

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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Inside this Issue

Conservation is Essential
– For Our Economy, Our
Health, and Our Future
Pages 1-2

Rooted in the Prairie: Ada
Hayden's Lasting Legacy
Page 3-4

The Fish of Ten
Thousands Casts
Page 4-5

Leave the Debris
Page 5-6

Blue Spotted Sallys
Page 6-7

Calendar of Events
Insert

Electronic versions and email
sign up are available at our
website
www.bentoncountyyia.gov



Conservation is Essential – For Our Economy, Our Health, and Our Future

By Shelby Williams
Director

When budget season rolls around, it's not uncommon to hear that conservation will be "getting the axe." Parks and natural areas are sometimes viewed as extras, something nice to have, but not essential. The reality is, nothing could be further from the truth.

Outdoor recreation is one of Iowa's strongest economic engines. A recent study shows that outdoor recreation contributes **\$4.6 billion to Iowa's GDP** and generates over **\$8 billion in total economic output**. It supports **60,000 jobs** and provides **\$2.1 billion in earnings** for Iowa families.

Right here in Benton County, our parks and natural areas are part of this statewide success story. Iowa county parks system generates **\$3.07 billion annually**, with county parks contributing a third of that. Creating an impressive return of investment: **for every \$1 invested in county conservation, the economy receives \$10 in return**. That's one of the best returns on investment anywhere in public service.

But conservation is not just about dollars—it's about people.



Figure 1: Youth enjoying an evening of firefly catching at Firefly Festival 2025

Local organizations like the **Benton County Suicide Prevention Coalition** and the **Benton County Critical Incident Stress Management Team** have spoken out strongly in support of conservation. Why? Because access to nature is proven to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and even suicidality. With nearly 79% of Benton County residents naming mental health as their top health concern, this connection cannot be ignored.

For first responders in our community, police officers, EMTs, and firefighters, exposure to traumatic events takes a heavy toll. Benton County's CISM Team reports that outdoor recreation and green space are among the most effective coping and resilience tools. Parks are not luxuries for them, they are lifelines.

Conservation is Essential – For Our Economy, Our Health, and Our Future

Continued from previous page



Figure 2: Paddlers enjoying the Cedar River in Benton County

Even more broadly, research shows that time outdoors lowers blood pressure, reduces obesity, and strengthens social connections. If access to green space increased by just 10% across Iowa, the state could save **\$80 million in healthcare costs annually**, including \$19 million in Medicaid spending.

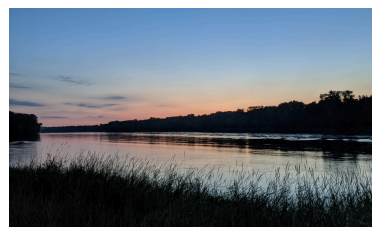
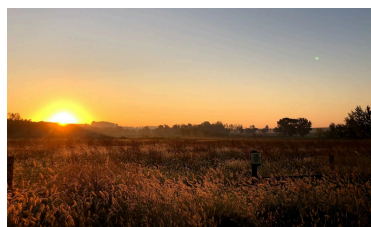
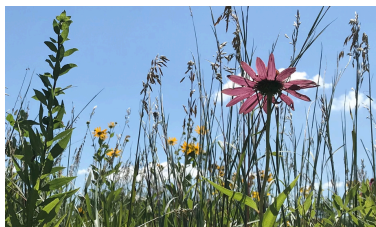
Conservation also protects what we can't replace, our soil, water, and wildlife. These natural resources are worth tens of thousands of dollars per acre, from preventing erosion to reducing flood risk to cleaning the air we breathe. In a time when every dollar matters, investing in conservation is one of the smartest financial decisions we can make.

Advocating for conservation has always been part of our work, but it is becoming more important than ever. If the value of parks is ever

questioned, the answer is simple: close the gates for a day. The impact would be immediate, visible, and deeply felt.

