

# THE NATURE OF THINGS

*The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter*

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



## Honoring Our Roots, Growing Our Future - 70 Years of Conservation

By Shelby Williams  
Director

For 70 years, Benton County Conservation has worked to protect, restore, and share the natural resources that make this county a special place to live, work, and explore. What began as a vision to preserve open spaces and provide outdoor opportunities has grown into a system of parks, trails, and natural areas that serve thousands of residents and visitors each year. As we celebrate this milestone, we're not just looking back, we're looking ahead.

Benton County Conservation Board was voted into action as one of the first 16 conservation boards created in Iowa. Following the development of the Benton County Conservation Board, the community got to work. Hannen Lake Park was created as the first man-made lake in Iowa for county conservation boards in 1958! Construction of the lake called for moving over 56,000 cubic yards of earth, placing 1,350 tons of stone rip rap, and constructing a 600 foot long dam to create a 45 acre lake, with a bill for dirtwork around \$18,000! Check out some of the pictures.



*Figure 1: Aerial view of Hannen Lake during construction*



*Figure 2: Two men looking at newly constructed Hannen Lake*

The cornerstone of county conservation was built on a simple idea: take care of the land and make it accessible for people to enjoy. From the first acres of protected land to the development of parks and wildlife areas, each step forward was made possible by community support, dedicated staff, and a shared belief in the value of conservation. Over time, those efforts grew, adding more parks, more programming, and more ways for the public to connect with the outdoors.

# Honoring Our Roots, Growing Our Future - 70 Years of Conservation

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From a single campground to six, from developing and managing one mile of trail to 40 miles, from a few public hunting acres to over a thousand, the individuals who started Benton County Conservation in the 1950s and brought us to where we are today have made SUCH an impact. They set the stage for us moving forward and we cannot thank them and you enough for allowing us to continue. Now, we are continuing that hard work with restoration projects, facility improvements, accessibility, outreach, and so much more.



*Figure 3: High schoolers helping plant trees at Atkins Roundhouse*

Beyond the projects themselves, what truly drives conservation forward is the people behind the work. Staff, volunteers, and community members all play a role, whether it's planting trees, maintaining trails, or helping the next generation learn about the outdoors. Today, Benton County Conservation continues to build on that legacy through ongoing projects and daily work across the county. Behind every project, every trail, and every restored acre is something less visible, and just as important: a culture of stewardship.

We strive to maintain areas at a high standard, work together across roles and responsibilities, support each other during demanding seasons and projects, represent the department and county with professionalism, and continuously improve and adapt as needs change.

Culture isn't something that happens overnight. It's something that is built, maintained, and strengthened over time, just like the land we manage. As Benton County Conservation continues to grow, maintaining that culture will be just as important as any new project or improvement.

While 70 years is an important milestone, it's also a starting point for what comes next. Future plans include expanding recreation opportunities, continuing habitat restoration efforts, and strengthening community connections through education and events. As we celebrate 70 years, we want to thank everyone who has been part of this journey, past and present. Your support has helped shape what



*Figure 4: Naturalist led hike at the Edna Shain Fen Grand Opening in 2022*

Benton County Conservation is today. As we look to the future, this remains clear: the work continues, and the best is still ahead.

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# Honoring Our Roots, Growing Our Future - 70 Years of Conservation

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The future of conservation in Benton County doesn't happen by chance, it happens with support from people who value the outdoors and the role it plays in our communities. If you enjoy our parks, trails, and natural areas and want to help shape the next 70 years of conservation, these are some meaningful ways you can help:

- Be an advocate. Support conservation efforts at the local and state level by staying informed and voicing your support for programs that protect natural resources and expand outdoor opportunities.
- Support key initiatives. Programs like Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) and Fund the Trust (Iowa's Water and Land Legacy/IWILL) play a critical role in funding conservation projects across Iowa, including work right here in Benton County.
- Get involved locally. Attend Benton County Conservation programs and events, volunteer when opportunities arise, and help spread the word about the importance of conservation in your community.
- Use and enjoy the areas. One of the best ways to support conservation is simply to get outside, your use and appreciation of these spaces helps demonstrate their value.

