

# The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 28 Fall 2022

## Severe Summer Storms *by Layla Hagen, East Unit Ranger*

I think it's safe to say that most Iowans are on high alert for storms after experiencing the 2020 Derecho. Once someone says there's a chance for "heavy winds" or you see that colorful cell pop up on the radar, you start contacting family and friends to tell them to be prepared. Some of you go out to make sure your bird feeders and patio furniture are moved to the garage. Then, you sit and wait while the sky changes color and you listen for the stillness in the air before the storm hits.

I was off work on Tuesday, July 5, 2022, after the long holiday weekend. Our work-based group chat started to send out a few messages about the possibility for some nasty storms in the afternoon so I made sure to have a flashlight and a candle ready. Usually I'm a little more prepared when I know a storm is coming, but I was exhausted from the weekend and thought it would be less severe than they were expecting.

Around 9:00 PM, the sky went from a dull gray-blue to a rich, foamy, deep blue. It was completely quiet before the straight-line wind started to tear through Wildcat Bluff. My household and I retreated to the basement as the power went out and sat in the basement for just a few minutes before we could hear cars honking between the rolling thunder. We looked out the windows to make sure the heaviest of the storm had passed and you could already tell that there were going to be a lot of down trees based on how my front yard looked.

We could see headlights bouncing off the park shop where the honking was coming from. We decided that the storm looked like it had switched to heavy rain with less severe wind so we grabbed a couple of flashlights and ran to the shop. Three camper's vehicles had tried to exit the campground but were blocked in due to a large tree blocking the entrance. I could see that one camper trailer was turned on its side from the wind but the other campers told me they didn't think that anyone was in the tipped camper.

The campground and my house were without power so I told the three couples to go into my basement until the storm passed and we knew the extent of the damage. Once I was able to radio in to Benton County dispatch to explain the current situation, we ran down to the tipped camper to make sure that no one was trapped inside. Once we were sure it was clear, we ran back up to the house basement to wait for the rest of the storm to pass with the campers. About an hour after the storm began, all individuals had left the campground. With not having power and not being able to access the storm damage at night, I left for the night and returned to the campground the next morning.

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Electronic versions and email sign up are available at our website

[www.bentoncountyiowa.org](http://www.bentoncountyiowa.org)



*Figure 1: Large tree blocking entrance of Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area after severe storm*

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# Severe Summer Storms *Continued from previous page*

One of my seasonal staff started picking up several branches and sticks right away in the morning while I walked around and documented the storm damage. There were several large branches down throughout the campground and two full trees down. I knew there would be a lot more damage throughout the disc golf course, but understood the campground was a priority.

After spending a day working on the campground with Benton County Conservation's full time and seasonal staff, the majority of the large cleanup was finished. The next day, we started on the disc golf course and then finished the remaining disc golf course cleanup the next week with a volunteer work day. We had six volunteers come out on the clean-up day and it was extremely hot out. The group worked alongside full time and seasonal staff, moving debris. Having volunteers is always extremely helpful, especially on big projects like this.



*Figure 2: Damage at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area after severe storm*

Wildcat Bluff isn't back to perfect condition, but you wouldn't be able to tell that we had a severe storm just a couple months ago. As full time and seasonal staff move onto other projects, we rely heavily on our main group of disc golf volunteers to clean up the last remaining debris. We are thankful that the storm damage didn't injure any visitors and that everyone who helped with clean up stayed safe during those days. Severe storms seem to be the new norm for Benton County, and our staff is adapting to how we respond to these intense situations. As always, be prepared, have a plan, and stay safe.

## Compass Plant *by Faith Henrichs, Naturalist*



*Figure 3: Compass plant flowering in the prairie*

One of my favorite parts about Iowa prairies is the diversity of blooming flowers. I love to see all of the purples, pinks, and yellows blooming across the open prairie. One of my favorite plants that rises above all other prairie plants (literally speaking) is the compass plant, *Silphium laciniatum*. The compass plant stands around eight feet tall but can grow over twelve feet in height. The plant blooms from June to August and a mature plant can have anywhere between six to twenty yellow flowers that look like sunflowers! The basal leaves have deep lobes and are between twelve to twenty-four inches long, making them one of the largest-leaved plants in the prairie. Their taproot can extend fifteen feet underground, making them drought and burn tolerant and they are able to withstand competition from other plants. Not to mention their very important role of keeping topsoil in place. The seeds are large and flat, with wind being one of their main sources of seed transportation. These plants can live to be up to 100 years old, making large colonies in some areas.

