

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 23 Spring 2021

Can You See That? *By Shelby Williams, Director*

I feel like I write this type of article every year – in fact, I am pretty sure I do. However, I cannot help myself given what we witness on a daily basis out in our parks. When I refer to parks, I am not only referring to campgrounds but all of our properties: trails, mowed areas, prairie, timber, etc.

Last year in the spring, I wrote an article and requested that if you see something, you say something. Since then, a few of our parks have been shot at, driven in, and trashed some. For those that get out and help and say something, we appreciate you.

This year, I would like to discuss a much “smaller” issue: micro-trash. These are the small pieces that seem to escape us but add to so much litter. These tiny bits of trash also get picked up by our favorite birds for nests and are confused as food for various animals. Some examples include juice pouch straws, cigarette butts, bottle tops, the corner of any granola bar or wrapper of any sort. If we look at the amount of trash that we can actually see that blows around in a small storm or a gusty day, think about how much those tiny pieces move and affect the environment.

In order to help with our huge micro-trash issue that we have all over the United States, it takes a few more seconds and a bit of observation. Some may consider it a minor inconvenience, but it makes such a dramatic difference in the environment.

Be sure to pay attention to the cigarette butts, wrappers, etc. and put them in a proper container for disposal. Some of our parks have garbage and recycling bins to help with that, others are pack in and pack out, be sure to keep that in mind. Throwing micro-trash in a fire ring isn't the best idea, especially if you ever plan on eating over or sitting around the fire ring. Plastic releases harmful chemicals which we wouldn't want to ingest or inhale. Simply, if it's trash or recycling, place it in such containers. If you are unsure, feel free to ask!

We appreciate all of you being responsible stewards of our parks. It is because of your respect and courtesy that we are able to keep our parks/land accessible and healthy for our generations and future generations to come!



Figure 1: Shelby Williams - Director

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www.bentoncountyiowa.org

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Spring Stargazing 101: *By Signey Hilby*

Spring is finally here! Now is the best time to get back outside, especially since many activities have been cancelled or limited by social distancing.

Most people spend time outside during the day when the sun is out, but not many people spend time outside after dark. Did you know that spring evenings are the best time to go stargazing? Stargazing is a cheap and captivating pastime enjoyed by people all over the world, though it is often a misunderstood hobby. One does not need to go all out and spend money on a fancy telescope in order to stargaze. Really all you have to do is step outside and tilt your head back, and you're stargazing! But, what the heck are you looking at? What is going on up there? Well, to help you get started, here are 10 stargazing tips and tricks that every beginning stargazer should know.

- 1. Do Not Be Intimidated:** Stargazing is for everyone! Of course, you can buy and use various equipment, like telescopes and binoculars, but remember they are not essential. If you are looking at the stars, constellations, or planets, you will be able to see many of them with the naked eye. However, a pair of binoculars will give you a more impressive view. If you want to look at deep-space objects, such as star clusters or other galaxies, then you are going to need a telescope.
- 2. Make Sure You're Adapted to The Dark:** Did you know it takes your eyes approximately 20 minutes to become fully adapted to the dark? When you are trying to see in the dark, your pupils will dilate. The bigger your pupils are, the more you can see. So, before you go stargazing remember to give your eyes extra time to prepare for staring into the dark sky.
- 3. Try to Avoid Lights:** When stargazing, location is key. Ideally you want a location that is genuinely dark and has little or no light pollution. Light pollution often washes out or blocks star- light in the night sky, making your view less clear. When stargazing, try and keep away from as many lights, street lights, and house lights as possible. For example, if you are stargazing in your backyard remember to turn off your indoor lights. If your living in a big city or neighborhood with lots of street lights and don't have the ability to get somewhere genuinely dark, do not worry – you can still stargaze! Because of the light pollution you may have a difficult time seeing constellations or meteor showers but you still may be able to see some planets. When picking your stargazing location, know what's available to you.
- 4. Don't Worry About Air Pollution:** Air pollution can be caused by many things, some natural and others unnatural. But we all know that the majority of air pollution is caused by human activities such as power plants and vehicular exhaust. If the air pollution is very heavy, it can often form a "haze" in the air. This haze contains many microscopic particles that block or scatter any incoming light from the sun or stars. However, air pollution this extreme is not typically found in Iowa, so air pollution won't have too much of an impact on your stargazing endeavors.

