

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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sign up are available at our
website
www.bentoncountyiowa.gov



What's in the Watershed?

By Camryn Grubic
South Unit Park Ranger



Figure 1: Drone footage of Hannen Lake Park

It shouldn't come as a shock to anyone who knows a thing or two about conservation that Iowa's waterways and aquatic ecosystems are under threat. Let me share with you about some of the steps Benton County Conservation has been taking to secure a safer and healthier future for one of our designated hotspots, Hannen Lake Park.

Hannen Lake Park was the first county conservation manmade lake in the State of Iowa, and was completed in 1958. Several basin cleanouts, sediment mitigation tasks, and shoreline infrastructure projects have been completed by the county with the help of partnering agencies over the last 67 years. The current conservation board and staff want to take even bigger steps to ensure that the next several decades of recreation and service at our lakes can provide the healthiest experiences for you.

Though Hannen Lake has been listed as an "impaired waterway" by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for over a decade, it doesn't mean that it is unsafe to swim or fish out of. BCCB participates in an annual lake monitoring study, tracking swimming safety standards from Memorial Day through Labor Day each year. Those results are published online, and warnings are posted at swimming locations if necessary. However, we almost never have increased levels of bacteria per the state lab's standards, but always feel free to reach out and ask. The IDNR states Hannen Lake is impaired due to algal growth and increased turbidity, which simply means "water that has become cloudy or murky due to the presence of suspended solids like silt, mud, algae, or other particles".

What's in the Watershed?

Continued from previous page

What is causing this turbidity? What is really in the watershed? The answer is sediment caused by erosion! Hannen Lake's watershed (approximately 603 acres), or the area of acreage which drains into the lake in the event of rainfall, is experiencing harsh erosion conditions. If you have taken the time to enjoy a hike along any of the trails at the park, it is easy to notice the excess gulley erosion where two hills converge at their bases. In some areas it looks like a miniature gorge where rain settles into the base between two large hills, creating a stream which churns up mud along the way, before finally draining into the lake.

Can we stop it? Yes we can! Conservation staff at Benton County have been working to develop a coordinated effort between our department and the Iowa DNR lake restoration team, and a plan is in the works. Lake monitoring and lab work is being conducted through 2025 to better understand the chemistry and ecology of Hannen Lake, and it was remapped in 2024 to compare sediment levels to the previous bathymetry map from 2012. This is a slow process, but worth the wait for good comparable data. In the meantime, our conservation staff has identified areas of concern and has begun tackling some of those with boots and equipment on the ground. A significant portion of that is the much needed cleanup of crowded pine plantings that took the front of the 2020 derecho, which will now be converted to tallgrass prairie in an effort to enhance water quality and habitat abundance. Our naturalists will tell you that one acre of prairie will absorb 9 inches of rain per acre per hour, a statistic from UNI's Tallgrass Prairie Center. That is a lot! We've already converted 12 acres of excess mowed grass hill slopes to prairie in 2023, and plan to establish tallgrass prairie in another 20+ acres of park area in the near future. This will help to ensure the water that does inevitably make it into the lake is as clean and free of soil and other nutrient particles as possible.

The time is now, and at Benton County Conservation, we realize that. We want to make sure that the steps we are taking today will ensure another 67+ years of Hannen Lake so that it doesn't become "Hannen Shallow Wetland". But, it all takes time, and we hope that you know that. Trust me, we are on the move! One of the best perks of the job is to hear of the family memories, traditions, and everchanging landscapes at our parks, and we will continue to keep those best interests in mind. Here's to many more years to come at Hannen Lake Park!



Figure 2: Ranger Grubic using the bottom of his hand as an example of gulley erosion. That's the bottom of a barbed wire fence that has been undercut by erosion.

**OPEN
NOW**

Atkins Roundhouse Area Now Open!

We're excited to welcome you back to the Atkins Roundhouse Area. While the space is still a work in progress, it's ready for you to enjoy once again.

You'll notice there's still work to be done, and that's because we're committed to continuous improvement for the benefit of people and nature alike. We currently have tree replanting bids open, so if you or someone you know is interested in helping shape the future of this property, please help us spread the word! Thank you for your patience—and your passion for Benton County's wild spaces. See you out there!



Spend Some Time on the Old Creamery Nature Trail

By Randy Scheel

Benton County Conservation Board & OCNT Volunteer

Recently, I was at a community event when a good friend approached me to let me know he had ridden the Old Creamery Nature Trail (OCNT) and how much he liked the trail. In addition, he commented how he understands the trail is to be promoted for others to use, yet appreciates how it is often a “hidden secret” in our county and state. He really likes the quiet and solitude along the trail. This seems to be a typical conversation I have had many times regarding the OCNT.

