

# THE NATURE OF THINGS

*The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter*

**VOLUME 31 Summer 2023**

## Inside this Issue

Hannen Happenings  
Pages 1 & 2

Foraged Food  
Pages 3 & 4

An Ode to an Oak  
Page 5

Meet our Naturalist  
Intern!  
Page 5

Horses on Trails  
Page 6

Simple Summer Fun  
Page 7

Calendar of Events  
Insert

Electronic versions and  
email sign up are available at  
our website

[www.bentoncountyia.gov](http://www.bentoncountyia.gov)



## Hannen Happenings

By Camryn Grubic,  
South Unit Park Ranger

Benton County Conservation's oldest park is taking on some new looks! The BCC crew has been incredibly busy over the past year making improvements to the park and natural areas surrounding our 45 acre lake in Blairstown, Iowa. It has been exciting to be a part of the changes around here and to see people from all over the state of Iowa enjoying the park on a daily basis. Projects have ranged from adding memorial benches, Arbor Day tree plantings, the addition of a park shelter on the beachfront, and soon to be the new office and maintenance building located at the entrance on the east side of the lake.



*Figure 1: New and improved Hannen Lake Park kiosk.*

A new campground registration kiosk has been added to the east entrance of the park. The design includes updated site maps, park rules and regulations and other BCC information. Our new kiosk structure was custom designed and locally fabricated from solid steel, and hopefully derecho proof.

Memorial benches are a unique way for families and friends of loved ones to donate to Benton County Conservation. A heavy-duty bench made of durable recycled plastic and powder-coated steel is placed on a five by eight foot concrete slab and commemorated with a customizable plaque. Benches donated to Hannen Lake Park so far this year have been made to honor the memories of Max O. Kimm of Blairstown, and Jason Gryp of Cedar Rapids. Levi Wagner, brother of Jason Gryp, says "After my brother passed, we wanted a place where we could just go and sit to be peaceful. The Hannen park ranger reached out shortly after about filling out the application for the

bench. I asked if we could be a part of putting together and placing the bench because it would mean a lot more to our family. Being able to put our own little touch and memory into it meant the world to our family”. Memorial benches and trees can be placed at any one of our many BCCB parks. For any further information on memorial benches or trees, visit our website at

<https://www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/>

The Hannen Lake beach has been a summertime hotspot for families gathering to soak up some sunshine and good times. Despite the beach parking area being crowded by the construction of the new shop facilities, the beach is still open and features a new twelve by eight foot shelter for some shade. The volleyball net is also up and ready for some play. A few renovations to the beach area are in discussion for post-construction at Hannen Lake. Russell Perkins, a Hannen Lake beachgoer from Central City, IA says “It is very enjoyable! This is a nice place and this new little shelter is the perfect place for shade while the grandkids swim”. The new shop facilities will include bathrooms and showers accessible to beachgoers and will also include a renovated parking area. Water sampling at the beach swimming area is completed by conservation staff every Monday morning and sent to the state hygienic lab for monitoring.



*Figure 2: Max O.Kimm bench donated by family of Max.*



*Figure 3: New Hannen Lake Park shop construction.*

Last, but not least, the construction of our new maintenance shop and office! This building will include a new park ranger office and a conference room that will overlook the beach. This will be the new host site for BCCB’s fall Iowa Hunter’s Education courses. As mentioned above, the new shop site will also feature two public restrooms accessible to beachgoers and park users. The rest of the building will be used for equipment maintenance and storage, project planning and construction. Upon completion, we would like members of the public to stop by, say hi to our staff, and take a look at the new facility. Stay tuned for more updates!

# Foraged Food

By Riley Curtis,  
Naturalist Intern

With warmer weather moving in, many kinds of wild edible plants will soon be seen popping up around Iowa. While foraging for wild ingredients can seem intimidating, there are a plethora of plants that are easy to identify and can be used to make delicious food.

