

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 19 Spring 2020

Nature Heals *By Karen Phelps, Executive Director*

I think many of us are discovering for the first time or perhaps you are being reminded of it through recurring childhood memories of years gone by: Nature can heal many wounds.

So often we are far too busy to take the time to enjoy Nature's gifts to us. Sadly, we often must be reminded of her gifts through the most trying times. The Snow trillium blanketing an entire hillside at Rodgers park, while offering an image of a walk in the clouds, is a gentle reminder to me that nature is not aware of COVID 19 or social distancing.

The trillium, crowding out the hillside with white, delicate blossoms and three pleasantly colored green leaves, seem to defy the order of keeping a safe distance of six feet and gatherings of less than ten in a group. The blossoms, reaching for the sunlight and forming a span of white as far as the eye can see, bring me comfort. They remind me that this too shall pass, and we will once again be able to gather with family and friends, hug one another without fear, and celebrate our special moments together.



Snow Trillium



Hillside of Snow Trillium at Rodgers

The past few weeks I have been alternating working from home and in the office. Both places offer a scenic view of the outdoors. The opportunity to open windows and doors to allow fresh air and sounds of nature to infiltrate my home and office, brings with it wondrous joys of nature.

Looking past my computer screen I see the cardinal picking out just the perfect sunflower seed from our bird feeder, only to woo in his female counterpart and offer to her his selected gift of food. His sweet territorial call from high in the tree tops wakens me early in the morning and I know exactly where he can be found. Hopefully, given his perch is the top of an Ash tree, it will still provide a place for Mr. Cardinal and other wooers for years to come.

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Electronic versions are available at our website
www.bentoncountyiowa.org

Contact us at:
319-472-4942 or
info@bentoncountyparks.com
to be added
to our mailing list.

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Animal Ambassadors *By Signey Hilby, Naturalist*



Snappy
- Snapping Turtle

Benton County Conservation has many animals on display in the Nature Center. These animals are not pets. They are referred to as Animal Ambassadors. All of our Animal Ambassadors represent an Iowa native species. They provide a variety of hands on education experiences for school aged kids and adults alike.

Benton County Conservation staff oversees the daily animal care. To be sure each animal is healthy and strong they require a specific diet. Each animal needs to be comfortable and happy, thus they require different habitats, environments, and enrichment.

Any contribution you can make to this cause would be greatly appreciated! Donations will be used to purchase food items, basic habitat supplies, habitat improvement items, and enrichment.

Donations of any amount are accepted. With a donation of \$50+ the donor will receive a recognition sign on the aquarium of a chosen animal ambassador and a personalized thank you letter.

We are currently accepting donations via cash or check. Please make all checks payable to the **Benton County Conservation Foundation**. Donations can be dropped off at the Nature Center or mailed to Benton County Conservation at 5718 20th Avenue Drive, Vinton, Iowa 52349. All Animal Ambassador donations are tax deductible.



Cinnabar
- Fox Snake



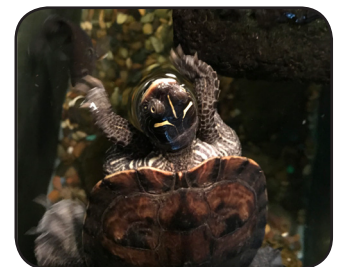
LP1&LP2
- Painted Turtles



Dallas
- Box Turtle



Woodrow
- Tiger Salamander



Tucker
- False Map Turtle



Fish from the Rivers of Iowa

Meet The New River Parks Ranger *By Ben Bonar, River Parks Ranger*

My name is Ben Bonar and I am the new Park Ranger for the River Parks! I'm very excited to continue my career in conservation with Benton County and look forward to making a positive impact on the areas I will be managing. Being a new member of the Conservation Department I thought I would share a bit about my background.

