

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 22 Winter 2020-2021

Winter Season Work : *By Collin Strickland, Hannen Park Ranger*

What does the Benton County Conservation staff do during the winter and non-camping season?

After our parks close in late November or early December, the staff at Benton County Conservation turns their focus to completing larger projects. Large winter and early spring projects often include trimming trees, mowing, mowing wildlife habitat areas, planting prairies, splitting firewood, environmental education school programs, and display work. Staff will also attend a variety of trainings, workshops, and conferences to keep up certifications and professional development. At these events, staff are able to connect with other County Conservation employees from across the state. Staff are able to learn about new ways to manage wildlife habitat areas and pick up new ideas that can be implemented in our county parks.

In the springtime when conditions are favorable, the staff will conduct prescribed burns that hold back invasive species and encourage growth of the planted native species. Staff also make plans for various projects they want to accomplish during the camping season. This may include writing grants and obtaining quotes from local vendors. Early spring is also a great time to get mowers and other maintenance equipment serviced and ready to go to for the busy camping season.



Snowshoeing School Program



Tree Trimming and Prescribed Burns



Prairie Planting and Mowing

Inside this Issue

Calendar of Events

Due to Covid-19, pre-registration and masks are required for most events

Winter Fun

page 2 & 3

Meet The New Director

page 4

Meet The New Rodgers Park Ranger

page 5

Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area

page 6 & 7

Eagle Scout Project

page 8 & 9

Meet The New Board Member and Chickadee Check-Off

page 10

Winter Word Search

page 11

Electronic versions are available at our website

www.bentoncountyiowa.org

Contact us at:

319-472-4942 or

info@bentoncountyparks.com

to be added to our mailing list.

Winter Fun: *By Signey Hilby, Naturalist*

Burrrr! Winter is officially here! Because it's cold outside, and the days are shorter, there are many kids who aren't spending as much time outside. Here at Benton County Conservation we're hoping to change that.

As long as kids are properly bundled up, being outside in the cold is much more beneficial than staying inside. Kids need time outside in the winter because it improves their immune system, gets their blood flowing, and helps them get essential nutrients.

Sometimes finding things to do in the cold winter months can be tough. So, to keep you active, outdoors, and having fun this winter here are seven outdoor winter activities for you and your kids to try:



Snowflake



Ice Globes

1. Frozen Colored Ice Globes

Add some color and fun to your outdoor space by making colored ice globes! All you need to do is fill round balloons with tap water. You can add a few drops of food coloring to the water. Then just let them freeze (either outside or in the freezer). Once frozen, pop/rip open, remove, and properly dispose of the balloon. You're now left with a beautiful ice globe of your color of choice. Take them outside to decorate your yard or to play with.



Ice Bowling

2. Ice Bowling:

All you need is 10 water bottles and 1 round balloon. Fill the water bottles with tap water. You can add a few drops of food coloring to the water. Then just let them freeze (either outside or in the freezer). Be sure leave the lid off to give the water room to expand as it freezes so it doesn't distort the bottom of the bottle, which would keep them from standing upright on a flat surface. Next, fill the round balloon with tap water and add a few drops of food coloring if desired. Then let it freeze (either outside or in the freezer). Once everything is frozen, take all outside and set up a bowling lane! The frozen water bottles are the pins and the frozen round balloon is the bowling ball.



Snow Paint

3. Snow Paint

Mix food coloring or watercolor paints with tap water and put into spray bottles. Then let your kids outside to color or draw in the snow!

Continued on next page

Winter Fun: *Continued from page 2*



Sun-Catchers

4. Frozen Sun-Catchers

Spend some time outside gathering natural items to use in your sun-catchers. Examples of natural items include: sticks, berries, twigs, flowers, buds, leaves, and seeds. Lay out a plastic lid, paper plate, pie pan, or a silicone mold to use as the mold for your sun-catcher. Fill the mold with water and place your natural items into the water in any design of your choosing. Then let it freeze (either outside or in the freezer). Once frozen gently remove the ice sun-catcher from the mold and place on an outdoor window sill or hang it from a tree branch. Pro Tip: If you want your sun-catcher to be crystal clear, boil the water first!