Many of these plants can be found right in your backyard! One plant that can be foraged is called sumac. Sumac is a small shrub or tree that is easily identified by the large, dark red clusters of fuzzy berries that grow upright from its branches. These clusters, also known as a 'drupe' or 'bob', are completely edible and produce a sour, lemony flavor when crushed. Sumac berries can be used to make a variation of lemonade by crushing the berries in water, allowing the mixture to sit overnight, and straining the juice the next morning. Adding honey or agave nectar makes this the perfect summer drink!



Figure 4: Red sumac drupes.  
Image from Google.



Figure 5: Blooming dandelion.  
Image from Google.

Another plant that can be foraged to make a fun summer treat is the dandelion. Every part of this plant is edible, and many cultures have been using dandelions as food and as a medicinal herb for hundreds of years. One way to incorporate dandelions into your diet is through the yellow petals of the flower- they can be added as a colorful ingredient to pancakes, cookies, muffins, or other favorite baked goods. Dandelion leaves and stems contain a bitter taste that can be reduced through boiling or sautéing, at which point they become a nice substitute for greens such as spinach or chard. Fresh young leaves can be collected and added to a tossed salad, as the leaves

become bitter with age but are still palatable when young.

One final plant that makes for a delicious summer snack is the red mulberry. Mulberry trees are plentiful in woodland understories and along fencerows due to birds consuming the fruit and eventually spreading the seeds.

Mulberries start out as small white berries and eventually turn a dark purple-black color when ripe. They have a sweet-tart flavor that makes them perfect for being eaten fresh from the tree or used in cooking and baking. When mulberries are ripe, they will easily disconnect from the tree at the base of the berry's stem- I have found that it is easiest to collect berries by laying a tarp under the foliage of the tree and using a large stick to shake the limbs. The ripe berries will fall from the tree and you'll collect your fill in no time!



Figure 6: Ripe mulberries.  
Image from Google.

Mulberries over vanilla ice cream has been a summer staple for me for years, as well as using the berries to create a wild-foraged variation of strawberry shortcake.

When foraging for wild edible plants, it is always important to be 100% sure what plant you are harvesting before you consume it. Many edible plants have toxic look-alikes, so it is crucial to confirm the plants with a field guide or an experienced forager before using them. Some people have allergies to plants so it is important to only try a small amount at first. It is also important to harvest plants that have not been sprayed with pesticides or treated with chemicals. Avoid areas such as ditches that would contain pesticides and herbicides. Harvesting wild edible plants allows you to create vibrant and unique dishes that taste amazing; so grab your field guide and get to foraging!

---

### Mulberry Jam:

- 2 ½ cups mulberries
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- ½ Tbsp lemon juice



Clean the mulberries by soaking them in water for 15 minutes and use a knife to remove the attached stems. Mix the mulberries, lemon juice and sugar in a pot. Cook and stir the mixture over medium heat for 20-30 minutes, or until thick. Test the jam by putting a plate in a freezer, and add a small amount to the frozen plate when the jam appears that it is beginning to gel in the pot. Return the plate to the freezer for a few minutes, then remove and nudge with a spoon. If the jam wrinkles, then it has gelled enough; if not, cook for a few minutes longer. Store the finished jam in sterilized jars. (*Manu's Menu*)

### Wild Sumac Lemonade:

- 4 cups of berries
- 3 quarts cold water



Holding the sumac bob in both hands, use your thumbs to separate the individual berries from the cluster until you have 4 cups of berries. Put the berries in a large strainer and shake to remove any twigs, leaves, etc. from the berries. Put the berries in a gallon pitcher, add cold water and stir for two minutes. After stirring, separate the berries from the mixture by pouring through a strainer into a large bowl. Strain again by pouring the liquid twice through a cheesecloth, jelly bag or dishcloth. To sweeten the 'lemonade', add simple syrup to your liking.

