

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 24 Fall 2021

Fall Funding: *By Shelby Williams, Director*

I kept saying that I was excited for fall, that I was ready for a “slowdown” with the department. Turns out, fall has been equally busy as summer. We still have plenty of campers that are enjoying the beautiful weather and change in colors, an abundance of school field trips and programs, and numerous park projects that need to be buttoned up or started prior to the winter weather. Our fall is moving right along.

Other exciting things that happen in the fall include the complex grant cycle of applications and reporting. This season we have been unbelievably lucky to receive support from various grant organizations and community groups, and we aren’t done yet.

So far, we’ve received the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa grant for \$4,500 to go towards the Old Creamery Nature Trail (OCNT) bridge. It’s exciting to have that open and fully running from Vinton to Dysart again. Secondary Roads helped remove the old bridge surface and the BCCB staff worked together to get the new bridge built.



Figure 1: BCC staff placing boards on an OCNT bridge

We also applied for and received \$8,000 from the Max and Helen Guernsey Charitable Foundation grant for the OCNT Garrison Trailhead, to provide water for trail users and have a functioning rest area. Our plan includes installing a bike rack, fix-it station, and watering station right off the trail and just below the shelter. If you haven’t had the opportunity to check out the Garrison trailhead, I highly recommend it.



Figure 2: OCNT Garrison trailhead update

Inside this Issue

Fall Funding
page 1

OCNT Garrison Trail Head
page 2

Tree Squirrels
Page 3

Volunteer Spotlight
page 4

Reflections on BWCA
Pages 5 and 6

Maintenance at Hannen Lake
Page 6

Topwater for Cedar Pike
Page 7

End of Year Camping
Page 7

Meet the New Naturalist
Page 8

Meet the New Naturalist Intern
Page 8

Coloring Page
page 9

Newsletter Update
page 10

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OCNT Garrison Trail Head: *By Cecilia Dirks, Conservation Technician*

The Old Creamery Nature Trail (OCNT) runs 15 miles between Vinton, Garrison, and Dysart. In 2019, the OCNT Committee partnered with Benton County Conservation Board (BCCB) to put up a shelter in Garrison to be utilized as a trailhead and rest area at the midpoint of the trail. This location features the original foundation from the Old Creamery, for which the trail is named. The OCNT committee and BCCB have been working together to continue to improve the area for public use. Accessibility has been the most pressing issue, so steps and railings have been installed to allow for better visibility and public access.



Figure 4: Leveling the wall before pouring concrete

First, the wall had to be taken down to an even level so a new, flat slab of concrete could be poured. This would give a solid surface to bolt the railings and steps to. Removing the upper wall was done primarily by hand to preserve as many of the original stones as possible.

Once we had the stone wall removed, the existing concrete was torn up and new slabs were poured to cap the wall and create a smooth sidewalk. We had to get creative with how to pour the cap on top of an uneven wall. Our summer seasonal, Larry Reiter, had a few tricks up his sleeve and the pour went really well, even as we raced the rain!

Once the cap and sidewalk had been poured, we got to work on the railings and steps. With the wall now level, the steps were built in the Northeast corner to allow for better use of the shelter area. The steps were made using composite boards to withstand the elements. The wooden steps were removed, allowing more of the original foundation to be visible.

The large limestone pieces taken from the Northern wall were reused in extending the sitting wall on the East side. The wall also contains local stones from a private quarry, donated by Zach Paramater. Mortar was added to original sections that needed to be touched up. The original foundation will require continuous maintenance to keep it intact as weather wears on the stones. The next project for the trail head includes installing a water bottle filling station, bike rack, bike fix-it station, and benches along the trail. These improvements are funded by the OCNT committee, grant opportunities, and the BCCB. Keep an eye out for these improvements and enjoy the beautiful, peaceful setting at the Garrison OCNT trailhead! **See you on the trail!**



Figure 3: Original foundation wall of the Old Creamery Theater



Figure 5: BCC staff installing new railing along the wall



Figure 6: BCC staff rebuilt the sitting wall with limestone taken from the northern wall