5. Maple Syrup Snow Candy

All you need to make this sweet treat is a container of pure maple syrup and snow!

STEP 1: If you are making the candy inside - Take a baking sheet outside and fill it with freshly fallen clean snow then place the baking sheet of snow in the freezer until you need it. If you are making the candy outside - Put on your winter attire so you are prepared to go outside. STEP 2 (Optional): In order to make some fun candy shapes carve little areas or designs in the snow to pour the maple syrup into. STEP 3: Pour a container of pure maple syrup into a pot. Bring the maple syrup to a boil over medium-high heat, while stirring constantly. Boil until the maple syrup reaches 220-230 degrees. STEP 4: Carefully remove the pot from the burner. Place it on a hot pad if you are doing the activity inside or take it outside to your candy making area. STEP 5: Using a tablespoon carefully spoon the hot maple syrup onto the snow or into your premade snow carvings. The maple syrup will harden quickly, so you can pick up the pieces and eat like hard candy after just a few minutes.



*Maple Syrup
Snow Candy*



Monster Tracks

6. DIY Monster Tracks

Use some heavy cardboard to create oversized footprints. Design, draw, and cut out big feet from the cardboard. Attach them to the bottoms of your kids' snow boots. Then go outside and let them walk around creating monster tracks in the snow as they go. Your kids might even be surprised by how much they can walk on top of the snow. With their monster feet on they cover a larger surface area, and will sink into the snow less.

7. Valentine's Heart Walk

With Valentine's Day just around the corner, go on a heart walk. You can walk around your neighborhood, through town, or even into the woods. Just keep your eyes open for hearts, you'll be surprised how many you can find! From heart-shaped rocks and leaves to heart-shaped knots on trees and everything in between! Go on a hunt for as many heart-shaped objects as you can find.



Heart Walk

Meet The New Director: *By Shelby Williams, Director*

I recently accepted the position as Director for Benton County Conservation. The last 2.5 years, I have been on the team as a Conservation Technician and Fill-in Ranger. In the last few years of working here, I've really enjoyed being on the team.

When not working on general land management throughout the county, I've been helping to patrol campgrounds and assisting on everything from park improvements to large school field trips. The life of county conservation is unknown day to day and I appreciate that aspect a great deal. I can't imagine working in any other environment and feel truly fortunate to be a part of this incredible team.

I started my conservation journey when I was young by camping, fishing, and exploring with my family in parks all around the country. I started working in the county conservation system in high school and have stayed in the field ever since, including getting my degree in Animal Ecology and

Environmental Studies from Iowa State. I have had the opportunity to work in several positions and boards in different counties within the Iowa County Conservation System, and I am excited to lead the team I have come to know as my extended family. This crew has been through a lot, as we all have in 2020, and I am eager to help guide the staff forward as we tackle new challenges and strive to improve our conservation, recreation, and education plans.

In this position, I plan on utilizing the wealth of diverse knowledge that our staff brings to the conservation field. We will continue to learn and expand on our expertise to accomplish our overall goals and make a difference in conservation of Benton County as a whole. I cannot express how excited I am to continue to work with the staff to accomplish great things. We all look forward to serving Benton County for years to come.



*Shelby Williams
Director*



Iowa's County Conservation System 99 Parks in 99 Weeks

There's no better way to celebrate Iowa's unique 99 County Conservation System! Each week we will focus on just 1 of the 99 Counties and will explore some of the opportunities they provide.

Follow the My County Parks Facebook page to participate in this great virtual adventure!

