

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.bentoncountyiowa.gov



Congratulations!



Benton County Conservation Naturalists Aaron & Faith both received a \$250 scholarship to attend the National Association of Interpretation Workshop in Council Bluffs in April. This scholarship was made possible by funding from Resource Enhancement and Protection Conservation Education Program (REAP CEP). Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP): Invest in Iowa, our outdoors, our heritage, our people. REAP is supported by the state of Iowa, providing funding to public and private partners for natural and cultural resources projects, including water quality, wildlife habitat, soil conservation, parks, trails, historic preservation and more.

Iowa Association of Naturalists (IAN) and Iowa County Conservation System (ICCS) also contributed funds to make this scholarship available.

Aaron & Faith are excited to attend this national workshop for Environmental Educators! Aaron will also be presenting at this workshop!

Hannen Lake to Host Spring Law Enforcement Training Workshop

By Camryn Grubic,
South Unit Park Ranger

The Benton County Conservation Board (BCCB) is excited to share with you that Hannen Lake Park will be the host site for the County Conservation Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) Spring Workshop on Tuesday, March 19th, 2024. What does this mean for you? Well, it means that our Park Rangers, and dozens of other county conservation officers from across the state of Iowa will be participating in a full day of hands-on and advanced training activities with assistance from the Cedar Rapids Police Academy and the Benton County Sheriff's Office. This

training will further the knowledge of officers across the region that protect and enhance natural and recreational areas. In choosing Blainstown as our host site, we are excited to announce that we will also be utilizing two local businesses. Our Place will be providing morning treats and refreshments, and Blainstown Quick Stop will be providing lunch for our participants.

BCCB has three full time Park Rangers on staff including myself, Camryn Grubic, South Unit Ranger; Layla Hagen, East Unit Ranger; and Ed Hach, North Unit Ranger. We also retain two additional full time staff members as certified law enforcement officers including Conservation Board Director, Shelby Williams, and Conservation Technician, Zach Parmater.

Hannen Lake to Host Spring Law Enforcement Training Workshop

Continued from previous page

Every October, the County Conservation Peace Officer Association (CCPOA) hosts its members at the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy for a three day mandatory training. This training provides annual refresher courses required of officers in the state of Iowa, which include areas of mental health awareness, hazmat control and response, and firearms qualification. CCPOA spring sessions are typically smaller and broken out into zones. Benton County Conservation finds itself seated in the eastern zone. Spring of 2024 will be the second time in just three years that BCCB has hosted the spring workshop; the last time was spring of 2022, where BCCB hosted this workshop in Vinton, Iowa. We are excited to do so again, as this training typically attracts up to 60 officers from surrounding areas of Benton County.



Figure 1: BCC Certified Law Enforcement from left to right: Zach Parmater, Ed Hach, Layla Hagen, Shelby Williams, Camryn Grubic

Advanced training topics slated for our spring agenda will be related to initiating traffic stops, high risk vehicle approaches, and vehicle searches. The Cedar Rapids Police Academy has been more than happy to assist us in coordinating training needs, and will even provide certified instructors in these training areas. The Benton County Sheriff's Office will also provide assistance. Our participants will spend the morning portion in a classroom setting where they'll be learning about skills and tactics to be utilized while on patrol. High risk vehicle approach and felony stops will be the main focus. The afternoon session will allow time for more hands-on related training. This is where officers, including our own, will be given the chance to practice what they have learned. Participating officers will be given the opportunity to step into live practice scenarios and utilize the tactics, tools, and other resources they have acquired through this form of continued education to assist them in critical decision making while in a training environment.

Our very own officers actively manage and patrol departmental areas as they're assigned. Our law enforcement staff are all certified through the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy's sixteen week basic academy program. Benton County Conservation strives to provide the safest educational and recreational opportunities for those who choose to venture in Benton County. We always look forward to advanced training offered through organizations like CCPOA, and work hard to apply what we have learned while performing on the job. If you ever see one of our officers out and about, please don't hesitate to reach out and say hello! We look forward to meeting citizens in our community and hearing feedback about our county parks!

FUNDRAISERS

Check out the Benton County Conservation website at <https://www.bentoncountyiowa.gov/conservation/donate/>

to see the awesome fundraisers Benton County Conservation Foundation has going on!

What's the Buzz?!

By Layla Hagen,
East Unit Park Ranger

If you are in the Eastern United States, get ready for the hum! From Illinois to Virginia, two cicada broods, Brood XIX and Brood XIII, will erupt at the same time around April and hum all through June 2024 resulting in an estimated billion cicadas. The last time the Northern Illinois Brood and the Great Southern Brood emerged at the same time was in 1803 (Thomas Jefferson was President)! Broods are made up of multiple species of cicadas that emerge on the same cycle. We will look at each brood in depth, but let's first look at the life cycle of the periodic cicada.

