

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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Electronic versions and
email sign up are available at
our website

www.bentoncountyia.gov



We Have Some Wild News

By Shelby Williams,
Director

Benton County Conservation has exciting news and we need your help!

What is so exciting?

Benton County Conservation strives to improve the quality of life for our citizens by providing recreational and educational opportunities that foster stewardship of our natural resources. We have the amazing opportunity to continue to do just that.

Our park, Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (Wildcat Bluff), two miles south of Urbana, Iowa is home to: The East Unit shop, 24 campsites, a boat ramp, miles of hiking trails, Iowa's best disc golf course (ranked top 10 in the nation and top 20 in the world), great timber, wildlife habitat, and Cedar River fishing access. Wildcat Bluff offers all of this in just 134 acres.

Even with all these things Wildcat has to offer, we are going to more than double the size of this property!

Benton County Conservation is partnering with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) to add roughly 180 acres immediately to the east of Wildcat Bluff. This property includes ideal timber habitat, upland and lowland habitat, and additional Cedar River bank. It will provide amazing hiking trails and habitat to support our native flora and fauna. This addition will soon bring Wildcat Bluff to over 300 acres for all to enjoy. We will be sure to let everyone know once it is open to public access, but until then, to accomplish this, we need your help!

How can you help? WE NEED ADVOCATES!

We need advocates for what we do and what this property has to offer. The amazing quality of life brought by wild spaces and outdoor recreation needs to be shared and promoted. We know the great opportunities our spaces create and we see people of all walks of life enjoying them year-round. What we need is for you to tell your story on why these places are important to you. Share these stories with people who make decisions for our futures, the people who make decisions for us and cast votes for us.



Figure 1: Map of Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area in yellow with addition in blue

We Have Some Wild News *Continued from previous page*

I'm not requesting you to campaign or go to the capitol to talk to the legislators for conservation's cause, however, that would be great. I am suggesting that many hands make light work and many voices make a big impact. There are so many causes and so many policies constantly being talked about, we get fatigued hearing about them all and stretched thin on where to spend our energy. If we are fatigued by all of the causes out there, think about how our politicians must feel. I am asking that you don't forget about conservation and to be a daily advocate so everyone is reminded that conservation and projects like this are imperative.

WE NEED DONORS!

We need donors in all capacities. Whether it be for small donations and fundraisers to large personal and corporate donations. Every bit makes a difference. We have a goal to raise as much as we can for the 1.2 million-dollar acquisition. We are very fortunate to work with INHF through this acquisition, but we must find funding. When writing this at the beginning of March, we currently have \$125,650 from community commitment.

We will also be applying for the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) grant through the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). This grant is highly competitive around the state but very rewarding. REAP encourages having funding matches to show community buy-in, which helps the score overall.

Plans moving forward.

Your Benton County Conservation team is full of passionate members working for your community. We plan to preserve this wildlife area for generations to come. To promote wild spaces and opportunities for humans to experience them. At this site, we'll have species inventories done to best manage the property for preservation. We will also expand existing trails to create miles of great hiking over the 300 plus acres. Once we own it, we'll have a grand opening similar to the Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area opening. Until then, it does remain private property.

Thank you for your continued support!

**Donations can be made to:
Benton County Conservation Foundation
5718 20th Ave Drive, Vinton, IA 52349
Or contact us at 319-472-4942 for
more information on a donation**

**Benton County
Conservation Foundation
has PayPal! Scan the QR
code to make a donation
or find BCCF by searching
@BentonCCF on PayPal**



Nature's Mosquito Control

By Faith Hunt,
Naturalist

Joke (answer at the end of article): What did one bat say to another?

One of my favorite signs of spring is watching bats fly out of their winter roosts. I love watching them swoosh in the sky during the twilight hour and listening to the faint, muted squeaks as they devour unsuspecting insects. Bats are placed in the category *Chiroptera*, which means “winged hand.” Sometimes, bats use their wings like hands, scooping food towards their mouths. These flying mammals are excellent hunters, using echolocation to find their prey with ease. The little brown bat can eat up to 600 flying insects (primarily mosquitoes) in just one hour! Big brown bats go for bigger prey such as beetles and moths that cause crop damage. A single colony of big brown bats can reduce the corn rootworm population in an area by 33 million. It is estimated that bats provide \$1 billion in pesticide aid to corn farmers!