The Old Creamery Nature Trail is 14 miles long and connects Vinton, Garrison, and Dysart. It has a limestone base which is perfect for walking, jogging, biking (trail bikes, fat tires, or hybrids are recommended), and a variety of other activities. Originally this was a rail line established in the 1870’s that was converted to a nature trail nearly 120 years later. It is rich in history and has 13 bridges along the way. If you stop in Garrison at the rest area, you will be able to see signage near the pavilion that describes the history of that site. Our goal is to add more signage along the trail in upcoming years.

We are working on improving the trailhead in Vinton. Thanks to the kindness of John Anderson and family, we now have a new trail head on West 13th Street just west of the New Century FS Plant. There is space to park vehicles, and the new portion of the trail runs north to connect with the current trail. We are working with the City of Vinton to create a safe crossing of Highway 218 (actual crossing location has yet to be determined) to allow better access to this new trailhead. In the meantime, the current trailhead at West 8th Street will remain open until we have this project completed. Our goal is to provide the safest way to cross the highway to encourage more trail use by all ages.

The next trail event will be held on Saturday July 19th in Garrison as part of the town’s Fun Days. A 5k will be held with registration starting at 8:15 am and the run/walk to start at 9:00 am. This will all start at the rest area where you can also enjoy breakfast served by the Library Board if you are rooting on your favorite runner. Registration information can be found on the Old Creamery Nature Trail Facebook page.

Take time to enjoy this valuable resource in Benton County! Along the way don’t be surprised if you see deer, chipmunks, turkeys, a large variety of birds, squirrels, other animals, and occasionally other trail users. There are places and benches to rest along the way. In addition, each town has services nearby. In Dysart, the trailhead is near Casey’s (just a few blocks to the downtown area). In Garrison, the Hitchin’ Post has recently reopened and serves food and beverages, not to mention a bike fix-it station and water at the rest area. In Vinton, there are a variety of services within blocks of either trailhead.

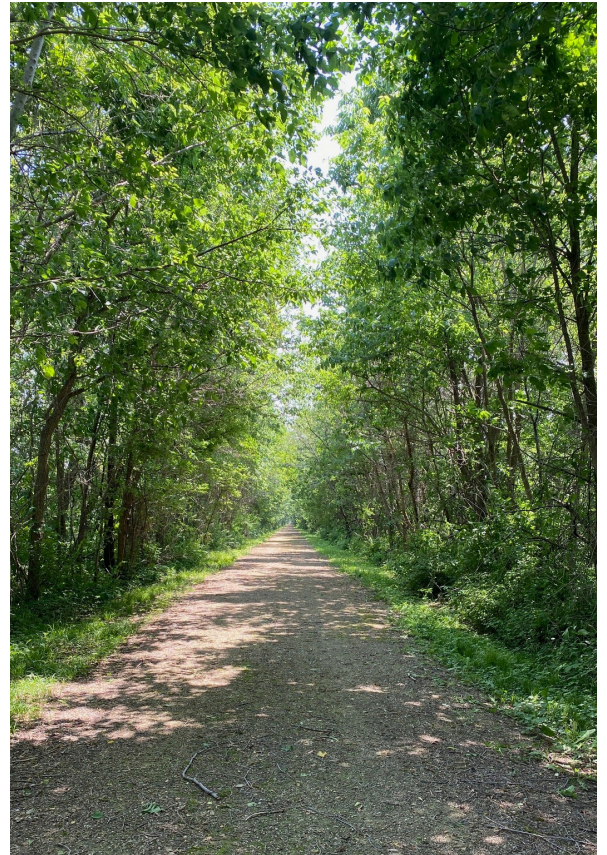


Figure 3: Scenic photo of the OCNT. Photo by Randy Scheel, BCCB member & OCNT volunteer

SANDHILL CRANE & PRAIRIE CHICKEN BUS TOUR

NORTH PLATTE, NEBRASKA

MARCH 26TH-28TH, 2026

Each spring, more than 500,000 sandhill cranes gather in the Platte River valley during their northward migration. Cranes have been making this migration annually for thousands of years.

The Platte is a “staging” area where the cranes stop to rest and replenish energy reserves before continuing on to their nesting grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia.

It is the only major staging area on the sandhill cranes’ northward migration.

Approximately 80% of all sandhill cranes come to the Platte every spring. The concentration of cranes here is the greatest of anywhere in the world.

