

# THE NATURE OF THINGS

*The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter*

**VOLUME 42 Winter 2025-26**

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[www.bentoncountyia.gov](http://www.bentoncountyia.gov)



## **We Have A New Animal Ambassador!**

By Aaron Askelson  
Naturalist

Our newest animal ambassador is a western hognose snake aka plains hognose snake. We received this male snake from a research project that is being conducted by West Liberty University in West Virginia. He is our second snake at the nature center. We already have a western fox snake who has been an ambassador with us for 13 years. Animal ambassadors help us teach the public about animals that live in Iowa. These ambassadors allow visitors to see first hand what these animals look like, how they move around, and even how they feel. The hognose was bred in captivity and is very used to being handled by humans since he was a part of a research program. This is essential for an animal ambassador. When the public can make a personal connection to a wild animal they can understand the importance of preserving an animal's habitat.



*Figure 1: Our new western hognose snake*

Western hognose snakes are best known for their upturned snouts that help them burrow or “dig” in the sand. They need loose gravelly soils to burrow into to hide. Playing dead is one of their defensive strategies. When threatened, they sometimes perform a convincing “death display,” rolling onto their backs and playing dead to deter predators. They will go completely limp and stick their tongue out of their mouth and release a musk that



*Figure 2: Western hognose snake showing off his “shovel” nose*

smells of decaying flesh out of their cloaca. This comes in handy when confronted by a predator. Another defensive tactic they have is to flatten their necks and hiss loudly to mimic more dangerous snakes. Their range in Iowa has been dwindling, and they are listed as a state endangered species, historically they would have had a larger range across Iowa's grasslands and arid environments. In Iowa, their endangered status and being a species of greatest conservation need makes learning about them and preserving their habitat that much more important. The snake is now referred to by its new common name the plains hog-nosed snake. If you were to see one of these snakes in the wild it is important that you report it to your local conservation board or the Iowa DNR as populations of this snake are not that well documented.

# We Have A New Animal Ambassador!

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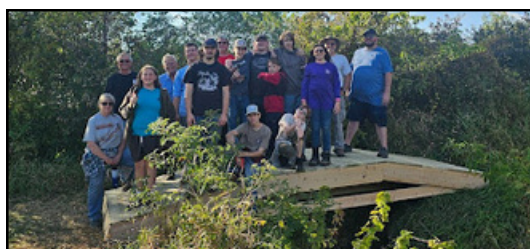
During the winter months they burrow down and brumate which is a cold-blooded animal's version of hibernation. The plains hognose snake is diurnal, so they are active during the day and sleep at night. Their preferred meal is toads or frogs, but they also eat small rodents and large insects. They even have specialized fangs in the back of their mouth that face backwards so they can easily pop toads. Toads try to inflate themselves so they can not be eaten, but this doesn't work with the hognose. Hognose snakes can reach lengths of 15 to 33 inches, females are typically larger than males. Their camouflage patterns can vary quite a bit depending on what region they are from.

We are excited to add this new snake to our collection of animals and look forward to educating the public about this amazing snake. He currently is not on display as he gets used to his new home, but he soon will be out in the animal room for all to see and enjoy.



## Eagle Scout Project at Hannen Lake Park

By Tristen Cook  
Troop 8



*Figure 3: Scouts group standing on a completed bridge that they built and moved*

I chose to do my Eagle Scout project at Hannen Lake because I have spent a lot of time there myself and they are very kind to scouting. I chose to do the bridge project because it seemed like it would make an impact that would last and it would help to reopen a trail that had been previously closed. When planning the project, I spent a lot of time talking to a carpenter in my scout troop and together we made the idea I had possible. When I first came to him about the idea, he was

intrigued because they have never built a bridge before; but we used his knowledge of wood working to help make the plans for the bridge. When I was organizing my help for the day, I talked to my troop and made sure some older scouts who knew more about using tools were able to come. I also spent a while talking to adults that had the tools needed to make sure they came. I made both announcements at troop meetings and I sent out some emails and texts to friends and family to work on gathering help. When it came time to do my project, I am grateful my troop pulled through and we had lots of help to get the project done. Overall it was a very rewarding eagle project and being able to see the impact I made was very nice as well.