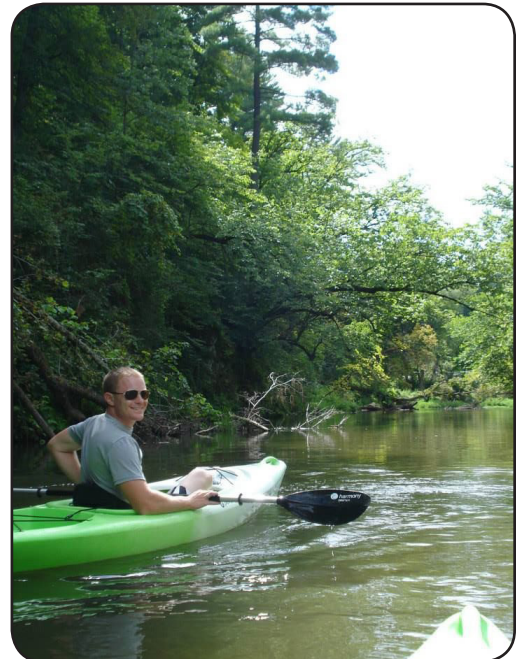
I grew up in Urbana and have been visiting Benton County parks since I was a kid. My family has always enjoyed the outdoors and having experiences in these areas which led to me pursuing a career in Conservation.

I attended the University of Northern Iowa where I attained a Bachelor's degree in Ecology and Systematics and Master's degree in Ecosystem Management. I held numerous seasonal positions in the field while in college and after. I worked two summers at Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area managing the campgrounds and patrolling the park at night. In college I held a graduate assistantship with the Blackhawk County Conservation Department and wrote a management plan for Hickory Hills park in Tama County.

Following graduation I held several seasonal positions but, the most impactful was with the Iowa DNR at Brushy Creek State Recreation Area. As their Prairie Specialist I gained an understanding of prairie ecology and plant identification. This led into my first full-time job in the field as Benton County's first Roadside Manager. For the past six years I've worked out of the Secondary Roads Department reconstructing prairie and managing prairie remnants in Benton County's rights-of-way.

In my free time I enjoy spending time with my family and pursuing numerous hobbies. I married my wife, Paula, in 2015 and we have one kiddo, Owen. I run a small prescribed fire and land management business in the spring and fall. My hobbies include kayaking, hiking, exploring natural areas, disc golf, coin collecting, playing video games, watching movies, fish keeping, listening to public radio, investing and traveling.

Working in the county conservation system has always been a dream of mine and I am grateful that I am able to continue serving in my home county. The River Parks offer a wide variety of ecological and recreational opportunities and I look forward to maintaining and improving them in the years to come. Please stop and say hello if you see me around the parks this summer!



Ben Bonar - River Parks Ranger

The American Beaver *By Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*



The American Beaver

There has been a lot of work going on between Rodgers Park and the Nature Center. We have had large pieces of equipment moving huge amounts of earth. This work is just part of a process that we have begun to help improve the water quality of Rodgers Park Lake.

For far too long lots of sediment has been making its way into the lake. The wetlands were created in 1998 to slow the water down as it came into the area from the creek and neighboring fields. As the water slowed down it would drop the majority of sediment out of the water column so the water that entered the lake would be slow moving and clean. It served its purpose for many years.

In 2014 a former naturalist, the current director, and I put on an “Adventure Camp” and on the final day of this camp we planned to take the kids canoeing from the wetland up the creek to the nature center. We knew there would be obstacles but we also knew that would be part of the fun. As we rounded one of the bends in the wetland the kids were able to see a juvenile beaver, who was confused by the 4th and 5th graders in canoes careening toward him or her. At first I thought it was a muskrat because of its size, but when it dove down, I was able to see the wide tail of a beaver.

When we came to the first obstruction our little friend was nowhere to be seen but the work of his parents was impeding our progress as their dam stretched across the wetland. After getting all the canoes together I checked the depth of the water with my paddle and found it to be very shallow, less than two feet. The bottom felt soft, as to be expected. I carefully got out of my canoe and eased myself into the water.