Tree Squirrels: *Faith Henrichs, Naturalist*

During these cooler autumn days, trees begin to drop their colorful leaves and seeds. Song birds, raccoons, turkeys, deer and many other Iowa mammals depend on these fallen nuts to build up their fat reserves for the cold winter months ahead. Squirrels in particular are very busy this time of year collecting as many nuts as possible, nibbling away at the hard hulls of the nut to get the nutrient rich core. Nuts like acorns, hickory, and walnuts are a favorite but they will also gorge themselves on tree buds, pine cones, mushrooms, crabapples, maple seeds, and occasionally they can be seen nibbling on animal bones for much needed calcium and minerals. In the fall they can gain up to 25% of their body weight in just a month! The fat they gain during this time helps to insulate and protect squirrels from the harsh winter weather ahead. These fat deposits can also be used as energy when food is limited during the bitter cold months.

Squirrels don't eat every nut they find in the fall. Squirrels will also collect nuts to make food caches. Their caches are typically just under the surface of the ground or in tree cavities. During the winter months, they will return to these caches to fill up on stored food. Before they bury their findings, they will sometimes crack open the nut to make sure it doesn't sprout before winter is over. One squirrel can hide up to 7,000 nuts per year! Various studies have found that squirrels place their nuts in specific locations, separating the acorns from the walnuts. When they get hungry in the winter, they will use their sense of smell to locate their food caches. But how do they remember where they buried all their nuts? They don't! Squirrels are excellent tree planters for this very reason.



*Figure 9: Large drey in a maple tree.
Photo by Larry Reis*



*Figure 7: Fox squirrel eating a walnut.
Photo by Larry Reis*



*Figure 8: Gray squirrel in a drey.
Photo by Larry Reis*

Not only are they packing on the pounds and planting a tree or two along the way, they are also gathering leaves and pine needles to make large nests called dreys. Tree squirrels like the gray and fox squirrel prefer to make their dreys in tree cavities. If they can't find a suitable cavity to make their nests, they will also build large dreys high up in tree branches where they are protected from predators. Occasionally, they will build multiple dreys to throw off predators from their scent and reduce pests issues. On really cold nights, squirrels will sometimes gather together in small groups to keep warm. During extended cold fronts, some squirrels will sleep for a few days to conserve their energy. These cold months ahead are hard for our tree-planting friends, so if you can, put up squirrel feeders to supplement their food. Not only will the squirrels appreciate it, but you will get some entertainment, too!

Volunteer Spotlight:

By Layla Hagen, East Unit Ranger

What comes to mind when you hear the title “Campground Host”? You may think of an individual that is always set up in a campground, answers camper questions, and collects camping fees. Maybe you are thinking of a specific person you know that has been a camp host at one time or another. What you probably don’t think of when you hear “Campground Host” is someone that keeps the entire park put together.

I met Duane Candler in early June 2021. Duane and his wife Rose were camping at Hoefle-Dulin Recreation Area at site 6 when I stopped to talk to them. I didn’t have anything in particular to talk about, but I noticed they were sitting by the campfire and I figured it was a good time for me to introduce myself. After a short conversation, I learned that both Duane and Rose had been camping at Hoefle-Dulin for the last 14 years and I could sense the love they both had for this small county park.

I left the park that afternoon and immediately thought that they would make excellent camp hosts, if we would ever come to that point in the future. Luckily, my boss also thought it was a great idea and by the middle of June 2021, I had Duane and Rose set up at their favorite site at Hoefle-Dulin!

I wasn’t expecting much from my camp hosts. I figured they could answer questions, visit with campers, and keep the peace when I was tied up at one of my other parks. Duane immediately took ownership of regularly cleaning the pit restrooms and fire rings at both Hoefle-Dulin and Benton City-Fry, another park of ours a few miles down the road. After a few weeks, Duane was looking for more tasks to do at the two parks. He started to weed whip and mow the parks, clean off camping pedestals, wipe off the kiosks, and even helped us pour concrete slabs! By taking these tasks on, it gave my seasonals and I more time to work on other types of projects in the other areas.

