

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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Welcome Baby Boy Hach!
6/4/2022
Proud Parents Heather & Ed

Welcome Baby Boy Grubic!
11/23/2022
Proud Parents Baylie &
Camryn

Congrats to Faith & Luke!

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



Reflections of the Fall

*By Aaron Askelson,
Naturalist*

Hickory nuts and acorns fall around me on a humid morning on the first day of fall, I swat the gnats and mosquitoes away from my face who seem to be enjoying the second summer as much as I. A woodpecker can be heard making its staccato drumbeat off in the distance, searching for its next meal. A blue jay announces their presence, letting all know that this is their territory. A squirrel chatters off to my left as it scurries and bounds around from tree to forest floor, collecting its winter stores. A fish jumps out of the water near the edge of the shore, possibly a bass. I wonder if it got the insect it was hunting. It leaves only circular waves radiating out from the center.

The sun filters through the leaves as many of the trees begin their transformation of color from green to brilliant orange, red, and yellow. The light reflects off the ripples in the lake and onto the underside of the leaves, creating ribbons of light that dance on the leaves hanging over the shore. These, soon, will also fall. In a few weeks, most trees will be bare except for the oaks who seem to hold on the longest. The shimmering ripples on the water will slowly give way to crystals of ice that form along the edges first. The fish will also slow with the season and its diet of flying insects will cease. The squirrels will slow only on the bitter cold days and the blue jays will keep proclaiming their presence throughout the coming season. The woodpeckers' meals might become a little harder to find, but they will continue their search through the bitter cold. I will trade in my shorts and t-shirt for a jacket and pants. My hiking boots for winter boots or snowshoes. The sweat on my brow for a stocking cap.

I am not ready for winter and the cold it brings, but I do enjoy the changes of the seasons. Hopefully, the squirrel is ready.

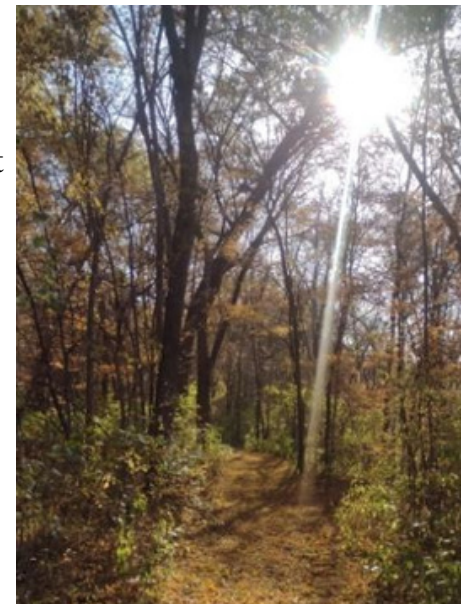


Figure 1: Sunlight gleaming through the trees at Winegar and Tobin Wildlife Area just west of Wild Rose Cabin.

Living and Learning - Primitive Horse Camping *By Cecilia Dirks, Conservation Technician*



Figure 2: Cecilia, Big Red, Lil' Red and Rumson traveling down the trail to their cabin at Whiterock Conservancy.

Something on my “Things to Try List” has been packing in with horses on a camping trip. I decided to try it this year with help from my sister, Layla. The trip was a lot of fun and we learned a lot along the way!

We rented a primitive cabin at Whiterock Conservancy near Coon Rapids, Iowa in mid-October. I got the horses in shape by riding the six miles of trails available for horseback riding at Winegar and Tobin Wildlife Area. We expected the weather to be cool, but of course the weekend of our trip brought a cold snap with nighttime lows of 29 degrees. Extra blankets and layers were added to our gear.

We arrived at the River Campground with our horses, Big Red and Lil’ Red and Layla’s dog, Rumson. The cabin was supposed to be a mile ride in, but because we had horses we had to use a different route that was three miles instead of one. We tacked the horses up, piling most of our gear into pack bags that attach to the saddles. We each wore a backpack and Rumson ran alongside us.