---

### Fried Dandelion Blossoms:

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 Tbsp seasoned salt
- ½ Tbsp black pepper
- ¼ cup butter
- 2 eggs
- 40 dandelion blossoms, stems removed

Combine dry ingredients in a bowl. Beat eggs in a mixing bowl, then stir in dandelion blossoms until completely coated. Using medium heat, melt butter in a large pan. Remove half of the blossoms from the egg, then use your hands to completely coat the blossoms in the flour mixture. Allow excess flour to fall away and cook in the melted butter until golden brown (around 5 minutes), stirring occasionally. Drain on a paper towel-lined plate and repeat with the rest of the blossoms. (*Allrecipes*)

# An Ode to an Oak

By Aaron Askelson,  
Naturalist

When people think of a big majestic tree they often think of oaks. These trees once spanned large sections of our state in oak savannas which are large areas of grasslands with oaks sprinkled in. White oaks are more tolerant to the occasional fires that spread across these savannas. Once they reach the age of twelve years their bark is thick enough to withstand quick grass fires. These fires keep other tree species at bay and provide excellent habitat for oaks and native prairie species. Many different species utilize the oak tree for food, shelter, and habitat. It is believed that the oak provides for over 150 species. Oaks can live over 200 years in the right conditions and produce up to 10 million acorns over their lifetime. There are 700 species of tiny wasps that make galls on oak trees, don't worry, they are not harmful to humans. The gall protects the insect as it grows and they do little to no harm to the tree. Oaks are an important part of our ecosystem, providing diverse habitat for so many essential species. From the tiny wasps *amphibolips confluent*, who use the leaves to make their "oak apple galls" that protect their tiny wasp eggs, to the massive whitetail bucks who munch on the plentiful acorns.



Figure 7: Oak leaf drawn by  
Naturalist Aaron.

## Meet BCC Summer Naturalist Intern!

By Riley Curtis,  
Naturalist Intern



Figure 8: BCC Naturalist Intern Riley Curtis

My name is Riley Curtis, and I am the seasonal Naturalist Intern for Benton County Conservation. I am from Atkins, IA and am currently attending Kirkwood Community College in the 'Parks and Natural Resources' program. I hope to pursue the field of wildlife rehabilitation outside of college. I enjoy all aspects of the outdoors, whether that be birdwatching, hiking, plant ID/foraging, or just sitting outside reading a book. I have always been fascinated with animals and love expanding my knowledge of Iowa's native flora and fauna; through volunteering with different wildlife rehabilitation organizations, I have also discovered a love for working with wildlife. Through my internship with Benton County Conservation, I am able to work with the public to educate others about the different aspects of our environment, and the creatures that live in it!

# Horses on the Trails

By Layla Hagen,  
East Unit Ranger

Have you been hiking with your family or your dog and out of nowhere, a horse with a rider meets you on the trail? If you've ever hiked at Winegar and Tobin Wildlife Area in Benton County, this probably has happened to you! The first thing that comes to your mind might be to get out of the way and be very quiet to not spook the horse. You might think that they need to yield to you and they should be trained well so you walk straight toward them expecting them to move and wait. I am here to share with you the most current and safe passing plan for trails that are shared with equestrian users. This material is from training I attended held by Equine Land Conservation Resource.



*Figure 9: Sunset horseback ride.*

## The Trails Safe Passing Plan: Stop! Speak and Stand Back

### STOP:

- Horses are prey animals and can naturally be afraid of unfamiliar people and animals.
- It is best for horses that other trail users remain STOPPED while people with horses pass at a walk.
- When approaching a horse from behind, please STOP and SPEAK to announce your presence and location. Pass slowly when the people with horses are prepared.
- STOPPING allows time for everyone to prepare for safe trail passing.

### SPEAK:

- Please announce your presence and say “Hi” when horses pass by. Riders would like you to talk to them!
- When approaching horses from behind, it is best for all trail users to STOP and announce themselves, so people with horses have time to turn their horses to face the other trail users and prepare for safe trail passing.
- SPEAKING helps horses identify you as a person and will help keep them calm.