*Figure 4: Scouts lifting the bridge to put it in place*



# Skijoring - a Winter Sport to Enjoy with Equines or Canines

By Cecilia Dirks  
Office Coordinator

With winter setting in and predictions for more snow (maybe) this year, I have been looking for different winter activities to get me outside enjoying the outdoors. That is how I found skijoring (pronounced skee-johr-ing), a sport where a person on skis is pulled by a horse, dog or vehicle! This sport has many ways to participate including going solo to enjoy fresh snow on trails or competing on snow packed courses with a friend. I will be attempting this with horses so that is what I will reference the rest of this article, but you can use a dog, team of dogs, or any other animal strong enough to pull you around on skis that you are comfortable training!



*Figure 5: Using a horse for skijoring  
Photo credit to Patty's Pony Place*

The most basic skijoring is done with skis and a tow rope. One person can ride a horse with the rope tied to the saddle and tow the other person around. If you train your horse to line drive and handle poles touching their sides and dragging behind them, you can begin to harness yourself to the horse with a belt and quick release safety latch and go solo (*figure 5*).



*Figure 6: Competitive skijoring  
Photo credit Skijoring Utah*

If you and a friend have a competitive streak, you can step things up and enter a skijoring event! These courses feature jumps, obstacles, and hoops to grab while being towed by your friend on a horse at a full gallop (*figure 6*). Spectators come from all over to brave the cold and watch the competitions. Events are timed with some races having \$15,000 in prize money!

There are different rules for each event and race. Common rules include penalties, rope length, payouts, attire to be worn, etc. Here are a few examples of rules taken from the Canterbury Park event in Minnesota:

1. Timed event: Timer starts when the skier crosses the start line and timer stops when skier crosses the finish line.
2. Rope: 35 feet (will be provided). The skier does not have to have the rope in their hand when they cross the finish line.
3. Penalties: Rings- 2 second addition for every ring missed. Gates- 2 second addition for every gate missed. Jumps- 5 second addition for every jump missed.

Learn more about the competitive side and see some cool videos from the race closest to us at <https://extremeeventsmn.com/skijoring>

If we get enough snow this year, this might be something I will be trying. So if you see me on a trail struggling to manage my lines, poles, horse, and stay upright, just give me a smile and a wave as you go by!

# Beat Cabin Fever & Explore the Outdoors!

By Faith Hunt  
Naturalist

It's that time of the year when daylight is shorter and the temperature can be bitterly cold. Finding the motivation to explore outside may become a little harder, but wildlife tracking can be a fun way to engage with the world around you during these colder days. Snowy conditions are some of my favorite times to explore. I love how the snow muffles sound, amplifying the calls of birds close by, the rattle of branches in the wind and the subtle rustle of critters scrounging for their next meal. Snow acts as a canvas, painting a story through wildlife tracking.

The earliest direct evidence of wildlife tracking was found about 70,000 years ago (although believed to be much older) and has been described as the “first science” because it represents the origin of scientific thinking, requiring early humans to use observation, hypothesis and deductive reasoning in order to survive. Luckily, we don't have to be expert trackers to survive, but we can use tracking as a way to explore nature. Wildlife tracking includes usage of pattern recognition, gathering and processing information, and some imagination for interpretation. When you stumble upon wildlife tracks, ask yourself these fundamental questions: Who made these? What was the animal doing? When were these tracks made? Why was the animal here? Where was the animal coming from and where was it going to?

*Figure 7* shows an interesting scene. If you look closely, coming from the trees are a set of tracks, it appears to be an animal that hops (likely a rabbit). In the center of the photo, dashes seem to appear out of nowhere. The splayed dashes are wings lightly hitting the snow, the further you get from the trees, the more defined the swoosh marks get, until you see where the animal landed in the foreground. The landing area is also where the hopping animals' tracks stop. What do you think happened in this woodland scene?

Wildlife tracking is more than their actual tracks, but also looking for signs that animals have been in an area. This can also help explain the animals behavior and help identify the animal who made these clues. Look for evidence such as rubs, scat, beds, nests, and evidence of feeding or predation. When you are lucky enough to combine wildlife signs and tracks, things really start to get fun!



*Figure 7: Wintery scene*  
Photo credit: Fayette County Conservation

The beauty of wildlife tracking is that it creates curiosity for all ages and can help us connect with nature. Tracking allows us to find wonder and change perspectives in a familiar place with new appreciation. It helps us slow down and look a little closer. No matter if it's in your yard or the woods, finding animal tracks in the snow is a great way to beat cabin fever and explore the outdoors. Make sure you get outside and see what new things you can discover!

