

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 12 SPRING 2017

Life on the Old Creamery Trail *By Randy Scheel, BCC Board*

Since its inception in 1995, the Old Creamery Trail has remained the same, yet come a long ways. Once it was transformed from a train rail line, it became a way to connect the communities of Vinton, Garrison, and Dysart for bikers, walkers, runners, and nature enthusiasts. But more than anything, it became a passion for many volunteers who worked diligently to make it the nature trail we all enjoy today.

Up until approximately 6 years ago, the Old Creamery Nature Trail was created and maintained by volunteers. 100% by volunteers. This group raised money each year to support the trail. They adopted sections of the trail to help maintain it on a more regular basis. They set up work days to do clean up and trimming activities. They worked tirelessly to keep the trail opened for others to use and enjoy. And this group has never asked to be recognized for this.

To list all the names of those who have pitched in over the years would be nearly impossible without leaving many names out. But those of you who have helped, even if for only one hour or buying a Christmas wreath to support the efforts, THANK YOU!

But I do feel it is important to recognize one individual who was an integral person on helping fund the trail at the very start. Bob LaGrange attended trail meetings on a regular basis, even when his body was telling him to stay home. Bob's passion for the trail was evident in his knowledge and history of everything surrounding it. Bob, who passed away in 2016, had done many things for our community. But for the volunteers and the Old Creamery Nature Trail, none were any more important than his impact helping for 20+ years. One of the projects in the works will be a memorial bench in his honor to be placed along the trail. The location has yet to be determined. But money has been donated and we hope you will enjoy using this spot while on the trail this summer.

The Old Creamery Nature Trail was donated to Benton County Conservation in April 2010. Even with this change, the volunteer group has continued to meet on a monthly basis and provides input and support for the trail. The relationship and efforts of the two groups working together has been fantastic!



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10 Years of Disc Golf at Wildcat Bluff *By Steve Hepker, Wildcat Disc Golf Volunteer*

Wildcat Bluff disc golf course is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2017! It's been an incredible journey reaching this milestone. 2017 looks to be what we hope is the best year yet! In the 10 years since the course was built, a lot has happened even though it seems like yesterday.

The course opened in April 2007 and was completed on November 24th, 2007. In the years since, the course has matured and changed in ways we never would've imagined when we first installed it. The first wind storm of 2009 damaged a number of trees on the back 9 and required months of debris removal. Two years later on July 11th another wind storm blew through at 120 mph and forever changed the makeup of Wildcat. When we first inspected the damage we thought that the course would be unplayable for months or a year or more. The response of the volunteer help that went to work cleaning up the damage was remarkable! With the help of the volunteers the course was still a mess but was playable for the Wildcat Bluff Open

Tournament dates are:

Memorial Doubles: May 13-14, 2 person best shot

Titan Open: August 12-13, Singles format

9th Wildcat Bluff Open: October 7-8, Singles format

Wildcat Triples: November 11th, 3 person best shot



tournament in mid-October. Work has continued on clean up since then. Today where there used to be shaded fairways there are now grassy fairways. The nearly 3 miles of wooded trail attract disc golfers from across the country and nature lovers of all kinds.

In the years since the storms the focus has been on improving the course. The first project was tee pad replacement. The patio block pads had become a constant maintenance issue. With the help of "Adopt a Pad" donors, all the pads but one were converted to concrete in 2014 and 2015. The patio blocks are being reused around the picnic shelter. Landscaping and steps have also been installed on several holes. In 2016 with the help of a memorial donation, a new walk bridge and wooden stairway were installed between holes 10 and 11. In 2017 the focus is a fund-raiser for new baskets. With the help of donors and volunteers the course keeps improving every year!

As Wildcat Bluff disc golf course reaches its 10th birthday, the course has become one of the top rated courses in the country. We host 4 tournaments per year, with all skill levels competing. In August, the "Titan Open" attracts many of the top touring pros in the country.