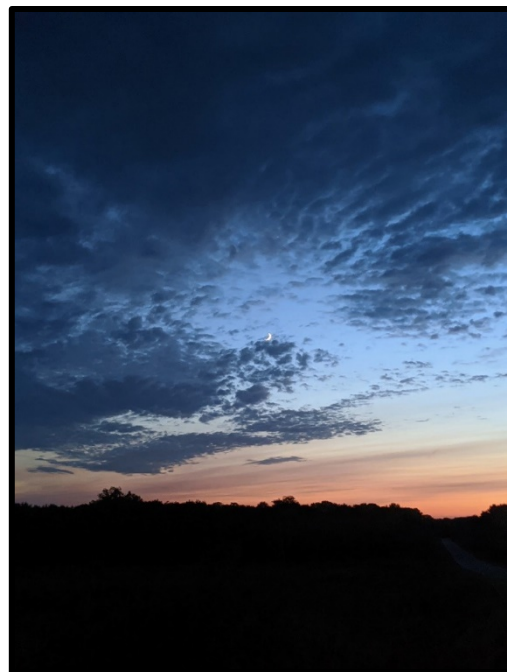


Figure 2: Layla Hagen - Park Ranger

Spring Stargazing 101: *Continued from page 2*

5. **Get to Know the Stars You're Looking At:** Of course, this is much easier said than done, but once you realize that you've spotted something well known then you'll be motivated to keep gazing.
6. **Go Back to Basics:** Do you remember your elementary school astronomy and solar system lessons? If not, don't worry! There are many resources that can help you remember.

7. **Download Apps, Print Off Maps, and Read Books:**

There are many resources, in a variety of platforms, that you can use to discover what you're gazing at. If you enjoy using technology there are many stargazing apps that you can download; Sky View, Sky Safari, Star Walk, and Night Sky. Your cell phone GPS enables the device to know your location and orientation. Many stargazing apps will instruct you to point the phone towards the sky so it can inform you about various objects in the area and help you narrow down or learn about the objects you're observing. In addition, there are several great stargazing maps and books out there. When I go stargazing I always bring a copy of Sky & Telescope's Pocket Sky Atlas. This is a small book because it's just a set of star maps but it is a very handy reference.



Figure 3: Layla Hagen - Park Ranger

8. **Get Creative:** As you're gazing, remember to have some fun! For example, try looking for constellations by making your own patterns, sort of like playing connect the dots in the sky.
9. **Make the most of clear nights:** The only real challenges for stargazing is clouds. So, be sure to make the most of the clear-skied nights! Over the course of a few hours, you'll see the earth rotating as the stars track across the sky, meaning you'll see more and more stars as the evening goes on. If you gaze at the beginning of the night and then gaze later in the night; you will notice a difference. Remember when you observe a star, notice that it sort of twinkles and sometimes the starlight may appear to change colors. On the other hand, planets don't appear to twinkle much at all.
10. **Know the Current Astronomy Calendar:** Throughout the year, there are many astronomical events that occur in the sky. Astronomical events can be equinoxes, solstices, meteor showers, eclipse, supermoons, and more. Check out the 2021 astronomical events calendar for dates and times of these astronomical events:

<https://www.skyatnightmagazine.com/advice/stargazing-what-to-see-in-the-night-sky-this-year/>

<https://www.thrillist.com/news/nation/stargazing-events-in-2021-calendar>

Mowing Less Equals More: By Ed Hach, Rodgers Park Ranger; Photos by Ed Hach

With spring upon us, we're all dusting off our lawnmowers and getting back at that seasonal chore of yard maintenance. While it can be a hassle, there are those of us -myself included, that genuinely enjoy mowing and take pride in a well-groomed lawn. However, growing evidence and studies are showing that traditional lawn care practices can be very harmful to the environment. From excessive engine exhaust, to nutrient and chemical runoff into water bodies, to soil erosion, to negative impacts on native wildlife; cutting lawn isn't so clean-cut.