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes," -Marcel Proust





We received a Vinton Unlimited HOT (Hotel Occupancy Tax) Grant! This grant fund is made possible through the collection of the hotel/motel tax within the City of Vinton. Total awarded amount to BCC was \$1,600 & was used to purchase 2 picnic tables at The Old Creamery Nature Trail Vinton Trailhead.



BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION FOUNDATION PRESENTS



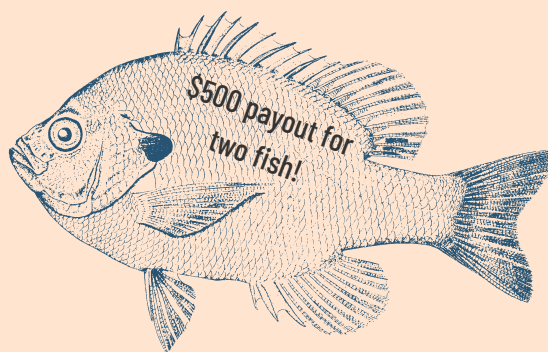
# BENTON TAG & BRAG SECOND CHANCE



Permits on sale  
during January!

**\$30**

Must have permit  
to participate!



More than \$7,800 in  
Cash & Gift Prizes

To participate, **purchase permit in the month of January ONLY** from these locations:

Benton County State Bank, Blainstown, IA

Cedar Valley Bank, Vinton, IA

Chelsea Savings Bank, Belle Plaine, IA

Thys Chevrolet, Blainstown, IA

**Payouts - a mix of cash and/or prizes worth \$7,800!**

- One fish in each lake is worth a \$500 payout
- All tagged bluegill will have preselected associated payouts - See rules for all details.
- **Must have a valid fishing license**
- **January permit purchases will not be entered in to the monthly drawings**

Complete rules can be found at:

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

Scan here for  
complete rules:



# Creek Chubs and Eyes

By Zach Parmater  
Conservation Tech / Ranger

Chasing walleye in Iowa's Cedar river system requires an understanding of how these fish feed within current-driven environments. While artificial lures and standard minnows have their place, live creek chubs often prove unmatched when pursuing larger, more selective walleye. Chubs offer durability, lifelike action, and a profile large enough to attract trophy-class fish, making them ideal for stained, flowing waters.



Figure 8: live creek chub

Walleye in rivers are opportunistic predators that position themselves in current breaks, deep pools, seams, and tailwaters where food is delivered directly to them. Creek chubs, abundant in many of Iowa's tributaries, closely resemble natural forage in these systems. Unlike smaller minnows, chubs offer greater durability in current, more enticing action and a profile big enough to attract trophy walleye. They work particularly well when fished with rigs that allow for natural movement in flowing water. Some of my essential rigging techniques for live chubs are the standard slip sinker rig, modified crawler harness and jig-and-chub combination.

The slip sinker rig is a cornerstone of river fishing and perhaps the most versatile setup for presenting live chubs in moving water. How I build it; Slide a 3/8-1/2 oz egg or bell sinker onto your main line, you can add a small bead to protect your knot, tie on a barrel swivel and attach a 7-foot monofilament or fluorocarbon leader and finish it off with a #2 octopus hook. This configuration allows the weight to anchor on the bottom while the chub drifts naturally just above the bottom, letting walleye pick up the bait without sensing resistance.

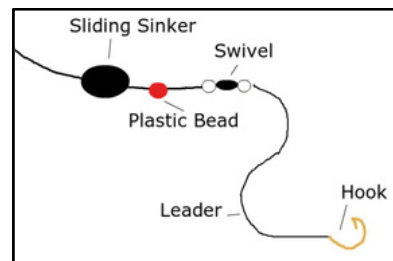


Figure 9: Diagram showing how to rig up a slip sinker

Although crawler harnesses are traditionally designed for nightcrawlers, they can be adapted for chub presentation, especially in dirty water by adding them to your swivel instead of a leader. Advantages include, added flash and vibration making them highly visible in low-clarity water. They are effective along slow current edges and flats using bright color patterns—such as chartreuse, orange, and gold—excel in Iowa's typically turbid river conditions.

