

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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Electronic versions and email
sign up are available at our
website
www.bentoncountyia.gov



Atkins Roundhouse Update

By Cara Harrill
Conservation Technician



Figure 1: Aerial view of Atkins while contractors were beginning work on east end of property

The Atkins Roundhouse area is an 85 acre property on the northeast side of Atkins. Once a historic train roundhouse, this is now a public area where users go to relax, walk trails, and enjoy nature. During the 2020 derecho, the Roundhouse property was destroyed after Atkins was hit with 126MPH straight line winds. Nearly every tree was damaged, with widowmakers overhanging trails and invasive species left to flourish in the understory. The Roundhouse was closed to the public after the storm due to unsafe conditions. Staff worked tirelessly to begin clearing the property after the storm, but it was too much to take on with lack of funding. Through coordination with East Central Iowa Council of Governments (ECICOG), in April of 2024 Benton County Conservation Board (BCCB) received a Tree Canopy Grant, which was awarded through the Community Development Block Grant (CDGG) totalling \$750,000 to complete a timber stand improvement project and reestablish the area.

After putting a bid out to contractors, Bill Miller and Sons Logging Inc. was selected, and began clearing trees in January of 2025, with work being completed in March of 2025. The work was to be completed prior to April 1st due to



Figure 2: Steam tunnel

Indiana bat habitat restrictions. Contractors removed damaged and invasive species, while working to save as many healthy and desirable trees as possible.

Once clearing was complete, BCCB staff were able to get a closer look and assess the property further. Staff found many foundations that had been uncovered, and underground steam tunnels that posed a threat to users. In coordination with Benton County Secondary Roads, staff members spent many days crushing and filling the underground steam tunnels. Old foundations can still be seen in different areas today, and the old turn table can be found towards the southern edge of the property.

Atkins Roundhouse Update

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Following the completion of tree removal, the property was reopened to the public in June of 2025. BCCB staff continued working on controlling invasive species by seeding 8,300lbs of rye cover crop, mowing invasive vegetation, and using chemical applications. Due to chemical applications continuing on the property and chemical levels, foraging for edibles such as berries and mushrooms is not recommended at this time.



Figure 3: Cover crop sprouting at Atkins Roundhouse

In October of 2025, after a bid process, Frazier Nursery was selected to plant 255 trees across the property. Trees ranged in size, and a variety were chosen to increase habitat and feeding opportunities for wildlife. In total, there were 19 species chosen: several oak species, white pine, yellow and river birch, and black cherry to name a few. Frazier Nursery will continue to monitor and water trees through 2026. At this time, staff are continuing work on the Roundhouse management plan, with the goal of planting a native grass mix in early March. Chemical applications and mowing will continue throughout the year as well.

We ask that you please be mindful of equipment in use, as the property will remain open as we continue work. To keep up with future updates of all properties, check out our [Facebook page](#) or [county website!](#)

Thank you
for
supporting
our Animal
Ambassadors



Sponsored by Tucker,
Max, & Colter



Sponsored by
Anita Gordon



Sponsored by Luke Ervin



Sponsored by Avery &
Charlie Gardemann



Sponsorship In Memory
of Craig Olson



Sponsored by Landon Ervin

Thank you to Abby & Philip Brecht
for your donation of mice

Gray Foxes: Little Known, Lesser Seen

By Faith Hunt
Naturalist



Figure 4: Gray fox on the left and red fox on the right

Did you know that Iowa has two different species of foxes? The one you may be most familiar with is the red fox, known for their reddish orange fur, black leg “stockings” and white tipped tail. The other lesser known and seen, is the gray fox. Gray foxes are much smaller than red foxes, with “salt and pepper” colored fur, and a black tipped tail. Their habitat preferences differ as well. While red foxes tend to do well on forest edges, dens in ditches and other edge habitat, gray foxes prefer deciduous forests.

Gray foxes generally live throughout Iowa, but the largest numbers live in forested habitats in eastern and southern Iowa.

Gray foxes weigh between 8-11 pounds, which is the weight of your average house cat. Being so much smaller than their canine counterparts, they are more likely to be predated by coyotes or larger animals, and occasionally bullied out of dens by red foxes. The biggest advantage of being the smaller canine in the woods is that their small stature helps them climb! Gray foxes are the only canines in their family who climb. They have retractable claws (just like cats!) and have longer and more hooked claws used to grip tree bark. In order to climb a tree, the gray fox hugs the tree, gripping bark with its claws. The hind legs are not capable of rotating to hold on like their front claws, so they are used to push against the tree and propel their bodies upward. The resulting motion is a series of upward scoots that continue until the fox can stand on a branch.