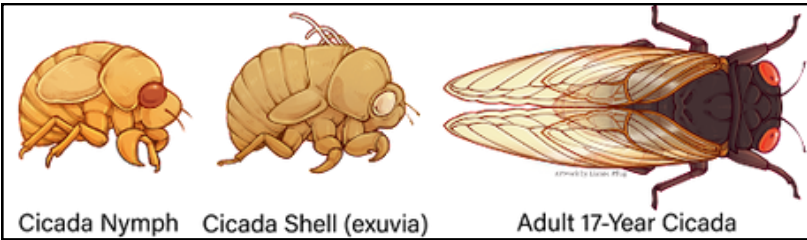


Figure 2: Life stages of a cicada

Periodical cicadas are known to have the longest insect life cycle spending most of their life in an immature nymph form underground. After 13 to 17 years underground, they surface for a brief adult life of only four to six weeks. Once the ground reaches around 64 degrees Fahrenheit, the cicadas find their way to nearby

trees and shed their skins. It takes about four to five days for the adult males to start humming. The male cicadas sing to attract the females to the trees in an attempt to persuade them to mate. After mating, the female cicada lays her fertilized eggs in the branches of plants and then the female dies, leaving her carcass at the base of the tree. The cycle begins all over when the cicada nymphs drop from the tree, returning to the ground for another 13 to 17 years.

Now, let's look at the two broods:

Brood XIX	Brood XIII
Great Southern Brood	Northern Illinois Brood
4 species of cicadas	3 species of cicadas
Every 13 years	Every 17 years
Late April through the first or second week of May	Mid-May through the first week of June
Across 15 states, mostly in the South, running from Virginia and into Alabama and Mississippi	Highly concentrated across 4 states, including Illinois, parts of Wisconsin, Indiana, and a bit of Michigan

What's the Buzz?!

Continued from previous page

Brood XIII (blue dots) and Brood XIX (red dots) will likely overlap in central Illinois and eastern Iowa. The last time the Northern Illinois Brood emerged 17 years ago, it was reported that people living in Chicago had to remove cicada carcasses with shovels to clear the roads and sidewalks. Floyd Shockley, an entomologist and the collections manager for the Department of Entomology at the National Museum of Natural History stated that their surfacing makes for an "extremely rare, once-in-a-lifetime event." The next time the broods align again will be in 2245. While the two broods this spring will mostly be separated by time and place, "they will overlap for several weeks in Illinois," says Shockley. This overlap could result in some Illinois residents hearing all seven species of the two broods singing their mating calls together. Shockley states that the overlap could result in "an extremely rare opportunity for genetic crossing between 13-year cicadas and 17-year cicadas that could lead to the emergence of a new brood."

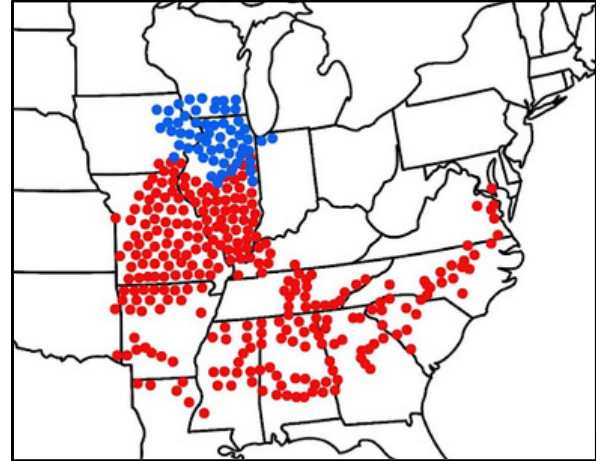


Figure 3: Map of cicada broods. Brood XII (blue dots) & Brood XIX (red dots)



Figure 4: Two cicadas cling to a rock

Shockley reminds us that cicadas are not harmful to humans or pets. While the large amount of them may be shocking to see or hear, they won't bite or sting you or your pets. Do not spray pesticides on the cicadas as the chemicals could impact birds and small mammals that might feed on them.

This event may be a bit much for some people, but try to spread the word about how unique this once in a lifetime opportunity in nature is. Make sure to pay attention this spring!

Join our mission to raise funds for the Wildcat Bluff Addition Acquisition this tax season! Be part of the change for a wilder Benton County!

DATE TODAY 2024

PAY TO THE ORDER OF BCC Foundation \$ Tax deductible funds

DOLLARS Protect natural resources for years to come!