A jig paired with a chub is one of the most controlled and versatile methods for working river structure. I prefer using 1/8" to 1/4" oz jig head depending on current. The key is to roll, and tumble the bait naturally along seams and eddies. Lighter jigs help maintain subtle, lifelike action that mirrors a struggling baitfish often triggering aggressive strikes. Hook placement and presentation strategy can be the difference in catching fish all day and going home empty handed. Nose-hooking or hooking the chub lightly through both lips keeps it lively and allows for a natural, forward-swimming presentation. This method is best for slip sinker rigs, slip bobbers in slow to moderate current conditions. Tail-hooking is placing the hook near the tail, just below the dorsal fin which induces erratic swimming motions that can trigger reaction strikes. Light jig presents situations where fish are inactive; a tail-hooked chub will put off more vibration and struggle, appealing to walleye feeding on distressed prey. Deep holes, outside bends and channel edges with reduced current or rock riffles and bottom transitions that funnel bait are areas that concentrate forage and offer ambush opportunities for walleye, making them ideal for chub-based presentations.



# Creek Chubs and Eyes

Continued from previous page

As always make sure you check regulations and safety considerations before heading out. Confirm you have a valid Iowa sport fishing license, which you need if you plan to collect your own bait before fishing. Review all current Iowa DNR regulations, as length limits and slot restrictions vary between lakes and rivers. Many inland waters include protected slot sizes—for example, 17–22" walleye require immediate release. Always consult the latest rules on the official Iowa Department of Natural Resources website.

Using live chubs paired with the right rigging techniques and proper placement dramatically increases your odds of encountering trophy walleye in Iowa's river systems. By presenting a natural, lively bait directly in the strike zone, anglers can unlock consistent success on even the most pressured waters.

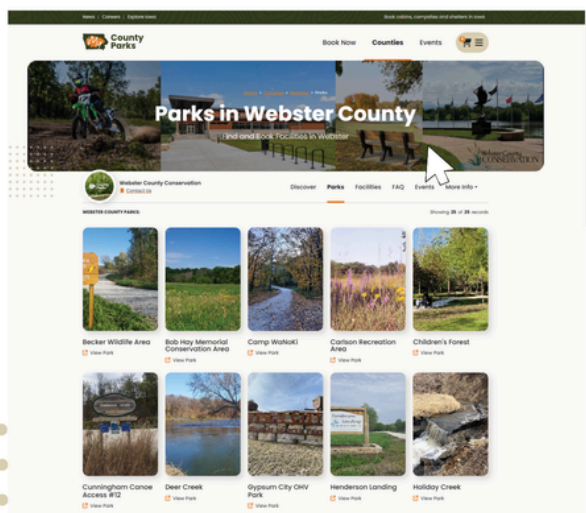


Figure 10: artificial jig



## County Parks

EXPLORE ALL 99 COUNTIES ONLINE



### Plan your 2026 Adventures!

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

Explore a centralized location to browse recreational offerings across each of Iowa's 99 counties in the Iowa County Conservation System:

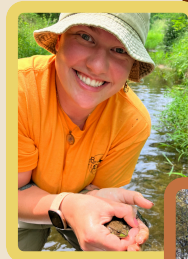
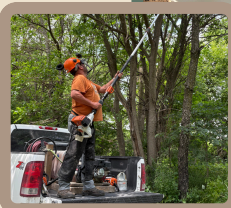
- More than 11,000 campsites & more than 280 rental cabins
- Countless county parks, trails & nature centers
- Hundreds of events in each season
- So much more!

Hurry! Cabin and campsite reservations fill quickly.

## SUMMER POSITIONS NOW AVAILABLE!

We are hiring Conservation Aides and a Naturalist Intern for Summer 2026. These positions are great for those who are interested in conservation, love being outdoors, and enjoy a fun & supportive work environment!

Apply today at <https://www.bentoncountyiia.gov/employment/>



## **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](http://www.bentoncountya.gov) For times and locations. Meetings are open to the public.

Find us online at:

[www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/](http://www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/)

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

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

To donate visit

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

## **Conservation Staff**

*Aaron Askelson, Interpretive Naturalist*

*Austin Wille, North Unit Ranger*

*Cecilia Dirks, Office Coordinator*

*Camryn Grubic, South 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*

*Ed Hach, Roadside Tech*





# Calendar of Events Winter 2025-26

## Winter Solstice Eve

**December 20th, 11am-12:30pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$3/person**

The winter solstice is the shortest day and longest night. It marks the return of the light and the sun's rebirth, symbolizing resilience and new beginnings. We will be hosting a Winter Solstice Eve gathering to celebrate the return of light by taking a mindfulness hike, creating a solstice spiral, followed by a fire. Dress warm and wear snow boots. Campfire desserts and warm drinks will be provided. Registration is required by visiting [mycountyparks.com](http://mycountyparks.com).