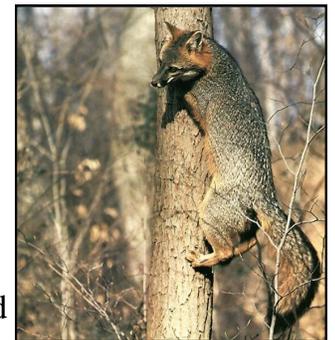


Figure 5: Gray fox climbing a tree. Photo Credit: Wildlife Science Center

You may be wondering why you have seen so many red foxes but never a gray fox. Gray foxes have been in decline for over 25 years. According to Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) researchers, there are roughly 10-12 gray foxes known in Iowa. Despite these incredibly low populations, hunting is still open for this species. Iowa has a hunting season for both red and gray foxes between Nov. 1 and Jan. 31, with no daily bag limits or possession limits, with a furharvesters license. Gray fox populations aren't in a decline in just Iowa, but all across their natural range from most of the Americas. Some think that their population is down 80% as a whole but the species is too understudied to say with certainty. It is believed that gray foxes face more predation from the increasing coyote and bobcat populations, as well as competition with other wildlife and people for habitat. Another factor is likely disease such as distemper.

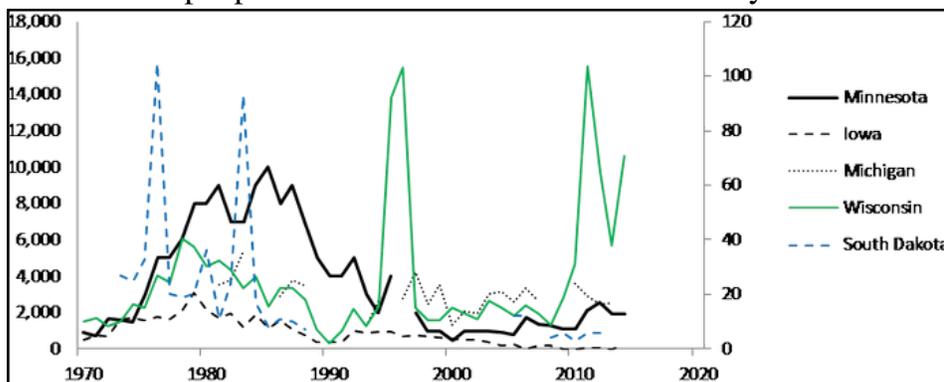


Figure 6: Graph comparing gray fox sighting in the Midwest. Credit: University of Minnesota Duluth

to not have the antibodies to fight distemper as many of their other canine counterparts and an increase in raccoon populations helps spread the disease. Of course as nearly all wildlife species in Iowa, habitat loss also likely plays a role in their decline.

Gray Foxes: Little Known, Lesser Seen

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To better understand the species as a whole, the IDNR has been capturing gray foxes and using tracking collars to track the movements of these animals. They are looking at their habitat and behavioral habits. One female gray fox known as Gray Fox 2 (GF2) was collared last fall and has successfully raised a litter of six pups! This is an extraordinary achievement because GF2 was caring for her young pups all alone. Typically, both parents care for their pups but something happened to her partner and he was no longer helping. The IDNR is hoping to catch one of her offspring to collar and track as well. Watch this cute video montage by the IDNR of GF2 and her pups: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/2018275675588268>

You can help the gray fox! The Iowa DNR is looking for trappers and landowners to help catch **live** gray foxes so that they can be collared and released as part of a research project. If you believe you have a gray fox in your area or have caught one, please call Vince Evelsizer at 641-231-1522 or Dave Hoffman at 641-425-0737 to report your findings. The Iowa Wildlife Federation has partnered with IDNR to offer a \$400 reward as an incentive for live-caught foxes that are healthy and used for the study.



Figure 7: IDNR biologist holds gray fox. Photo from IDNR

Welcome Our New North Unit Park Ranger!

By Austin Wille
North Unit Park Ranger



Figure 8: Ranger Wille with a giraffe at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

Hello! My name is Austin Wille, the North Unit Park Ranger for Benton County Conservation. I will be stationed at Rodger's Park in Vinton, but work at all the parks and recreation areas all across the county as needed. If you see me, stop and say hello!