MEMO Wildcat Bluff Addition Your Name

Contact us today at foundation@bentoncountyparks.com

The Myers' Family Conservation Fund came forward with a substantial donation towards the Wildcat Bluff Acquisition to more than double the size of the existing park. Not only that, they have offered to match any donations up to \$100,000 until May! This allows the opportunity for you, your business, or your organization to double your impact!

Double Crested Cormorant vs Gonzo

By Aaron Askelson,
Naturalist



Figure 5: A side-by-side comparison of Gonzo and a Double Crested Cormorant

I am probably dating myself but hopefully there are some people out there that remember Gonzo from the Muppet Show, if not, here is a picture. Gonzo's actual species is not known but if you look at the long-hooked beak and double crest of the cormorant you can definitely see a resemblance. With their long snake-like neck and dark thick body they are pretty easy to spot.

Cormorants nest along river corridors. They prefer to nest in groups or colonies along the edge of the river high in the trees or on steep cliffs, preferably on an island. Larger colonies are found along the Mississippi River complex

with dozens of birds grouping together. This can be detrimental to the vegetation below their roosts as the guano from the cormorants builds up and kills some of the surrounding plants. The birds might enjoy this because it clears the vegetation a possible predator could be hiding in. They are fairly long-lived birds; the oldest cormorant recorded was 23 years and 8 months old. Most typically live from 6 to 22 years. Cormorants are found on every continent except Antarctica. In China, cormorants have been trained to fish for people. There are some amusing YouTube videos on this.

They are amazing fishers which is where the majority of their diet comes from. They will consume some larger insects and the occasional frog or crayfish which we will discuss later. To be such great predators of fish, one needs to be able to swim fast and change direction fast. They do this by having a sleek shaped body and powerful legs and feet. Their powerful legs and webbed feet move them swiftly through the water as they tuck their wings tightly against their body. Using their tail and wings to steer their underwater chase. Diving to depths of 100 feet or more to pursue their prey, they can hold their breath for multiple minutes giving them plenty of time to chase fish, crayfish, and frogs. Once they have grabbed their prey with their beak, the hook in the end helps them latch onto their prey and not let go. They are also pretty fast through the air reaching up to 35 mph during flight.

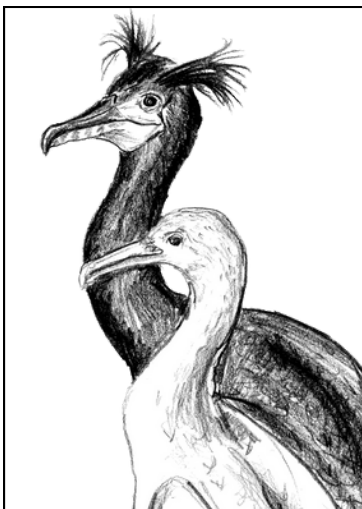


Figure 6: Illustration by Naturalist Aaron of a male and female double crested cormorant

Males are the ones with the goofy crests of feathers that make them look a little like Gonzo. They spend half the day fishing and the other half resting and drying off in the sun, oh to be so lucky. Cormorants do not have the same amount of preening oil as ducks and other waterfowl so they must dry out their feathers after going for a swim. When in the water, cormorants tend to float lower than most ducks and fly with a bend in their neck.



Figure 7: A cormorant drying off its wings in the sun

Double Crested Cormorant vs Gonzo *Continued from previous page*

Like many predatory birds, cormorants suffered when humans used DDT as an insecticide. It made the shells of their eggs too thin for the eggs to survive. After the ban of DDT cormorant population numbers have bounced back but they are susceptible to toxins in the water because everything they eat comes out of the water. If you happen to watch a cormorant eat a crayfish they sometimes bash the crayfish against the water to dislodge the crayfish's pincers and legs or stun them. Then they flick them into the air and try to swallow them headfirst. I have never witnessed this but I have seen one catch and eat a frog in this same manner along the Mississippi. If you get a chance, get out this spring and look for one of our cool avian friends along the Cedar River.

Haiku Challenge: Responses Submitted by readers

*Prairie teems with life
A world we have forgotten
In our busy lives*



*Strolling through woodlands
peace descends upon my soul
thoroughly restored*



*It's only a seed
inside is a miracle
waiting to happen*



Benton County Conservation Proposing a Water Trail on the Cedar River!



Benton County Conservation is working on establishing a water trail on the Cedar River! The proposed trail will begin at Winegar Access and go to Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area. This will equate to 24 miles amount of mapped trails in Benton County on the Cedar River! This process can take up to 5 years. Stay tuned for updates!