Iowa is home to nine species of bat, with Eastern Iowa having the largest population and diversity in the state. Five of these species are hibernators who live in Iowa year-round, in places like caves, rock faces, or maybe your attic. The other four species are migratory and head somewhere a bit warmer as soon as it starts getting too cold for insects to be active. The most common bats in Iowa are the big and little brown bat, which are often the species that get in peoples homes. Six of the nine Iowa bat species are considered species of greatest conservation need in Iowa’s Wildlife Action Plan. These species include the little brown bat, the northern myotis long-eared bat, the Indiana bat, the silver-haired bat, the eastern pipistrelle, and the evening bat. The Indiana and northern long-eared bat are additionally listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act.



Figure 2: Silver-haired bat

Bat populations are rapidly declining for multiple reasons. One large cause for their decline is a disease known as white-nose syndrome (WNS) and is considered one of the worst wildlife diseases of modern times. WNS is caused by a fungus that disrupts hibernating bats, causing them to become more active than they should be and use up valuable fat storage that is needed to survive cold Iowa winters. It is especially devastating to bat species that hibernate in colonies like the little brown and northern long-eared bats. Along with WNS, bats face habitat loss. They rely heavily on trees for roosting and raising their young. Introduction of invasive species and changes in the forest composition have played a role in bat population decline.

Let’s do our best to help Iowa’s only true flying mammals! You can help bats by planting trees where they can seek cover and raise their young. Shagbark hickory trees offer ample roosting spots under its shaggy bark. You can also help bats by building a bat house. Check out page 4 for a simple bat box plan. Please note that it may take a while for bats to find your bat house so be patient and don’t get discouraged. Once they find the house the bats will return year after year!

Answer to joke: Let's hang out together!