Conservation is not where the axe should fall. It is where investment should begin.

*Stats in this article retrieved from: *"The Economic Impact of Recreation in Iowa"* Prepared for Iowa's County Conservation System by Scioto Analysis.



What You Can Do to Support Conservation

- **Visit your local parks** – Use them, enjoy them, and let others see their value.
- **Share your story** – Tell friends, neighbors, and decision-makers why Benton County's parks matter to you.
- **Advocate** – Contact local and state leaders to remind them that conservation is both an economic driver and a community lifeline.
- **Stay informed** – Follow Benton County Conservation for updates and opportunities to get involved.
- **Be a voice for nature** – Our parks cannot speak for themselves. They rely on all of us.
- **Get involved locally** – Join the Benton County Conservation Foundation by volunteering, getting involved with meetings, fundraising, or donating.



Rooted in the Prairie: Ada Hayden's Lasting Legacy

By Faith Hunt
Naturalist

At the beginning of August, I attended a statewide Naturalist workshop in the West Okoboji area. We spent a better part of day two visiting significant geological features that are unique to that area. We visited Iowa's largest kettlehole (or prairie pothole), an esker (long narrow ridge created when a glacier left behind water and sediment as it retreated), a kame (hills made of glacial till that accumulate in a low spot as the glacier melted), a fen with flarks (a flark is a peat moss depression, sometimes filled with water), and visited Cayler Prairie State Preserve, a 545-ace prairie that was designated as a National Natural Landmark in 1966 and later as a state preserve in 1971.



Figure 3 & 4: left to right - Naturalist Faith feeling the peat moss in a flark & Kettlehole in Dickinson County, Iowa



Figure 5: Cayler Prairie State Preserve

While these unique land formations were fascinating to explore and learn about, the Cayler Prairie resonated the most with me. As we had time to explore on our own, I used my time to sit in the prairie. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what this land looked like in 1850's, prior to permanent European settlement. I tried to imagine the vastness with no phone lines, roadways, wind turbines, or crop fields. The wildlife that roamed this land, the sound of the untouched prairie. I imagined what Ada Hayden bore witness to as she roamed our state, seeking out Iowa's land that needed to be preserved.

Hayden contributed much of her life to Iowa's landscape preservation. She collected, photographed, observed, and educated about our native landscapes for decades. Hayden first earned her B.S. in Botany from Iowa State College in 1908, then obtained an M.S. in Botany from Washington University in St. Louis in 1910 before returning to Iowa State to pursue her Ph.D., which she completed in 1918, becoming the first woman and the fourth person to earn a doctorate there at the time.

Hayden then served as curator of the Iowa State University's Herbarium, where she added over 30,000 plant specimens, with details such as flower color, habitat, and ecology. During this same workshop, we visited Lakeside Labs, where they house a rather large herbarium that includes over 3,280 permanent slides, some of which were curated by Ada Hayden herself. It was remarkable to be touching and viewing the same blotting paper as Ada Hayden. I felt a little star struck.

She had a deep passion for plants, particularly prairies. In the 1940's, Hayden documented more than 100 tracts of native prairie, identifying 32 as potential preserves to be purchased by the State, one of which was that very prairie that I walked that day. Hayden published 29 academic papers, some of which was the first formal recognition of the need to protect

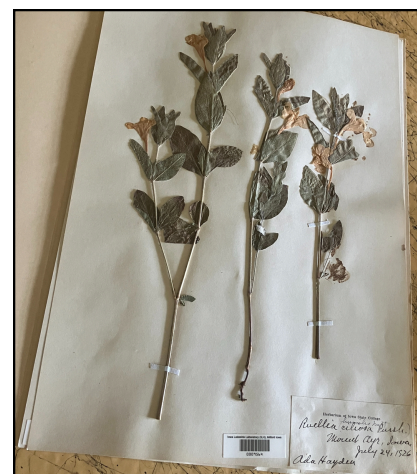


Figure 6: Wild petunia preserved by Ada Hayden

Rooted in the Prairie: Ada Hayden's Lasting Legacy

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Iowa's rapidly vanishing native prairie, describing the "sea-like expanse" of grasses that once dominated the State's landscape.

