

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 9 FALL 2015

In the Woods *By Karen M. Phelps, Naturalist*

Five o'clock in the morning: it's dark outside. Trudging across the pasture to the woods, I am guided by Orion the Hunter, my favorite constellation in the fall southern sky. The three main stars that make up Orion's belt, shine brightly overhead as I slip quietly into the woods to spend the day observing and hunting as well as neglecting domestic chores around the house.

Upon entering the woods, I am enthralled in the stillness that awaits me as the nighttime world prepares to slumber and the daytime world stirs to awaken. As my diurnal eyes adjust to the pre-dawn hours, I can make out the distinguishing hump of the raccoon's back as he cautiously makes his way back to his hollow tree for his daytime slumber. His steps slow and become ever more cautious as he crosses my scent left behind on the trail I took into the woods. Upon reaching his bed, I hear the rustling of turkeys, startled by the intrusion of the raccoon, sharing his tree with them. A few clucks from the turkeys, an angry retort from the raccoon, and the raccoon disappears into the tree. As the sun continues to rise and creep its light throughout the forest, the unseen world begins to emerge.

Off in the distance, I see the flick of an ear. I watch for sometime before the bedded doe shifts her weight and swats at an unseen irritant with her head. More ear twitches, and soon the doe is up and walking away, tail and ears flicking sporadically as she leaves the frame of my vision. The night sounds slowly give way to the waking sounds of the forest. The crickets still and the mosquitoes seem to have left, as the bluejays announce to the forest that the time to awaken is *now*! As if on cue, the squirrel chatter begins, followed abruptly by their alarm scolding. I slowly divert my eyes to the sound of a twig snapping. There, slinking through the low brush, is their cause for alarm. The red fox proudly makes his way down the trail, carrying his rabbit supper, all the while ignoring the scolding taking place above him.



Barred owl (Strix varia)

Inside this Issue

Calendar of Events
Insert

Eastern Kingbird
page 2

Shellsburg Plantings
page 3

Words of Wisdom
page 4

Gathering the Harvest
page 5

Prairie Girl's Notebook
page 6

Plant Profile
page 7

Images of Fall Season
page 8

Thank You
page 9

Electronic versions are
available at our website
www.bentoncountyparks.com
or call us at:
319-472-4942 to be added
to our mailing list.

continued on page 9

The Eastern Kingbird *By Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

If you have not been out on the Old Creamery Nature Trail lately you are probably missing a lot. Not only is it a great place to bike or walk, it is also a great time of year to go birding because so many species are on the move. One of these migrating species is the Eastern Kingbird. The Eastern Kingbird is a Neotropical migrant meaning it travels between North American, Central American, and South American continents. This bird like many others likes to spend it's summers in North America and then as the temperatures begin to dip and the food becomes harder to find they head South for the winter. I must admit that around February I start to wish I could have flown south for the winter.

Kingbirds are notorious for guarding their territory many birds are very vigilant about guarding a nesting site but the Kingbird takes it to a whole other level. They seem to actively pursue conflict with any bird that might stray too close to its area. The size of the intruder does not dissuade the Kingbird from a fight it often takes on crows, hawks, and vultures. It has a tried and true technique it climbs high into the sky in a spiral and then dive bombs the larger birds trying to hit them in the back. It accompanies this aggressive attack with several loud shrieks to announce its presence. Since the Kingbird is more agile and faster in flight it usually has no problem dispatching birds from its area. Once the invader has been dealt with it returns to its lookout tower (which is often a nearby power line). Since they are apparently fearless and willing to take on very large birds like the Great Blue Heron they were aptly given the name *Tyrannus tyrannus*. It also helps to have a crown of yellow, orange, and sometimes red feathers that are normally concealed until it encounters a potential predator. These little tyrant kings often treat their own kind in the same way. They are not large birds having a wings span of only 13-15 inches. They are slightly smaller than a Robin but certainly fiercer.

The dark gray to almost black head and shoulders of the kingbird transition into a gray on their wings and back. They have a white square tipped tail and a short straight bill. With a white neck under their beak and a white breast it appears that the Kingbird is formally dressed. The distinct call of the Kingbird is described as a "single or variety of *zeer*, *dzeet*, or trilled notes. Dawn song: a series of complex notes and trills, which are repeated over and over, *t't'zeer*, *t't'zeer*, *t'zeetzeetzee*." (National Geographic.com). Their calls have also been described as sounding an awful lot like the buzz of an electric fence.