It’s one thing to make the parks look “camper ready”, but it’s another thing to take ownership of an area and really put your heart and soul into making it look beautiful. The river parks received outstanding reviews from campers, mainly about how clean and nice they looked. I could not be more pleased with how my first summer as a Park Ranger went thanks to my seasonals and my camp hosts.

Thank you Duane and Rose, for putting Hoefle-Dulin Recreation Area back on the map!



Figure 10: View of the Cedar River from Hoefle-Dulin Park

Benton County Conservation Foundation Needs You!

Benton County Conservation Foundation is reestablishing! In the past, this was an active group that assisted our Benton County Conservation Department in many ways. Over the last several years, involvement has dwindled.

We would like to get the BCCF going again. We have a number of exciting projects going on today and anticipate many more in the future!

We need people who value conservation, our county, and have a vision for the future. If this seems like something you want to be a part of, the Foundation is hosting a meeting January 18th at 7PM, at the Nature Center! Please stop by and learn more about the group.

Reflections on the BWCA 2021: *Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) on the border of Minnesota and Canada is a very unique place with its abundance of wildlife and solitude. It is a great place to reflect and explore. Once a year in the late summer, Benton and Buchanan County Conservation work together to take a group of high school age kids from the area on an epic adventure. Our group consisted of five students and three adult leaders, two females and six males. We all had one goal; to spend a week in the BWCA and have some fun. In the BWCA we travelled over thirty-three miles by land and water. Some portages were rough others were rougher. Some were rocky some were muddy, some were both.

We began to learn about each other on our training day and our van ride up to Sawbill Campground. Our ideas of what to expect on the trip were very different. Some were avid outdoors people while others had spent little time in the outdoors. Some had dreams of catching large fish while others were concerned about the prospect of encountering a bear. All hoped to see wildlife not common in Iowa.



Figure 11: Group photo of BWCA participants

A drought in the BWCA over the summer caused the Forest Service to ban campfires throughout all of the BWCA. The lack of rainfall also made some of our portages a little longer and muddier than they normally would have been. There was even an active wildfire to our North in Canada, but it was not close enough to be of any concern we did however get the occasional whiff of smoke in the air.



Figure 12: Portaging through the bog

The BWCA is home to more than 2,000 lakes and streams, 1,500 miles of canoe routes, and 2,200 campsites. Walleye, Northern pike, and smallmouth bass are ripe for the catching. On day one we loaded up our four canoes with everything we needed for a week of adventure. We had at least five miles to go before our first campsite. It was a dreary morning with little sun light and an on again off again drizzle. The BWCA is dotted with lakes, some large, some small, and some connected by trails or portages. Webster's defines portage as "the carrying of boats or goods overland from one body of water to another or around an obstacle such as rapids." Portages are a necessary evil, the only way to get you, your stuff, and your canoe into the next body of water. For most people, portages are certainly not their favorite part of the BWCA, they tend to be muddy, rocky, water logged, steep, and mosquito filled. Some of the mud puddles will suck a pair of loose-fitting shoes right off of your feet! If you are carrying a 40lb pack and a 55lb canoe, it is hard to swat the mosquitoes away without losing your balance so you watch them buzz around your head biting your face, neck and forearms. But it is all worth it as you paddle and portage further and further away from "civilization".

Campsites are primitive and always lakeside. There is a fire grate and a latrine at every campsite. The latrine is just a fiberglass seat with a lid. No enclosure, no outhouse. The latrine is usually found down a trail away from the campsite. Sometimes this can be a bit of a hike so it is always recommended to get all your "business" done before the sun goes down. Late night trips to the bathroom involve a little planning and can be a little spooky if you think everything you hear is a bear coming to investigate you.

Reflections on the BWCA 2021: *Continued from previous page*

These are the type of challenges the high school students face on the trip. It is physically and mentally challenging but very rewarding. The early part of the day is spent eating a quick breakfast then breaking down camp. Clocks do not mean much in the BWCA, the sun, weather, and your stomach tell you what time it is.