The hike in was lovely, even if it was longer than we expected. The cabin was very simple with no heat, water, or electricity. In the summer months there is an outdoor shower that is heated by the sun. We got settled and enjoyed a campfire meal of mac and cheese and s’mores. Thanks to our excessive amount of blankets, we stayed plenty warm at night.

We hit the trails after a breakfast of bacon, pancakes, and coffee. Of the seven miles we rode, four and a half miles were equestrian and hiking exclusive trails. Other trails were multiple use for equestrians, hikers, side-by-sides, and bicyclists. Trail lunch was chips and popcorn due to the meat and cheese being left behind. Supper was a filling campfire stir fry of sausage and veggies.

The last morning, we mucked out the horse yard, cleaned the cabin, and packed differently. We put most of our gear on Big Red, Layla carried a backpack and walked Rumson, while I rode Lil’ Red and ponyed Big Red.

This was our first primitive trip and we didn’t do too bad! For future trips I would invest in: collapsable buckets, a single burner stove, and a packable pot and pan (I packed in my trusty cast iron dutch oven).

If you want to try something new, start planning! Facebook groups have great resources from people who have been places and tell others the good, bad, and ugly of where they have been. Start simple, a three mile hike to a primitive site is far enough away to practice, but close enough that if things go wrong it isn’t a big deal to go back.

Thankfully, we have great horses so we could enjoy learning. I am already planning my next trip!



Figure 3: Cecilia with Big Red, tacked up for the hike to their cabin.



Figure 4: Group photo



Figure 5: Hiking to the cabin



Figure 6: Lil' Red inspecting the cabin

Tri-County Snowmobile Association

One of the many volunteer groups BCC works with is the Tri-County Snowmobile Association. The Tri-County Snowmobile Association is an Iowa State Snowmobile Association club that maintains snowmobile trails in the state, covering Black Hawk, Benton, Grundy, and Tama counties. Their trails connect to other trails maintained by Central Iowa Snowmobilers and Wapsipinicon Snowmobilers Association.

The trails they use are marked by the organization every fall across the participating counties and can be found on their website. Please see the link below for more information.



Some of these marked trails cross BCC properties include the Old Creamery Trail, when conditions allow. If you are interested in finding out more about this club or are interested in joining, information can be found at Tri-County Snowmobile Association (tcsaiowa.com)

ECO-EXTRAVAGANZA: ART IN NATURE SAVE THE DATE: APRIL 22ND, 2023

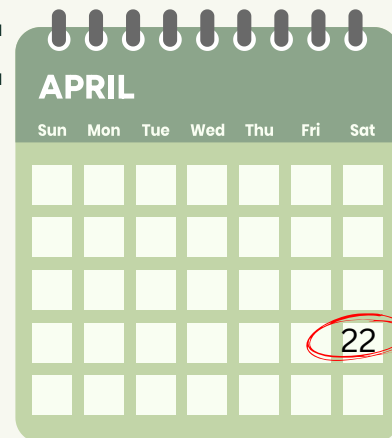
2023 Eco-Extravaganza theme will be Art in Nature.

After all, mother nature is the best artist.

Family fun with hands-on activities suitable for all ages!

Bake sale with proceeds going to Benton County Conservation Foundation.

More information to come. Follow us on Facebook to keep up-to-date.



SANDHILL CRANE & PRAIRIE CHICKEN BUS TOUR

NORTH PLATTE, NEBRASKA

MARCH 23RD-25TH, 2023

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

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

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

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

This 3-day trip will be packed with professional guided tours by Dusty Trails, LLC to view prairie chickens and sandhill cranes, a visit to the Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, Golden Spike Tour and Visitor Center, Buffalo Bill State Historic Park and Recreation Area and more!

Trip fee includes motorcoach transportation, lodging, professional guides, entrance fees, two breakfasts and tips.

Participants will be responsible for lunches and dinners.