Although non-native species lawns aren't going to disappear, as they are engrained in our landscaping and culture, there are still things we can do to lessen the adverse effects and make lawns as eco-friendly as possible. Here in Iowa, we have a favorable climate and most of us are lucky enough to have soil conditions suited for what we idealize for growing lawns. That being said, there are certainly things that many homeowners may be doing that both hurts the health and appearance of their lawn, along with causing unintentional harm to the environment. The most common mistakes in lawn care are one of two things, but usually a combination of both: mowing too often and cutting the grass too short.



Figure 4: Blue Skies and Green Lawns!

While the common turfgrasses we use in lawns are adapted to being low-growing and cut regularly, they are still plants that can be damaged by too much pruning and disturbance. If you don't give the grass sufficient time to grow its leaves, it makes it difficult for enough photosynthesis to occur to sustain itself. In that same purpose, letting the grass grow taller, along with longer periods between mowing, also assures good root development.

Generally speaking, cutting your grass no less than 3 or 4 inches is suitable to achieve this, and is well within most municipal rules of lawn height. For example, in City of Vinton Ordinances, lawns in developed residential areas within the city must remain at or less than eight inches, while undeveloped areas can exceed that eight-inch mark [see chapter 158.05 for full description].

There are many benefits of less frequent mowing and cutting taller. For starters, with deeper more developed roots, drought tolerance of your lawn increases greatly. Factor in a taller, thicker turf that shades the surface, and you prevent the hot summer sun from drying out the soil. Along with that, denser ground coverage also prevents many weeds from competing or even germinating from seed. It's also been shown that shorter, more frequently disturbed lawns have more difficulties with invasive insect pests, while a longer, healthier grass harbors many of the beneficial critters that can actually aid in fighting off the bad ones.

Add all these things together and you get a positive feedback loop; better drought tolerance equals less/no watering. Healthier turf equals less/no need for fertilizing. Thicker grass, with fewer weeds and pests, equals less/no need for chemical spraying.

Mowing Less Equals More: *Continued from page 4*

Another common misconception in lawn care is the need for a homogenous turf and appearance. Golf courses spend extravagant amounts of money on their grounds and should not be seen as the standard for lawns as a whole. So much time, labor, and money are wasted by homeowners trying to get rid of relatively harmless plants simply because they're viewed as weeds or they don't "match." Clover, dandelion, wild violet, and even Creeping Charlie—to name a few of the most common species—are all viewed negatively, but can actually bring several benefits to lawns and common wildlife species. Even though some are not native, they have been naturalized in Iowa and are often not worth the effort to eradicate.



Figure 6: Honey Bee

For one, clover is shorter and softer than your common grasses, which makes for easier maintenance and is great for activities like picnics or for the kiddos to roll around in. Clover is also a legume, which fixes nitrogen to the soil, providing the essential nutrient to other plants. Though dandelions can seemingly plague your yard in the spring and early summer with the hundreds of gangly-looking stalks, they are quick to dissipate, and the flowers provide some of the earliest and most consistent pollen sources to bees and butterflies. Wild violet is much the same to pollinators, and the leaves of violet, dandelion, and clover are all rich, healthy food sources for several wildlife species to graze on. Though it's true that Creeping Charlie is known to be toxic to some animals like horses, it would take quite a lot of it to upset their digestive system. The low-growing ground cover plant prefers shadier areas, and is a member of the mint family, which is quite apparent by its smell. Mint species are natural pest deterrents, which can help repel rodents and even mosquitoes!

So, put down the tools and chemical spray and let your lawn be a mixture of species! Diversity is always the best and healthiest approach for any habitat, even in your own backyard. Save your back and your wallet by not fighting these "weeds" that are anything but, and don't take the unnecessary risk with pesticides that can be harmful to you and your pets. If you happen to have that ambition with your lawn, perhaps consider seeding native turfgrasses like buffalo grass or blue gramma. These are hardy, deep-rooted species that require even less maintenance than the "standard" species we know such as Kentucky blue grass.