The compass plant is a staple to the tallgrass prairie. Small mammals such as rabbits and ground squirrels eat the seeds. Birds also enjoy the seeds of the compass plant and use the tall stalks as a perch.



# Compass Plant *Continued from previous page*

While sulfur butterflies and monarchs can be seen enjoying the nectar from the flowers, the primary pollinators of the compass plant are long-tongued bees which include bumblebees, miner bees, and leaf-cutting bees. Several species of insects are specialist feeders who only eat compass plants, which includes the uncommon prairie cicada, whose grubs feed on the large taproot, while the Silphium Beetle and its larvae feed on the flower heads and stems. The larvae of a few gall wasp's species feed within the stems, forming galls which aren't visible from the outside.

The compass plant gets its name due to the placement of its leaves. Early settlers would sometimes use this plant to find north-south as that is typically the direction the leaves grow to get maximum exposure to the morning and evening sun and minimal exposure to the hot, drying noon sun. On a hot, summer day, you can put your hands on the sides of the leaves and you may notice that they are cool to the touch! While the leaves typically grow north-south, it isn't always the case. Make sure to double check your *true* compass before following the leaves!



*Figure 4: Compass plant leaves*



*Figure 5 & 6: Compass plant standing proudly in the prairie*

Not only was it sometimes used for orienteering, but Native Americans and settlers have traditionally used the plant for various uses. Sometimes the plant was used as a marker as natives traveled through the prairie. Children would use its resinous sap as a chewing gum. The pine-scented sap was dried then chewed to help clean their teeth and mouth while freshening up their breath. The root of the compass plant can be brewed into a tea for back and chest pain or the plant was burned to inhale the smoke which helped relieve pain from head-colds.

With so many beautiful plants in the prairie, the compass plant is one that truly stands out.

## **Benton County Conservation Foundation Needs You!**

Benton County Conservation Foundation is reestablishing! 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 September 20th at 7PM, at the Nature Center!** Please stop by and learn more about the group. If you have questions, email [foundation@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:foundation@bentoncountyparks.com) or call 319-472-4942



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# Eagle Scout Project: Sunbathing Turtle Docks

by Will Cardo, Troop 55

For my Eagle Scout Project I designed and constructed three sunbathing turtle docks for Benton County Conservation (BCC) to be placed in two of their parks: Rodgers Park and Hannen Lake Park. Twelve workers, including myself, worked a total of 104.4 hours during the planning and execution phases to create the four foot by three-foot sized docks. These three turtle docks will have a positive impact for BCC for several reasons including providing spaces for the turtles to thrive, allowing students on field trips to study and observe reptiles, as well as giving campers and park goers the opportunity to view some fun wildlife.

Editor's note: Reports have come in that turtles are already putting the docks to use! Great job Will and Troop 55 for providing basking habitat for turtles and excellent turtle viewing opportunities for park visitors!



Figure 7: Will Cardo in Ranger Grubic's boat at Hannen Lake, attaching cinder blocks to the bottom of the docks with rope. The cinder blocks will keep the docks in place.



Figure 8: Testing the floatation on two of the three turtle docks in the Rodgers' beach area



Figure 9: Turtle dock at Hannen Lake



Figure 10: Will Cardo - Troop 55

## OCNT Garrison Trailhead

by Cecilia Dirks, Conservation Technician



Figure 11: Old Creamery Nature Trail at the Garrison Trailhead.

The Old Creamery Nature Trail (OCNT) has a new addition this summer! Stop by and fill your water bottle, fix your bike, or secure your bike while you venture around Garrison, which, conveniently, is the halfway point of the trail. The OCNT is 15 miles of limestone trail running from Vinton to Garrison to Dysart.



Figure 12: Water refill station, benches, bike rack, and a fix-your-bike station at Garrison Trailhead.