The diet of the Kingbird is also very interesting in that it changes depending on the area it is living in. While the Kingbird resides in North America it is predominantly a solitary insectivore (eats only insects) and during its time in South and Central America it travels in flocks and is primarily an herbivore subsisting almost exclusively on fruit. They are attracted to movement and sally out from their high perches to catch flying insects. These meals can also include small frogs caught on the ground. Once they have the prey they dispatch it by beating it against their perch. Since their diet consists mostly of flying insects during the summer months they do produce pellets of insect exoskeletons that they regurgitate.



Eastern Kingbird photo by Chuck Carlson, former Vinton resident taken on Old Creamery Nature Trail

Native Plantings in Shellsburg *By Nancy Thorkildson, Guest Writer*

People are beginning to notice some changes around Shellsburg. There are several projects stemming from our 2013 participation in Community Visioning that involve native flowers and grasses and we've been invited to share a little information about those.

Almost twenty years ago Shellsburg residents took the initiative to reintroduce native prairie vegetation to a seventeen acre tract of land behind the Shellsburg Elementary School. Prairie plantings take many years to become established so we're fortunate for the foresight of the folks who planned this project. For a long time the prairie was tucked away and not getting too much attention, but in 2014 the Vinton Shellsburg Community Schools allowed our community group to create an access to the trail from the north end of Pearl Street. Thanks to the volunteer efforts of the Shellsburg Area Community Group (SACG), many people are now using the "Prairie Forest Trail" to enjoy walks through the timber and prairie.

I recently had an opportunity to walk through this restored prairie with Dustin Hinrichs of Trees Forever and Karen Phelps, a naturalist with Benton County Conservation. Karen has been involved with the prairie since its inception and is very knowledgeable of the native plants growing there. During our stroll she identified probably thirty different kinds of native grasses and flowers. Dustin had not seen the prairie previously and was really impressed with the diversity and health of the prairie! This really is a unique asset in Shellsburg and of course the environmental benefits are many, including creating pollinator, butterfly and other wildlife habitat. Feel free to come enjoy a walk through our prairie!

SACG has also provided volunteers and funding to create some display beds near the entrance of the Prairie Forest Trail. These provide examples of prairie flowers and grasses that will be seen on the trail and we will soon have plant identification signs that provide information about the plant's characteristics and historical uses. We are also appreciative of the Benton County Conservation Department's donation of some native plants which have been placed along the split rail fence at the entrance of the trail. We anticipate adding additional native plants in our final landscaping around the entrance next spring.

As a retired person, I'm always thankful for opportunities they refer to as "teachable moments". We were planting a goldenrod up at the trail entrance and someone expressed concern that this would cause hay fever symptoms for anyone passing by. Turns out Goldenrod happens to be blooming at the same time as the dreaded ragweed. But Goldenrod pollen is quite large and sticky and relies on insects for pollination. The Goldenrod pollen cannot become airborne and never makes its way into our sinuses. The ragweed pollen, however, is wind pollinated which causes it to broadcast large amounts of lightweight pollen into the air and this is the actual culprit for our fall allergies. The articles that I read stress the importance of goldenrods to the landscape and recommends including them in your garden plot because they provide color and pollen well into the fall when most other plant life is shutting down. There are many different varieties of goldenrod, but from what I've read they are all quite harmless when it comes to fall allergies!



Volunteers work to spread native seed in prepared area near Bear Creek in Shellsburg