“ Water Trails are recreational corridors and routes on rivers and lakes that provide a unique experience for canoeists and kayakers and provide adequate access points that can be used for planning your trips at various lengths and difficulty.

A water trail will have a detailed map showing access points and river mileage and may even provide information on history and area culture, wildlife viewing opportunities and more.

They can help re-connect lowans to their history, heritage, geology and wildlife. A water trail promotes an ethic of caring that makes us more aware of our surroundings and environment and can be thought of as educational venues.

Whether they are used for relaxation, health and fitness, education or just for spending time with family, water trails provide in-state destinations for recreational river users that can even help boost local economies.

-Iowa Department of Natural Resources

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Prairie Chickens... in Iowa?!

By Faith Hunt,
Naturalist



Figure 8: The lone prairie chicken showing off his air sacks and gorgeous pinnate feathers. Located outside of Lamoni, Iowa.

The second weekend in March, I had a chance to see a prairie chicken for the first time in the state. The greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*), sometimes called a boomer bunny, is a large bird in the grouse family. They are known and adored for their flashy display of courtship, known as “booming” which happens in the spring. After seeing a few reports online, I traveled 208 miles to Southwest Iowa to find the lone prairie chicken. We arrived on a Sunday evening in hopes to scout out the area before the morning, when the birds are most active. After spending some time driving around the area, we were about to call it a day, when we finally saw him. Right off of Route 18, along the fence row that separates the ditch from cropland, strutted the lone prairie chicken. There was no traditional lek (the term for the booming grounds). We watched as he would stop periodically to peck at the ground and check out his surroundings. Something about his strut, the colors of his plumage, the lush green grass around him and

the orangey-purplish hue of the evening sky made the moment feel even more surreal. I couldn't wait to wake up the next morning to see him in full action.

The next day, we arrived just as the sun was beginning to rise. He was exactly where he had been the evening before. He had no competitors in site, but also no visible female watching his theatrical performance. It's important to mention that he is ahead of the typical “booming” schedule. That did not stop the young male from giving it his all. I set up the spotting scope and watched his pinnate feathers raise from his eyebrows like horns pointed towards the sky, his bright orange pouch on his neck expand and shrink with every call. He cooed, hooted, whooped, drummed, and hollered. He bowed, stomped, side-stepped, pivoted, raised and lowered his tail feathers as he patrolled a distance no longer than a telephone pole. Whenever a vehicle would pass by, he would stop, fly along the fence line, “chasing” the vehicle away, then start his dance again. This happened countless times in the two hours we were there. At one point, he became curious of us as more on-lookers started to show up to watch his dancing, that he charged a photographer with no more than 8 feet between them. The prairie chicken was no chicken at all. His fierce spirit and complete confidence was inspiring and left me feeling both awestruck and sad - a feeling of grief for the near loss of this incredible bird species from our state.

In the 1880's, the prairie chicken was the most abundant game bird. It was estimated that one flight was around 33,000 birds - expanding half a mile long, 50 yards wide and three to four birds deep. By 1956, the last bird disappeared from the state. Today, it is estimated that the prairie chicken population is less than 100 birds. An aggressive reintroduction effort to restore their populations began in the 1980's in Ringgold County. Today, this is one of the last places reported in Iowa where the prairie chicken successfully reproduces. If you want a chance to see prairie chickens for yourself, visit the Kellerton Grasslands Bird Conservation Area to view the males in the lek during their boom in late March to early May. Make sure to bring binoculars and be ready for a show! I promise it is worth the trip.

Conservation Board Members

Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Chair

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member

Samantha Hunter: Mount Auburn, Member

Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member

Becky VanWey: Vinton, Member

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

Check www.bentoncountya.gov

For times and locations. 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.bentoncountya.gov

or www.mycountyparks.com

Find us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/bentoncountyparks): @bentoncountyparks

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

Calendar of Events Spring 2024

Registration for all events is required by visiting

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

Building Better Birders

April 13th, 7AM-3:00PM at Nature Center; \$20/ per bird house

Benton County Conservation is hosting a Building Better Birders Workshop where bird watchers, “birders,” will learn the basics about birding and have a chance to put their knowledge into practice. This is the FINAL Building Better Birder workshop hosted by Benton County Conservation. To learn more about other workshops, visit:

<https://buildingbetterbirders.com>. Registration is required by April 5th, 2024 by visiting

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx>. **If you would like to attend and NOT build a bluebird house, please call us at 319-472-4942 or email info@bentoncountyparks.com to register.**

Come for the whole workshop, or just a portion!

