and to Wisconsin, where his ancestors were the first to settle in the town of Mitchell in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin. In 1939, Neil was born into a blue-collar family in Plymouth, Wisconsin; he was a sixth-generation Wisconsinite. His dad didn't graduate from high school, and both parents, Forrest and Ruth, worked in a factory making toilet seats. For a while they lived in a rented house without running water. Neil's first memory was at age three, in the back hall of the house, and being scared stiff of a mouse (he who would, as an adult, live-trap bear!). Neil was raised in Sheboygan Falls, with a younger brother, Glenn, and a sister, Virginia, and developed an early interest in nature and animals on his grandfather's farm.

Neil graduated from Sheboygan Falls High School in 1957. He became the first person in the family's ancestral line to graduate from college, earning a BA in zoology in 1961 from the University of Wisconsin (captain of UW fencing team, Big Ten Champions). He went on to obtain an MS in wildlife science from Virginia Tech in 1964 (a thesis on rabbits that entailed pulling and tagging 516 rabbits barehanded 857 times from wooden live-traps), and a Ph.D in wildlife science from Utah State University in 1975 (dissertation on beaver). He became a "Wildlifer," not fully aware that he was stepping into a most complex and essential profession—maintenance of the biodiversity of ecosystems required by all life. As a Wildlifer, he became a manager, researcher, professor, and author.

Neil married Eileen Tagge in 1964 and then served as a captain in the U.S. Marine Corps as a combat engineer during the Vietnam War (1964-67), living in Virginia, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, California, the Philippines, Okinawa, and Vietnam. His first employment after leaving the Marines was as a bear and furbearer biologist in



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the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador (1967-71) where he extended the beaver trapline management system throughout Newfoundland, designed the province's caribou arm patch, and solidified his field credentials as a wildlife researcher by initiating research on black bears, martin, otter, beaver, and red squirrels. He also worked at the University of Washington in Seattle (1973-75) for Dr. Richard D. Taber, Aldo Leopold's last surviving graduate student, with whom Neil co-authored the book, *Wildlife, Conservation, and Human Welfare*.

After a 14-year round-trip involving the Marine Corps, the Vietnam War, wildlife pursuits, and four single and seven family moves (not counting USMC moves) across the United States and Canada, Neil returned to Wisconsin in 1975 from Washington State, driving a large U-Haul, his two boys beside him, with a loaded station wagon attached (dog and cat inside, canoe on top). He spent most of his career as a professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (1975-1998), teaching for 23 years, conducting wildlife research with his graduate students, and publishing.

Neil's numerous contributions to wildlife conservation encompass education, research, and literature. Using his experience as a wildlife biologist, he taught wildlife ecology to more than 4,600 students, with about 50% of WDNR wildlife biologists being UW-Stevens Point graduates. He conducted research on more than 20 wildlife species and published extensively, including seven books on wildlife management.

His work has influenced conservation practices in Wisconsin and beyond, with a focus on habitat management. Neil's efforts have had a lasting impact on wildlife conservation and education. His students have gone on to significant careers in conservation, influencing policies and practices in Wisconsin. Neil's books and teachings are widely used in wildlife management and conservation education.

Support letters from colleagues and family emphasize Neil's influence and contributions. Scott Craven, a professor emeritus and WCHF inductee, praises Neil's extensive impact on students and wildlife conservation. Adam Payne, Neil's son and former Secretary of the Wisconsin DNR, reflected on his father's teachings and their influence on his own conservation work:

Our dad is a dedicated conservationist who had an extraordinary career. His broad experience, talent, and determination, combined with a good sense of humor, made him a very effective teacher, mentor, and leader who positively motivated and impacted others.

Dr. Payne has made significant contributions to wildlife management and education in Wisconsin over a distinguished 57-year career. He has authored more books on wildlife management than any other author. He continued writing even after retirement, providing valuable resources for students and professionals. His influence extends to many students who are now engaged in impactful conservation work.

Personal accounts from colleagues and students emphasize Dr. Payne's engaging teaching style and mentorship. Jeff Shaw, a DNR retiree whose father, WCHF enrollee Byron Shaw, Neil's deceased close friend and hunting and



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fishing partner, recalled learning and collaborating with Neil since 1975 and appreciating his humor and wisdom in wildlife biology. Neil's teaching methods and humor captivated students and made learning enjoyable. Many students attribute their pursuit of wildlife-related careers to Neil's motivation and guidance.

Dr. Payne's extensive education and diverse professional experiences have shaped his expertise in wildlife ecology. His publications have played a crucial role in advancing wildlife management practices and education. He authored several key textbooks and guides on wildlife management, addressing integrated ecosystem management. His works serve as technical guidance for wildlife professionals, students, and landowners. His latest book, *Wildlifer*, is extraordinary and a career highlight. It is an unprecedented chronicle of Wisconsin's wildlife management history and reflects his commitment to education well after his retirement. Dr. Payne is recognized as a Certified Wildlife Biologist and received Outstanding Scholar Awards from UW-Stevens Point. His book on wildlife habitat management won the UW-Stevens Point Publication Award and the Annual Publication Award from the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society. He is listed in various professional directories and recognized for his many contributions to conservation.

He and Eileen Tagge had three children before divorcing in 1984: Adam, born on the Pacific coast in California, while Neil was in the Marines in Vietnam. Mark, born on the Atlantic coast in Newfoundland, and Erin, born on the Pacific coast in Washington State. It's an indication of how much they moved in a relatively short time, and the difficult, stressful decisions and actions involved. Neil married Jan Lyman in 1986, and has three step-children—Patty, Shari, Gail—grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

After he retired in 1998, he wrote several more wildlife books. He and Jan spend their retirement during the summer in Wisconsin and in Newfoundland and Labrador, where they were during 9/11 in 2001, helping to buy and distribute food to the foreign "plane people" forced to land there. They winter in Florida, where he sings bass in a mixed chorus directed by Jan. At 86, Neil continues to enjoy the outdoors, birding, plant walks, and recently went on a successful moose hunt in Newfoundland with his two sons.

WCHF INDUCTION EVENT DETAILS

The 2026 WCHF Induction Events will be held on Tuesday, April 21, 2026. The events will be held live on a virtual platform and are free and open to the public, and donations are appreciated. For more details about the events visit: <https://wchf.org/2026-induction-events/>

WISCONSIN CONSERVATION HALL OF FAME FOUNDATION, INC. (WCHF)

The WCHF was established in 1982 to encourage the growth and practice of a conservation ethic as a legacy for the people of the State. Individuals may be nominated for induction into the WCHF by the public. Based on a set of criteria, 2025 nominees were selected for induction by the WCHF Board of Directors, Representatives of 30 Voting Member Organizations, and an independent Board of Governors.

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