Likewise, to caring differently for your areas that do need to be mowed, perhaps more important is the practice of simply mowing less ground overall. Consider planting pollinator gardens of native prairie plants in places where a short lawn is simply not necessary.

(Continued on page 8)



Figure 5: Northern Leopard Frog



Figure 7: Happy Pups enjoying an organic lawn!

The Old Creamery Nature Trail: *By Layla Hagen, River Parks Ranger*

The Old Creamery Nature Trail connects the communities of Vinton, Garrison and Dysart. A former railroad that connected Cedar Rapids to South Dakota, the Iowa Trails Council, purchased this 15- mile section in 1994. Hundreds of volunteer hours later, the Old Creamery Nature Trail was opened to the public for use in 2000. In 2010, the trail volunteers donated the trail to Benton County Conservation in an effort to improve maintenance, resources, and fundraising opportunities. This was significant since, prior to this, all needs for the trail were based entirely on donations, available volunteers, and fundraising efforts by the volunteers.

In 2014, the trail received funds through the Federal Recreational Trails Programs to resurface the entire 15 miles of trail. This was significant since the surface of the trail had been damaged by a few flooding events and the derecho of 2011. It also energized the communities to use the trail more. The original railroad was built in 1872. Included at that time were 13 bridges along the length of the trail. All of the original steel structure is in good condition. However, on some bridges, the treated wooden railroad ties are decaying.

During the summer of 2020, we had an engineering firm do a thorough evaluation of all and 13 bridges and provide feedback on their structure and stability. One bridge was determined to be unsafe and the Benton County Conservation Board and staff immediately closed this bridge at that time along with a section of the trail that runs approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ mile east to the next road crossing. This portion of the trail still remains closed today and will remain closed until the bridge is safely repaired. The trail is still usable by riders. However, they must detour along a dirt road and gravel road to reconnect to the trail again. This is not the safest option for trail users. ITC has also started power line work on 3 miles of the Old Creamery Trail near Dysart and the project is due to be completed in October of 2021. We apologize in advance for any accessibility issues and ask that users be aware of any equipment on the trail in this area.



Figure 8: Randy Scheel – BCCB Member

The Old Creamery Nature Trail continues to thrive. One of the most recent additions was the addition of a rest area in Garrison at the halfway point. While still a work in progress, there is a new pavilion and picnic table on site with plans to add benches, a bike fix-it station, and a water station in 2021. Not only is our goal to maintain a safe and useful trail to all users, it is also a goal to increase usage by connecting to the Vinton Trail System as well as the Cedar Valley Nature Trail as those opportunities become available.

We can't wait to see you on the trail!

Morals vs. Morels: *By Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

Not all the leaves have begun to spring from their buds as the snow trillium flowers begin to fade. This is the time that people begin to think about looking for morel mushrooms. This is also the time of the year when visitors to our parks can help out. Due to differing values of our park patrons, there is a problem that continues to grow in our parks.

While the majority of our park users are responsible conscientious citizens, there is a small percentage of our park users who are still toddlers in their actions and behaviors. When I say toddlers, I don't mean the cute adorable kind, I am referring to the temper tantrum, leaving a mess everywhere and ruining it for everybody else kind.

I can only assume that these individuals are as miserable humans as they are park patrons. They feel that they do not need to follow the laws of common decency like the rest of us. These are humans who feel that the world is theirs to do with as they please. What causes people to become so pathetic and worthless? Perhaps, lack of morals? I don't have the answer to that question. Who are these immature people? I wish I knew so we could keep them out of our parks.



Figure 9: Zach Parmater – Conservation Technician



Figure 10: Aaron Askelson - Naturalist

So, if you are out looking for some tasty morels, bring an extra bag for trash and your morals. Just like a wise man once told me, that if you find one morel, make sure you stop and look all around, look high and look low. Make a small circle and look some more. This can be done with trash also. If you find one piece, you can probably find more just by pausing and looking around. It is sad that we have to ask this of our park patrons but far too many of those toddlers have been in our parks over the years. And if you happen to see one of these toddlers, make sure you correct them in their behavior. They know what they are doing is wrong and when confronted, most will do the right thing. If you get skunked on the morels, you can probably fill your bag with trash and at least you will have cleaned up an area and made the world a better place. This should be common practice on public or private land.