Benton County Conservation is looking to celebrate our 70th anniversary with a time capsule to be opened at the 100 year anniversary (2056)! Super exciting, if you have ideas on must haves in the capsule reach out to us at [bcadmin@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:bcadmin@bentoncountyparks.com)!

## Scouting America Continues to Build a Legacy at Hannen Lake

By Cam Grubic  
South Unit Park Ranger



*Figure 5: Ranger Grubic showing Troop 8 how to plant a tree*

Hannen Lake Park property was purchased from the Hannen family in Blairstown, Iowa in 1957, with the lake and park itself being constructed shortly after. This little bit of information is fairly well known to the locals, but Benton County Conservation staff have been digging through the archives in hopes of unearthing some of the department's unique seventy year history. As it turns out, we've found the Scouts of America (formerly Boy Scouts of America) have had a powerful and lasting impact at the park that can be traced back to the beginning.

For many Americans, the tradition of scouting can trek back through generations. Scouting's bold traditions and oath includes being dutiful to yourself and the community you belong to. If you've been fortunate to spend time around young scouts or their families, then I'm sure you've probably realized what I am talking about, and it doesn't take long to start counting the benefits of their lasting commitment to the communities around them. I was planting oak trees with Pack 46 near the White Oak Shelter at Hannen Lake in early May, and realized the signs of the scouts' work and historical value are all around the park. Paul Stults, a Blairstown native, said he and two of his brothers were in Boy Scouts

# Scouting America Continues to Build a Legacy at Hannen Lake

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in the 1960's and 70's, adding "with the scouts alone, we planted a lot of trees out there every year, probably at least 100 trees." A recent article we found in the archives said the conservation board had help planting over 15,000 red, white and scotch pines in the early days. Paul continued reminiscing, "my fondest remembrance was the monkey bridge that the Boy Scouts built somewhere in the sixties or early seventies. We put in bird houses and such. . . a lot of great memories there." Today, many of those trees are the mature forests that surround the park.



*Figure 6: Belle Plaine scouts in the very early 1960's at Hannen Lake*

That legacy has lasted through to the present day as parents, grandparents, and other community leaders put in the effort and continue to foster the next generations of scouts to follow. We truly have been lucky to have the support of the scouting community. The scouts and families of Pack 46 and Troop 8 dedicate an annual walk dedicated to "Keep America Beautiful", where the focus is the removal of litter and other unsightly findings on over two miles of the park's roads and trails. Because of their efforts, they continue to collect a record low litter count each year. Jeff Cook, Cubmaster of Pack 46 from Atkins said "from camping at Hannen Lake as a youth, to bringing my Cub Scout Pack there as a Cubmaster, to seeing my oldest child complete their Eagle Scout Project there.," he continued to say "Hannen Lake has been a meaningful part of my Scouting journey through every stage of my life."

Scouts and families continue to go above and beyond, often directing Eagle Scouts to get in touch with the park office to see what kind of project needs they can be a part of. Most recently, Eagle Scouts John Sebedka and Tristan Cook have made significant additions to the park for patrons to enjoy. In 2024, John added waterfowl nesting structures around the lake, and a wildlife viewing blind near a grove of fruiting trees and shrubs that conservation staff planted with volunteers in the spring 2022. Tristan recently replaced an outdated bridge on a trail loop, connecting campground users and hikers with easier trail access to restrooms around a cove on the lake's west shoreline. He also designed and constructed a five by sixteen foot bridge to replace a foot trail where a culvert used to sit on the northeast end of the lake, reopening a section of the trail that had been closed for several years. Now Tristan's younger sister has an Eagle Scout plan in the works that she wishes to complete at Hannen Lake this fall.

It is often said "it takes a village," which can be said of any kind of work or organization. . . I am sure the local leaders in our scouting programs have said those exact words. But, what I hope they know and remember at the end of the day, is that we see them as part of our conservation village, too. Because it does take a lot to keep all aspects of a park functioning moving forward; especially for 70 years! It often takes the derived meaning of a Scout's Oath to get the job done:



*Figure 7: Scout camp at Hannen Lake Park in the 60's*

"On my honor, I will do my best  
To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law;  
To help other people at all times;  
To keep myself physically strong, Mentally awake, and morally straight."