Shane Mahoney: Conservation Words of Wisdom *By Matthew Purdy, Director*

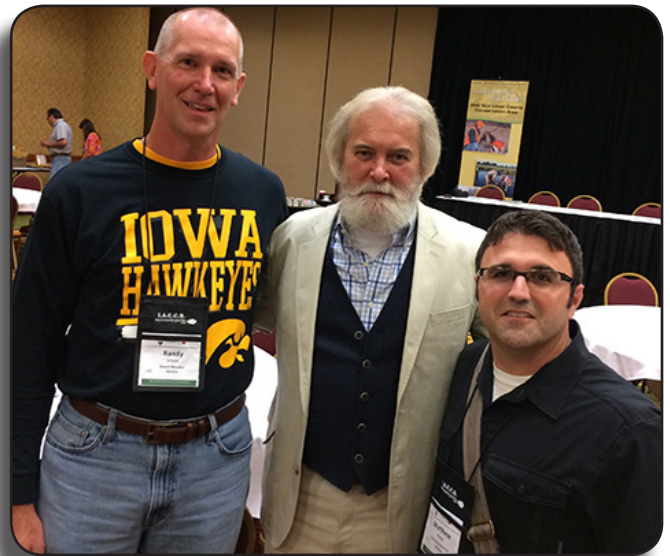


Conservation Director Matthew Purdy, former Director Russ Glime and wife Brenda, along with Board member Randy Scheel had the pleasure of attending the annual conservation conference (IACCB) this year in Cedar Rapids Iowa. During that time we discussed new issues with old friends from across our 99 counties, and gathered inspiration from one another for the challenges we will face in the upcoming year. Among the topics presented at the annual conference included: special event management, recruitment and retention of your board, creative land protection methods, balancing recreation & conservation, conservations future & wellbeing, governance regarding your board, Bio-restoration of streams and river banks, & park tours to neighboring facilities.

However, the most influential presenter and key note speaker for the conference was Mr. Shane Mahoney. Mr. Mahoney works as the head of Conservation Visions, & serves as the International Liaison of the Wildlife Society, and is the North American chair of the World Conservation Union.

Mahoney's presentation served as an inspirational call for all those in attendance. His profound auditory posture brought visions of Teddy Roosevelt in the Oval Office, commanding the vital necessity for preservation of our worldwide natural environment against all odds. He explained the conservation movement we know today was started by, and is still driven by, hunters that love their land and are willing to protect the diverse wildlife resources it provides for their families in the form of a food on their tables, and natural heritage. Hunters share the glory of the wildlife that exists in our state, and pass that commitment of conservation onto their children through positive hunting ethics.

He reminded all "keepers of the land" in attendance that the resounding idea for a lasting legacy of conservation growth and protection spanning to the edges of the earth, was first founded within the boundaries of the United States of America. Started by our 26th President, Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 – 1909, and continued by agencies public and private that have continued to expand our lands today. This movement was only founded upon the brink of extinction of so many American species and the rebirth and growth of this movement has been unmatched across the world still today. But in America we still face these concerns. For instance the Chinese are currently pollinating by hand, will that be the future of America? Or will Americans find a way to overcome this issue.



Board member Randy Scheel, Shane Mahoney and Director Matthew Purdy

Continued on page 8

Gathering Up the Harvest *By Logan Hahn, Hannen Lake Park Ranger*



Hickory Nuts. Gathered from Hannen Lake Park; these tasty gems serve as another great excuse to go outside. They taste like eating a walnut and a pecan in the same bite.

the finding and eating of the forest's wild food products. The woods are filled with dozens of plant species that put massive effort into producing delectable morsels, just in time for fall. The timing is no coincidence. Many tree species produce nuts in the fall with the intent that some hibernating creature will find the seed, bury it for winter, and accidentally forget to eat it. When this happens, the plant gets its seeds planted for free by exploiting the critter's need for food! This symbiotic relationship between squirrels and trees has, in turn, benefited human visitors to Hannen Lake Park's "Hickory Hill" as well.

Plants aren't the only players in the wild-edibles game, however. In the fall, they receive some stiff competition from the fungi as well. Puffball mushrooms, oyster mushrooms, and goat's beard are just a few of the delicious sides to a deer roast that a person can find on the public grounds of Benton County Conservation.

When hunting for mushrooms, it is always important to be absolutely certain that the mushroom is identified correctly, as there are several species in the state that are poisonous. Book stores and websites have excellent mushroom identification resources, and these resources should be studied thoroughly before eating any wild mushroom.

Happy hunting, and gathering, this fall!

As far as many outdoor enthusiasts are concerned, fall is the greatest season of the year. One of the underlying reasons for this is the upswing in hunting opportunities that take place this time of the year. Deer, pheasants, ducks, geese, and various other small game all become fair game to license-holding, field-going, adventure seekers who have a year's worth of appetite built up for wild table-fare.

However, there is another rewarding outdoor activity that is all-too-often overlooked among the feverish excitement surrounding hunting season: gathering. I'm not talking about gathering around the thanksgiving table, not that everyone doesn't enjoy that. What I'm referring to is



Oyster Mushroom. Found in September on various dead tree species

More images on page 8

On Their Own *by Coralee Bodeker*

The birding at my grandparents' cabin in NW Wisconsin has been exceptional this week. Over the course of the first few days of my annual summer visit I've been lucky enough to watch Bald Eagles, Osprey, Common Loons, a pair



of Pileated Woodpeckers, and one juvenile Green Heron. The highlight of my visit thus far has been the chance to observe a band of five juvenile Hooded Mergansers. Each morning the little group comes right up to the dock and dives for breakfast in the lake weeds. At first I wasn't sure what species duck they were, but with the help of a few field guides (and some online sleuthing) I concluded that they were indeed juvenile Hooded Mergansers. I had considered two other possible breeding duck species in this area, Common Mergansers and Red-breasted Mergansers, but both are far too big physically for my group. In addition, both Common and Red-breasted Merganser juveniles exhibit a white patch running from the base of the bill and stopping just behind their eye—like a white version of a football player's eye black; my birds sport nothing of the sort. The mergansers before me are small, brown birds with red-tinged crests, white wing patches, and a thin yellow stripe on the lower bill.