I grew up in the Cedar Rapids area, with family ties to Benton County. My mother grew up outside of Norway on the family farm before moving to Cedar Rapids. As a kid I always enjoyed being outdoors, whether that be fishing, trapshooting, or playing sports of some kind. When I was young, the school let us take elective classes, when it was available I picked the class where we watched the BBC Planet Earth series, one of my favorites. Our family always took vacations out west, mostly to Rocky Mountain

National Park and Yellowstone National Park. We also made sure to ride the cog train to Pikes Peak every time it was available. Our family also loves to visit the St. Louis Aquarium at Union Station as well as the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Denver. Both are must visits. I am also a proud Eagle Scout!

I started working in the maintenance department for my high school, where I worked throughout high school and college during breaks and summers. I did a lot of painting over the years, then moved into working with various heavy equipment projects around the school grounds. I graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in 2018 with a degree in Criminology, starting my law enforcement career as a police officer for Belle Plaine in 2020. I then joined the Monona Police Department, most recently serving as Chief up until I joined Benton County Conservation in November last year.

Welcome Our New North Unit Park Ranger! *Continued from previous page*

I also followed in my dad's path, joining the Hiawatha Fire Department in 2019, followed by the Monona Fire Department when I moved up to the Driftless Area continuing my law enforcement career.

In my free time these days, I enjoy fishing, usually for panfish like crappies, bluegill and perch. The secret sauce for a good fish fry is Andy's Cajun breading. I also enjoy boating, camping and hiking for other outdoor activities. I am a big hockey fan, cheering on the St. Louis Blues in the NHL and my hometown Cedar Rapids Roughriders. I have always had a love for cars, both driving and working on them. A big part of my summers is racing. I enjoy autocross, the safest way to race without having to worry about repeatedly tearing up expensive equipment. It's basically like setting up cones in a big parking lot and having a mini road course to run through. When I'm not racing, I enjoy cruising and being a part of the car scene in the Cedar Rapids area. My dad and I have been working on restoring a 1970 Monte Carlo for several years, a two-door coupe with a hood over six feet long. All seventeen feet of 'business luxury' cost a whopping \$3,123 back then. My all-time favorite car is the Eleanor Mustang from *Gone in 60 Seconds*, but at \$1,000,000 I'm priced out of that market. On a completely different note, if anyone has a VW bus or an old station wagon stop in at Rodger's and hit me up.

At home I have a dog and a grumpy orange cat. My dog is a Plott Hound. Plotts rank 173rd out of 205 for breed popularity in America and I've yet to meet anyone who had heard of them before meeting my dog. Plott Hounds were bred to hunt bears and wild boar and is the official state dog of North Carolina. The only thing she enjoys hunting for is the food that falls off the kitchen counter. We just call her the food hound.



Figure 9 & 10: Austin's dog Sasha (left) and his grumpy orange cat, Eleanor (right)

My main focus since starting here in Benton County as a Ranger (besides learning the ropes) has been tree cutting and planting on the Old Creamery Nature Trail at the Garrison trailhead, as well as Winegar and Tobin Wildlife Area. We've been clearing invasive species and dead trees in those areas to replace with more desirable trees. We have also been patrolling our properties and state land during shotgun season for deer. Our projects for the future hopefully include repainting Wild Rose Cabin and replacing the fishing pier at Rodger's Park. I'll be continuing my education at Kirkwood CC in the natural resources field and while learning on the job. I hope to see everyone at some point in the year! Happy trails - Austin Wille

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. Money from the Trust would be split into the following accounts:

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



Photo from Fund The Trust

Bison: A National Treasure

By Aaron Askelson
Naturalist

The sound of their thunderous hooves could be heard for miles as the earth shook and trembled under the force of their mighty weight. Herds as large as 15,000 once roamed the open plains from Canada to Mexico. It is believed that bison made their way to North America by crossing the ancient land bridge that connected Asia and North America during the Pliocene Epoch 400,000 years ago. These giants of the grassland were much different than the bison we see roaming around today; they were 25-50% bigger than our modern bison and their horns were up to six feet across. Over thousands of years the bison grew smaller adapting to the changing climate. A mature modern bison bull stands about 6.5 feet at the shoulder and weighs up to 2,000 pounds. The female is about 5 feet tall and weighs about 800 to 1,000 pounds. These massive animals can run at speeds of 35 to 40 mph and jump over six foot high fences. During the mating season, which reaches its height in August, bulls engage in head-butting contests to determine who has the right to mate. A female usually gives birth to a single calf in May after about nine months of gestation. Once born the calf is protected by all the members of the herd.