COST PER PERSON:

Single Occupancy fee: \$737

Double Occupancy fee: \$637

Triple Occupancy fee: \$604

Quad Occupancy fee: \$587

**Register by February 23rd to secure your spot
\$100 Deposit required at registration.**

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



DEADLINE TO REGISTER IS FEBRUARY 23RD, 2023



Contact Sondra Cabell at 319-334-3436
or Faith Hunt at 319-472-4942
for more information



"Off-Season" Work

By Ed Hach
North Unit Ranger

Another successful camping season has come to a close here at Benton County Conservation and with it, comes one of the most common questions we encounter from the public, and even from other county department employees, "What do you do in the winter?" Warmer months are considered our "busy season" with campgrounds being open, field trips being led by our naturalists, shelter and cabin reservations, and the overall increased usage of our properties.

After campground gates are closed in the fall, our staff shifts efforts to maintenance tasks that are challenging to do during the camping season. A few projects BCC staff has completed during this year's off-season so far includes: staining the Cedar Cabin at Hannen Lake Park, adding insulation to the Nature Center attic, and installing a cabled fence at Hoefle-Dulin Recreation Area to allow year-round boat ramp access.

Routine off-season work includes: utility care and repairs, winterizing water lines and shower houses, installing new electric pedestals, and purchasing and maintaining equipment. BCC staff creates plans for projects and needs, takes inventory of supplies, interviews and hires seasonal workers, all in preparation for the next year. Fall and winter are ideal times for trail maintenance and tree work such as removing hazardous limbs and dead trees, which has increased due to the emerald ash borer infestation. Once the snow falls, snow removal at the Nature Center, park shops, and access drives for ice fishing becomes a priority.

Most importantly, we are able to shift gears and focus our energy on the work that is our department's main purpose and namesake: **conservation**. These conservation focused projects include: timber stand improvement, prairie planting and burning, wetland management, terrestrial and aquatic habitat restoration and improvement, invasive vegetation removal, erosion control, tree and shrub planting, research of best management practices, in-school visits, public programs, and grant writing. BCC is involved in protecting wildlife by enforcing state game laws and answering calls concerning wounded animals. The staff undergoes various trainings and classes to maintain our certifications, maintain public safety, and be better prepared to do our jobs.



Figure 7: Gates closed for 2022 camping season at Rodgers Park.



Figure 8: Rangers removing old pit toilets.

These are all things that we truly love and care about as a conservation staff. I think I speak for our whole crew in that these were the reasons we all got into this field in the first place. We will always strive to provide the best recreational and educational experience possible and complete the tasks needed to achieve such. When it comes to our true passion and drive, the preservation of our natural world and resources will always come first.

The Mighty Oak and the Bold Blue Jay

By Faith Hunt
Naturalist

On a warm October day, my fellow Naturalist cohort, Aaron, and I were walking around the Nature Center enjoying the fall sights, sounds and the last of nice weather. As we were walking, we were dispersing prairie seeds in areas that we planted last year. Occasionally, we would stop along the way to watch the squirrels grabbing walnuts and the blue jays squawking angrily at any other animal that dared to get close. We had stopped by the stream and started talking about future plans for the area when we looked at a silver maple just above the creek. The maple had a large wound traveling up to where the tree forks. In this deep wound was an acorn from a red oak, stuffed tightly into the tree. We both enjoyed thinking about which determined animal had stashed such a perfect acorn into the tree, hoping to come back to this spot to gather its gift from the work it had done weeks earlier. Acorns are packed with carbohydrates, fat, and protein that are crucial for wildlife during the harsh Iowa winters. This mighty red oak, that produced that one little acorn that was stashed in the silver maple, is the same oak that can produce up to 3 million acorns in its lifetime. Planting an oak tree is planting a living community. It's phenomenal to think of all the life that this one tree provides. Turkeys, deer, squirrels, chickadees, warblers, wood ducks, acorn weevils, titmice, towhees, nuthatches, acorn moths, flickers, and many more animals will enjoy the bounties of this single tree planted many years ago at the Nature Center.