To understand Ada's urgent need to advocate for our natural landscapes, we must first understand the rapid alterations happening at that time. In 1846, the original land survey of Iowa identified 23.3 million acres of prairie in the State. By the 1930s, less than 30,000 acres remained. Today, less than 0.1% of the original tallgrass prairie that once covered 70–85% of the state remains. The remaining remnant prairies exist in scattered, small pockets, typically areas that were not accessible to the plow or suitable for development. Iowa is the most altered landscape in the nation, with less than 5% of its original landscape unaltered. The areas that Ada Hayden advocated so hard for, barely remain.



*Figure 7: Ada Hayden
(Credit: Iowa Natural
Heritage Foundation)*

In 1950, Ada Hayden died of cancer at age 65. Hayden's legacy continued to live on; she was inducted into the Iowa Conservation Hall of Fame in 1967, and in 2007 she was honored in Iowa Women's Hall of Fame. In 1988 the herbarium on Iowa State's campus that she dedicated so much of her time curating, was named in her honor - The Ada Hayden Herbarium. Today, the Herbarium "has the largest collection of Iowa plants and fungi, containing over 660,000 specimens of vascular plants, bryophytes, fungi, and lichens." A legacy left behind by a woman who saw the need for action in our state and acted for the betterment of our natural heritage. Due in part to Ada Hayden's advocacy and efforts, prairies across the state are still being preserved.

The Fish of Ten Thousands Casts

By Ethan Hennings
Conservation Technician

Muskellunge, otherwise known as muskie, are a species of predatory freshwater fish that can be found native in many lakes and rivers in the Great Lakes region and Canada, as well as being stocked in many bodies of water by state programs, such as Iowa. The Iowa DNR runs an extensive stocking program, where they stock over a dozen of Iowa's largest lakes. Some of the lakes include East and West Okoboji, Clear Lake, Pleasant Creek Lake, Brushy Creek Lake, and many more. Muskie also find their way into river systems in Iowa and can be found at low densities in the Des Moines River, Shell Rock River, Mississippi River and Little Sioux River.

The reason our state has such a dedicated stocking program is because muskie are a beloved sport fish in much of the fishing community. Females of the species grow bigger than males, averaging mid 30's to mid 40's in lengths, and fish reaching 50 plus inches are possible, too. They have earned themselves the nickname "the fish of ten thousand casts" due to their elusiveness and difficulty to catch. They are ambush predators that will lie in wait amongst weed lines and rocky structures for prey items to pass them by.



*Figure 8: Conservation Tech
Ethan holding a muskellunge*

The Fish of Ten Thousands Casts

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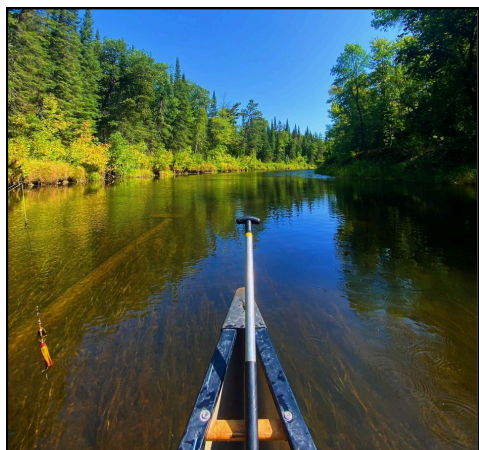


Figure 9: View from a canoe in Northern Minnesota

Anglers who wish to pursue muskie need to be prepared with the proper tackle and equipment in order to have the best chances of safely landing a fish. For the rod and reel, a heavy baitcasting rod around 7ft will be able to handle the largest of muskies while still leaving you some versatility for different lures and tactics. The majority of anglers prefer baitcasters for targeting muskie because of their accuracy and power while throwing larger lures. Braided line weighted 50lbs or greater will be plenty strong, however, muskie have sharp teeth and can cut the line so anglers should tie on a strong nylon or braided steel leader. Good luck fishing! Hopefully it won't take 10,000 casts!