Happy hunting!

Mowing Less Equals More: *Continued from page 5*

For those of us who live in towns, one would have to find the proper rules and methods to do this within the city codes -methods which may not currently exist. Many city governments are beginning to allow these kinds of gardens to be grown as they consider the benefits to wildlife, soil, and water, along with the citizens' desires to care for these plantings. Pollinator gardens, even on small scales, are vital sources of food and habitat for many native insects and birds, as well as providing beautiful colors throughout the growing seasons.

For those of us living in the country, growing pollinator gardens may come with fewer hoops to jump through, but there is one major thing that we can be doing -or rather not doing- to help our native plants and wildlife. Today, less than 0.1% of Iowa's original tallgrass prairie habitat exists, the majority of it being located along our roadways. So, not mowing ditches is vital to the remaining fragments of prairie. In fact, there is an ordinance in the Iowa State Code that forbids mowing along roads until July 15, with some exceptions [see Iowa Code 314.17]. The midsummer date was chosen for the reason of allowing enough time for ground-nesting birds (like pheasants) to have their clutches hatch and grow.

Protecting these small patches of habitat for a few species benefits many more. While mowing the ditches after July 15 for harvesting hay is allowed for certain roadways, there is a permitting process with the Iowa DOT or with some county road departments, depending on the road designation. While there is currently no permitting process with Benton County Secondary Roads, the State Code should still be followed.

Not only can you help wildlife by leaving roadways alone, but the Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management department -within County Secondary Roads, is responsible for maintaining our rural road habitats and can be contacted if you are interested in some collaborative management in your area. Benton County IRVM plants and maintains native prairie species to help these habitat fragments persist as best as possible.

All in all, the many benefits of mowing less far exceed what little could be gained with that "green carpet" look. Letting your grass grow a little taller and waiting longer between cuts only adds to the health and resilience of your turf. Laying off the chemicals only protects the health of your family, pets, and local wildlife. Planting pollinator gardens and leaving roadsides alone only ensures greater diversity, and better soil and water quality. Running your mower less often and not buying expensive pesticides and fertilizers saves you time and money, while also lessening the impact on our environment. So, when it comes to mowing, doing less actually equals more!



Figure 11: Iowa DOT right of way (photo by Iowa DOT)

Meet the Naturalist Intern: *by Dakota Brown*

Hello! My name is Dakota Brown, and I am the Summer Naturalist Intern for Benton County Conservation. I have completed my first year at Kirkwood Community College, and I am pursuing a two-year degree in Parks and Natural Resources. I hope to eventually pursue a career in Wildland Firefighting. My interests include horseback riding, hunting, conservation, and writing. I like to hike on Blue Creek with my German Shorthair Pointer, Jäger, and I have volunteered with a burn crew to assist with prairie burn-offs. I am learning taxidermy as well and I am thinking about starting a taxidermy studio in a year or two.

I grew up in Cedar Rapids and moved to Center Point when I was ten. My dad took me turkey and deer hunting every year, starting me early on the road to wildlife conservation. I intend to get more involved with Pheasants Forever and other conservation clubs as I get older. Shed and dead-head hunting got me interested in taxidermy, which led me to DNR work and then made me turn to Kirkwood so I could work towards a Parks degree.

I'm very excited to work with you all this summer!



Iowa's County Conservation System

There's no better way to celebrate Iowa's unique 99 County Conservation System! Each week we will focus on just one of the 99 Counties and will explore some of the opportunities they provide.

Follow the My County Parks Facebook page to participate in this great virtual adventure!