# Field Trip Season and Back Again, A Naturalist Tale

By Aaron Askelson  
Naturalist

During the months of April and May, naturalists are extra busy. Field trip season means one day we might be working with 80 preschoolers and the next day we will be dealing with sophomores in high school. It makes for an interesting and exciting time. The younger kids tend to be amazed by things you might find to be mundane and uninteresting. If a preschooler yells out “bird poop!” they are likely to get over half the class to congregate around and examine their discovery. The high school students don't seem to be as impressed with bird poop.

On one very typical field trip for kindergartners this spring I led six 30 minute hikes around the nature center. On this hike we look for animal signs that the kids can help identify for example animal tracks, animal poop, feathers, or fur on the ground. During this field trip we got to see many painted turtles sunning themselves on logs, Canada geese, numerous red-winged black birds, wood ducks, robins and goldfinches; multiple sightings that we do not typically get blessed with. While I was pointing out how a beaver had chewed on one of our silver maple trees an observant kindergarten student pointed out that there was a snake two or three feet from my feet. I was able to catch the snake and show it to the kids. I held it briefly while the kids were able to gently touch the snake before I released him. The kids were very impressed especially since this class got to see a fox snake in the wild and a hognose snake at the nature center. While walking towards the nature center on our hike one of the girls expressed how cool it was that they got to touch a wild snake. She also stated that “Snakes give her and her mom the heebie-genies.” I asked “The heebie-genies?” She said “yeah the heebie-genies.”

“Not the heebie-jeebies?”, I said.

She responded “Nope the heebie-genies.”

The kids were also able to see Canada Geese defend their nesting territory and two other geese that were getting very frisky and began to mate. One of the kindergartners exclaimed "they are wrestling!" I simply agreed that they were wrestling and made eye contact with one of the teachers and knew the geese were doing far more than wrestling.

On that same day we also witnessed a bald eagle soar above one of our prairies, the students were impressed with that. But as we watched it fly towards Rodgers Park I saw a hawk out of the corner of my eye. It was way above the eagle. The hawk went into a stoop, which is what they call it when a raptor dives. It got closer and closer and I thought these kids are going to see something epic like on Wild Kratts or Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Right before the hawk was about to knock the eagle out of the sky, the eagle flipped over and put its sharp talons out. The hawk veered away at the last second, avoiding a catastrophic collision. The kids were able to witness this dogfight between the birds and have a memorable story to tell.

Field trip season is a hectic fast paced time of the year for the Benton County Conservation staff but well worth it for all the kids that exclaim “This was the best day ever!” And maybe learning about snakes will prevent her and others from getting the “heebie-genies” next time.



Figure 8: Aaron holding a wild fox snake caught during a hike with kindergartners

# In Memoriam to Cinnabar

By Faith Hunt  
Naturalist

Cinnabar, the Western fox snake, came to us in 2012 after being found in Mahaska County Conservation's Nature Center. The naturalist who found the snake in her office thought her young fox snake escaped, and went to put it away, only to learn her fox snake was still safely secured in its enclosure. Cinnabar found her way from that naturalist's warm computer tower to the warmth of the Benton County Nature Center. She was our first Animal Ambassador, helping educate on the importance of snakes in our ecosystem. It is hard to express how much of an impact an Animal Ambassador has on the community, even more so with a snake like Cinnabar. For many, she may have been the first and only snake that they ever touched. She helped shake fears of a commonly misunderstood animal, and created joy from her calm disposition in those who she impacted. When not slithering through dried leaves in her enclosure, she could be found over the necks of people with long hair, in hoodie pockets and winding through belt loops.



Figure 9: Cinnabar, our beloved Western fox snake

Cinnabar was named after the clever fox who taunts George Washington and his hunting hounds in the children's book *Cinnabar, The One O'Clock Fox* by Marguerite Henry. When she arrived at our Nature Center, she was only 15 inches long. By the time we said goodbye, she was nearly 53 inches. Cinnabar had 3 "Mickey Mouse" spots on her body, a common feature on fox snakes. She was mentioned on the radio show *Those Girls in The Afternoon* on 102.9 for being a crowd favorite after the Vinton-Shellsburg High School Career Fair, although they called her a "garden snake." In all the years that Cinnabar was an Animal Ambassador with us, she never pooped during a presentation which is a BIG deal when you are working with live animals.