Meet The New Rodgers Parks Ranger: *By Ed Hach, Rodgers Parks Ranger*



*Ed Hach
Rodgers Park Ranger*

Hello, I'm Ed Hach, the new Park Ranger for Rodgers Park with Benton County Conservation. I grew up on a farm outside of Dysart, where I spent much of my childhood enjoying the outdoors in our family's small timber. Along with many day trips to Backbone State Park, family trips to Colorado, fishing trips with my dad to Ontario, and many other visits to parks, scenic areas, and wild places, my interest in the outdoors and wildlife was developed from a young age.

In 2012, I spent my summer in Yellowstone National Park, working for the vendor which operated the Lake Yellowstone Hotel and Lodge. I hiked over a hundred miles that summer, and though I couldn't give you an accurate count on all the amazing sights, geological features, and creatures big and small I saw those few months, I can tell you a place like our first National Park is not short on any of them!



*Ed Hach
Rodgers Park Ranger*

The following year I moved to Michigan and began working seasonally for a county parks commission while going to school. My college and career decisions changed while I was there, as I became hooked on working in parks at both county and city levels, and my path was set. While also exploring some of the amazing state parks Michigan has to offer and the beautiful forests and waters of places like Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, my love and appreciation for public lands at all levels grew all the more.

Shortly after getting married, my wife and I made the move to Iowa, where I promptly began seasonal employment with Black Hawk County Conservation, working at Hickory Hills Park. I soon enrolled to Hawkeye Community College, where I graduated with an Associate Degree in Natural Resources Management in 2019. I thoroughly enjoyed my three summers at Hickory Hills, along with the hands-on coursework at Hawkeye. With the networking and collaboration we did with several area boards, I knew the county conservation board system was the kind of place I wanted to make a career.

Most recently I spent almost two years as the Natural Resource Technician, assisting the City Forester in the Waterloo Leisure Services Department, gaining valuable experience and working with some great people. I am very honored and excited to start my time here as a ranger. I look forward to the park and habitat improvement projects, public outreach and collaboration, and the great camping seasons to come!

"When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."
-Aldo Leopold

Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area: *By Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

Wetlands tend to get a bad rap because they are viewed as useless areas that only produce mosquitoes but, they are essential for good water quality. They slow water down as it meanders through a wetland, letting nutrients and sediments fall out of the water column and be deposited rather than being carrying down stream into our creeks and rivers. Keeping these sediments and nutrients out of the water is beneficial to everyone. Our rivers will run cleaner and since many people get their water from rivers, we would be spending less money to clean and treat the water before we use it for drinking and other household uses. Wetlands work like giant filters storing sediment and excess nutrients. These slow waters are ideal for insects and other biodiversity. Creating one of Iowa's most diverse habitats.



Plant Biodiversity

What is a fen you might ask and what makes it so special?

A Fen is a wetland that gets the majority of its water from ground water and rainfall. A wetland is usually characterized by the soils and types of plants found in it. The recently acquired Edna Shain Fen is worth saving due to several plant species that are rare and hard to find in Iowa. Cotton grass is one of the rare plant species found at the Edna Shain Fen. Some of the more common plants found there are just as interesting and can typically be found only in high quality wetlands across the state. For example early buttercup, prairie ragwort, and numerous sedges are found at the Edna Shain Fen. Not to mention the wildlife that abound in such a small area. Wetlands provide an ecosystem that can produce the most diverse types of flora and fauna. Providing habitat for crayfish, many different species of birds, and insects.

Benton County Conservation has partnered with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to preserve a unique property in the northwest region of the County which contains a fen. This fen contributes to the biodiversity of the area and a simple hike around the edge of the property or even pulling over to the side of the road and rolling down the windows will clue you into the fact that there is a lot going on there. Many different kinds of birds can be seen darting around the low vegetation. Yellow-headed Blackbird and red winged blackbirds frequent the area. Bobolinks can be heard making their joyous song. King birds and kestrels have been spotted on the neighboring powerlines waiting for their next meals. At least one species on the threatened plant species list has been found on the property Bog Willow (*Salix pedicellaris*) and three other species on the special concern plant list have also been found Sage Willow (*Salix canadida*), Swamp Thistle (*Cirsium muicum*), and Tall Cotton Grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*). Grasses and sedges cover the ground with beautiful marsh marigolds and turtleheads to add some color. Crayfish chimneys can frequently be found on the site also.