Much like humans, most birds learn important survival tips from their parent(s) at a young age and once the parent(s) cease their parenting, the juveniles are on their own to experiment and learn further. These Hooded Mergansers are no exception. Born with the incredible ability to swim, their perfectly streamlined bodies and quickly-learned instinct to fish in shallow water finds my group well on its way to supporting itself, but that doesn't mean these tiny ducks are experts at "being" Hooded

Mergansers. I observe several of these juveniles struggling with their catch—one will dive and quickly resurface, struggling with an oversized perch halfway down its throat or a small sunfish speared a bit too far down its bill. It's giving me a good chuckle to watch he or she regretfully sort out his or her fishy problems. The five youngsters are excellent learning buddies. If one begins to preen him- or herself after a particularly fruitful catch, the other four almost instantly follow suit; the same goes for test flights around the bay (newly cast off by their mother, I've observed that they are hardly proficient flyers quite yet). One by one they all take off from the water until there are five little white-bellied birds flying low over the lake, creating a great deal of commotion in the process.

It's now about 7:30AM; with bellies full and the sun's rays heating up the white pine forest surrounding the lake, the little mergansers give up their fishing and slowly paddle around the point across the bay, not to be seen again until the next morning, eagerly slurping up a morning meal.



Wood Betony

(*Pedicularis canadensis*)

Prepared By:

Ben Bonar

Wood Betony is a flowering perennial plant that is native to the eastern half of the United States. This species begins growing early in the spring and its leaves initially emerge with a red color. When viewed from above, the plants flowers look like a pinwheel.

Wood Betony is also known by the common name Lousewort. This common name refers to a misguided belief that livestock grazing on pastures where the plant grew would become infested with lice. This is ironic as Wood Betony itself is a parasite. A brief description of its hemiparasitism can be found below. Through its parasitism the plant is able to promote diversity by hindering the growth of tall grasses. This allows shorter grasses and forbs to thrive.

Wood Betony flowers attract a variety of pollinators. However, long-tongued bees are the primary visitors. These include bumble bees and mason bees.

Wood Betony Quick Facts:

- Classification: Forb
- Life Cycle: Perennial
- Flower Color: Yellow
- Bloom Time: April through May
- Other Traits: Hemiparasitic Plant



More Interesting Facts

Habitat

Wood Betony prefers full sun to partial shade. The plant can be found on a variety of soil types ranging from mesic to dry.

Hemiparasitism

Wood Betony is a hemiparasitic plant species. This means that the plant can photosynthesize but often attach to host plants such as short grass species. Several of these host plants include Little Bluestem, June Grass, Common Oak Sedge, Hairy Grama and Blue Grama.

Images of the Fall Season



Left: Goat's Beard mushroom. Found near dead oak trees in October.

Below: Puffball Mushroom. Generally found at the end of September to early October.