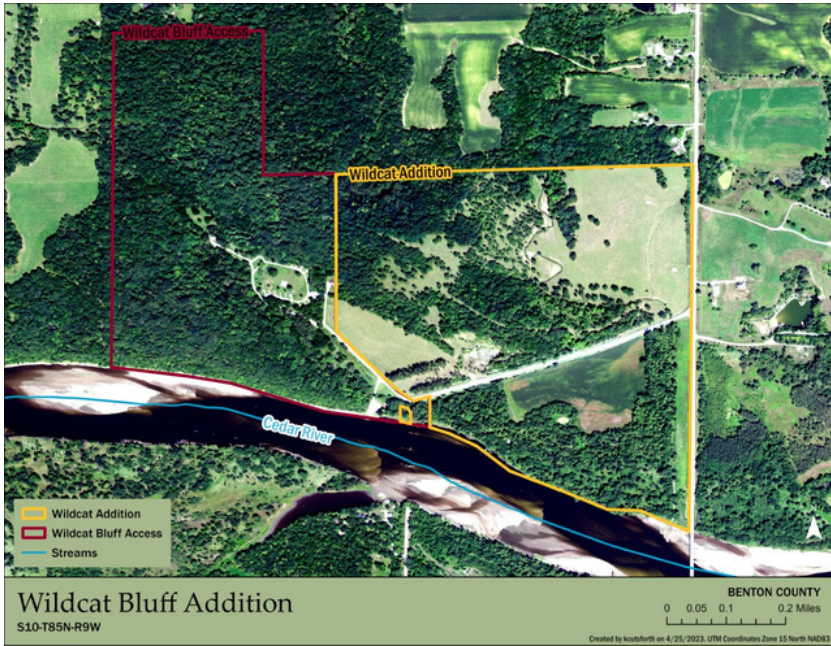
### STAND BACK:

- Please STAND BACK with your whole group on the same side of the trail.
- If possible, it is best to STAND BACK on the lower side of the trail, so you do not appear to the horses to be taller than they are.
- Please contain children and dogs.
- Please do not hide or stand behind a tree, as this might cause fear to the horse thinking you are a predator.

### SMILE:

- Enjoy the safe trails!

**Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is partnering with the Benton County Conservation Board to purchase 184 acres of land adjacent to BCCB's Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area. So far, BCC has raised over \$210,000 in donations for the Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area Addition!**



Interested in donating to help the property? Your donation is tax-deductible! Scan the QR code to donate today or visit our website at <https://www.bentoncountyiowa.gov/conservation/donate/>



**Simple Summer Fun!**

A little creativity and time goes a long way to keep the kids entertained for the summer. One activity that we did this year for summer camp was create our own hopscotch obstacle course for the kids. "Obstacles" included the vine walk, spin around the sun, duck waddle, frog hop, rainbow run, bubble pop, spell your name, and balance branch. The kids couldn't get enough of it! Grab some chalk, find a nice concrete area and have some fun! You could even have the kids make their own course for added fun!



## **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. Check

[www.bentoncountyiowa.org](http://www.bentoncountyiowa.org) 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](mailto:@bentoncountyparks.com)

Find us online at: [www.bentoncountya.gov](http://www.bentoncountya.gov)

or [www.mycountyparks.com](http://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 Summer 2023

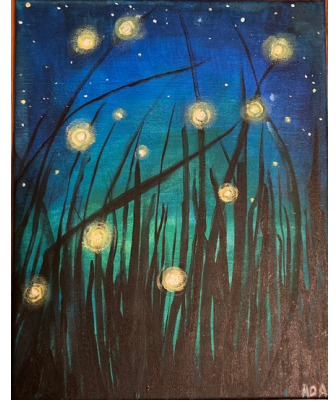
Registration for all events is required by visiting

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

## Artistry with Aaron: Firefly in the Sky

**July 6th, 6:30PM at Nature Center ; \$40 for adult, \$20 for kid**

Fireflies are found on every continent except Antarctica. However, in the U.S., it's uncommon to find them west of Kansas! This painting class led by Naturalist Aaron will include step-by-step instruction, one 11x14" canvas and painting supplies to make a firefly painting. No refunds. Space is limited. Registration is required by visiting [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)



## Firefly Magic

**July 6th, 8:00PM at Nature Center; FREE**

Explore the magical world of fireflies! Learn about some of Iowa's most unique bioluminescent insects that can be found in your own backyard! Participants will then make their own insect observation container and go on a firefly catching adventure! Participants are encouraged to bring bug spray and an upcycled glass jar with a lid. This program is suitable for all ages and is weather dependent. Registration is not required.