Cotton Grass

Continued on next page

Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area: *Continued from page 6*

With the help of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Middle Cedar Watershed Authority, Edna Shain Trust, Prairie Creek Pheasants Forever, Cargill, the Red Cedar Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, Iowa Ornithologists Union, Iowa Native Plant Society, local citizens, Benton County Conservation Foundation, and Benton County Conservation Board we were able to preserve this unique piece of land for future generations to enjoy.

Benton County Conservation acquired 158 acres of unique habitat for the citizens of the state to preserve it for future generations. It will be known as the Edna Shain Fen and Wildlife Area. It sits on the corner of 54th Street and 20th Avenue in rural Benton County. The Benton County Conservation Board plans to improve the surrounding acres of the fen by planting more native grasses and forbs to protect and enhance the surrounding area. A small parking lot will also be put in for visitors to the area to use. It will become an ideal bird watching location for many. Without contributions from groups like those listed above and citizens of Benton County this land acquisition would not have been possible. Thank you for the work you do to preserve Iowa's native plants and habitats across the state. If you want to learn more about fens follow this link: [2007-2 PDF.indd uiowa.edu](#)



Early Buttercup



Prairie Ragwort



Arrowhead

Eagle Scout Project : *By Connor Hicok, BSA Vinton Troop 47*

This past year, I have been extremely busy, and the biggest occupier of my time was planning and carrying out my Eagle Scout Project.

Truly, it started months before the date it all happened, I took multiple walks throughout the garden I was revitalizing, and had multiple discussions with my benefactors representative to discuss what the school district - my benefactor - wanted, which was someone to 'revitalize' their outdoor garden. I agreed; inspired to take on this project because I was going to Tilford Elementary when that garden was first planted, and when I walked through it during my planning phase, I saw how far it had gone into disarray, and I started wanting to make it at least a little bit better and look more like it's former glory.

A lot of time went by with me doing boring planning and even more boring paperwork, but eventually the time came around the beginning of August where I thought I'd be able to get it done, so I made up some handouts, and got my fellow scouts together with the bribe of a free lunch, for the work to take place on the 22nd of August.

On that day, myself and some adult scout leaders woke up early in the chilly morning to go out into the garden, and cut down the 6 large dead trees that were back there, as well as an uncountable amount of mulberries and other invasive shrubs that were big enough to overcrowd the flower beds and other trees and bushes in the area. As well as being able to shave back the willow tree, which looks much better, and can now be mowed around.

Luckily, this was after the derecho, and a lot of the trees had a couple limbs down, and one even fell down $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way up, and made our job a lot easier. Something else that was truly a god-send, was the skid loader the school graciously provided to carry around all of the large lumber and numerous sticks that were scattered throughout the entire garden, without it this project would have taken several days. After the long morning of cutting down trees, everybody went home for a small break until 1pm when all of the younger scouts would arrive for work that required fewer chainsaws.

What I had the kids do was split up into three groups, a few of them went to a small pond in the garden and raked gravel around the edge so there was a nice gravel 'beach'. I also had a few kids go through where all of the trees were cut down, and rake up all of the smaller twigs that the skid loader wasn't able to get.



Small Wetland



Willow Tree

Eagle Scout Project: *Continued from page 8*



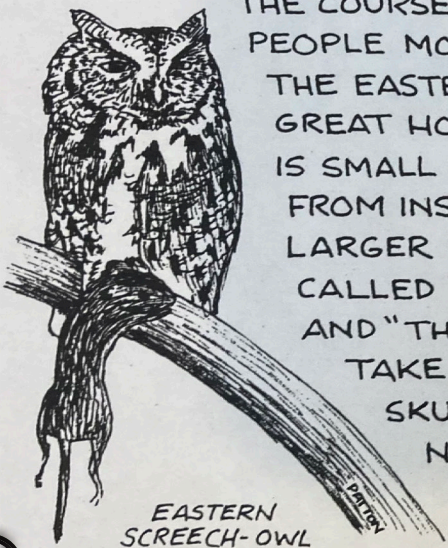
Recovered Bench

Lastly, the largest group of the kids went over to the main flower bed at the beginning of the garden, and weeded the entire thing so we could mulch it over, and all of the actual flowers could grow back during next summer.