## State of Iowa Wood-burning Class

**January 10th, 10am-11:30am at Benton County Nature Center; \$20/person**

Learn the art of pyrography and create a goldfinch or wild rose to celebrate our state bird and flower. Participants will be woodburning their choice of American goldfinch or wild prairie rose on an oak slab (10"x6.5") in the shape of the state of Iowa. This program is suitable for people 14 years of age or older. Registration is required by January 7th by visiting [mycountyparks.com](http://mycountyparks.com).



## Toadally Awesome Pets: Connecting Communities to Amphibian Conservation

**January 16th, 2:30pm-4:00pm at Benton County Nature Center**

Toadally Awesome Pets is a mobile amphibian education program dedicated to building curiosity, empathy, and conservation awareness throughout Iowa. Founded and operated by amphibian enthusiast and educator Lenora Hagen, the program brings live frogs, toads, and other small aquatic creatures for hands-on learning accessible to everyone. This is an open-house style program and registration is not required.



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

**Jan 22nd, 5:30pm-6:30pm at Belle Plaine Public Library (904 12th Street, Belle Plaine, IA)**

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.

## Jig Tying

**February 19th, 6pm-7:30pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$5/person**

Get jiggy with it! Join us at the Nature Center and try your hand at tying a jig. If you can tie a knot, you can tie a jig! The program includes a tying demonstration, information about fishing with jigs, and jig tying. Limit 6 jigs per person. Must be 14+ years of age or older. Registration is required at [mycountyparks.com](http://mycountyparks.com) by February 13th, 2025.



## Avian Adventures

**March 11th, 3:30pm at Hannen Lake Park - Park Shop; Geared for PreK - 12th Grade**

Uncover the secrets of bird nests, feathers, feeding habits, migration patterns, and even their catchy tunes in this exciting program! Young explorers will use writing and creative skills to learn more about Iowa's avian friends. Participants **MUST REGISTER** in advance at [mycountyparks.com](http://mycountyparks.com). Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate.



Watch our Facebook page  
for pop-up snowshoe  
programs!





## **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/>

Save the Date

## **River Raiders 2026**

**June 16th-18th, 2026 / Mandatory Training: June 9th at 5:30pm**  
**Youth going into 6th-8th grade / Cost \$100**  
**Paddle the Upper Iowa River**

Adventure awaits around every bend! Explore the Upper Iowa River from Kendallville to Decorah. Campers will canoe, camp, cook outdoors, and learn other wilderness skills on this two-night, three-day excursion. Enrollment is limited to 14 participants. This opportunity is a partnership between Buchanan and Benton County Conservation.

Registration opens **MARCH 1st** on  
[www.mycountyparks.com/Buchanan](http://www.mycountyparks.com/Buchanan)



## **BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA YOUTH TREK 2026**

**JULY 23RD - 30TH**

**MANDATORY TRAINING: JULY 9TH**

**\$500 (MANY SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE!)**

**REGISTER AT [WWW.MYCOUNTPARKS.COM/COUNTY/BUCHANAN/EVENTS](http://WWW.MYCOUNTPARKS.COM/COUNTY/BUCHANAN/EVENTS)**

Youth will venture out into the wilderness to connect with nature, challenge themselves, and make lifelong memories!

Youth will paddle across wilderness lakes, portage canoes and packs, fish for fun and food, read maps and use a compasses, live in tents without leaving a trace, cook meals in wilderness areas, and learn about the ecology of this magnificent area. This opportunity is a partnership between Buchanan and Benton County Conservation.



## **Happy Retirement, Sondra!**

Although Sondra is not an employee of Benton County Conservation, she has spent thousands of hours working closely with our staff. We have partnered together for numerous field trips, many River Raiders canoe trips, numerous trainings, and week long trips into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. She has also been a mentor to many in the Iowa Association of Naturalist community, including our own naturalist team. Benton and Buchanan County have partnered together on these adventures over the last 10+ years and Sondra Cabell has been a driving force making these successful programs for the youth of eastern Iowa. We would like to wish Sondra a retirement filled with new adventures and excitement!

