

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

VOLUME 45 Fall 2026

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www.bentoncountyiowa.gov



Memories of Canada Geese Reintroduction

By Will Souer
East Unit Park Ranger



Figure 1: Gaggle of geese in lush grasses with yellow flowers
Photo Credit Larry Reis

As the seasons change from summer to fall, so will many of our daily and weekly activities. Just last night, I attended our son's first high school football game! Where did the summer go? How could it be that school has started again and the camping season is winding down? How could it be that the young Canada goose gosling that hatched at Hannen Lake and Rodgers Park in the spring are now looking more and more like their protective parents? How many of you have watched them grow, explore, and figure things out together as a family? How many of you have seen the one goose amongst the many at both Rodgers and Hannen, respectively, that looks just a little bit different than the rest, specifically because they have a white bar across their black forehead and wondered about the reason for the different plumage? I've asked myself the same question when seeing the giant birds numerous times in their wetland habitats over the last couple of months. Research into the topic shows that the white "eyebrow" is likely an indication that the bird could be a direct descendant of some of the original Canada geese reintroduced to Iowa, all things considered, not that long ago. Why is that



Figure 2: Canada goose with a white "eyebrow"

important you might ask? In this case I find it particularly important because my dad, Wayne Souer, a retired wildlife technician with Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), helped with the restoration efforts. What follows is my dad's recollection of the effort to bring back the Canada Goose to Iowa, specifically relating to his time spent near Ruthven, Iowa and Smith's Slough.

Memories of Canada Geese Reintroduction

Continued from previous page

Wayne Souers recollection: *Prior to about 1960, giant Canada geese were thought to be extinct in Iowa. One of the first existing flocks to be discovered was in Missouri, where geese were found nesting in trees, (in old hawk nests, in the top of old broken off trees and that kind of thing). Missouri started putting out wash tubs in trees to increase the flock.*

I'm not sure just when the Iowa DNR started their Canada goose restoration effort, but when I started in 1972 it was already started. A wildlife biologist from the Ingham Unit had found several farmers in Northwest Iowa and Southern Minnesota that had small flocks of giant Canadas created from nest robbing flightless birds, when the giants still nested on local marshes. One of my first chores was to help catch a small flock in the driveway of a corn crib.



Figure 3: Canada geese nesting in an abandoned eagle nest

There were pens built from poultry wire at three locations: Ingham Lake, Kettleeson Hogsback, and Smith's Slough. I think our pen was about 5 or 6 acres (the others were similar). To protect from predation, nest structures were made from ¼ barrels on pipe about four feet above the ground. Since the geese were wing-clipped, there had to be a ramp so mother goose could get up to the nest. Most of the geese didn't bother to climb up to the artificial structure as it was easier to just nest on the ground and we found they were just as successful. In fact, I can't remember a predated nest in the pen in the several years that we had them. To make matters worse, the ramp would occasionally get knocked down so the parent couldn't get to the nest, resulting in an abandoned nest. After 2 or 3 years, I just took down the barrels and let them nest where they wanted to.

At Ruthven, we also had a pen at the unit headquarters for easier access for people that wanted to see them. People would come out evenings and weekends and stroll across the yard just to see those beautiful birds. "This project is just wonderful," many would say. A few years later, when we started our releases and the depredation started it was "You have to get rid of those [geese]. They're destroying all our crops!"

Depredation was the biggest problem with the restoration project. After the young hatched, the geese would form 2 or 3 large groups and move into the crop fields to feed. On one of our DNR areas we had a 4-acre field of knee high soybeans reduced to 2 inch stubs in about 2 days. Usually, the damage was in much less mature crops.

In order to save the project from failure due to public complaint about the depredation, we were given propane gas exploders and chicken wire fencing to keep geese out of trouble areas in the crop fields. These had to be checked almost every day to be sure the fence was still up and the noise-makers were still working. We even had to put exploders on the local golf courses to scare geese off the greens.