Figure 3: Little brown bat



Figure 4: Eastern Red Bat



Figure 5: Indiana Bat



Figure 6: Big brown Bat

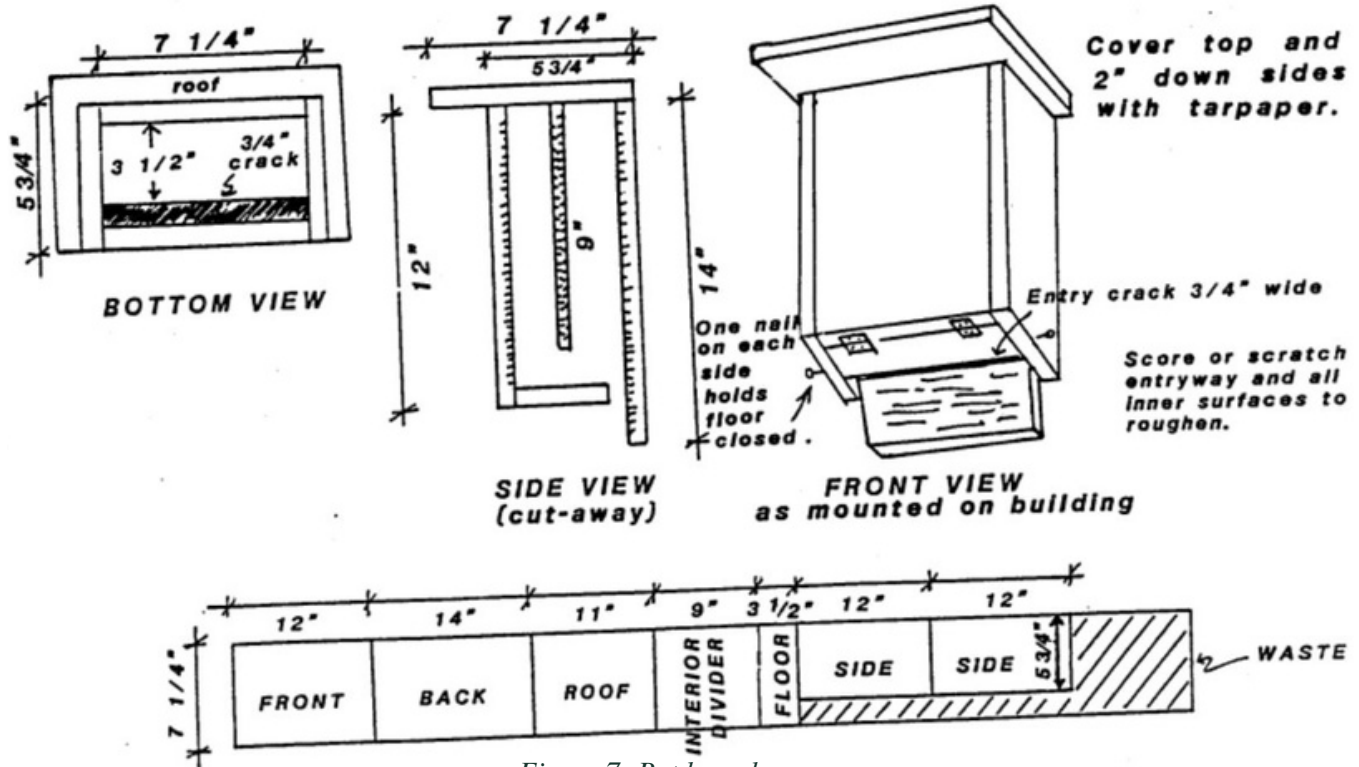


Figure 7: Bat box plans

Camping Season Coming Soon!



Benton County Conservation Campgrounds open April 15th, 2023.

BCC has 6 campgrounds throughout the county.

Electric sites are \$16/night & Non-electric sites are \$10/night

All sites are first come first served with self-registration.

For more information on parks and camping, visit www.mycountyparks.com and follow us on Facebook @Bentoncountyparks

Spring Walleyes

By Zach Parmater,
Conservation Technician

As soon as the weather is warm enough to melt the ice, head out to find the bite. Early spring walleye fishing can be great. With temperatures still warming though, you might have to bundle up. When searching for walleyes look for current seams, where areas with little to no current border fast currents. Also, look for the heads and edges of big eddies, where water circles back upstream behind a log jam or sand bar. These areas can be a good area to fish. Anywhere slack water is close to faster current, that's where walleyes tend to be, right next to faster currents where they wait for a meal to pass by. Dead or dying baitfish flowing downstream are an easy target.

It's been months since the last spawn, so baitfish alive this time of year tend to be bigger. I take this into account and use larger baits like larger crankbaits, bucktail jigs, and artificial baits tipped with live bait including minnows and worms. My favorite colors are fluorescent pink, white, orange, or chartreuse. But, definitely don't rule out darker colors like black, brown, or dark purple. I prefer a medium weight rod with a fast tip and 10lb test braided line.



Figure 8: Zach holding a Walleye he caught on the Cedar River.



Figure 9: Four walleye caught on the Cedar River.

Varying presentations can be the difference between catching a few and catching your limit. Change bait presentation by speed of retrieval and working different areas of the water column. If you aren't having luck, try changing the weights and colors until you find one that works. I like to use the lightest jig possible while maintaining the ability to feel the bottom. Depending on the water current and depth, I use anywhere from a ¼ oz all the way up to a ¾ oz jig head. I try to keep my bait within a foot of the bottom. When the jig hits the bottom, pop it up off the bottom and slowly drop it back down. When your line goes slack, pop it up again. Often the fish will hit as it falls back towards the bottom, so be ready to set the hook.

Fishing the Cedar River is always fun because in every area that you fish for walleye, you can catch an array of species including pike, smallmouth and largemouth bass, channel and flathead catfish, crappie, and drum. Even if the fish aren't biting, wildlife is always abundant on the Cedar River with eagles, deer, turkey, ducks, and geese that are always there to put on a show. As soon as conditions are favorable, make sure you've purchased your fishing license, grab your gear and head on out. Whether you're fishing from a boat or from the bank, look for the areas that will hold fish. Good Luck!



Figure 10: Sunset on the Cedar River.

Aqua-whatz it? Aquaponics!