This 3-day trip will be packed with professional guided tours by Dusty Trails, LLC to view prairie chickens and sandhill cranes, stop at The Old Market in Omaha, Golden Spike Tour and Visitor Center, and more!

Trip fee includes motorcoach transportation, lodging, professional guides, entrance fees, two breakfasts and tips. *Participants will be responsible for lunches and dinners.*

COST PER PERSON:

Single occupancy fee \$1,050.00

Double occupancy fee \$900.00

Triple occupancy fee \$850.00

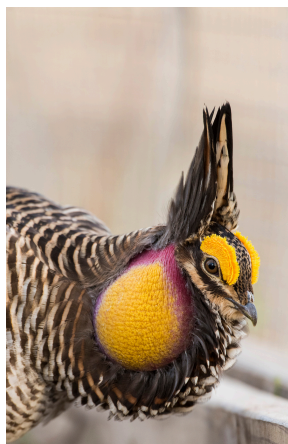
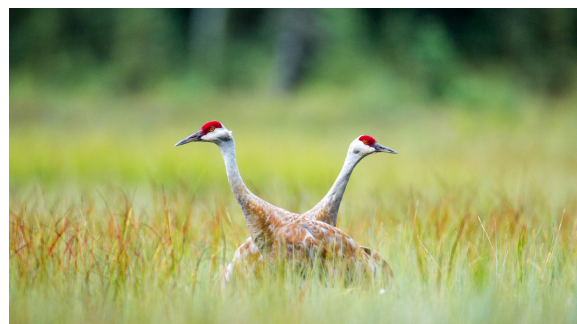
Quad occupancy fee \$750.00

**Register by February 12th to secure your spot
\$350 deposit required at registration.**

Register online at www.buchanancountyparks.com under the events tab or scan the URL code to register



DEADLINE TO REGISTER IS FEBRUARY 12TH, 2026



Benton County Conservation

Ph: 319-560-9809

Bremer County Conservation

Ph: 319-882-4742

Buchanan County Conservation

Ph: 319-636-2671



Welcome East Unit Park Ranger!

By Will Souer
East Unit Park Ranger



Figure 4: East Unit Ranger Souer and his family

Hello, my name is Will Souer and I am the newest Park Ranger for Benton County Conservation. I work primarily out of the river parks: Wildcat, Benton City, and Hoefle-Dulin, but you may see me at any of our properties as I work closely with our other Rangers and conservation staff to provide quality services for all Benton County residents and park users.

I grew up in rural Iowa by Lake Odessa outside of Wapello. My dad worked for the Iowa DNR and ran a taxidermy business out of our house so I was introduced to conservation and wildlife at a young age. I have been told that as a kid whenever Marty

Stouffer's Wild America came on PBS I demanded everybody in the house be quiet so I could watch the show without any distractions.

I graduated from the University of Iowa in 2006 and was hired as a Deputy Sheriff by the Johnson County Sheriff's Office later that year. While at the Sheriff's Office I worked in both the jail and patrol divisions, providing general law enforcement and emergency services to the residents of Johnson County.

In 2014 I went back to school at Kirkwood Community College and started working toward a second degree in Parks and Natural Resources. When I wasn't working at the Sheriff's Office or attending class I volunteered as much as I could at the Iowa River Wildlife Unit and for the Bur Oak Land Trust. During my Kirkwood years I also worked as a Park Aide at Palisades-Kepler State Park. The conservation-related experiences at these different places helped me realize my dream was to work in the wild.

In 2016 I was hired by the Johnson County Conservation Board as a Park Ranger and worked there for two years before moving on to the Black Hawk County Conservation Board in 2018. In Black Hawk County I worked as a Park Ranger for a number of years before focusing on land management and habitat restoration type work as a Wildlife Conservationist.

My wife and I currently live in Center Point with our four kids ages 14, 12, 7, and 2 so I couldn't pass up the opportunity to come home and work in Benton County. When not at work most of my free time is spent running kids around to various school sports and music events. I am truly honored to be able to serve and protect the community to which our family belongs.

If you see me out and about in any of the Benton County areas, come say hello. I would love to hear what brings you to the area. Benton County has a lot to offer and I look forward to working with you!

SCHOOLS OUT – LEARNING SHOULDN'T BE

ENHANCE YOUR OUTDOOR ADVENTURE WITH OUR FREE PARK PACKS, FILLED WITH NATURE-THEMED ACTIVITIES AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES. THEMES INCLUDE MAMMALS, INSECTS, WETLAND WONDERS, TERRIFIC TREES AND PLANTS, & BIRDS. TO BORROW A PACK, CONTACT US AT (319) 472-4942 (OPT 3) OR EMAIL INFO@BENTONCOUNTYPARKS.COM.