*Beaver teeth marks
on a tree stump in the
wetlands*



*A fallen beaver
chewed tree in the
wetlands*

As I began to push the kid’s canoes over the first small dam, it became clear that I was sinking deeper and deeper into the mud. I was afraid of losing my shoes so I grabbed onto one of the boats and began to work one leg loose from the muck, being careful to lift my toes up first so it didn’t suck off my shoes. With great effort, I was able to free one leg and then the other. I learned that if you kept moving you wouldn’t keep sinking knee deep in silt.

Behind the scenes other powers have been hard at work trying to keep the silt out of the lake even before the dump trucks and excavators moved in. Humans have been altering their surroundings for thousands of years but another animal has been doing it for longer.

Continued on next page

The American Beaver *Continued from page 4*

Their long flat tail is a unique characteristic that helps them swim fast and alert other beavers that there is danger about. By raising their tail above the water and bringing it down fast onto the surface of the water, it creates a loud noise.

The American Beaver as we know it has been around for at least seven million years. He holds the title of being the largest rodent in the United States and can reach two to three feet in length without it's tail. Rodent's teeth will continue to grow throughout their life so it is essential for them to gnaw on trees and branches for their entire life. To chew on trees your whole life you will need strong teeth. The enamel on their teeth is very thick giving them an orange color. The orange color comes from the iron that is in their diet.



A beaver chewed tree in the wetlands

Beavers can be found across the continental United States in streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes. Beavers are known for building dams and lodges. The dams they build provide additional habitat for the beavers by flooding more land. This gives the beaver access to food and provides a safer habitat for the beaver to live in. When they are in the water, they have fewer predators. "The deeper the water the better it is" would probably be the beaver's motto. Beavers build their lodges out of sticks and mud; and are only accessible from under the water. Beavers have built in swimming goggles; a set of transparent eyelids to help them navigate underwater, and they can hold their breath for up to 15 minutes.



Naturalist Aaron standing by the beaver dam in the wetlands



A beaver skull

A female beaver will have one litter of kits per year with one to four kits per litter. Most kits stay with their parents for two years before venturing out on their own. Other animals have been known to overwinter in beaver lodges like mice and muskrat. Since beavers do not hibernate, they store sticks, roots, and branches underwater to preserve them so they can eat them throughout the winter.

We are trying to do our part to improve the water quality of Rodgers park and the beavers are trying to do theirs. Hopefully working "together" we can both have clean water that will provide excellent habitat for many different species.

2019 Recap From The Field *By Shelby Williams, Conservation Tech/Ranger*

A day in the life of a Conservation Technician or any county conservation position is anything but typical. In 2019 we accomplished a wide variety of projects and can't wait to see what 2020 brings. A lot happened in 2019 and I would like to give just a few highlights that were a lot of fun.



Garrison Trail Head:

AmeriCorps NCCC, volunteers, and staff worked several days to turn the Old Creamery Theater location into a rest and picnic area for the Old Creamery Nature Center Trail. We look forward to having a bike fixit and water station there in the future.

Prairies:

We were lucky enough to plant 55 acres of prairie in the fall which will eventually be open to public hunting. It took a crew and some helpful neighbors to plant. We can't wait to see how it looks in a few years! We also planted several more acres around the county and prepped multiple areas for planting this spring! This spring and fall we were also able to get in several prescribed prairie burns, allowing us to control unwanted vegetation.



EcoExtravaganza:

This family event takes place every spring and I was lucky enough to work the bow fishing station! This was a lot of fun and a big perk of the job, teaching people something new while everyone has fun.



Do you enjoy birdwatching?

We are looking for donors to help sponsor the filling of Nature Center bird feeders! Donations of any amount are accepted. Please make all checks payable to the **Benton County Conservation Foundation**. Donations can be dropped off at the Nature Center or mailed to Benton County Conservation at 5718 20th Avenue Drive, Vinton, Iowa 52349. All donations are tax deductible.