Leave the Debris

By Aubrey Cady
Naturalist Intern

As you begin to prep your lawn and gardens for winter, you can save time and take a few simple steps to help our local insects and animals make it through the winter. When we rake our leaves or clean out our gardens, we are removing very important habitats that many insects use throughout the cold winter months. Not only do insects benefit from leaving your yard a little more natural, but your old produce and green waste will welcome more diverse animals to your yard. To help our local bird populations during the cold month, instead of cutting back your plants, leave your seed heads to provide a great natural food source. By making these efforts to make a more ideal habitat in your yard, you will be able to see a more diverse population of our native species.



Figure 10: Local yard full of fall leaves



Figure 11: Polyphemus moth cocoon wrapped in dried oak leaves

When talking about leaving the leaves, it's as simple as it sounds: no need to pick up the rake. There are so many benefits to leaving your plant debris where it falls. Not only do you benefit, but plants, animals, and insects in your yard will too. When you have a layer of dead leaves in your yard, it acts as a natural mulch, improving soil health by reintroducing nutrients back into the soil as the leaves break down. The blanket of leaves will also provide insulation and help suppress weeds for the coming spring. Furthering the idea of having an easy cleanup this fall, leaving your dead plants in your garden can also promote a healthy ecosystem within your yard and community. Just by leaving the remaining produce and greenery planted right in your garden it can have a big

impact. Insects need a place to go during the winter months that can keep them out of the elements.

Leave the Debris

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These places can be dried leaves, decaying organic material, and stocks of dead plants. Ladybugs hibernate in leaf litter and will eat aphids, helping to keep the aphid population down and suppress the damage that aphids can cause to your plants. Another insect that will take advantage of the plant debris are moths by making their cocoons for the winter inside curled up dried leaves before emerging in the spring.

The breakdown of the plants being left in your garden will supply much needed nutrients for the soil in your garden. As the organic material decomposes, it supplies nitrogen, phosphorus, increased water retention, and other valuable nutrients that mitigate the need for chemical fertilizers. Supporting this ecosystem in your own backyard will help build up the populations of insects and animals needed to help keep pest populations down. You can even get ahead on some spring planting by planting seeds that need to freeze before they can germinate. When the seed needs to go through a freeze, it is called cold stratification. Lots of beautiful native Iowa plants need to go through stratification, including milkweed, coneflower, poppy mallow, and many others. By adding these native plants, you will continue to promote biodiversity in your yard by bringing in more pollinators, birds, and other wildlife to enjoy. These native plants are also low maintenance and do a great job at helping with flooding due to their deep root systems. There are many simple actions that can be taken to support our native wildlife this winter and for winters to come.



Figure 12: Landscape grass left in the fall for local wildlife



Figure 13: Showy goldenrod with a dusting of snow

So this fall, consider putting down the rake and letting nature do the work. By leaving leaves, seed heads, and plant stalks in place, you're supporting pollinators, birds, soil health, and the broader ecosystem in our community. Small changes in how we care for our yards can make a big difference to the environment, especially during the harsh winter months. As you prepare for the coming season, be mindful of who might be resting on your leaves for the cold months ahead.

**DO YOU USE THE CEDAR RIVER?
WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**
**PLEASE FILL OUT THIS SHORT
SURVEY! YOUR INSIGHTS WILL HELP
WITH FUTURE PALNNING!**

We invite feedback from anyone who enjoys the Cedar River, whether through paddling, fishing, floating, or simply appreciating its presence.