Figure 11: American Bison standing in a prairie

After the decimation of the indigenous populations of North America, from smallpox and other Old World diseases introduced by European colonizers, taking out 90 percent of the human population in North America. It is believed the population of Bison expanded to 50 - 75 million across the continent after the decline in the human population. The bison were integral to many of the indigenous cultures that used them for food, shelter, and just about everything else. They had hundreds of uses for almost every part of the bison, for example using the bladder as a water container, the horns for drinking cups, and the stomach for cooking food. Unfortunately the Native Americans dependence on bison made the bison an easy target for the military. “In 1873 the Secretary of the Interior noted that “[t]he civilization of the Indian is impossible while buffalo remain on the plains”; following this logic, the Army provided free ammunition to hide hunters, who brought bison to the brink of extinction” (National Park Service(NPS)). Bison were



Figure 12: Man standing on top of “mountain” of bison skulls

slaughtered and left to rot sometimes only their hide being harvested or just their tongue. This led to a rapid decline in population. To the point where the only truly “wild” herd was left in what would become Yellowstone park. In a matter of less than a century the bison herds across the US had been decimated. No longer would this majestic beast roam the open plains. “In 1905, the American Bison Society (ABS) was formed to support bison recovery efforts, compelling Congress to establish several public bison herds at Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge, the National Bison Range, Sully’s Hill National Game Preserve, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, and Wind Cave National Park and President Theodore Roosevelt to establish the Grand Canyon Game Preserve. These efforts helped save

Bison: A National Treasure

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bison from extinction and the ABS disbanded in the early 1900's having accomplished their mission, however in 2005 the ABS was once again reestablished to help advance the ongoing restoration of bison to our lands and cultures" (NPS).

"The U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) also helped reverse the bison's fate. Beginning at Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the park protected its remaining two dozen bison. Today, through immense collaboration with diverse partners, DOI lands currently support 17 bison herds in 12 states, for a total of approximately 10,000 bison over 4.6 million acres of DOI and adjacent lands" (NPS). There are approximately 400,000 bison in North America today with the vast majority in private herds. On May 9, 2016, President Barack Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act. Our country has a national emblem, flower and tree, and now a national mammal. A great way to celebrate 250 years of the United States of America might be to honor the bison is by visiting one of the local herds to see one of these beautiful animals up close in their native habitat. Happy Semiquincentennial! I would recommend checking out the Neil Smith Wildlife Refuge near Prairie City, Iowa. And with some imagination you can envision what a massive herd would have looked like crossing Iowa's once vast prairies.



The Iowa DNR, in partnership with Alliant Energy, offers various hardwood, ornamental, and evergreen tree species for \$25 each. Alliant Energy customers can buy up to two of the following trees:

Sugar Maple

Hackberry

Thornless Honeylocust - Skyline

Swamp White Oak

Serviceberry - Autumn Brilliance

Eastern White Pine

Tree pick up is offered at **Benton County Nature Center** (5718 20th Ave Dr, Vinton) on **Thursday, April 23, 4:00-6:00 p.m.**, You must submit an order form, available online at www.iowadnr.gov/trees, to reserve your trees.

Conservation Board Members

Becky VanWey: 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/>

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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 Spring 2026

Live Astronomy Presentation with the Cedar Amateur Astronomers

April 11th, 7pm at Dows Observatory - limited carpool from Vinton Public Library

Come join us for an exciting evening under the stars at The Eastern Iowa Observatory and Learning Center! The Cedar Amateur Astronomers will be hosting a live astronomy presentation where you can learn about the wonders of the universe. Whether you're a seasoned stargazer or just starting out, this event is perfect for all ages and levels of interest. Don't miss this opportunity to expand your knowledge and gaze at the cosmos with fellow astronomy enthusiasts. We will be leaving from the Vinton Public Library at 7:00pm. We have a limited number of transportation seats available, and preregistration is required. Register at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/live-astronomy-presentation-with-the-cedar-amateur-astronomers-tickets-1983566557971?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>



Spring Ephemeral Hike & Sketch

April 25th, 10am at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area - Boat Ramp

This event combines the beauty of nature with the creativity of art. Take a one-mile hike through the stunning trails, stopping to capture the fleeting moments with your sketchbook. Let the ephemeral beauty inspire your artistic side as you immerse yourself in the great outdoors. Sketchbooks will be provided to the first 20 registrants. Don't miss this opportunity to explore, create, and connect with like-minded individuals. Our hike includes steep hills, with frequent stops to sketch and learn about local plants. Registration is required by visiting <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/spring-ephemeral-hike-and-sketch-tickets-1510650298709?aff=odcleoeventsincollection>



Reel Heroes Day

June 6th, 8:30-11:30am at Hannen Lake Park

Join BCCB Park Rangers and other area first responders for a fun filled day of FREE fishing during the IDNR's annual FREE Fishing Weekend. No license required for Iowa residents. Fishing equipment and bait to be provided for use during the event. For more details, find us on Facebook!