By Aaron Askelson,
Naturalist

We have recently acquired two different kinds of aquaponics systems at the Nature Center. One is small and would fit nicely in any home. It is made out of a three-gallon cheese ball puff plastic container so just about anyone could make one. The other system is a much larger system, a 40-gallon tank built onto a wooden stand. It would fit in most homes with a little planning.

Webster defines aquaponics as a system of growing plants in the water that has been used to cultivate aquatic organisms. The basic idea of aquaponics is that the plant and animals will support each other, the animals such as fish will provide the nutrients that the plants need to survive. The plants will filter out the waste created by the animals and will provide some food in the form of roots. The water is the connection that feeds the plants and the animals.

We have five bluegills in our tank and 15 new crayfish in the big tank. The little three-gallon tank only holds a small guppy named Bubba Gump, and a few aquatic snails that help keep things clean. The fish are fed pellets daily and eat them up greedily. The fish continue to grow and their waste provides much needed nutrients for the plants. The fish live in the lower tank. Water and nutrients are pumped up to the plant trough. There, the plants are suspended in the nutrient rich water with their roots submerged and their stems held up by a plastic grate. We have had success growing mint, arrowhead, spinach, pilea, pothos, and green bell peppers. We plan on expanding our “garden” to include some lettuce and herbs to feed the animals. A small water pump circulates the water from the tank to the trough. It is also necessary to have a bubbler to provide additional oxygen and water circulation in the trough and tank.



Figure 8: The 40-gallon aquaponics system at the Nature Center.



Figure 10: Bubba Gump, the guppy in our 3-gallon aquaponics.



Figure 9: Close up picture of plants in the 40-gallon aquaponics system.

Setups like these, but on a larger scale could help bring fresh greens and cheap sources of protein to people in developing nations. They have systems in development that will run on a small solar panel in places where electricity might not be reliable or available.

This whole program was started by a group called Ioponics at Wartburg College. These systems were awarded to Benton County Conservation from the Iowa STEM Council in August of 2022.

SUMMER CAMP 2023

Dragonfly Camp

For youth going into 3rd - 5th
June 6th - 8th, 2023

\$30



Critter Camp

For youth going into 1st & 2nd
June 13th - 15th, 2023

\$25



All registrations must be done
online and be made **ONE WEEK
PRIOR** to start of camp.

Registration is required by visiting
<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx>

YOUTH BOUNDARY WATERS WILDERNESS CANOE TREK

TRAINING DAY: JULY 20TH AT 4-9 PM (MANDATORY)

BWCA TREK: JULY 23RD - 30TH, 2023

AGES 14-18 COST \$500 (SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE)

REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED BY VISITING

[HTTPS://WWW.MYCOUNTPARKS.COM/COUNTY/BUCHANAN.ASPX](https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan.aspx)

Participants will paddle across wilderness lakes, portage canoes and packs over rugged land trails, fish for fun and food, read maps, live in tents, cook meals, and learn about the ecology of this magnificent area.



Conservation Board Members

Dan Hill: Vinton, Chair

Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Member

Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Member

Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member

Becky VanWey: Vinton, Member

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month at the Nature Center.

Check www.bentoncountyiowa.org for times. Meetings are open to the public.

Conservation Staff

Shelby Williams, Director

Aaron Askelson, Interpretive Naturalist

Faith Hunt, Interpretive Naturalist

Ed Hach, North Unit Ranger

Layla Hagen, East Unit Ranger

Camryn Grubic, South Unit Ranger

Zach Parmater, Conservation Tech/Ranger

Cecilia Dirks, Conservation Tech

Email anyone on staff by using their first initial combined with their last name
@bentoncountyparks.com

Find us online at: www.bentoncountytia.gov

or www.mycountyparks.com

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

To donate visit <https://www.bentoncountytia.gov/conservation/donate/>



Calendar of Events Spring 2023

Registration for all events is required by visiting

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx> unless otherwise stated.