SCAN HERE

Vinton Parks & Recreation **WINSTON COUNTY**

Blue Spotted Sallys

By Aaron Askelson
Naturalist

Have you ever wanted to “discover” something on your own? Something that not many people have ever found. For me that would be seeing a blue spotted salamander in the wild. I am not sure if I will ever get the chance but I have my eye out for one of them and will celebrate when it happens. The reason for my joy will be because the blue spotted salamander is on Iowa’s endangered species list. This salamander has only been reported to be found in two counties in Iowa: Black Hawk and Linn. This small area in eastern Iowa overlaps with a small corner of northeastern

Blue Spotted Sallys

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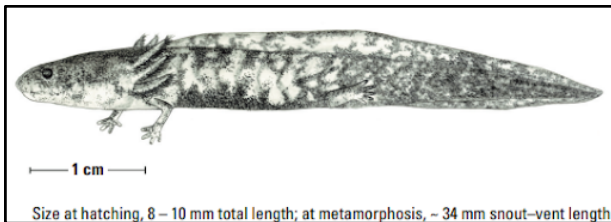
Benton County so a boy can dream that we might find one in Benton County one day.

Salamanders are an amphibian that doesn't get a lot of attention in Iowa. They are very reclusive and do not move around a lot, making them hard to find. Their lifestyle lends them to spending a good portion of their adult life burrowing under rotten logs and areas with leaf litter and moisture, being quiet and eating bugs. Frogs and toads are certainly more common and can usually be heard and seen at any pond, stream, river, or lake.

Amphibians are unique from other vertebrates due to their metamorphosis: they spend the beginning of their lives in water and then spend their adult life on land with the exception of the mudpuppy salamander that lives its adult life in the water. All amphibians start their life cycle in the water as soft eggs. Blue spotted salamander eggs are usually laid in small clumps of 7 to 40 eggs on underwater vegetation or submerged sticks. Most eggs are laid in temporary pools or ponds without large fish populations. Eggs are laid in the spring and the salamander larva grows all summer until metamorphosis occurs in fall and they emerge from the water.



Figure 14: Adult blue spotted salamander



Size at hatching, 8 – 10 mm total length; at metamorphosis, – 34 mm snout-vent length

Figure 15: Larval stage of a blue spotted salamander

During metamorphosis their limbs continue to grow larger and more developed and they lose their external gills. This begins their adult life on land. They will forage for earthworms and other invertebrates as adults, rarely coming out into the open and being mostly nocturnal makes them even more elusive.

If you happen to come across one please take a photo and contact us at the Nature Center. We would love to hear about it! To learn more about the blue spotted salamander and paint a picture of one of these adorable endangered critters, I will be teaching a painting class at the Benton County Nature Center on November 1st at 10am. To register go to: ['Iowa's Threatened and Endangered' Painting Class Tickets, Sat, Nov 1, 2025 at 10:00 AM | Eventbrite](#). This program is sponsored in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, Arts Midwest, the Charles and Helen Yundt Charitable Foundation and the Friends of the Vinton Public Library.



BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION IS LOOKING FOR A NEW VOLUNTEER BOARD MEMBER!

The Conservation Board helps guide the future of our parks, trails, wildlife areas, and conservation programs. It's a chance to lend your voice, your ideas, and your passion for nature right here in Benton County.

Meetings are generally the second Monday of each month at 5:30pm at the Benton County Nature Center, though location and time can change and will be posted!

If you—or someone you know—is conservation-minded and would be a great fit, we'd love to hear from you! Applications are open now for a January appointment.

Apply online at <https://www.bentoncountyiowa.gov/conservation/>

Conservation Board Members

Becky VanWey: Vinton, Chair

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member

Samantha Hunter: Mount Auburn, Member

Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Member

Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month. Check www.bentoncountya.gov For times and locations. Meetings are open to the public.