Figure 10: 7 eggs laid by Cinnabar in 2023

For over 10 years, we believed Cinnabar was a male due to her tail size (this is not a 100% accurate way to sex a snake, but it is the least invasive). In early spring of 2023, Cinnabar's personality changed. She was spending a lot of time in her moisture box, refusing to come out and eat, hissing and shaking her tail every time we reached in to clean her enclosure or change her water. We weren't sure what to think, as this was very unlike her. She finally left her box and we discovered she had laid 7 eggs. These eggs were not viable as she had been in captivity for over 10 years at this point, but it told us two things: she was a female and she was very healthy!

In her later years, she had a few medical issues, as we all do as we age. Most of which she was able to overcome with some extra TLC. We want to say thank you to her Sponsors over the years who helped pay for her medical bills as she aged, and give a special thank you to Dr. Timmerman and the staff at the Vinton-Urbana Veterinary Hospital for helping take such good care of an Ambassador that was adored by many. Thank you, Cinnabar for touching the hearts of thousands of people.



Figure 11 & 12: Cinnabar enjoying enrichment time in the aquaponics plants & youth touching her during a program

# Monarchs in Iowa - Not Just a Fall Thing

By Sondra Cabell  
Summer Naturalist

Recognized by most, the large orange and black monarch butterfly is often associated more with its iconic fall migration than with its summer resident status in Iowa. Monarchs typically arrive back in Iowa in May - timing their arrival with the emergence of milkweed. These May arriving monarchs are mostly the children of the monarchs that left Iowa last fall, spent the winter in Mexico, and died after laying eggs in the southern US.

I spotted my first adult this year on May 8th. While outside on May 21st, I watched a female scouting milkweed and laying eggs. Collecting a few, we reared the caterpillars which have now made chrysalises. By mid June, they will emerge as grandchildren of the Mexican over-winterers. If conditions are good - enough rain to sustain milkweed; temps in the range of 72-90 degrees during the day; winds light enough for monarchs to maneuver and find milkweed; and parasite and predator loads not too extreme - we could see great-grandchildren by July, great-greats by August and potentially great-great-greats by September. Then comes the amazing mystery: How do these butterflies emerging in fall find their way back to the same locations in Mexico where their great-great-great grandparents spent the last winter? The mysteries with monarchs continue to engage both scientists and citizens alike.

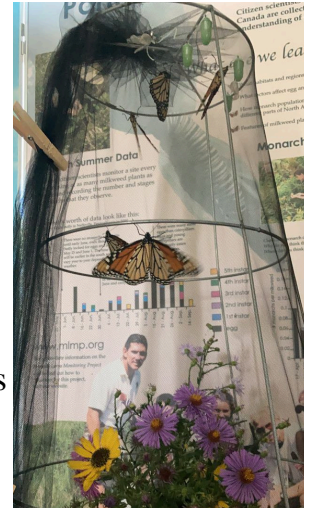


Figure 13: Freshly emerged monarch



Figure 14: Freshly formed chrysalis at the nature center

Stop in the nature center this summer and observe the monarch life cycle in progress. We hope to be rearing monarchs through fall. The Benton County Nature Center is open on Mondays from 12:00pm-4:00pm or call us at 319-472-4942 to set up a visit Monday-Friday, 8:30am-4:00pm.



Figure 15: 5th instar monarch caterpillar munching away at a milkweed leaf

## FUND THE TRUST

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



Photo from Fund The Trust

## **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](http://www.bentoncountya.gov) For times and locations. Meetings are open to the public.

Find us online at:

[www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/](http://www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/)

or [www.mycountyparks.com](http://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 Summer 2026

The Benton County Nature Center is open every Monday from 12pm-4pm! If Mondays don't work, give us a call at 319-472-4942 opt 3 to set up a time to come see us! As always, our playground behind the nature center is open from sunrise to sunset.