Every summer during the molt we had to round up all the geese in the pen and trim off all the flight feathers about once a week until they quit growing. Just prior to when I started, personnel from another unit brought up some new geese that were supposed to be flightless but promptly flew away. They wound up at Green Slough. I was supposed to catch them but never figured out how, so that was our first release!



Figure 4: Canada geese gathered in a snowy scene with corn in the background

Before we started our official releases, a 64-square mile “closed to Canada goose hunting” area was established. We put signs on the side of the road at every intersection coming into the refuge, so it was clearly marked. At the end of the hunting season we had to take them down again. Some years it was miserable due to extreme cold weather. After the flock was well established the refuge was reduced to 25 square miles.

We were supposed to put up new nest barrels on all the local marshes, but we purposely didn’t get around to it. We had seen

how well the geese did in the pen and decided to just give it a try with the releases outside the pen. Our geese at Ruthven expanded just as fast as the ones at Ingham and Kettleston Hogsback that had nest structures. In the late 70’s our pen was taken down and rebuilt in another area of the state and the remainder of our breeding flock was distributed to other areas. Even after the pen was gone, the pen area was still a concentration area for geese. On Sunday afternoon of the opening weekend of goose season, the geese would funnel in for several hours, one flock after another, just about on the same pattern, like airplanes coming into an airport. I used to go watch them and I’ve never found a better stress reliever.

So as the seasons change in our busy lives, lets take the time to slow down a little bit; take the time to appreciate what came before you and the work that it took to get here. Take the time to share and protect those things that are most important to you while also taking the time to connect with those very things. Even though my family has a lot going on in the coming weeks with school and sports I know we’re also going to take the time to visit the great outdoors and all that it has to offer. I hope to see you and yours along the way!

Loess Hills Cooperative Burn Week

By Ethan Hennings
Conservation Tech



Figure 5: Squad Member (Ethan) dropping fire using a drip torch

The Loess Hills are a geographical feature of wind blown loess found only in Western Iowa and China. Loess (pronounced luss) is a sediment that is primarily composed of wind blown silt with sand and clay. Because of its composition, loess has the unique ability to remain stable in steep vertical slopes. This trait is what led to the formation of the Loess Hills as wind blew the sediment for thousands of years. Loess soil is fertile and well drained, making it ideal for agricultural practices. Much of the steep hilly areas have remained unfarmed however, preserving the native remnant vegetation that has existed there for thousands of years.

The vegetation that would have naturally been a part of the Loess Hills landscape is native prairie with scattered oak trees in the mix. Historically, fire was a natural part of our landscape in Iowa which would shape our ecosystems. The fire would promote the native vegetation and keep woody species from encroaching. Oak trees however, are more fire tolerant than other tree species so some would make it through the fire cycle to create oak savannas.



Figure 6: Wide shot of fire back burning down the hill side from the ignition team at the top of the hill

Present day, fire has been greatly reduced on our landscape. Paired with the loss of elk and bison our 3 biggest forms of natural disturbance no longer shape the landscape. The Loess Hills of today are inundated with tree species. Eastern red cedar now blankets many hill sides allowing no sunlight to reach the native plants below. This is where the Loess Hills Cooperative Burn Week comes into the story. The Loess Hills Alliance has hosted a multi-organization burn week for 11 years now with two main focuses; education/training about prescribed fire, and getting acres burned. It is free for participants to attend, including breakfast, dinner, and lodging. I had the good fortune of attending this spring's burn week for the first time. This year hosted 160 different participants from either 61 different agencies or 14 fire departments. 21 units were burned in 4 days totally to 3,200+ acres. The participants were split into 4 different divisions, and each division had 4 squads. With training and education being the primary goal, each division and squad had a burn boss and squad boss, as well as burn boss and squad boss trainees. The trainees ran their respective squads or divisions with the assistance of the actuals, working on radio communication and strategy for burning with multiple different ignition teams. One such strategy is interior ignition. This took place when hillsides had too heavy of tree cover to carry fire to the top, but there was native fuel we wanted to burn on ridges and fingers. A team would head into the unit and climb to the top of the ridge and start walking while dropping fire behind them. Each member of the team would take a different finger down to the bottom burning as they went. We also practiced Incidents Within Incident (IWI's) where a hypothetical injury on the fire line takes place while there is active fire on the ground. This year was extra special too as we had a designated mobile dispatch center for communicating as well as a plane for practicing ground to air communications.