Orb Weaver

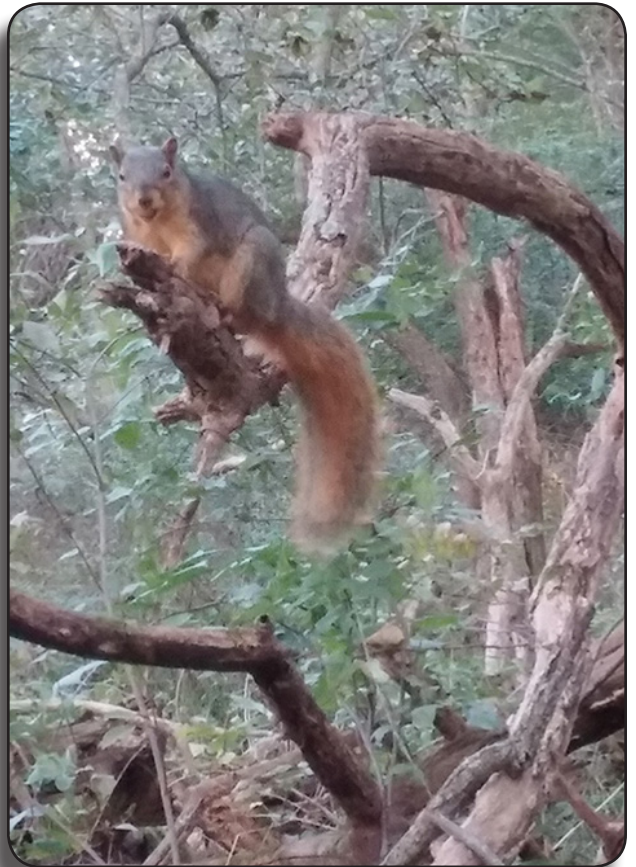
In the Woods *continued from page 1*

The fox has passed. The scolding alarm has ceased and the thunderous flap of wings signal the downward path of the roosting turkeys. Reaching the ground, they regroup with a few soft uttered clucks and make their way across the forest floor, scratching for bugs and seeds as they go.

The forest is waking up. The cardinals soon join in the cacophony of birds all announcing their territorial rights. Startled by a wren landing on my knocked arrow, I flinch and the wren departs as quickly as it appeared: I need to practice holding still. As the choir of blending voices increases, an opossum trudges through the undergrowth, seemingly in no hurry to fulfill his nocturnal instincts. The barred owl signs off for the day with its tell-tale "*who cooks for you, who cooks for you-all*" only to be answered by a distant repeat of the same call.

As the morning hours give way to mid-day, the forest quiets once again. An occasional bird flits by, a spider begins to use my arrow as an anchor point for a web, and it's then I realize I've been sitting for too long. As I stand to stretch, I place my bow on the ground, altering the plans of the industrious spider. Overhead, unseen through the canopy of trees, I hear the distinctive sound of snow geese, encouraging one another for the long migratory flight ahead. I shift my gaze in time to see a Cooper's hawk glide silently through the woods, dodging trees and brush with just the slightest cant of its tail. Directly behind the hawk, in swift pursuit is a crow, followed by a bluejay.

The hours pass and I find myself now facing the oncoming darkness when the diurnal and nocturnal world begin to trade places and become crepuscular. There is an eerie moment in the woods when this change takes place. Complete silence. The squirrels have gone to bed, the birds have stopped their ruckus chatter, the crows and bluejays no longer sound-out in alarm: Stillness. I wait. Will it be the raccoon, the deer, the owl, the fox, trees frogs? Who will emerge first among the night creatures? "*Whoooo*". There it is; the Great Horned owl announces the coming of night. As darkness enfolds me, I quietly gather my things and silently make my way out of their world and back home.



A Heartfelt Thank You to the Following People:

Coralee Bodeker, *Nature Center volunteer, guest author, programs*

Ruby Bodeker, *Nature Center volunteer*, Janet Brown, *Nature Center volunteer*

Tess Erger, *Miscellaneous nature items, books, shelves*

Yvonne Erger, *50 lbs. of bird seed*, Rosey Reifentahl, *50 lbs. of bird seed*

To everyone that visits and enjoys our facilities

The Kingbird *Continued from page 2*

As it gets later into the summer they do enjoy some of the local berries that can be found for example; mulberries, serviceberries, cherries, blackberries, elderberries, and nightshade.

Kingbirds often make their nests in areas with open fields and water nearby. This makes the Old Creamery Trail the ideal habitat for nesting Kingbirds. With its tall trees so close to farm fields and a creek nearby. Most breeding pairs only produce one brood per season due to the fact they feed their young for seven weeks before they leave the nest. Kingbirds begin to show up in North America in March and April and they begin to head South in August and early September. By the time you read this all of the Kingbirds will be on their way to warmer climates and munching on fruit and a few insects as they head south and begin to gather in flocks. Look for them in the early spring guarding their territory. If you happen to see a smaller lone bird harassing a much larger bird look for the tell-tale signs of the yellow to red crown and the white tipped tail and it will certainly be a Eastern Kingbird proving they were given the proper scientific name *Tyrannus tyrannus*.

Native Plantings in Shellsburg *Continued from page 2*



After many months of planning, we initiated our streambank stabilization project in our city park, near the bridge at the south end of the business district. Utilizing grants secured by SACG, excavation of the streambank began on September 28, 2015. Dirt was removed from the existing creek bank to lessen the slope and rip rap was redistributed along the water line. Limestone steps were placed down to the water and then volunteers gathered on October 3rd to plant native grass and flower seeds, along with five native shrubs. Given the extensive root system of the native vegetation, the design is intended to decrease erosion during periods of high water. There will also be environmental benefits of improving water quality and providing pollinator habitat.