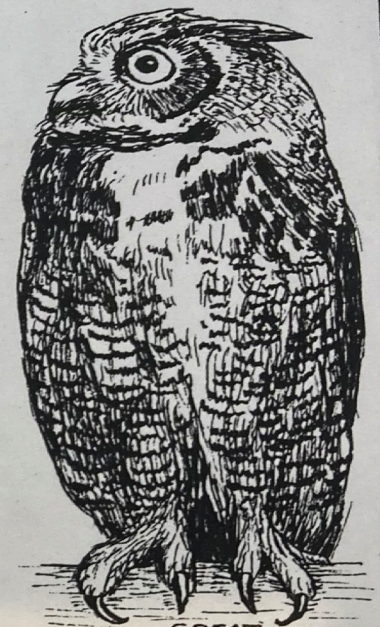
Which brings me to my favorite part of this entire project in my opinion, and what shows that the work I decided to put into it was worth it. During the weeding process of the flower bed, we uncovered a bench that has been in that flower bed the entire time, since it was first planted years ago, but which was forgotten about as time passed, and weeds grew. So when we uncovered it, it was a genuine surprise to everyone because it was 100% covered, and no one could see it. But by the end of the day, considering all of the amazing work everybody put in, everyone was tired and ready to be done, but I think it turned out really great, and I hope everyone can enjoy the result in the future.

NATURE AROUND US BY SCOTT PATTON

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE EIGHT OWL SPECIES THAT MAY USUALLY BE FOUND IN IOWA THROUGHOUT THE COURSE OF A YEAR, THE TWO THAT PEOPLE MOST OFTEN ENCOUNTER ARE THE EASTERN SCREECH-OWL AND THE GREAT HORNED OWL. THE SCREECH-OWL IS SMALL AND TAKES PREY RANGING FROM INSECTS TO MICE. THE MUCH LARGER HORNED OWL HAS BEEN CALLED "THE TIGER OF THE AIR" AND "THE EXECUTIONER." IT MAY TAKE PREY AS LARGE AS CATS, SKUNKS (ITS SENSE OF SMELL IS NOT GOOD), AND PHEASANTS, AND MAY INCLUDE THE SCREECH-OWL ON ITS MENU.



EASTERN
SCREECH-OWL



GREAT
HORNED OWL

Meet The New Board Member:

Hello! I am Mike LaGrange. I am honored to be the newest member of the Benton County Conservation Board.

I grew up in Vinton exploring all aspects of the Cedar River and hunting mushrooms on the land that is now known as Rodgers Park. My family has always been very involved in conservation, with my father being instrumental in starting the Old Creamery Nature Trail. I have always had a strong interest in native prairies and currently manage 80 acres of prairie.

I am looking forward to working with the Board and Benton County Conservation staff to continue to improve our parks to benefit Benton County residents.



Mike LaGrange - Board Member

Chickadee Check-Off

Since 1982, when the Iowa legislature created the Fish and Wildlife Fund Tax Check-off, Iowans have been able to bring a little wildness into the tax season.



The Fish and Wildlife Tax Check-off, affectionately called the Chickadee Check-off, was created to allow people to make a charitable donation to wildlife conservation in Iowa out of their tax refunds or by tacking a few dollars on to any taxes owed. When filling out the state income tax form, just look for the contribution line (line 57 on Form 1040) and write in any dollar amount next to Fish/Wildlife. All the money contributed through the chickadee check-off helps support the Wildlife Diversity Program at the Iowa DNR. This program has statewide responsibility for all the wildlife that can't be hunted, fished or trapped from Peregrine Falcons to Poweshiek Skipperling [butterflies](http://www.iowadnr.gov/wildlifediversity). You can learn more about the program on their website: www.iowadnr.gov/wildlifediversity.