Toddler Time: Mama's & Babies

April 7th, 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM at Benton County Nature Center

Come on out to the Nature Center to learn about Iowa animals! This program will include a book and puppets. Mama's & Babies is suitable for kids under the age of 5. Registration is required by visiting:

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx>

ECO- Extravaganza: Art in Nature

April 22nd, 12PM - 3PM at Benton County Nature Center

Celebrate Earth Day and World Art Day! Family fun with hands-on activities & games suitable for all ages. At 1PM, there will be an Artistry with Aaron program painting Iowa wildflowers with a \$10 suggested donation per painting. Decorate and take a pre-built bird feeder for \$15. Registration is not required.

Egg-cellent Wildcat Weekend

June 3rd, 10AM - 1PM at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area

Come out and enjoy the "Egg-cellent" weekend at Wildcat! Egg hunt registration begins at 10:00 AM with the egg hunt starting at 11AM. Learn about Dutch Oven baking by enjoying an egg bake near the shelter and hands-on, educational "Nest Makers" program at the shelter from 12PM - 1PM. Egg hunt is suitable for youth 12 years old and younger. Free will donations are greatly appreciated to help support events like this in the future.



Dragonfly Camp

June 6th- 8th, 9am - 3pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$30 per camper

Does your child love nature and exploring outside? Is your child going into 3rd-5th grade? This camp is exactly for them! If you are interested in signing up for summer camps, please visit <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx> or call us at 319-472-4942 for more information. All registrations must be done online and be made at least ONE WEEK PRIOR to start of camp.

Critter Camp

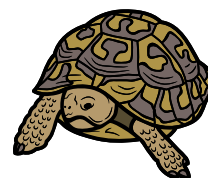
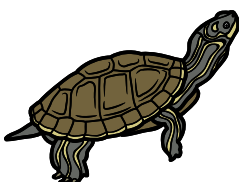
June 13th - 15th, 9am - 12pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$25 per camper

Does your child love nature and exploring outside? Is your child going into 1st or 2nd grade? This camp is exactly for them! If you are interested in signing up for summer camps, please visit <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx> or call us at 319-472-4942 for more information. All registrations must be done online and be made at least ONE WEEK PRIOR to start of camp.

Reptiles!

July 18th, 9:45-10:45 at Van Horne Library; Free

Come out to the Van Horne Library to learn about Iowa reptiles with Benton County Conservation Naturalists! This program will include live animals and is appropriate for all ages. Registration is not required.



Youth Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Trek - NE Minnesota

Fontana Training Day: July 20th, 4PM - 9PM (mandatory)

Boundary Waters Trek: July 23rd – 30th, 2023

Ages 14-18; Cost \$500; Registration limited to 5 youth. Pre-registration is required.

Embark on an adventure of a lifetime in the largest designated wilderness in the lower 48 states!

Participants will be guided through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness by Naturalists from Buchanan and Benton County Conservation Boards.

Participants will paddle across wilderness lakes, portage canoes and packs over rugged land trails, fish for fun and food, read maps, use compasses, live in tents without leaving a trace, cook meals in wilderness areas, and learn about the ecology of this magnificent area. By weeks end, youth will better understand the value of the wilderness to people, and to loons, moose, wolves, black bear, and other wildlife that inhabit this special place. Tents, backpacks, canoes, cooking gear, food, and transportation from Fontana Interpretive Nature Center and Benton County Nature Center are provided. If you have some canoeing experience, are able to carry 40+ pounds, and possess the strength and spirit to explore, this trip may be for you! Limited stipends and scholarships opportunities are available, and are listed on the website registration - www.buchanancountyparks.com. Registration includes a \$100 deposit – final payments of those selected to participate will be due in May.

Youth interested in this trip are asked to submit a 2 paragraph (no more than 4 paragraphs) explanation of why they are interested, what they think they might gain, and what they think wilderness means. Please send to Sondra Cabell at scabell@co.buchanan.ia.us. Participant selection will be made based on this submission by May 1, and deposits for those not selected among the limit of 5 participants will be reimbursed in full. For more information, call 319-636-2617.

Stipends and scholarships are available to help offset costs.

- [Iowa Association of Naturalists](http://www.iowanaturalists.org) – (\$50-\$500 amounts while available)
- Friends of Fontana Park – 2 @ \$250 - Available to those who participated in River Raiders.
- Benton County Conservation Foundation 2 @ \$250 available
- Private Scholarship - 1 @ \$250