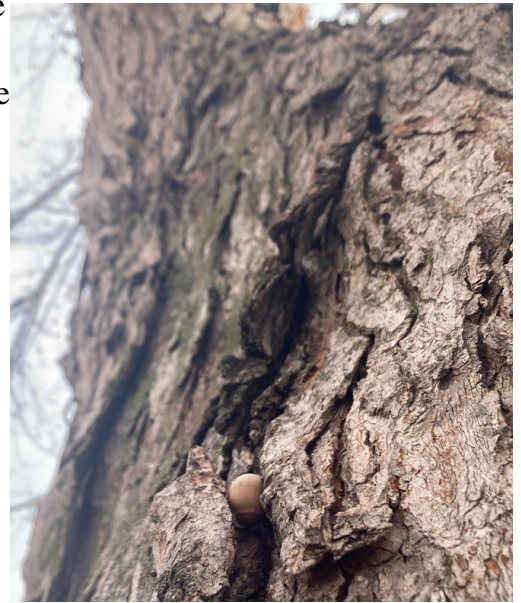


Figure 9: Acorn tucked into a silver maple tree wound



Figure 10: fall oak leaves on the ground

One animal that immediately comes to mind when thinking about the oaks' relationship with wildlife is the blue jay. The relationship between oaks and jays goes back 65 million years ago in South East Asia. Oaks and jays have a mutualistic relationship, both depending on each other. Blue jays rely on the oak trees for their protein packed nuts and the oak trees rely on the jays to disperse their seeds over a wide range. We often think of squirrels being master tree planters for oak trees, but squirrels typically bury their nuts 200 feet from the tree where they collected the nut. Blue jays, however, will carry the acorns faster than any other animal, up to one mile from the mother tree. In fact, it is thought that blue jays are the reason oak trees spread north so rapidly after the last glacial period. Not only does the oak tree provide necessary food from its nut mast, oaks provide shelter, are excellent at water absorption, and also drop thousands of leaves. These oak leaves return nutrients back to the soil with the help of bacteria, fungus, and insects that slowly decompose all the leaves.

The Mighty Oak and the Bold Blue Jay

Continued from previous page

Blue jays can carry up to five acorns at one time! One in their mouth, one in the tip of their bill and two or three in their gular pouch (specialized throat pouch). Jays will often store acorns one at a time in the ground, but not always. Sometimes they will store them in cracks of a tree, under a loose tile in a roof, maybe even a potted plant. Studies have shown that blue jays hide anywhere from 3,000-5,000 acorns every fall. Their average lifespan is seven years. They certainly can't remember where they hide each nut. Approximately one out of four acorns are found, which inadvertently plants seeds that will produce trees long after the jays are gone. On average, jays will plant 3,360 oaks every year!



Figure 11: Young blue jay with a full mouth and gular pouch. Photo by Larry Reis.



Figure 12: Acorn weevil

Blue jays are often referred to in the bird community as the bullies of the woods. They are dominant and territorial, they will even mimic red-tailed hawks to scare off other birds and animals. Jays are large, loud and bold, but are also rather intelligent for a bird. All acorns are not equal. A small weevil that I find to be rather adorable, called an acorn weevil, lays its eggs inside acorns. Its larvae will eat the nutrient rich flesh of the acorn and emerge through a tiny hole in the fall. These acorns don't provide much sustenance after the acorn weevil is done with it. Blue jays can sense which ones have been devoured by the weevil and are good at avoiding stashing away those spoiled acorns. While they are flying around, stashing acorns in their carefully selected spots, they will be aware of those around them. If they notice they are being watched by other jays, they will continue to hide the acorn in that spot, then fly back at a later time to move it when their audience is gone.

Thinking back to that beautiful early October saunter, I think about that acorn that had fallen from the Mighty Oak that was jammed into the silver maple and imagine the Bold Blue Jay who spent time gathering the acorn to stash it in a spot the jay selected ever so carefully. I went back later in the day and the acorn from the mighty oak was gone. Maybe another fortunate creature benefited from the work of that bold blue jay, or maybe it saw us marveling at its treasure, and moved it.

Benton County Conservation Foundation

Think about Benton County Conservation Foundation (BCCF) for a charitable donation. BCCF is a non-profit 501(c)(3). When you donate to BCCF, it is a tax deductible donation. All funds help conservation efforts within Benton County.