My biggest takeaway from this event was getting to meet so many new people and professionals in the same line of work as me. Getting to observe how different people work a burn plan and on the fire line was incredibly insightful and I was able to absorb lots of information through them.



Figure 7: Hillside view of the native fuel present at the top of the ridge but the hillsides being covered by eastern red cedar and other trees

In 2010, Iowans made their voices heard in support of clean water, outdoor recreation, soil quality, and wildlife habitat when 63% of voters approved the establishment of Iowa's Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. Funds from the Trust would go into the these accounts:

- **Natural Resources**
- **Soil Conservation and Water Protection**
- **Watershed Protection**
- **Iowa Resources Enhancement and Protection Fund**
 - **Local Conservation Partnerships**
 - **Trails**
 - **Lake restoration**

If you feel passionate about these conservation issues, consider contacting your Representatives



Garden Spiders

By Sondra Cabell
Summer Naturalist



*Figure 8: Garden spider in its web with golden rod in the background
Photo credit: Larry Reis*

Ask a person what animals they are most afraid of and they would probably say spiders or snakes. “I don’t like spiders and snakes!” is even a line in a song. But once you get past the fear or dislike and really look at some of the things they do, spiders might also amaze you. Fall is a great time to observe spiders. After breeding all summer, their numbers are at a peak for the year.

Even those who don’t like spiders are often impressed by a dew or frost covered spider web. The typical rounded webs that may line an Iowa ditch on a dewy fall morning are made by an orb weaver aptly called the black and yellow garden spider. Full grown females are

large - bodies about an inch long and legs over three inches. They have a striking white cephalothorax (head) and black and yellow abdomen. Males are only about a third that size and lack the bright yellow coloring.

Garden spiders have seven specialized silk glands in their spinnerettes to spin different types of silk. Dragline silk makes the frame and spokes. Sticky elastic silks make up the spiral to catch prey. Wispy silk is used to wrap prey and a protective silk is used for egg cases. There is also anchoring silk, parachuting silk and scaffolding silk and the silk to make the characteristic thick zig-zag near the center of the web that may serve to keep birds from flying through their web.

Garden spiders sit in the center of their web and wait for an insect to get stuck. Feeling the vibrations, they quickly run out on the non-sticky spokes, bite the bug to paralyze it, and wrap it in a sheet of silk. They may then carry the wrapped dinner parcel to the center of the web to eat, or leave it hanging to save it for

Garden Spiders

Continued from previous page

later. A day of dust and trapping insects can ruin much of the web, so orb-weavers frequently eat their old webs and spin new ones each night.

Even if you still don't like them, watching a garden spider as it spins its web or catches prey is fascinating and will give you a whole new respect for them. They are often aware of your approach to their web and may "bounce" their web back and forth - perhaps in an effort to keep animals from breaking through their insect traps. Approach too closely and they will drop down on a line of silk for a quick escape - they really are afraid of you.

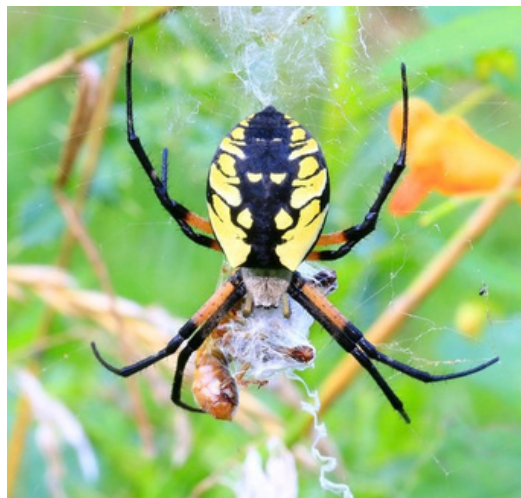


*Figure 9: Garden spider eating a dragonfly
Photo credit: Larry Reis*

Save Your Windbreak and Desirable Trees: Read the Herbicide Label Before Using the Product