Conservation Library Programs: Plant a Seed & Read!

June 5th, 10am - Belle Plaine Public Library

June 22nd, 10:15am - Atkins Public Library (4 & 5 year olds)

June 22nd, 1pm - Newhall Public Library

June 23rd, 2pm - Atkins Public Library (1st-5th)

June 30th, 10am - Blairstown Public Library

July 8th, 4pm - Urbana Public Library

July 29th, 10am - Vinton Public Library



Archery Camp

July 1st, 9am-2:30pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$25/kid

Ready, set, aim! Join us for Archery Camp! During this camp, students will learn how to shoot archery, bow fish, and create their own bow using PVC. Archery camp is for youth going into 5th-8th grade. Campers should bring a sack lunch, water, bug spray, sunscreen and a hat. Registration is required by visiting mycountyparks.com



WILDcat Adventures Camp

July 16th, 10am-2:30pm at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (3150 57th St Trail, Center Point, IA 52213); \$5/kid

Young adventurers in 1st to 4th grade are invited to discover the thrilling natural wonders of Wildcat! Activities will include creek stomping, fossil hunting, and hiking through the woods. Explorers should come prepared to get dirty and wet. Campers should bring a sack lunch, water, bug spray, sunscreen and a hat. Space is limited. Registration is required by visiting mycountyparks.com.

Survival Camp

August 6th, 9am-2:30 at Benton County Nature Center; \$15/kid

Learn how to build a natural shelter, start a fire with a bow drill, campfire cooking and make your own survival kit! This camp is for young adventurers who want to build upon their outdoor skills. Lunch will be provided. For youth going into 4th-8th grade. Registration required at mycountyparks.com



River Raiders

June 16th-18th, 2026

Mandatory Training: June 9th at 5:30pm

Youth going into 6th-8th grade

Cost \$100

Paddle the Upper Iowa River

Adventure awaits around every bend! Explore the Upper Iowa River from Kendallville to Decorah. Campers will canoe, camp, cook outdoors, and learn other wilderness skills on this two-night, three-day excursion. Enrollment is limited to 14 participants. This opportunity is a partnership between Buchanan and Benton County Conservation.

Registration opens March 13th at
www.mycountyparks.com/Buchanan



BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA YOUTH TREK

JULY 23RD - 30TH, 2026

MANDATORY TRAINING: JULY 9TH

\$500 (MANY SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE!)



YOUTH WILL VENTURE OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS TO CONNECT WITH NATURE, CHALLENGE THEMSELVES, AND MAKE LIFELONG MEMORIES! YOUTH WILL PADDLE ACROSS WILDERNESS LAKES, PORTAGE CANOES AND PACKS, FISH FOR FUN AND FOOD, READ MAPS AND USE COMPASSES, LIVE IN TENTS WITHOUT LEAVING A TRACE, COOK MEALS IN WILDERNESS AREAS, AND LEARN ABOUT THE ECOLOGY OF THIS MAGNIFICENT AREA. THIS OPPORTUNITY IS A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN BUCHANAN AND BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION.

REGISTER AT WWW.MYCOUNTPARKS.COM/COUNTY/BUCHANAN/EVENTS



"I was awestruck by the wildlife we were lucky enough to see. At one point, I was able to swim with two loons, and that was really a special moment for me. These programs change kids' lives, and I'm so happy to have had mine changed."

-Elliot C.

"I learned so much and saw so many amazing things like otters, beavers, and many, MANY loons. I learned a lot of things about camping. This trip gave me opportunities to take a break from social media which I desperately needed. It was so refreshing!"

-Melissa E



"I had a great experience and learned a bunch of new skills. For example, I learned how to portage, leave no trace, and adjust to the needs of others. I learned that I am capable of more than I thought I was. I couldn't have done it without this trip."

-Kiera S.