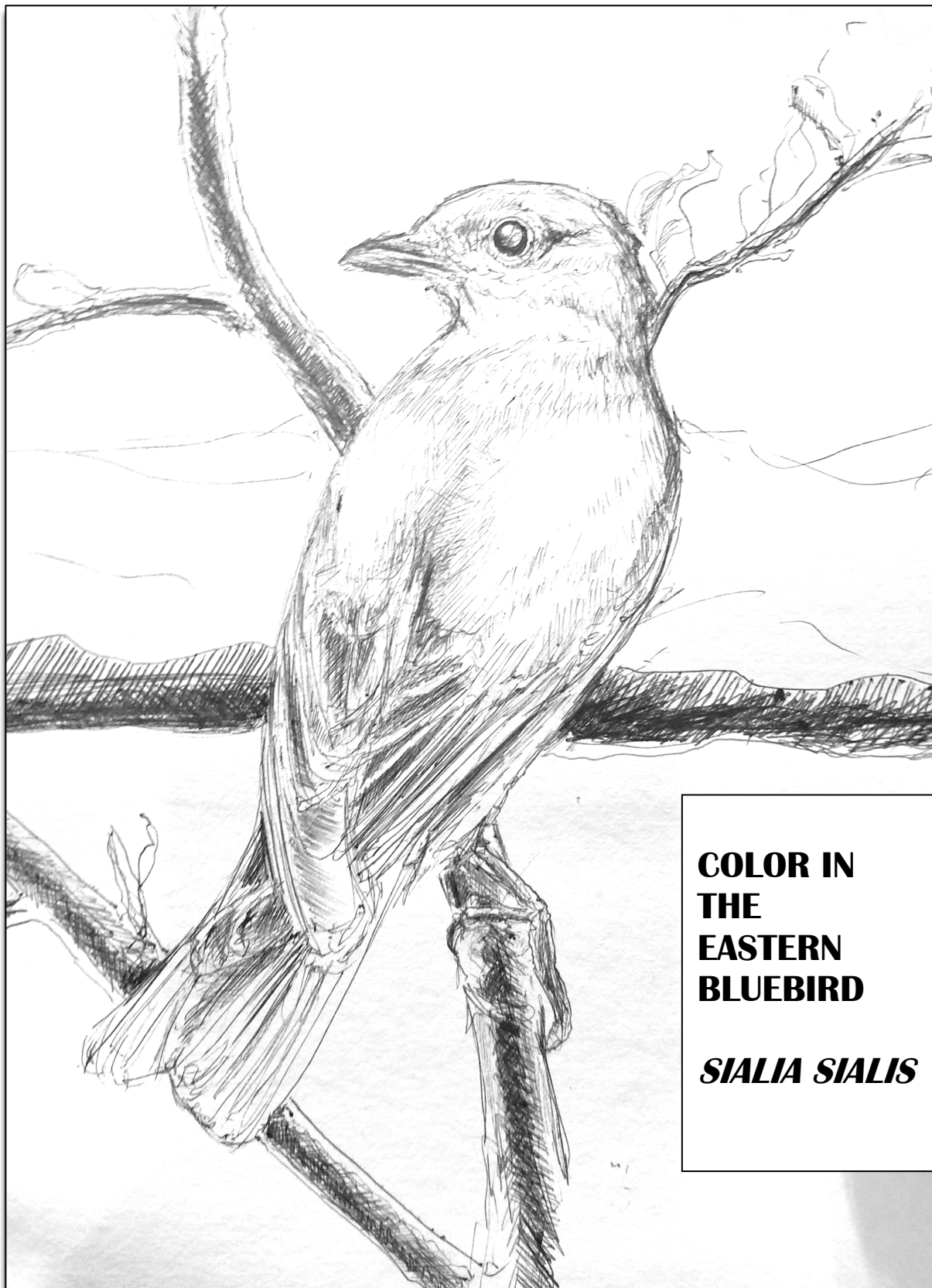
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Newsletters can be found online at: www.bentoncountya.gov under conservation department - newsletters tab.

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

Coloring Page: *by Aaron Askelson*



**COLOR IN
THE
EASTERN
BLUEBIRD**

SIALIA SIALIS

Spring Has Arrived at Benton County Conservation!

Photos by Layla Hagen and Aaron Askelson



Conservation Board Members

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

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

Find us online at:

www.bentoncountyiowa.org or
www.mycountyparks.com

Find us on Facebook: Benton County
Conservation

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