By Mark Vitosh
Iowa DNR District Forester #12

Every year I hope I do not receive the call(s) and for the last 10 years I receive 5 to 10 of these calls every year. The call starts with: "Hello Mark this is John or Missy Doe and I have a windbreak with some sick evergreen trees. Over the last few weeks some of the branches/needles turned off color and brown/reddish and in some cases portions of the tree look dead." Since I get this call multiple times every growing season my first response now is: "Did you cut any mulberry, honeysuckle, or other unwanted vegetation from underneath these trees recently and if so did you treat the stubs with a herbicide?" In most situations (9 out of 10 times) their answer is yes. Now it is okay to cut unwanted woody vegetation from underneath desirable plants and then treat the stubs with a herbicide. The catch is you have to make sure that the herbicide is labeled for cut stump treatments and that there are no warnings on the label that indicate that the specific herbicide could be damaging to off-target plants. In most of the calls I receive the landowner used a herbicide that had a warning on the label that indicated that if it is used within the drip-line of a desirable tree or plant or adjacent to a desirable tree or plant that the desirable plant could potentially sustain damage. There are a number of herbicides commonly sold off the shelf utilized to kill woody plants and other vegetation that have warnings similar to this so it is critical to read any label before you purchase and use it to avoid being a person that has to make the call to see what is happening to their windbreak trees. It is also important to avoid using wood chips, grass clippings, and in some cases manure as mulch around trees and plants that might have herbicide residue in it that could impact adjacent plants. Again READ THE LABEL. The challenge is once the damage is done in many cases the impacted plants do not recover.



*Figure 10 & 11: Two different
Norway spruce showing damage
from herbicide used under the trees
against label warning*



Iowa County Conservation System Conference

Benton County was excited to co-host the Iowa County Conservation Systems fall conference with Linn and Jones county in September. There were 168 conservation Board members, conservation staff and alumni from 44 county Conservation Boards across the state in attendance. Some of Benton County highlights were; Learning about disc golf and what it takes to run a world class disc golf course at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area, touring the Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area and learning about reconstructed wetlands, and visiting the nature center to have some delicious BBQ from Vinton's own Beast & Bird. This event helped Benton County Conservation highlight some of its great parks and the projects we have completed recently. We're proud to show off a little of Wild Iowa and celebrate ****70 years of county conservation**** with our conservation colleagues from across the state!



Do you enjoy receiving the newsletter in print?

Please send us an email at info@bentoncountyparks.com or call us at 319-472-4942 opt 3 and let us know that you would like to continue to receive our newsletter in print. If you would like to receive our newsletter virtually, call or email us to make that switch. If we do not hear from you and you currently receive a printed newsletter, you will be removed from our mailing list starting in the summer of 2027.

Conservation Board Members

Becky Van Wey: Vinton, Member

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member

Derrick Parker: Watkins, Member

Samantha Hunter: Mount Auburn, Member

Randy Scheel: Garrison, Chair

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

Austin Wille, North Unit Ranger

Cecilia Dirks, Office Coordinator

Cam Grubic, South 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

Ed Hach, Roadside Tech



Calendar of Events Fall 2026

Follow our Facebook page for more events!

The Big Read - All About Bison

October 8th, 6-7pm at Vinton Public Library

Join BCC naturalists to learn all about the American Bison, the official mammal of the United States of America! This interactive program will include reconstructed bison parts and will cover how Indigenous peoples utilized the bison. This program is suitable for all ages. Registration is required by visiting <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/all-about-bison-program-tickets-1998970182627?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>



Owl Prowl

October 15th, 6:30-8:00pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$3 per family

Whooo was that? Join us for a short presentation about Iowa owls then take a quiet leisurely hike to call for owls. After our short hike, enjoy s'mores around the campfire! Registration is required by visiting mycountyparks.com.