## Join Benton County Conservation **September 15th, 5-7pm** for the grand opening of the **Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area**

-- Door Prizes -- Food for sale by Beast & Bird --  
-- Samples by Benton County Brewing Company --  
Proceeds go to the Benton County Conservation Foundation

### Schedule:

Open house, food, and samples 5-7pm  
Fen and Wetland Program 6pm



**Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area**  
2053 54th St, Mount Auburn, IA

## Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area Grand Opening!

Did you know that fens are among the most diverse natural ecosystems in Iowa? A single fen contains as many as 75 plant species! 🌻

Join us for the Grand Opening of Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area on September 15th from 5pm-7pm.

Don't miss out on door prizes, BCC led program, food for sale by Beast & Bird and samples from Benton County Brewing Company.

Proceeds will go to Benton County Conservation Foundation.

## Certified Monarch Waystation

**Benton County Conservation Nature Center became a certified Monarch Waystation and your yard could be certified, too!**

Monarch Waystations are places that provide necessary resources monarch butterflies. Without milkweed plants throughout the spring and summer, monarchs would not be able to produce the successive generations for migration each fall. Without nectar from flowers, these fall migratory monarch butterflies would be unable to make their long journey to overwintering grounds in Mexico!

Impress your neighbors by certifying your yard. All you need is habitat, no matter how big. Visit: <https://monarchwatch.org/waystations/> to learn more!

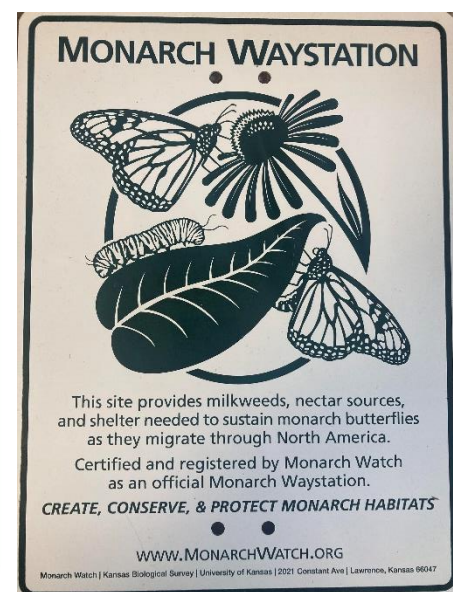


Figure 13: Monarch Waystation sign from monarchwatch.org

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# Hackleback

By Zach Parmater, Conservation Technician



Figure 14: Shovelnose sturgeon

The hackleback, more commonly known as the shovelnose sturgeon is North America's smallest and most abundant species of freshwater sturgeon due to the fact that the Shovelnose seems to be minimally affected by turbidity. Too much turbidity or dirty water is unfortunately more common than not in North American waters. The shovelnose cruises the bottom of our river systems feeding largely on insect larvae, crustaceans, worms, and small fish. Anglers using worms as bait can catch them if fishing in areas with sand or rock bottoms and swiftly moving waters. The state of Iowa does not have a length limit or catch limit for the shovelnose sturgeon in the river systems that flow through Benton County.



Figure 15: Shovelnose sturgeon caught on the Cedar River by Zach Parmater

When trying to distinguish the difference between the shovelnose sturgeon from other endangered species of sturgeon, there are a few characteristics to look for. The shovelnose sturgeon has a flattened, shovel-shaped snout. Shovelnose also have a small opening above and slightly behind the eye which distinguishes it from the lake sturgeon. Their nostril opening closest to the eye is larger than the eye. The upper lobe of the tail fin has a long, slender filament however this can be broken off in adults. The barbels on the shovelnose sturgeon are fringed and are roughly the same length, whereas the endangered species pallid sturgeon's inner barbels are about half as long as the outer barbels. The pallid sturgeon's head and snout are considerably longer than that of the shovelnose. Range is another important way to help with distinguishing species.

If one is interested in angling for the shovelnose in Benton county, the Cedar River is your best bet. Having one of these fish in your hands is quite interesting. As always it is the angler's responsibility to know local fish and game regulations. To learn more about Iowa fishing regulations, visit: [Iowa DNR 2022 Fishing Regulations](#) If you happen to catch one of these amazing fish please share to [Benton County Conservation Facebook page](#).