Spring Birds *By Signey Hilby, Naturalist*

Many people have bird feeders in their backyard. Birdwatching is a popular activity especially during the winter and spring migration months when the feeders become busy. If you enjoy birdwatching but like me, are not great at bird identification hopefully the following can help you out.



American Crow



American Robin



Blue Jay



Canada Goose



Chickadees (subspecies variety)



House Finch



House Wren



Killdeer



Mourning Dove



Northern Cardinal



Red-Winged Blackbird



Ruby-Throated Hummingbird



Sparrows (subspecies variety)



Tufted Titmouse



Waterfowl (species variety)



Woodpecker (subspecies variety)

Burn Baby, Burn *By Shelby Williams, Conservation Tech/Ranger*

Fire is an amazing tool in the conservation toolbox. It has been used for management of timbers and prairies for hundreds of years. Now, what we call prescribed burns, is a regular spring and fall occurrence in the field.

Fires are beneficial for prairies and timbers because it removes the leaf litter and dead grasses. Which allows better growth for native flowers and native grasses. By opening up the area, it also allows the soil to warm quickly and release nutrients back into the soil.

Not only are the areas benefited in this way, but it slows the growth of invasive or undesirable species in the area. Invasive species are a battle for natural areas so the burns are a great way to cover a lot of area at once!

When out and about if you see a burn happening , remember to stay a good distance away from the fire and upwind from the smoke!



Chickadee Check-Off



Since 1982, when the Iowa legislature created the Fish and Wildlife Fund Tax Check-off, Iowans have been able to bring a little wildness into the tax season. The Fish and Wildlife Tax Check-off, affectionately called the Chickadee Check-off, was created to allow people to make a charitable donation to wildlife conservation in Iowa out of their tax refunds or by tacking a few dollars on to any taxes owed. When filling out the state income tax form, just look for the contribution line (line 57 on Form 1040) and write in any dollar amount next to Fish/Wildlife.

All the money contributed through the chickadee check-off helps support the Wildlife Diversity Program at the Iowa DNR. This program has statewide responsibility for all the wildlife that can't be hunted, fished or trapped from Peregrine Falcons to Poweshiek Skipperling butterflies. You can learn more about the program on their website: www.iowadnr.gov/wildlifediversity.

Please consider donating to the chickadde Check-off this tax season and supporting wildlife conservation in Iowa!

Spring Flowers *By Signey Hilby, Naturalist*

As the snow melts and warmer weather arrives, a variety of wildflowers begin to appear from the woodland grounds. We call these early blooming flowers ephemerals, meaning “short lived.” As their name suggests, spring ephemerals only bloom for a short period of time. There are many different spring ephemerals that you may come across. The following are some of the more common spring ephemerals you may see in our parks.



Anemone (species variety)



Bloodroot



Dutchman's Breeches



Hepatica



May Apple



Phlox (Sweet William)



Snow Trillium



Spring Beauty



Violets (species variety)



Virginia Bluebells



Wild Geranium



Wild Ginger

Nature Heals *Continued from page 1*

Even in this anxiety driven time of social distancing, I find comfort in the return of old friends. The Red-breasted nuthatch and it's larger relative, the White-breasted nuthatch, share space at our peanut feeder. Downy, Hairy, Red-Bellied and Red-Headed woodpeckers take reluctant turns consuming all the palette-pleasing food we place for them in our feeders. In the side yard I am drawn to the melody of the male Bluebird. He heartily sings to his love as she inspects the nesting box he has chosen for her.

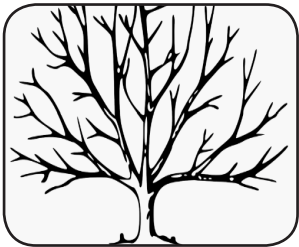


*A Tree Frog - Often
sing in the early
spring*

My morning ritual consists of letting our three dogs out in the yard while I enjoy my fresh-brewed coffee and play recordings of the Purple martin morning call found on the Cornell Lab app (<https://www.birds.cornell.edu>). My husband placed martin condos in the yard three years ago, and unfortunately, we still have the vacancy sign up.