On the Eve of Summer

By Faith Hunt
Naturalist

Step out at dusk and feel the eve of summer greet you. Feel the air as a new breeze moves in, making the midday heat dissipate with ease. Be still. Watch the grass follow suit. Steady as the atmosphere changes, so does the world around you. Did you feel that?

Enjoy the ever so beautiful sunset as it disappears over the horizon, trading its place in the sky with the crescent moon, and sparkling constellations. Watch as a meteor soars through the space above you. Did you see that?

Listen to the fading songs of cardinals and robins, as their music is traded for the chorus of frogs. Eastern grey tree frogs belting and bleeping, cricket frogs clacking, and the out of tune banjo strum of the green frog trying to amplify. Witness the bullfrog's race across the vegetated water, plump legs plopping the waters surface, racing for the prime locations - hoping a listening lady is close by to hear their song. *Jug-o-ruuum! Jug-o-ruuum!* Did you hear that?

Watch. Feel. Listen. The bugs come out slowly, then all at once. Not long and the bats join in to save the evening. Ever so slowly, so gently, the firefly flashes join. One at first...then two...then you are surrounded. Enjoy the yellow-green strobes of light - if you are lucky - you may see an orange flicker or a blue flash. Sometimes, their glow isn't acknowledged, but one must not give up. The show must go on - they must continue to shine. Watch as the male timberdoodle performs its ever so graceful sky dance - soaring like a swirling tornado going up into the sky, then delicately falling back down like a falling leaf. With big risks



Figure 6: Large common snapping turtle crossing the road late at night

come big rewards. May the tree frogs always be reminded that no matter how small, their voice is mighty and deserves to be heard. Witness the decades old snapping turtle dredge her way through steep ditches, cross busy roads, for her to find the perfect spot for her offspring to continue her elegant legacy.



Figure 7: Woodcock (also known as a timberdoodle)

The eve of summer is a beautiful place. May it remind you of life's many transitions. May you greet what's next with an open heart as if it were the eves of summer. Watch. Feel. Listen.

RIVER RAIDERS 2025 RECAP

Earlier in June, Benton & Buchanan County Conservation took 14 kids going into 6-8th grade on a paddling trip on the Upper Iowa River from Plymouth Rock Access to Chattahoochie Park. Paddlers spent 3 days paddling, practicing leave no trace, and swimming, and 2 nights of camping with the stars (and rain). Great times were had and friendships were made. We look forward to doing it again next year!





We're thrilled to announce that an accessible sidewalk has been installed at the Hannen Lake Park beach! This project is a big step toward making our parks more inclusive and enjoyable for everyone.

It all started with a generous \$3,000 donation from Amy Williams, who hoped to see more accessibility at the lake. With additional support from our Benton County Conservation Foundation (BCCF) Hannen Lake Chili Cook-Off, t-shirt fundraiser, dinner fundraiser, & Benton County Conservation (BCC) funds—we were close. Benton County Whitetails Unlimited stepped in with a \$4,000 donation to finish it off!

A designated parking spot and landing are still in the works, but general access is now complete—and we couldn't be more excited! The Benton County Conservation Foundation proudly supports projects like this to improve our parks and public spaces.

Pictured: Lenny Engelking (Whitetails), Dale Henry (BCCF), Chris Pippert (Whitetails), Dan Schorg (BCCF), Kelly Johnson (BCCF), Paul Stults (BCCF), Cam Grubic (BCC).

Photo by: Brenda Engelking (Whitetails)

WHY?

EXPLORE A LOCAL PHENOMENON

You're the scientist! Come discover local natural phenomena! Every **Monday at the Nature Center from 12:00-4:00** now through July, kids can study a phenomenon to try and help figure out why, how, and when the event takes place. Using their scientific minds to help them come to a conclusion based on the clues available. Once they have made all their observations, they can write down their hypothesis as to why they think the phenomenon happens.

This is a self led activity.

Conservation Board Members

Becky VanWey: Vinton, Chair

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member

Samantha Hunter: Mount Auburn, Member

Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Member

Randy Scheel: Garrison, 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.