Sources: (Pflieger 1997). Held, J.W. 1969. Froese, Rainer; Pauly, Daniel (eds.) (2006). Iowadnr.gov

## Don't Call Me a Stinkpot!

by Aaron Askelson, Naturalist

We have a new addition to our animal family at the Nature Center, a musk turtle. Musk turtles are an aquatic species of turtle found on the eastern side of the state. Musk turtles are often there but rarely seen. They are solitary and somewhat nocturnal. They walk along the bottom of the stream bed foraging for food. They are looking for invertebrates that live on the stream bed.



Figure 16: Musk turtle in its new tank



# Don't Call Me a Stinkpot! *Continued from previous page*

Crayfish, aquatic insects, and plants are mainstays of their diet. They are not known to be the best swimmers and prefer to lumber along the bottom of slow-moving creeks, ponds or backwaters. They have a ridge or keel down the center of its shell. The top part of their shell is known as the carapace. They have a very large head for the overall size of the turtle making it look very unique.



Figure 17: Musk turtle showing off its carapace (shell)

Musk or stinkpot turtles got their name from their ability to “musk” or make a bad smell when they feel threatened or are in danger. The musk excretes from a small gland on their underside of their body. Since they are very reclusive, encounters with people are fairly rare.

Musk turtles hatch out of a soft egg shell that has been buried by a female turtle. Females reach sexual maturity at the age of 4 years where males become mature at around 2 years of age. Females of the species tend to be larger than the males. Loss of habitat and egg predation are two of the biggest problems facing musk turtles. With fewer quality wetland areas, musk turtle populations have been on the decline.

During the winter months they hibernate underwater under logs, burying themselves in mud or even beneath muskrat lodges.

Our musk turtle is very shy and takes a while to come completely out of his shell and move around. So far, we have used him for several small in person programs. The turtle has been very hesitant to come out of his shell. So, if you are in the area stop by and see our new addition, by the way it is ok to call him “Stinkpot” as long as you say it nice.

**HANNEN LAKE PARK**  
**CHILI**  
**COOK-OFF**  
**10.01.2022**



**\$20**  
PER RECIPE  
ENTRANCE  
(LIMIT 1 PER  
PERSON)

Hannen Lake Park -White Oak Shelter  
1949 Benton Iowa Rd., Blairstown, IA

**Chili cook-off registration: 11:30 AM-12:00 PM**  
**Judging will be held at 2:00 PM**

**Grand prizes for 1st, 2nd & 3rd place include:**  
**2 weeks of camping**  
**Hannen Lake Cedar Cabin weekend getaway**  
**1 weekend of camping**

**Don't want to compete?**  
**Enjoy chili and live music provided by Scott, Annette & George**  
**from 12:00-3:00PM for free will donation**

**Win a Yeti Cooler!**  
**\$10 raffle tickets available day of, cash only**  
**Need not be present to win**

**RODGERS PARK**  
**FALL FAMILY FEST**



**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14TH -**  
**6:00PM - MAKE YOUR OWN CAMPFIRE DESSERTS**  
**7:00PM - PARTICIPANTS WILL HEAD TO THE TRAILS AND**  
**DO A NIGHT HIKE WITH GLOW STICKS AND LIGHTED**  
**PUMPKINS GUIDING THE WAY.**



**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15TH -**  
**12:00-3:00PM - SCARECROW BUILD**  
**3:30PM - SCARECROW CONTEST/JUDGING**  
**\*REGISTERED CAMPERS ONLY**  
**5:00-6:15PM - GATES CLOSE - NO CAMPGROUND**  
**TRAFFIC PERMITTED DURING THIS TIME**  
**5:30-6:15 TRICK-OR-TREATING**



## ***Conservation Board Members***

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

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month at the Nature Center. Check

[www.bentoncountyiowa.org](http://www.bentoncountyiowa.org) for times.

Meetings are open to the public.