Whether you enjoy nature from the confines of your home, on a trail or in a park; find comfort in her consistency and the ability to heal. When this pandemic passes, and life returns to normal, let's not forget that normal isn't always what we strive for. Let us learn from the hearts and bears in the windows. Let us learn from the special moments we are creating now in this anxious time, and above all, let us create a new normal of kindness and appreciation with each other and for nature as time heals.

Back Yard Scavenger Hunt *By Signey Hilby, Naturalist*



Tree With No Leaves



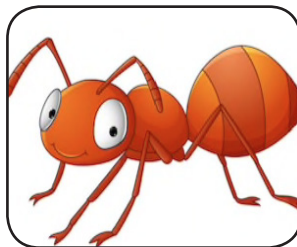
Tree With Leaves



Flower Bud or Tree Bud



Flying or Singing Bird



Insect



Clouds

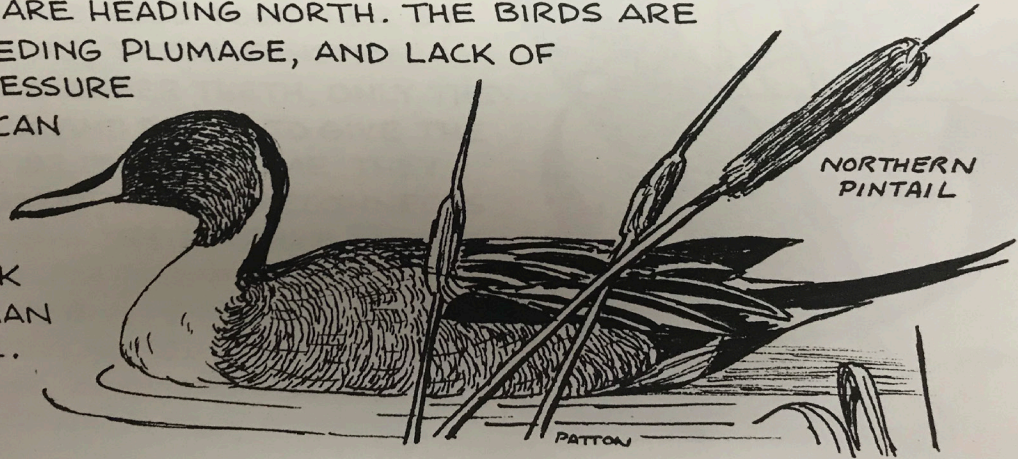
Coloring Page



NATURE AROUND US

BY SCOTT PATTON

NOW IS A GREAT TIME TO DRIVE OUT TO THE VARIOUS MARSHES AND WETLANDS TO OBSERVE THE MIGRATING WATERFOWL. THE MONTHS OF MARCH AND APRIL PROVIDE EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITIES TO VIEW THE DIFFERENT SPECIES OF DUCKS AND GEESE THAT ARE HEADING NORTH. THE BIRDS ARE IN FULL BREEDING PLUMAGE, AND LACK OF HUNTING PRESSURE MEANS YOU CAN GENERALLY GET A MUCH CLOSER LOOK AT THEM THAN IN THE FALL. ENJOY!



NORTHERN
PINTAIL

Conservation Board Members

Daniel Gibbins: Urbana, Member
Dan Hill: Vinton, Member
Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Member
Randy Scheel: Garrison, Chair
Becky Van Wey: Vinton, 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.

Conservation Staff

Karen Phelps	Executive Director
Aaron Askelson	Interpretive Naturalist
Signey Hilby	Interpretive Naturalist
Scott Bahmann	Rodgers Park Ranger
Benjamin Bonar	River Parks Ranger
Collin Strickland	Hannen Park Ranger
Zach Parmater	Conservation Tech/Ranger
Shelby Williams	Conservation Tech/Ranger

Email anyone on staff by using their first initial

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