Mark Pingnot, a certified arborist and owner of Arbor Care LLC of Vinton, has provided consultation on this project and advised us on the selection of native vegetation. The “Short Sedge Meadow Seed Mix” recommended by Mark includes such things as Cardinal Flower, Rose Milkweed, Swamp Marigold, False Aster, Great Bur Reed, Porcupine Sedge, Brown Fox Sedge and Fowl Manna Grass. I’m anxious to get acquainted with these and all the other species which will be emerging. We still have an assortment of bare root native plants arriving that will be placed along the limestone steps. Again, this will be a variety of flowers, grasses and sedges selected for this area to add visual interest. Rattlesnake master, Wood grass, Culver’s Root, Blue Flag Iris are just a few of the natives that will be planted here.

We are cautioning folks that native vegetation does not have the manicured look that many of us are accustomed to, and will take approximately five years to become fully established. As plants emerge in the spring it will look untidy and we need to change our thinking and recognize native plants for the benefits they provide. Please be patient with us and watch this area as it evolves. If you are interested in additional information or pictures about these projects, please visit www.shellsburgareacommunitygroup.com or see the Facebook page for Shellsburg Visioning Committee.

Words of Wisdom *Continued from page 4*

Perhaps through our newly founded “Monarchs & Milkweed” movement, we can reverse the actions we have caused with pesticide use in our country which has eliminated butterflies, bees and other vital pollinator species. other vital pollinator species.

This ability to mobilize change in our country, holds an inherent responsibility to maintain and expand the world’s jointly owned environmental resources held within the boundaries of the United States of America for the world to see as a shining example for the future. Future generations have the same constitutional rights to learn to hunt and fish on public lands, and have the ability to share their passions and love of wildlife with their children. In Mahoney’s opinion, the future of our world economy will be solely judged upon the environmental preservation that a country has to offer. If your watersheds are clean, and your lands are pure, then your country will flourish. Prosperity does not happen because of attractive beauty, but because of the lack of reliance on surrounding areas and countries for things like clean water, healthy soil, and fresh air. These are the things that will stimulate an economy and provide a basis for a long term economic sustainability.

Mahoney made one other point that I feel must be expressed: There is a myth that currently exists in the world, that if we leave wildlife alone it will be fine. People think if we remove the hunters, and fisherman and simply preserve the lands everything will be okay. However this has been proven to be false across the world. Wildlife no longer exists by accident, it exists by our efforts. And those efforts are being put forth by the hunters and fisherman who use and cherish the lands and have a vested interest in its survival. Few examples of truly conserving lands have existed across the globe without the joint cooperation of hunting sponsored agencies. This is the concept we must grasp as a population, and the responsibility we must hold high as the “keepers of the land.”



Conservation alumni who have given the majority of their working years to the conservation movement and should be recognized for their commitment. (Back row L to R) - Doug Schroeder (Floyd), Mark Ackelson (Story, INHF), Steve Lekwa (Story), Brian Holt (Webster), Mark Wagner (Jasper) (Front row L to R) - Bob Walker (DNR Coord. Office), Joyce Hornstein (Story), Steve Finnegan (Black Hawk), John Stuart (Wapello), Tom Hazelton (Linn), Dave Olson (Carroll) and Russ Glime, past director and eighteen-year veteran of Benton County Conservation.

Conservation Board Members

Dan Hill - Vinton, Member
Jean Ohlen - Blairstown, Chair
Mark Pingenot - Vinton, Member
Denni Randall - Belle Plaine, Member
Randy Scheel - Garrison, Member

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month at 5:30 at the Nature Center. Meetings are open to the public.

Conservation Staff

Matthew Purdy	Executive Director
Scott Bahmann	Deputy Director/Ranger
Karen Phelps	Interpretive Naturalist
Aaron Askelson	Interpretive Naturalist
Jon Geiger	River Parks Ranger
Logan Hahn	Hannen Park Ranger
Zach Parmater	Conservation Tech

Email anyone on staff by using their first initial combined with their last name
@bentoncountyparks.com
eg: mpurdy@bentoncountyparks.com

***Please follow us on Facebook at Benton County Conservation
Visit us on the web at www.bentoncountyparks.com or www.mycountyparks.com***

***Benton County Conservation
5718 20th Ave., Dr., Vinton, IA 52349
319-472-4942***