7:00am - 9:00am Welcome at Wildcat Bluff Boat Ramp and birding

9:00am - 10:45am travel / bird at Edna Shain Fen Wildlife Area

10:45am - 12:30pm travel to Nature Center / Intro to Wetland bird species presentation

12:30pm - 1:30pm Lunch

1:30pm - 2:30pm Build Bluebird boxes

2:30pm - 3:00pm Questions and wrap up



Building Better Birders Workshop will be conducted by Kelly McKay (BioEco Research and Monitoring Center), with assistance from Mark Roberts (Clinton County Conservation), Brian Ritter & James Wiebler (Nahant Marsh Ed. Center). Funding for this workshop was provided by the Resource Enhancement and Protection – Conservation Education Program (REAP-CEP).



Hannen Lake Park Shop Grand Opening

April 21st, 12:30-2:30 PM at Hannen Lake Park (1949 Benton Iowa Rd, Blirstown, IA 52209)

Have you wondered what that new building is at Hannen Lake Park? Join BCCB staff and volunteers to view the new maintenance shop at Hannen Lake Park! Enjoy beverages and baked goods provided by Recharge Coffee Company. Questions? Call 319-560-9804.

Trail Blazers

April 27th, 9AM at Benton-City Fry Recreation Area (5899 29th Ave Dr. Vinton, IA 52349)

Trailblaze Benton City-Fry with us on April 27, 2024 at 9:00 AM! Be the first to hike the new “Maple Ridge Trail” and explore what this river park has to offer! This trail is approximately .5 miles long and is considered moderate due to the uneven terrain and some steep inclines. Please wear sturdy shoes and bring water for this hike. Registration for this event is preferred but not required at mycountyparks.com

Conservation Library Programs

June 5th, 11AM at Blairstown Library (305 Locust St NE, Blairstown, IA 52209)

June 5th, 2PM at Schroeder Library (93 Main St, Keystone, IA 52249)

June 7th, 9:30AM at Belle Plaine Community Library (904 Main St, Belle Plaine, IA 52208)

June 25th, 9:45AM at Van Horne Public Library (114 Main St, Van Horne, IA 52346)



River Raiders - Paddle the Upper Iowa River (Kendallville - Decorah)

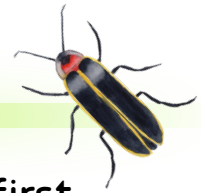
June 19th-21st; MANDATORY training on June 13th ; \$100 per adventurer

Adventure awaits around every bend! Explore the Upper Iowa River from Kendallville to Decorah. Youth will canoe, camp, cook outdoors, and learn wilderness skills on this two-night, three-day excursion. Participants will paddle their way around winding bends, rapids, scenic waterfalls, cold springs, and 200-foot chimney bluffs. The trip fee includes tents, food, canoes, life jackets, paddles and transportation. Enrollment is limited to 14 participants. Participants must attend the training day on June 13 (5 - 8 pm). The training will include camping and paddling basics, menu for the trip itinerary, and what to pack. Age - youth entering grades 6-8. The trip is offered in partnership with Buchanan and Benton County Conservation. Sign up by visiting <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Buchanan-County-Conservation-Offices/Events/23499/River-Raiders.aspx>

Save the date: July 20th, 2024



Firefly Festival



Come on down to Benton County Conservation's first annual Firefly Festival! Get ready for a magical evening filled with twinkling fireflies, laughs, delicious grub, games, crafts, learning, and toe-tapping tunes from local artists!

We are seeking mobile food vendors.
Contact info@bentoncountyparks.com to learn more!



DISCOVER: WOLVES & BEARS OF THE UPPER MIDWEST BUS TOUR

Ely, Minnesota
September 26th-29th, 2024



Get ready for a 4-day adventure packed with howling excitement as you journey to the International Wolf Center and the North American Bear Center! Join other wildlife enthusiasts in special programming to learn more about these incredible creatures. This trip will also include site seeing along the scenic highway to Twin Harbors, additional visitor centers, time for shopping in Ely, and more!

Cost Per Person:

Single Occupancy Fee: \$870
Double Occupancy Fee: \$640
Triple Occupancy Fee: \$560
Quad Occupancy Fee: \$530

Trip fee includes motorcoach transportation, lodging, entrance fees, tours, breakfast, & tips.
Participants will be responsible for lunches & dinners.

Contact us for more information!

Michael Maas: 563-581-3553

Faith Hunt: 319-560-9809

\$200 deposit required at registration

Register online at www.buchanancountyparks.com under the events tab

Deadline To Register is August 23rd, 2024



This is a joint trip with
Buchanan County
Conservation and Benton
County Conservation