## Reptiles!

**July 18th, 9:45AM-10:45AM 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.

## Wild Animals: When to Help and How

**July 20th, 6:30PM at Benton County Nature Center; FREE**

Come learn about wild baby animals and what to do if you find one! This presentation will cover emergency response actions, identifying and assessing wild baby animals, information about local rehabilitators, and what you can do to help. Registration is required by visiting [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)

## Nature Kids: Creek Stomp

**July 21st, 10AM-11:30AM at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (3139 57th Street Trail, Center Point, Iowa 52213); FREE**

Come explore the creek at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area! This program is suitable for all ages so bring the whole family! Participants must wear shoes and be prepared to get wet and dirty. Meet at the pavilion. Registration is required by visiting [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)



## Public Canoeing at Rodgers Park

**August 17th, 1-3PM at Rodgers Park; FREE**

BCC is offering a public canoe program at Rodgers Park. During this program, we will cover canoe and water safety and paddling basics for flatwater canoeing. Participants should meet at the beach and should bring their own water and wear shoes that can get wet. BCC will provide canoes and life jackets. Registration is required by visiting [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)

## Find Your Voice: Frog Band

**August 15th, 3PM at Blairstown Library; FREE**

Hop into the Blairstown Library for a "ribbiting" program about Iowa's amphibian friends. Participants will learn about frogs and their calls and create their own frog chorus! This program is suitable for all ages. No registration required.



## Monarch Tagging - Citizen Science

**September 8th, 10AM - Old Creamery Nature Trail - Garrison Trail Head** (near the intersection of Sycamore Ave & Pine St. near the Garrison Library)

**September 11th, 2PM - Benton County Nature Center**

**September 12th, 10AM - Irvine Prairie** (1173 55th Street, Dysart, Iowa)

**September 15th, 2PM - Hannen Lake Park - Beach Parking lot**

Contribute to monarch citizen science by catching monarch butterflies on their amazing migration back south!

Participants will get a chance to catch monarch butterflies, tag them for monitoring and test their health. This program is free, weather dependent and family-friendly. Participants should meet at locations listed above. Registration is not required.

## Building Better Birders Workshop #2

**September 14th, 7AM at Hannen Lake Park - White Oak Shelter (east side); FREE**

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 workshop is the second of three Building Better Workshops around Benton County. To learn more about other workshops, visit <https://buildingbetterbirders.com>.

**Registration is required by 9/7/23 by visiting [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)**

*Those who are registered can come for the whole workshop, or just a portion!*

7:00-7:15 Introductions and housekeeping

7:15-10:00 Birding at Hannen Lake

10:00-10:15 Break

10:15-10:30 Travel to Beautiful Plains Prairie Park

10:30-12:00 Birding at Beautiful Plains Prairie Park

12:00-1:00 Lunch at Lincoln Café or El Catrin Mexican cuisine or bring lunch on your own

1:00-1:15 Meet at Beautiful Plains Prairie Park to caravan to Iowa River Wetlands

1:15-2:45 Birding at Iowa River Wetlands

Building Better Birders Workshop will be conducted by Kelly McKay (BioEco Research and Monitoring Center), with assistance from Mark Roberts, 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).



# SAVE THE DATE

## RODGERS FALL FAMILY FEST SEPTEMBER 29TH -30TH, 2023

Activities include a full moon scavenger hunt, campfire desserts, campground trick-or-treating & more!