Visit these websites for more information:

<https://www.facebook.com/Wildcat-Bluff-Disc-Golf-Course-392191570823455/>

<http://www.iowadiscgolf.net/events/>

<https://www.facebook.com/TheIowaTour/>

<http://www.pdga.com/>

<http://www.dgcoursereview.com/>

Eagle Scout Tackles Invasive Species *by Isaac Vrba*

This past fall as part of my Eagle Scout project, I decided to help out the people at Benton County Conservation in efforts to remove two main invasive tree species located near the Rodger's Park campground.

Within an 11-acre area, the main objective was to remove the Honeysuckle and Autumn Olive tree species which are known to be non-native tree species to Iowa.

The first thing I had to do was to get all the details from Benton County Park Ranger, Scott Bahmann. We went over a decent amount of details on the project, but as we got into the conversation, I realized that I was going to be removing these trees for more than just beautification. The land that my fellow scouts and I were going to be removing the trees on was resting on a watershed that feeds into the Rodgers Park lake. By removing these trees, it would allow room for more native species to grow. The native species are better for cleaning out the watershed of harmful chemicals versus the invasive species. Now knowing this and also finding out that Benton County Conservation has been wanting to work on this project for over a year, I was ready to get into the first stage of completing the project.

When the time came to work on the project, I had already arranged all the work days and what was going to be accomplished on each day. The first thing that needed to be done was to mark all of the trees. That way in the future, when we have the whole group with us, they can quickly identify the trees, making the process go by faster.



A couple of weeks later was the cutting day. For about six hours of work on the first day, we got about half of the land cleared of the invasive species. We came back out the following week to finish up, getting done just as the sun was setting. Throughout the whole project there were 25 unique people that came out to help and a grand total of 113 hours of manpower that was put into marking and cutting down the trees. The whole area was almost unrecognizable from when we started. The lines of oak trees are now visible and all of the cut trees were moved into piles. The land now looks like it did back in its day, and it's all thanks to the people who came out to help and the support from various people.

Editor's Note: Thanks to Isaac and his team of volunteers, this area allows us to now expand our trail around Rodgers park. We plan to install a footbridge over the creek behind the Nature Center and this will allow us to provide a full loop around the park and nature center.

Spring is almost here, and if you're one of the many who made New Year's resolutions at the beginning of 2017, you are either still persevering (good for you!) or gave up long ago (you're not alone - I usually retire my resolutions by the second week of January). Often times, the goal of New Year's resolutions are to help you feel better, both inside and out. Even if your resolutions fell short this year, there is something that can help improve your mood and health, while also contributing to your community: volunteering!

I am fortunate to work in a career I am extremely passionate about, and spend time doing things I love — exploring the outdoors and teaching kids about nature. However, another of my interests has turned into a volunteer position. Every Tuesday evening, I head to Safe Haven, an animal rescue shelter located in Homestead, in Iowa County, to walk the dogs. I love helping out the shelter, as they pursue another cause I support. While Safe Haven is hugely appreciative of its volunteers, I think volunteering benefits me more than them. As a dog lover who does not have a dog of my own, it gives me some much-needed “dog therapy” for the week. In addition, it helps motivate me to get outside and moving, even after an exhausting day, or when it is frigid or raining (or both!). There is the selfish motivation as well —I feel better about myself when I help out other people (and animals, in this case).

There are other benefits to volunteering: according to a report by the Corporation of National & Community Service, volunteering has several health benefits. People who volunteer tend to have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and less risk of depression later in life than people who do not volunteer [Source: <https://www.nationalservice.gov/serve-your-community/benefits-volunteering>]. It also gives you the chance to develop skills, meet new people, and get involved with your community. If you're on the job hunt, volunteering makes a great addition to resumes and can help you improve skills that are useful to the workforce. It is also a great opportunity to spend time with others — you might make new friends while volunteering, or you can volunteer together with your friends or family. Volunteering as a group, such as scout or other community groups, is a great team-building activity and way to get to know each other better [Source: <http://www.habitat.org/stories/benefits-of-volunteering>].