**Find us online at:**

[www.bentoncountyiowa.org](http://www.bentoncountyiowa.org) or

[www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)

**Find us on Facebook: Benton County Conservation**

## ***Conservation Staff***

Shelby Williams	Director
Aaron Askelson	Interpretive Naturalist
Faith Henrichs	Interpretive Naturalist
Ed Hach	North Unit Park Ranger
Layla Hagen	East Unit Park Ranger
Camryn Grubic	South Unit Park Ranger
Zach Parmater	Conservation Tech/Ranger
Cecilia Dirks	Conservation Tech

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

**Benton County Conservation**

5718 20th Ave. Dr., Vinton, IA 52349 (319)-472-4942



## **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!

## **Newsletter Update:**

**If you wish to continue to receive a mailed paper copy of this newsletter, please contact our office via phone or email to remain on the paper mailing list.**

Newsletters can be found online at: [www.bentoncountyiowa.gov](http://www.bentoncountyiowa.gov) under conservation department - newsletters tab.

We will email newsletters from now on, sign up at: [www.bentoncountyiowa.gov](http://www.bentoncountyiowa.gov) under conservation department - newsletters tab or [click here](#).



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## **Calendar of Events Summer 2022**

All programs are FREE of charge unless a price is listed.

Registration is required unless otherwise stated and masks are strongly encouraged when indoors.

### **Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area Grand Opening**

**September 15th, 5:00PM - 7:00PM - 2053 54th St, Mt Auburn, IA**

Join us to celebrate the grand opening of one of Benton County Conservations newest and most unique property, Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area. Door prizes, food for sale by Beast & Bird, and beer samples by Benton County Brewing Company, with proceeds going to Benton County Conservation Foundation. At 6:00pm there will be a fen and wetland program. No registration required.

### **Family Fun Bike Ride on the Cedar Valley Nature Trail**

**September 24th, 10:00AM - 2:00PM - \$6 per family**

Benton County Naturalist Faith Henrichs and Buchanan County Naturalist Sondra Cabell are joining forces to provide the community with this family orientated bike ride on the Cedar Valley Bike Trail. Bike riders will meet at the Brandon city park (601 Lime Street, Brandon) by 10 am. Drop the bikes and family at the shelter, and have a family member drive your vehicle to Urbana. A shuttle will be available to return riders to Brandon to start the ride. This rail-to-trail ride means only very gradual climbs and descents, making the route a relatively easy 9 miles of mostly crushed limestone. Tree cover along the trail provides shade for much of the route. There are many gravel road crossings along the trail, and we will have volunteers stationed at some to offer water and assistance if needed. Upon reaching the Urbana city park, you are invited to partake in a grilled lunch provided by VFW post 8884 (free will offer) from 11:30 am – 2 pm. This ride is geared for families, but the 9 mile ride may be challenging for younger bikers not used to distance riding. Please use your discretion. To break up the ride and add some fun, participants will be involved in a scavenger hunt using their phone cameras. Dressing in layers with a small backpack to carry peeled items, water and snacks, sunscreen and insect repellent is recommended. Pre-registration is required at [www.buchanancountyparks.com](http://www.buchanancountyparks.com) under the Public Events Tab.

### **Hannen Lake Park Chili Cook-off**

**October 1st, 11:30pm - 3:00pm at Hannen Lake Park**

**White Oak Shelter 1949 Benton Iowa Rd., Blairstown, IA**

Join us for some Hannen Lake Park fall fun with delicious chili, live music and a Yeti cooler raffle! Chili cook-off registration is from 11:30 AM-12:00 PM, with \$20 per recipe entrance (limit one per person). Judging will be held at 2:00PM. Grand prizes for 1st, 2nd & 3rd place include: 2 weeks of camping, Hannen Lake Cedar Cabin weekend getaway, and 1 weekend of camping. Don't want to compete? Enjoy chili and live music provided by Scott, Annette & George from 12:00-3:00PM for free will donation. Win a Yeti Cooler! \$10 raffle tickets available day of, cash only. Need not be present to win. Proceeds will go towards installation of hydrants and a swing set in the west campground area.