On one of the first portages, I led the way with my pack and canoe on my shoulders. It was a fairly easy portage as they go but it ended in a bog that opened up into a lake. After I had set my canoe in the water I took off my pack. I proceeded to load my pack into the canoe and as I set it in the boat, I miss stepped and put my foot on what I thought was solid ground. It was not, I tumbled into the water that was chest deep. Eager to get out of the cold, dirty water, I made my way toward the wooden planks the Forest Service had placed and very ungracefully flopped myself out of the wonderfully smelling water. As I stood, the water rushed out of my clothes and rain jacket. What a good start to the first day! Luckily none of my trip companions witnessed my elite skill and grace. As I walked back to the other end of the portage, my trip mates observed my soaking filthy state with great interest. I had to fess up that I had in fact been swimming in a bog with my rain jacket. Which a few of them never let me live down and this was brought up several times during the course of the trip. It is little anecdotes like that, that make a trip memorable. One of the young gentlemen began referring to the beef jerky we were eating as cow raisins, so we all began to refer to it as cow raisins, and I haven't stopped.



Figure 13: Scenic lake view in the BWCA

So, if you know a high school age kid that loves a little adventure and doesn't mind getting a little dirty, this might a great trip for them. Just make sure they know swimming in a bog in a rain jacket is never recommended and be sure to bring your cow raisins.

Maintenance at Hannen Lake: *By Collin Strickland, Hannen Park Ranger*

Benton County Conservation purchased a Bobcat skid loader during the summer of 2021. This is the second skid loader that our department owns and will primarily be used at Hannen Lake Park, near Blainstown. By acquiring a second skid loader, our department will be able to cover more ground and get larger projects done in a more efficient, and safe manner. Many of our wildlife areas are difficult to maintain with a brush hog or rotary mower. The need for a second skid loader became evident during the first week of the Derecho 2020 clean up as our department put nearly 35 hours on our skid steer, which is located at Rodgers Park.

This skid loader will be used for many different projects including: re-rocking and re-leveling campsites, helping with storm damage clean up, trenching new electrical lines to upgrade existing campsites, mowing wildlife areas, grinding stumps, maintaining roadways, and additional park maintenance. We were glad to have the new skid loader in July when we removed old concrete and replaced approaches on both ADA (American with Disabilities Act) accessible fishing docks. This fall, we plan to continue working on cleaning up Derecho damage and mowing wildlife areas. This skid loader will also be used at other county owned properties when needed.



Figure 14: New skid loader at Hannen Lake Park

Topwater for Cedar Pike: *By Zach Parmater, Conservation Technician*

Sitting at home and bored? Well then grab your rod and your favorite surface lure and head to the Cedar River near you. Backwater eddies, slack water created by sandbar points, submerged sandbar points that create break lines, and rocky shorelines even if they are shallow, can produce some really nice Pike. A lot of times people are reluctant to fish the river because of the ridiculous number of snags beneath the surface of the water. Snags include rock, naturally occurring and placed by mankind, along with all of the trees that have sluffed off the banks from the erosion, then carried downstream during flooding and deposited on the bottom of the river channel. These coupled with the flowing water of the river can make for a miserable day of fishing. Enter surface lures.

Whopper-popper, Zara spook, Chug-bug, Jitter-bug and Buzz-baits are my go-to lures on the Cedar River. I prefer medium/heavy rod with spinning or bait-cast reel and 10-20lb test braided line. Select an area of the river described above and strategically cast the bait in different directions and retrieve it at different speeds covering as much of the shoreline as possible. Certain species of baitfish in Iowa move to the shallows to spawn in Autumn, with Pike following suite. Representation of any surface lure imitating injured baitfish at the surface will raise Pike after Pike. Catch and release is favored by many, but if you want to give Pike a try, smoking the fish is a delicious treat, breeding and frying is not as good as walleye but better than catfish in my opinion. The Y bones can be a little tricky while cleaning Pike, but with a sharp knife and a little patience one can become quick at removing the extra bones in Pike.