Turn your passions into a volunteer opportunity! If you enjoy being outside, working with your hands, or spending time with kids in nature, volunteering for Benton County Conservation (BCC) is the ideal opportunity to spend time doing these things while aiding in natural resource conservation and getting that warm, fuzzy feeling that comes with volunteering. There are a multitude of opportunities for volunteering. If you enjoy teaching kids, you could volunteer to help out with a naturalist program or field trip. If you enjoy spending time outside and manual labor, invasive species removal may be for you. If you love to watch wildlife, you might enjoy helping to keep bird feeders stocked and in good condition, or checking bluebird boxes along the Old Creamery Nature Trail.

As a BCC volunteer, we appreciate any time that you can give to us. If you assist regularly, great! If you can only volunteer a couple times a year, that's great as well! Benton County Conservation would not be what it is without the help of its volunteers.

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Become a Hannen Helper *by Logan Hahn, Park Ranger*

Have you ever thought about volunteering at Hannen Park? Volunteering is a great way to feel even better about a place that you already enjoy, by knowing that you had a hand in maintaining that place. You might ask, what kind of volunteer opportunities happen at Hannen? Here are a few things that have happened in the last year at Hannen Park which relied on volunteers:

- “Little Free Library” on the East side of the park was built and placed by Florence Go-Getters 4H club.
- Several memorial trees were donated and planted at the park.
- Hannen Park relies on the enormous effort of a campground host every year to keep things looking great (much thanks to Alan and Glenda Page for signing up for another season!)
- High school groups from Belle Plaine assisted with mulch and rock spreading at the new playground.
- Birdhouses built by residents of Tallgrass Assisted Living.
- AmeriCorps groups assisted with taking out fencing on an old property boundary, painting buildings/posts, and removing invasive shrubbery.
- Cub Scouts prepare the park every spring by walking through the park filling garbage bags with litter.
- When it is hard for staff to keep up with mowing, Hannen Park relies on volunteers to jump on a mower.
- Campers at Hannen can look forward to new wildlife habitat this year, thanks to an Eagle Scout project building bat, bird, and chipmunk houses.
- Volunteers assist with the logistics of holding special events at Hannen every year.
- Local businesses offer donated items to help make special fund-raising events more profitable and enticing.

Next time you visit Hannen Park, take time to appreciate a couple of things; for one, the park itself. For another, the immense effort put forth by the above groups to make the park what it is. To get in on the action, or to offer any time or donation that you would like to volunteer towards our efforts, feel free to contact us at info@bentoncountyparks.com .



Left: Cub Scouts work on picking up trash to beautify the park before camping season.

Right: The Florence Go-Getters 4H Club proudly shows off the Little Free Library they built and placed in Hannen Park.

Thank you so much to those of you who donate time and resources to Benton County Conservation! We appreciate all that you do and thank you for your contributions!

A Mink in the January Thaw by Coralee Bodeker

In the early 1940s, the American conservationist Aldo Leopold took a winter walk on his farm in Sand County, Wisconsin. There had recently been a *"night of thaw when the tinkle of dripping water is heard in the land"* in Leopold's neck of the woods. Today, instead of a single January thaw, it has been a *thawed January*. Since the first of the year my yard in Iowa has been locked in what seems like an eternal thaw, filled only with the sounds of running water and the squishing of mud underfoot.

Unlike Leopold, however, I haven't observed any animals *"prowling the wet world"* outside my windows on this January day. Not a single bird has flitted past my feeders—perhaps due to the lack of snow cover a trip to the feeders seems pointless? No deer or turkeys have crossed my yard, either, but both are probably lurking deep in the woods with thoughts of spring on their minds. Even the mischievous squirrels, who never miss a chance to gorge on my sunflower seeds, have failed to appear today.

Despite an apparent absence of outdoor life, I, like Leopold, decided to go on a January stroll this morning. As I walked along the gravel drive I kept my ear cocked for bird calls, but all I heard was the gurgle of nearby Prairie Creek. All around hung the peaceful silence of winter. As I neared the lane, a single Red-bellied Woodpecker flew over, announcing his presence with a long squeaky chatter. But silence persisted thereafter.