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**Rodgers Park Fall Family Fest****Friday, October 14th, 6:00pm at Rodgers Park Enclosed Shelter**

Kick off the fun fall weekend with delicious campfire desserts and a guided night hike at Rodgers Park! The fun begins at 6:00pm with campfire desserts. At 7:00pm, participants will head to the trails and do a night hike in the dark, with glow sticks and lighted pumpkins guiding the way. Registration is encouraged by calling 319-472-4942 or email [info@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:info@bentoncountyparks.com)

**Rodgers Park Fall Family Fest****Saturday, October 15th, 12:00pm - 6:15pm at Rodgers Park Campground**

Let the fun fall weekend continue by decorating your own scarecrow at your campsite! BCC will provide a scarecrow base while supplies last, or bring your own scarecrow! Campers can have up to three scarecrows at one site. Scarecrow stuffing will be provided, but campers should bring their own scarecrow decorating materials. Scarecrow decorating is from 12pm-3pm with judging at 3:30pm. Categories are as followed: scariest, cutest, and BCC outdoor recreation theme. The scarecrow contest is for registered campers ONLY.

At 5:30, bring the kids dressed in their best costume for trick-or-treating at the campground, ending at 6:15. Everyone is welcome! From 5:00-6:15pm, park roads are closed to traffic. Save the date and follow us on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/bentoncountyparks/> to keep up-to-date with this event!

**Grapevine Basket Weaving****October 18th, 6:00PM - 7:30PM at Benton County Nature Center - \$10 per basket**

Come learn the lost art of natural basket weaving! Participants will be able to make their own basket using wild grapevine. Limit one basket per participant. \$10 per person. Limited space. Registration is required by October 11th by visiting:

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton/Park/Benton-County-Nature-Center/Events/21399/Grapevine-Basket-Weaving.aspx>

**Grapevine Wreath Making****November 16th, 6:00PM - 7:30PM at Benton County Nature Center - \$5 per wreath**

Come out to the Nature Center and enjoy the art of wreath making. We will be making grapevine wreaths and decorating them for the holidays. No skills necessary, just a little imagination. If you have anything you would like to use to personalize your wreath feel free to bring it. Cost is \$5 per wreath. Please bring cash or check. Register November 9th by calling 319-472-4942 or emailing [info@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:info@bentoncountyparks.com)

**Woodburning Coasters & Ornaments****Wednesday, December 7th, 6:00PM - 7:30PM at Benton County Nature Center; \$5 per item**

Join us at the Nature Center to wood burn drink coasters and ornaments with a nature theme. This beautifully simple project is designed for all abilities. Some of the patterns might be animal tracks, mushrooms, or feathers — you decide! Cost is \$5 per person (Includes one coaster or one ornament), plus \$5 for each additional item made. Please register for the class by November 30th by calling 319-472-4942 or emailing [info@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:info@bentoncountyparks.com)



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**Building Better Birders Workshop - Introduction to Birding**

**January 20th, 2023 9:00AM - 3:00PM at Benton County Nature Center; \$10 per person**

Benton County Conservation is hosting a Building Better Birders Workshop where bird watchers, “birders,” will learn the basics about birding and have a chance to put their knowledge into practice. This workshop is the first of three Building Better Workshops around Benton County. To learn more about other workshops, visit: <https://buildingbetterbirders.com>.

Registration is required by visiting:

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton/Park/Benton-County-Nature-Center/Events/21468/Building-Better-Birders-Workshop.aspx>

*Come for the whole workshop, or just a portion!*

9:00-9:15 Introductions

9:15-10:45 Introduction to bird ID (passerines) presentation

10:45-11:00 Break and snack

11:00-12:30 Birding hike (if there's 4+ inches of snow, we will snowshoe)

12:30-1:15 Lunch break on own

1:15-1:45 Backyard Bird Count presentation

1:45-2:45 Build your own bird feeder

2:45-3:00 Wrap up and questions

Building Better Birders Workshop will be conducted by Kelly McKay (BioEco Research and Monitoring Center), with assistance from Mark Roberts (Clinton County Conservation), Brian Ritter & James Wiebler (Nahant Marsh Ed. Center). Funding for this workshop was provided by the Resource Enhancement and Protection – Conservation Education Program (REAP-CEP).