Daily limit for Northern Pike is 3 and possession is 6, no length limit and year-round season. Grab a rod and your favorite surface lure and head out to the old Cedar and have some fun. Remember, bigger the bait, bigger the fish. Using smaller surface lures will attract smaller species of game fish that are also fun to catch like Smallmouth Bass and even Crappie. Trust me when you see a big old Pike break the surface and grab your lure; the fight will be on. Wish you luck and great fishing.



Figure 15: Zach Parmater with a Northern Pike

End of Year Camping: *By Collin Strickland, Hannen Park Ranger*

Please keep in mind that water is shut off at all Benton County Conservation Parks. This includes water spickets, dump stations, restrooms and shower houses. Pit toilets will remain open where available. We will close our gates to the parks on Friday, December 3rd, or earlier, depending on when snow arrives and the weather. Please follow our Benton County Conservation [Facebook page](#) for latest updates or call the Nature Center at 319-472-4942.

We hope you had a wonderful summer camping and we will see you during the 2022 camping season!



Figure 16: Fall campers at Wildcat Bluff Park

Meet the New Naturalist: *By Faith Henrichs, Naturalist*



Figure 17: Naturalist Faith Henrichs with a brown trout

Hello everyone! My name is Faith Henrichs and I am the new Interpretive Naturalist for Benton County Conservation! I have always loved spending time outside ever since I can remember. Growing up, I spent a lot of my time climbing trees, making stick forts and playing in a mud pit in our backyard.

After high school, I attended Muscatine Community College where I completed the Conservation Pathway program. From there, I transferred to Western Illinois University where I received my Bachelors degree in Recreation, Parks, Tourism and Administration with a minor in Environmental Studies. While in college, I worked as a Natural Resource Technician for the City of Bettendorf at Forest Grove Park. After I graduated, I served two terms as an AmeriCorps Environmental Educator for Scott County Conservation at the Wapsi River Environmental Education Center. Before joining the BCC team, I was the Naturalist for Wapello County Conservation.

I was born and raised in Muscatine and I now live in Cedar Rapids. My fiancé and I own a cabin on the backwaters of the Mississippi so I spend a lot of my free time boating, paddling, fishing, and birdwatching. I also enjoy natural crafting, camping, bicycling, and hiking. You can almost always catch me outside doing something!

I am incredibly excited to be a part of the BCC team and look forward to meeting more people in the community!

Meet the Naturalist Intern: *By Cara Harrill, Naturalist Intern*

Hello! My name is Cara Harrill, and I was the Naturalist Intern for Benton County Conservation this fall. At a young age, I fell in love with the outdoors. I've been fishing for as long as I can remember. I first went deer hunting with my dad when I was 12; since then, I've always known I wanted to work in the outdoors.

After graduating high school, I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do for a career. I looked at a few different programs but ultimately decided on Natural Resources Management. Once I started, I knew it was something I was passionate about. During my time at Hawkeye Community College, I found great interest in aquatics, woodland management, and prairie restoration. I graduated in May of 2021 with my Associates Degree in Natural Resources Management and with a Natural Resources Aide Certificate.

For the past three summers I've worked for Black Hawk County Conservation at Hickory Hills Park as a seasonal worker. While working there, I gained a great amount of experience.

In my free time I enjoy hunting, fishing, being outdoors, and spending time with family, friends, and my dog. I'm originally from La Porte City but now live south of Dysart with my boyfriend on his family farm. While working for Benton County this fall, I'm excited to gain more knowledge about conservation, and to experience new things!



Figure 18: Naturalist Intern Cara Harrill with her dog, Benny.

“Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.” ~ Aldo Leopold

Coloring Page: *by Aaron Askelson*



**Color in the
American
Toad**

***Anaxyrus
americanus***

Conservation Board Members

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member
Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Member
Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Member
Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member
Becky VanWey: Brandon, Chair

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month at 5:00 pm at the Nature Center. Meetings are open to the public.

Find us online at:
www.bentoncountyiowa.org or
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Iowa's County Conservation System

There's no better way to celebrate Iowa's unique 99 County Conservation System! Each week we will focus on just one of the 99 Counties and will explore some of the opportunities they provide.

Follow the My County Parks Facebook page to participate in this great virtual adventure!

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