By the time I reached the Prairie Creek crossing, I was (for once) glad of the lack of something—a lack of ice! The previously-frozen December creek was now swirling and bubbling like a true river after a northern snow melt. I deduced there might be some form of life congregating along the now-dampened banks and began to climb the small cliff that ran along it. Scanning the lower branches of the juniper and hickory trees, I convinced myself I might spy an elusive Saw-whet Owl if I just looked hard enough. Or maybe a few paddling ducks.

With no owl nor duck materializing and no bird calls reverberating off the cliff, I was now grasping at straws. I continued to look up until a splash caused me to look down. Out of the corner of my eye I caught something in the water on the opposite bank. I trained my gaze over the moving creek and spotted a small animal well-camouflaged in a tangle of exposed roots. I focused my binoculars and to my surprise found a mink staring back at me! A mink! I have only ever seen a mink in the wild once before and never from a mere few yards away. His rather pale brown coat looked soft and dry even though he must have just climbed out of the water. His tail remained dipped in the eddying murk beneath him. This lengthy January thaw was quite possibly a cause for much rejoicing on the part of the mink as his historically ice-locked Prairie Creek now stood open. I slowly moved to stand, continuing to watch the mink through my binoculars. The mink remained still, two front paws balanced on the root below him. Perhaps he thought I had not spotted him? After a couple seconds, however, he began to move, pacing back and forth on the root tangle, seemingly looking for a path of escape.

The noontime clock began to beckon and so I turned for home. I pondered how incredible it

was to observe such a secretive animal so close. Mink are hidden right under many a nose here in Iowa, only occasionally spotted, but often with much astonishment by those who understand the mink's secrecy. I wondered how long this mink had lived in my creek before I stumbled upon him today while grinding for winter birds...



Aldo Leopold's January stroll afforded him multiple encounters with hibernators leaving their winter lairs amid the temporary thaw. Needless to say, I did not encounter the same volume of wildlife on my stroll. I deduce the feeling of a perpetual spring this year is causing many animals to remain unseen and I treasure my mink sighting all the more. In the words of Leopold, *"things hoped for have a higher value than things assured."*

'A Prairie Girl's Notebook' is inspired by 'A Naturalist's Notebook' penned by John Schmitt & found in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Living Bird journal. All quotations were taken from A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River by Aldo Leopold.

Check out our Park Packs!

Something new and exciting is available at the Benton County Nature Center! Thanks to our former seasonal Naturalist, Tess Erger, for her hard work and determination, we now have Park Packs available for you to check out for FREE. A variety of packs are available to check out for up to 3 days upon completion of a short check out form. You will need an adult present with a photo ID. Please call us at 319-472-4942 for more information or if you are interested in checking out a pack.

These packs contain a variety of tools and resources to allow users to have fun while learning about various topics in exploring nature. Our Park Packs include: For the Birds, Mammals, Wetland Wonders, Insect Safari, and Terrific Trees and Plants. They make a great resource for teachers, parents and family members, scout leaders, and other youth group leaders.

Tess Erger used her skills and knowledge to assemble these Park Packs, securing donations and materials for the packs, and advertising them to area schools and teachers. We can't thank her and the contributors enough for making these packs possible.

Whether or not you check out these adventuresome packs, please be sure and take a minute to thank Tess and the generous donors for making these packs available for all to use: Earl and Yvonne Erger, Dave and Tess Erger, Scott and Kasey Keeling, Latham Seeds (Andy Erger), and Betterton Chiropractic.



Above: Two of our park packs and their contents. For the Birds (left) includes binoculars, bird bingo, and an Identifier that makes different bird calls, while Insect Safari (right) includes bug nets, containers, magnifying glasses, and a bug memory game. All park packs include a variety of tools and activities.

AmazonSmile?

AmazonSmile is a website operated by Amazon that lets customers enjoy the same wide selection of products, low prices, and convenient shopping features as on Amazon.com. The difference is that when customers shop on AmazonSmile (<https://smile.amazon.com/ch/20-2006699>), the AmazonSmile Foundation will donate 0.5% of the price of eligible purchases to the charitable organizations selected by customers, at no extra cost to you!

So please support Benton County Conservation Foundation and use **smile.amazon.com** THANK YOU!