Find us online at:

www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/

or www.mycountyparks.com

Find us on [Facebook](#): @bentoncountyparks

To donate visit

<https://www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/donate/>

Conservation Staff

Aaron Askelson, Interpretive Naturalist

Cecilia Dirks, Office Coordinator

Camryn Grubic, South Unit Ranger

Ed Hach, North Unit Ranger

Cara Harrill, Conservation Tech

Ethan Hennings, Conservation Tech

Faith Hunt, Interpretive Naturalist

Zach Parmater, Conservation Tech/Ranger

Will Souer, East Unit Ranger

Shelby Williams, Director

Integrated Roadside Management

Eric Schares, Roadside Manager & Weed Commissioner

Sam Jacobs, Roadside Tech



Calendar of Events Summer 2025

Rodgers Fall Family Fest

September 26th & 27th, at Rodgers Park (2113 57th St Trail, Vinton, IA)

On Friday, join us for Rodgers Fall Family Fest at Rodgers Park. Meet BCC at the enclosed shelter for s'mores over the campfire and yard games set up for all ages starting at **6:30pm**. A self-led moonlight scavenger hunt on the trail starts at **7:00pm**. Bring your own flashlight! No registration required.



On Saturday, Trick-or-Treating will be from **6:30pm-7:30pm** at the campground. Traffic will be restricted to lower drive only, while park goers can take note of their favorite decorated site and vote for them at the host site! The winner will be announced shortly after 7:30. Prizes are the following: 1st place: 3-night camping certificate, 2nd place: 2-night camping certificate, 3rd place: 1-night camping certificate. Traffic at the campground will be reopened once trick-or-treating has ceased. Call Ranger Hach at 319-560-9803 with questions about this event. No registration required.



Nature at Night

October 6th, 7pm at Benton County Nature Center

Bats, owls, raccoons, oh my! Join our Naturalists for a short program about nocturnal animals in Iowa then take a *quiet leisure* hike under the full moon to call for owls! After our short hike, enjoy s'mores around the campfire! Registration is required by visiting mycountyparks.com.

Hannen Lake Chili Cook-off

October 11th, 12-2:30pm at Hannen Lake Park - White Oak Shelter

Bring your best chili to enter into the contest, or come and enjoy all the delicious chili presented! Enter your favorite chili recipe in one of three categories: smoked, classic, and white. Chili registration is at 11:30am. Call Ranger Grubic at 319-560-9804 with questions about this event.



Hosted by the Benton County Conservation Foundation.

Flora, Fauna & Females: Women's Camp Out

October 18-19th, at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (3150 57th St Trail, Center Point, IA 52213)

Come join us for a night under the stars and make new gal pals! This overnight adventure is all about forging fresh friendships and strengthening the bonds you already have. The Campout begins Saturday at 10:30am at The Den - Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area and concludes on Sunday at 10am. Join us for a range of activities such as nature journaling, hiking, nighttime scavenger hunt, candle painting, Dutch oven cooking, a coffee/tea station, team building exercises, stargazing, and much more! Cost includes food, lodging, and supplies for activities. Space is limited to 8 women. Registration is required by October 6th at 6:00PM at mycountyparks.com. Questions? Call/text Faith at 319-560-9809 or Ceci at 319-560-9806.

Nocturnal Animals

October 23rd, 10am at Benton County Nature Center

Who goes in the night? Join us for a fun and educational morning as we explore the mysterious world of Iowa's nocturnal animals! From owls and bats to raccoons and other nighttime critters, we'll uncover what makes these animals special and how they thrive after dark. Kids will discover how nocturnal animals use their senses, adapt to the night, and play important roles in our local ecosystems. Participants **MUST REGISTER** in advance at mycountyparks.com. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate.