Find us online at:

www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/

or www.mycountyparks.com

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

To donate visit

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

Conservation Staff

Aaron Askelson, Interpretive Naturalist

Cecilia Dirks, Office Coordinator

Camryn Grubic, South Unit Ranger

Ed Hach, North Unit Ranger

Cara Harrill, Conservation Tech

Ethan Hennings, Conservation Tech

Faith Hunt, Interpretive Naturalist

Zach Parmater, Conservation Tech/Ranger

Will Souer, East Unit Ranger

Shelby Williams, Director

Integrated Roadside Management

Eric Schares, Roadside Manager & Weed Commissioner

Sam Jacobs, Roadside Tech

Drew Weisskopf-DeSmet, Roadside Tech



Calendar of Events Summer 2025



Conservation Library Programs - Leveling Up: Monarch Metamorphosis

July 23rd 10:00am @ Vinton Public Library (510 2nd Avenue Vinton, IA 52349)

July 23rd 2:00pm @ Newhall Public Library (109 Railroad St, Newhall, IA 52315)

July 24th 1:30pm at Atkins Public Library (480 3rd Ave, Atkins, IA 52206)

Level up with monarchs at one of these fun and interactive library programs! Programs are free and suitable for all ages. No registration is required.

Ice Cream Science

July 11th, 2:30-4:00pm at Benton County Nature Center

Explore the chemistry that goes on behind making ice cream. During this tasty open-house style program, you will make your own ice cream in a bag and explore the Nature Center! This program is free and suitable for all ages. No registration required.



Build A Bug Hotel

July 12th, 10:00 AM at Benton County Nature Center

Insect hotels give solitary insects such as pollinators a place to rest and hide. Participants will be able to make their own insect hotel for their yard and learn about how they can aid traveling insects. We encourage you to bring your own mug to build your hotel out of, and all other materials will be provided. Participants must register at mycountyparks.com.

BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION PRESENTS SECOND ANNUAL FIREFLY FESTIVAL

JULY 19TH, 5:00PM-9:00PM
AT THE BENTON COUNTY NATURE CENTER

LIVE MUSIC BY DAVID ZOLLO, FOOD & BEVERAGES INCLUDE BEAST & BIRD, THAT'S SO CHEESY, RECHARGE COFFEE CO., 42° NORTH WINERY, & CRAVIN' SHAVIN'S SHAVED ICE.

EVENT PARTNERS JOINING THE FUN INCLUDE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION FOUNDATION, BENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, IOWA LEARNING FARMS - CONSERVATION STATION, TANGER PLACE, TROUTLEAF NATIVE PLANTS & VINTON GUILD OF FINE ARTS.

COME FOR THE GOOD MUSIC, DELICIOUS FOOD AND BEVERAGES, FUN CRAFTS, AND FIREFLY EDUCATION AND CATCHING! FOLLOW OUR FACEBOOK EVENT FOR MORE UPDATES @BENTONCOUNTYPARKS



Natures Superheros!

July 25th, 10:00am at Benton County Nature Center; \$8 per kid

Discover the real superheroes of nature-like specialized mammals, trees, and tiny insects that help keep our planet healthy. Kids (and adults) are encouraged to come dressed as their favorite superhero whether it's a comic book character, an animal, or a hero from their own imagination! Each child will get to design and create their very own superhero cape to take home. It's a fun-filled, hands-on program that combines creativity, learning, and a touch of superpower magic. Registration is required by visiting mycountyparks.com.

Sandhill Crane & Prairie Chicken Bus Tour

March 26th-28th, 2026 to North Platte, Nebraska

Each spring, more than 500,000 sandhill cranes gather in the Platte River valley during their northward migration. Cranes have been making this migration annually for thousands of years. The Platte is a “staging” area where the cranes stop to rest and replenish energy reserves before continuing on to their nesting grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia. It is the only major staging area on the sandhill cranes’ northward migration. Approximately 80% of all sandhill cranes come to the Platte every spring. The concentration of cranes here is the greatest of anywhere in the world.

This 3-day tour will be packed with professional guided tours by Dusty Trails, LLC to view prairie chickens and sandhill cranes, a visit to Omaha's Downtown District, Golden Spike Tour, and more! Trip price includes deluxe motor coach transportation, hotel room, professional guides, entrance fees, two breakfasts, and tips. Participants will need to pay for lunches, dinners and incidentals on the trip.

Cost per person:

Single occupancy fee \$1,050.00

Double occupancy fee \$900.00

Triple occupancy fee \$850.00

Quad occupancy fee \$750.00



Advance registration by February 12th, 2026 is required by visiting

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Fontana-Park/Events/27151/Sandhill-Crane-and-Prairie-Chicken-Bus-Tour-Registration-Deposit>