Life on the Trail, *Continued from page 1*

Many things have been accomplished on the trail with many more plans in the works. The biggest project in the past 15 years was completed in November. The entire 14 miles of the trail was re-surfaced thanks to a \$180,000 Federal Recreational Trails Grant and the hard work of the Benton County Conservation staff. This project was 2.5 years in the making and we are very pleased to have it finished. Also in 2016, the trail group participated in a Trails Visioning program which helped identify areas in need and funding sources to assist in addressing them. In the upcoming 12 to 24 months, you will start to see the benefits from this program at the trail-head in Dysart as well as a Rest Area in Garrison. We also plan on working on the best long term solution for the Vinton trail-head.

With so much positive energy in our county with trails, especially the efforts towards the new off-road trail on the edge of Vinton by the Vinton Off Road Cyclists (VORC), the future is very bright for the Old Creamery Nature Trail and its goals on connecting with other trails! If you would like to be part of the volunteer group, meetings are held the 3rd Monday of each month from March through October or November at 6:00 pm at the Nature Center. Or feel free to contact me if you would like any additional information or to be included in our group's e-mail list. Randy H. Scheel, rhscheel@gmail.com



Don't be a Couch Potato... Volunteer!!

Volunteerism, *Continued from page 4*



If you are interested in finding out more about what the BCC volunteers do, but are not sure you want to volunteer yourself, come to our Earth Day event on April 22nd to learn more about the volunteer groups that help out BCC. This event will have activities for the whole family, and also gives you a chance to learn more about what our volunteer groups do. Even if you are not interested in becoming a volunteer at this time, you will get a chance to find out more about the “behind-the-scenes” work of BCC. Plus it is packed with all kinds of fun activities. See the insert for more details.

Meet our New Board Member *by Shelby Williams, BCC Board Member*

I'm Shelby Williams; the newest member of the Benton County Conservation Board.

I grew up in Iowa County and attended Iowa State University, graduating with a bachelor's of science degree in Animal Ecology and Environmental Studies.

I have always had a passion for conservation and obtained various seasonal and temporary positions in the field before becoming the Iowa County Conservation Park Ranger. After working there for three years, I found myself moving to Benton County!

I am now working for the Benton Soil and Water Conservation District as the Project Coordinator for the Benton/Tama Nutrient Reduction Demonstration Project. I enjoy continuing work in the conservation field and I'm excited to work with the Benton County Conservation Board and Staff!



We are excited to welcome Shelby to the Board of Benton County Conservation. Regular Board meetings are held the second Monday of the month, 5:00 p.m., at the Benton County Nature Center. The public is always welcome. Please check Bentoncountyiowa.org/public_notices, for possible date changes and agenda.

ECO Extravaganza! *By Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

Here is a riddle for you: What rides a horse, a bike, throws a Frisbee, removes brush, scares children and adults, and does trail work, all for free? Are you stumped? Benton County Conservation volunteers, that's who!

Volunteers are such a huge part of Benton County Conservation. They make us a diverse and vibrant group, offering exciting activities that this small staff of seven, full-time employees would not be able to do without their help.

We thought the best way for the public to find out about all the different groups would be to get them all under the same roof so the public can learn about all the exciting opportunities that are available. But wait, there is more we are going to offer that day. Stop out and enjoy live birds of prey, activities for kids, snacks and refreshments, atlatl throwing, and a silent auction. All of this will take place on Earth Day, Saturday, April 22nd from Noon to 3pm. This is an event geared toward the entire family. No matter what age you are, there will be something fun for you to do or experience.

You can learn about so many different things going on with Benton County Conservation. Most people in Iowa, let alone in Benton County, don't know we have a Nationally ranked disc golf course in one of our parks. It is even in the TOP TEN! We have a Rails to Trails (Old Creamery Nature Trail - OCNT) that is 15 miles long and has been recently resurfaced. We will have the Vinton Off Road Cyclists (VORC) here to share what they have been doing to create an off road trail in Vinton. Winegar Area Equestrian Trail Volunteer representatives and other groups will also be in attendance to share what they are doing in our parks. All of our parks will be represented, so if there is one that is near and dear to your heart, you can find out more about what is happening, future plans, and how you might be able to help.