BCC Foundation is selling butterfly rocks  
FREE posters & stickers (while supplies last)  
Enjoy our community puzzle table  
View our special monarch butterfly display  
Play with our NEW naturescape elements!  
Grab a FREE house plant cuttings (while supplies last)



## Sunset Hike

**June 29th, 8:30pm at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (3150 57th St Trail, Center Point, IA 52213)**

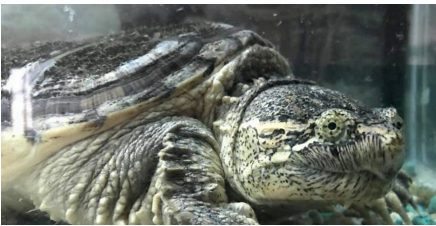
Join us as we watch the beautiful hues of the sunset as it meets the Strawberry moon. June suns set at a low angle in the summer sky, the full moon appears exceptionally large and often casts a striking golden or orange hue as it climbs the horizon. Then we will hike into the woods lit by moonlight, hopefully hearing owls, frogs and other creatures of the night. This program will include walking on uneven surfaces and is considered a moderate hike. Please wear sturdy shoes, bring bug spray, and a headlamp (red light is preferred). Registration is required by visiting [mycountyparks.com](http://mycountyparks.com)



## Ice Cream Science!

**July 10th, 2:30pm-4:30pm at Benton County Nature Center**

Have you ever made ice cream? 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! Programs are free and suitable for all ages. No registration required.



## Animal Ambassador Feeding Experience!

**July 7th, 10am-11am at Benton County Nature Center**

**July 21st, 1:00pm-2:00pm at Benton County Nature Center**

Meet one of our Animal Ambassadors and watch as they feed. Learn about their diets and feeding behaviors. This program is free and does not require registration.

## Conservation Library Programs: Squirrels!

**Learn about squirrels through a book, puppets, song, and a squirreley game!**

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

June 22nd at 1pm - Newhall Public Library

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

June 30th at 10am - Blairstown Public Library

July 8th at 4pm - Urbana Public Library

July 29th at 10am - Vinton Public Library



## WILDcat Adventures Camp

**July 16th, 10am-2:30pm at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (3150 57th St Trail, Center Point, IA); \$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](http://mycountyparks.com).



# SCHOOLS OUT – LEARNING SHOULDN'T BE

EXPLORE THE OUTDOORS 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](mailto:INFO@BENTONCOUNTYPARKS.COM).



## Art in Nature

**July 21st, 10am-12pm at Benton County Nature Center**

Join the naturalist as we explore the world of art and nature. We will look at some skulls of different mammals and then draw them with different media. We will use hand made art charcoal and walnut ink to create art inspired by nature. This program is for 8 year olds on up to adults. Fun for the whole family. Registration is required by visiting [mycountyparks.com](http://mycountyparks.com).



## Sandhill Crane & Prairie Chicken Bus trip Recap!



At the end of March, we partnered with Buchanan & Bremer County Conservation to witness the incredible migration of sandhill cranes and the courtship displays of prairie chickens on their booming grounds, known as a lek. We traveled the 8 hours to North Platte, NE and spent 3 days learning all about these incredible birds.

On the lek, we saw a total of 12 prairie chickens, 8 males and 4 females. The males put on an incredible show! These males gave it their all trying to be the most dominate male. They cooed, hooted, whooped, drummed, and hollered while bowing, stomping, side stepping, raising and lowering their tail feathers. It's a sight to see. The most dominate male will likely be the only one who will mate with all the females so there's a lot at stake! While on the lek, we also saw burrowing owls, prairie dogs, horned larks, western meadow larks, and a northern harrier!

In the evening, we traveled to the North Platte River where we watched the sunset and the sandhill cranes slowly moving in. The bugle calls of the cranes gradually got louder, until we were surrounded by a cacophony of calls.

Thousands of these birds seek refuge on the shallow and wide river to roost overnight and come morning, they disperse into the surrounding fields to gorge on grain waste and rodents. We were able to witness them leave the next day at sunrise, as well as them gathering in their staging area before dispersing into the fields.

A very special thank you to all our participants for joining us, our wonderful tour guides with Dusty Trails and Golden Spike Tower, and Bill from Hawkeye Stages for getting us there and back safely.

We can't wait for the next one!

We want to know where you want to go next! Email [fhunte@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:fhunte@bentoncountyparks.com) with suggestions!