Astronomy at the Dow's Observatory

October 25th, 6:30pm at the Vinton Public Library

Come join us for an exciting evening under the stars at The Eastern Iowa Observatory and Learning Center! The Cedar Amateur Astronomers will be hosting a live astronomy presentation where you can learn about the wonders of the universe. Whether you're a seasoned stargazer or just starting out, this event is perfect for all ages and levels of interest. Don't miss this opportunity to expand your knowledge and gaze at the cosmos with fellow astronomy enthusiasts. We will be leaving from the Vinton Public Library at 6:30pm. We have a limited number of transportation seats available, but participants are welcome to drive their own vehicle to the learning center in Mt. Vernon. This is a partner program with Vinton Library. Register at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/live-astronomy-presentation-with-the-cedar-amateur-astronomers-tickets-1510687660459?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>

Iowa's Threatened & Endangered Painting Class - Blue Spotted Salamander

November 1st, 10am at Benton County Nature Center

Welcome to Iowa's Threatened and Endangered Painting Class! Join us at the Benton County Nature Center for a fun and educational painting session on the blue spotted salamander. Let your creativity flow as we focus on capturing the beauty of Iowa's endangered species on canvas. No prior painting experience is necessary - our talented instructor will guide you every step of the way. Don't miss this unique opportunity to learn about conservation efforts while creating your own masterpiece. This is a partner program with Vinton Library. Registration is required by visiting <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/iowas-threatened-and-endangered-painting-class-tickets-1514078261839?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>



Darkness Hike

November 18th, 6pm at Benton County Nature Center

Under the cover of darkness, see nature in a new light! This will be a dark hike, lit only by the moon and stars! This program will require quiet participation for ample wildlife encounters. Registration is required by visiting mycountyparks.com

Tracks & Scat

November 20, 10am at Rodgers Park - Enclosed Shelter; Geared for PreK - 12th Grade

Get ready to step into the shoes of a wildlife detective! In this fun and educational outdoor program, participants will learn how to identify animal tracks and scat (droppings) to uncover what animals live in the area, what they eat, and how they behave. Through guided exploration and a hands-on "scat" snack activity, kids will develop observational skills and learn about the secret lives of animals. Participants **MUST REGISTER** in advance at mycountyparks.com. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate.



Iowa's Past & Future: Prairie Chickens & Sandhill Cranes

November 20th, 6pm at Vinton Public Library (510 2nd Avenue, Vinton, IA 52349)

Join us for an educational program exploring the rise and fall of two of Iowa's most captivating bird species: the greater prairie chicken and the sandhill crane. Learn about their unique behaviors, the challenges they've faced, and the inspiring conservation efforts that are helping bring them back to our landscape. Get all the details on our upcoming guided bus trip to witness the great sandhill crane migration and experience the thrill of watching prairie chickens on their booming grounds! No registration required.

BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA YOUTH TREK

JULY 23RD - 30TH

MANDATORY TRAINING: JULY 9TH

REGISTRATION OPENS DECEMBER 1ST!

REGISTER AT WWW.MYCOUNTYPARKS.COM/COUNTY/BUCHANAN/EVENTS



Sandhill Crane & Prairie Chicken Bus Tour

March 26th-28th, 2026 to North Platte, Nebraska

Each spring, more than 500,000 sandhill cranes gather in the Platte River valley during their northward migration. Approximately 80% of all sandhill cranes come to the Platte every spring. The concentration of cranes here is the greatest of anywhere in the world.

This 3-day tour will be packed with professional guided tours by Dusty Trails, LLC to view prairie chickens and sandhill cranes, a visit to Omaha's Downtown District, Golden Spike Tour, and more! Trip price includes deluxe motor coach transportation, hotel room, professional guides, entrance fees, two breakfasts, and tips. Participants will need to pay for lunches, dinners, and incidentals on the trip.

Cost per person:

Single occupancy fee \$1,050.00

Double occupancy fee \$900.00

Triple occupancy fee \$850.00

Quad occupancy fee \$750.00



Advance registration by February 12th, 2026 is required by visiting

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Fontana-Park/Events/>