Equestrian Trail Volunteers at Winegar Lake *By Julie Schwenker*

Six years ago it was brought to my attention that Benton County Conservation was considering putting in some equestrian trails at the Winegar Lake Area. I contacted several local riders and they all agreed how nice it would be to have another place to trail ride that was close by. We worked with the staff of Benton County Conservation to add this amenity to this beautiful park in Northern Benton County that sits along the Cedar River.

The Winegar Lake Area, combined with the adjoining Tobin Cabin Area, has 467 acres of river bottom land. Winegar Lake is actually an oxbow lake from when the Cedar River used to take a different route. In the early spring it is a great place for a hike to view the early woodland flowers blooming.

To date the volunteers and Benton County Staff have completed 3 trails with signage, one of the trails has a long turn around that was the old highway. We are considering an additional trail that would go through the lower part of the park. Nick Fisher is one of our volunteers that mows the trails regularly and keeps the trails clear of fallen branches. We really appreciate his hard work and dedication.

The Winegar Lake area is located just south of the Benton-Buchanan Road, in the far northern part of Benton county. An equestrian trail sign under the Winegar Lake Park sign on the Benton-Buchanan Road, identifies where to turn and park while utilizing the area.

With every ride we practice “Leave no trace” ethics; cleaning up after our horses in the parking area and removing any garbage we find along the trails.

These trails are not just for equestrian enthusiasts. There are many hikers and cross country skiers that also frequent these trails. We enjoy the wildlife viewing because it is so plentiful. We commonly see deer, wild turkeys, ducks, woodland birds, bald eagles, as well as turtles galore.

We do hold meetings where people can voice their concerns for improvements so we can all have a fun and safe place to ride. If you have any interest in helping us out or learning more about this wonderful area, please feel free to contact me. “Happy Trails” Julie Schwenker (319) 521-3483



Become a Junior Naturalist!

This is a great way to spend time outdoors as a family! We are launching our Junior Naturalist program, open to kids ages 4-18. Participants ages 4-12 will complete Level One, and participants ages 13-18 complete Level Two. Kids who complete the program will get a colorful patch and a certificate of achievement!

So How Do I Become a Junior Naturalist?

Step 1: Obtain a Junior Naturalist record sheet from a Benton County Conservation Naturalist. You can get an electronic copy to print at home by emailing info@bentoncountyparks.com, or simply obtain one from our website www.bentoncountyparks.com. You must complete the activities within one year of starting the program.

Step 2: Attend three environmental education programs taught by the Benton County Naturalists. Benton County Conservation Summer Camps are a great opportunity to fulfill this requirement! Check out the newsletter insert with our “Calendar of Events”, or follow us on Facebook at “Benton County Conservation” to keep track of our programs.

Complete three independent activities. Examples include reading a nature-themed book, hiking or biking a trail (check out the BCC parks and trails!), going camping, fishing, or planting milkweed and other native pollinators. A responsible adult must sign off on these independent studies.

Note: For Level Two (ages 13-18), one of the independent activities must be a one hour (or more) voluntary commitment toward a public conservation program.

Step Three: Turn in the record sheet to the BCC Naturalists within one year of starting the Junior Naturalist Program. Once you are an official Junior Naturalist, you will receive a certificate of achievement as well as a colorful patch that you can attach to a T-shirt, jacket or backpack!

Don't stop there! This is a yearly program that gives you the potential to earn a variety of patches. Each year offers a different patch and another certificate of achievement. Complete five or more consecutive years and you'll receive a special gift.

Thanks to former seasonal naturalist Tess Erger for launching this State-wide program in our parks!



A sampling of the variety of patches that await you upon yearly completion of the Junior Naturalist Program.

Conservation Board Members

Daniel Gibbins: Urbana, Member
Dan Hill: Vinton, Vice-Chair
Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Chair
Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member
Shelby Williams: Mt. Auburn, Member

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

Benton County is an equal opportunity employer

Conservation Staff

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

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