Please consider donating to the Chickadee Check-off this tax season and supporting wildlife conservation in Iowa!

Winter Word Search:

H T R S L E D D I N G J C N K
O T O K N E Q X F L Q D O T B
T R H F I R E P L A C E L C Y
C A S L I I C I C L E V D A I
H C I N Z X U Q B M R L S R C
O K C U O K D E E R L Y G D E
C S E C T W N Y G P S K J I F
O R G L O V E S I A N X A N I
L L H E C H M S A F O V N A S
A F R E E Z I N G V W P P L H
T T I A J W Y O I U F M A B I
E F I E E Q X A N A L L T O N
M S N O W M A N K W A O E O G
R B B E J K C V L F K O K T I
G V R U I Q D Z J P E H D S S

Hot Chocolate

Ice Fishing

Snowflake

Fireplace

Cardinal

Sledding

Freezing

Snowman

Icicle

Gloves

Deer

Snow

Tracks

Boots

Cold

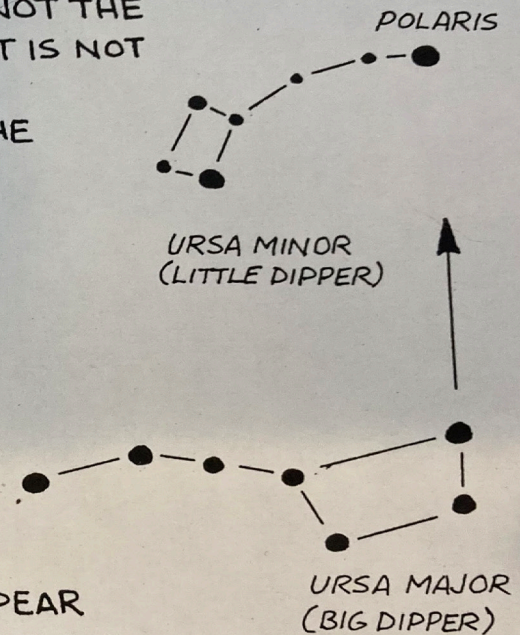
Ice

NATURE AROUND US

BY SCOTT PATTON

THE NORTH STAR, NAMED POLARIS, IS NOT THE BRIGHTEST STAR IN THE NIGHT SKY. IT IS NOT EVEN CLOSE. NEVERTHELESS, IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO LOCATE. FIRST, LOOK FOR THE BIG DIPPER IN THE NORTHERN SKY— IT IS EASY TO FIND. THEN USE THE TWO STARS OPPOSITE FROM THE "HANDLE" AS A POINTER TO LEAD YOU TO THE NORTH STAR, WHICH IS ALSO THE END OF THE HANDLE OF THE LITTLE DIPPER. THE LITTLE DIPPER APPEARS TO "POUR" INTO THE BIG DIPPER.

AT THE NORTH POLE, THE NORTH STAR IS LOCATED DIRECTLY OVERHEAD. BECAUSE OF EARTH'S ROTATION, ALL OTHER STARS APPEAR TO REVOLVE AROUND IT AS THE NIGHT WEARS ON.



Conservation Board Members

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member
Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Member
Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Member
Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member
Becky VanWey: Urbana, Chair

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month at 5:00 at the Nature Center. Meetings are open to the public.

Conservation Staff

Shelby Williams	Director
Aaron Askelson	Interpretive Naturalist
Signey Hilby	Interpretive Naturalist
Ed Hach	Rodgers Park Ranger
Layla Hagen	River Parks Ranger
Collin Strickland	Hannen Park Ranger
Zach Parmater	Conservation Tech/Ranger
Vacant	Conservation Tech

Email anyone on staff by using their first initial combined with their last name
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