Nature Knowledge Day: Spiders!

October 30th, 10-10:30am at Benton County Nature Center

Learn all about spiders at the nature center! Young learners are encouraged to dress in costume. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate. This program is designed for youth in K-5th grade. Participants MUST REGISTER in advance by visiting www.mycountyparks.com.



The Big Read - Iowa Bald Eagles

November 19th, 6-7pm at Vinton Public Library

Bald Eagles have been a symbolic staple of the United States since 1782. Learn all about the bald eagle and its conservation history with Iowa during this educational presentation. Registration is required by visiting <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/iowa-bald-eagles-presentation-tickets-1998970904787?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>

The Big Read - Frontier Foraging

November 21st, 10-11:30am at Benton County Nature Center

Foraging has been used in North America for centuries; early frontiers depended on the foraging knowledge of Indigenous peoples to thrive as they established colonies in the Americas. Join Foraging Instructor, Chelsea, to learn about some wild edibles found in Iowa, how to prepare them, and even sample a few. Registration is required by visiting <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/frontier-foraging-program-tickets-1998971905781?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>



Woodburning: Coasters & Ornaments

December 8th, 6:30pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$5/item

Join us at the Nature Center to woodburn drink coasters and ornaments with a nature theme. This beautifully simple project is designed for all abilities. Some of the patterns might be animal tracks, mushrooms, or feathers, you decide! Cost includes one coaster or one ornament, paid at the time of registration. If you would like, and time allows, additional items can be made for \$5 each. This program is suitable for participants 10 years of age and older. Anyone under the age of 18 must be accompanied by an adult. Register for the class by December 3rd at www.mycountyparks.com



Nature Knowledge Day: Hibernation!

December 10th, 10-10:30am at Benton County Nature Center

What do animals do in the winter time? Young learners can learn about Iowa animals adaptations to the cold weather. This program includes a book and activity. This program is designed for youth in K-5th grade. Participants MUST REGISTER in advance by visiting www.mycountyparks.com.

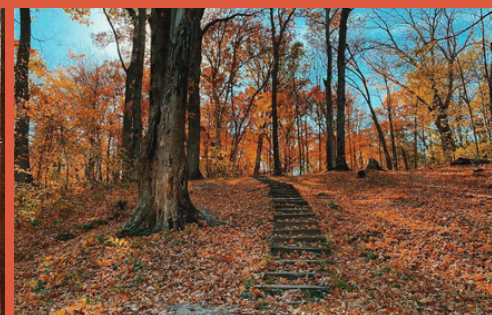


Winter Solstice

December 21st, 5:30pm-7pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$2/person

Celebrate the return of light and new beginnings on the eve of the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night. We are gathering to celebrate the return of light by taking a short mindfulness hike, walk through a solstice spiral, followed by a fire. Campfire desserts and warm drinks will be provided. Registration is required by visiting www.mycountyparks.com.





Help us celebrate 70 years!

To celebrate the future of Benton County Conservation, we're creating a time capsule that will be opened during our 100-year anniversary

We're inviting YOU to help fill the capsule with meaningful pieces of today's world. Ideas to include:

Letters to the future

Photos of parks, programs, or families enjoying the outdoors

Drawings or notes from kids

Newspaper clippings or event flyers

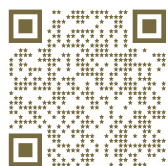
Small items that represent daily life or conservation efforts

What would someone 30 years from now find fascinating about today?

Contact bcadmin@bentoncountyparks.com with questions and ideas

Submission deadline: Friday, October 23, 2026

Old Creamery Nature Trail Events



Scan for OCNT
Vinton Trailhead
directions

We have a few exciting events coming up on the Old Creamery Nature Trail! On October 13th at 1pm, we are hosting a Veteran's Memorial tree planting at the Garrison Trailhead.

On November 13th from 3:30-4:30pm, we are having a Grand Opening at the Vinton Trailhead. Follow our Facebook for more details coming soon.