Checks payable to BCC Foundation and can be sent to the Nature Center (5718 20th Ave Drive, Vinton, IA 52349) or donate directly through PayPal @BentonCCF or scan the QR code. Interested in being apart of something bigger? Join BCCF! The Foundation meets quarterly. Next meeting is January 17th at 7PM. Email foundation@bentoncountyparks.com for more information.



Conservation Board Members

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member

Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Member

Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Chair

Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member

Becky VanWey: Vinton, Member

The Benton County Conservation Board meets the second Monday of every month at the Nature Center.

Check www.bentoncountyiowa.org for times. Meetings are open to the public.

Conservation Staff

Shelby Williams, Director

Aaron Askelson, Interpretive Naturalist

Faith Hunt, Interpretive Naturalist

Ed Hach, North Unit Ranger

Layla Hagen, East Unit Ranger

Camryn Grubic, South Unit Ranger

Zach Parmater, Conservation Tech/Ranger

Cecilia Dirks, Conservation Tech

Email anyone on staff by using their first initial combined with their last name
@bentoncountyparks.com

Find us online at: www.bentoncountyiowa.gov

or www.mycountyparks.com

Find us on Facebook: [@bentoncountyparks](https://www.facebook.com/bentoncountyparks)

Calendar of Events Winter 2022-23

Registration for all events is required by visiting

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx> unless otherwise stated.

Masks are strongly encouraged when indoors.

Building Better Birders Workshop - Introduction to Birding

January 20th, 2023 9:00AM - 3:00PM at Benton County Nature Center; \$10 per person

Benton County Conservation is hosting a Building Better Birders Workshop where bird watchers, “birders,” will learn the basics about birding and have a chance to put their knowledge into practice. This workshop is the first of three Building Better Workshops around Benton County. To learn more about other workshops, visit: <https://buildingbetterbirders.com>.

Registration is required by visiting <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton.aspx>

Come for the whole workshop, or just a portion!

9:00-9:15 Introductions

9:15-10:45 Introduction to bird ID (passerins) presentation

10:45-11:00 Break and snack

11:00-12:30 Birding hike (if there's 4+ inches of snow, we will snowshoe on this hike)

12:30-1:15 Lunch break on own

1:15-1:45 Backyard Bird Count presentation

1:45-2:45 Build your own bird feeder

2:45-3:00 Wrap up and questions



Building Better Birders Workshop will be conducted by Kelly McKay (BioEco Research and Monitoring Center), with assistance from Mark Roberts (Clinton County Conservation), Brian Ritter & James Wiebler (Nahant Marsh Ed. Center). Funding for this workshop was provided by the Resource Enhancement and Protection – Conservation Education Program (REAP-CEP).

Artistry with Aaron: Barred Owl

February 1st, 6:30PM - 8:00PM at Benton County Nature Center;

\$30 for participants 17+, \$20 for 16 & under

Historians believe that Harriet Tubman, an avid naturalist, used the Barred Owl's call as a signal for people seeking to use the Underground Railroad.

This painting class led by Naturalist Aaron will include step-by-step instruction, one 11x14" canvas and painting supplies to make a realistic barred owl painting.

Registration required by visiting:

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton/Park/Benton-County-Nature-Center/Events/21841/Artistry-with-Aaron-Barred-Owls.aspx>. Registration closes 1/27/23.



Toddler Time: Cuddly Critters

February 3rd, 10:00AM - 11:30AM at Benton County Nature Center; Free

Join us for Cuddly Critters where we will learn about some of Iowa's cutest critters. This program will include a book and puppets. Toddler Time is suitable for kids under the age of 5. Registration is required by visiting: <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton/Park/Benton-County-Nature-Center/Events/21843/Toddler-Time-Cuddly-Critter.aspx>

Full Moon Snowshoe & Campfire Desserts

February 3rd, 6:30PM - 8:00PM at Benton County Nature Center; Free

If you can walk, you can snowshoe! Join us for an evening of campfire desserts and snowshoeing under the full moon. This program is free and weather dependent. If there is not at least 4 inches of snow, this program will be cancelled. Due to snowshoe size, this program is suitable for youth 11 and up. Registration is required by visiting: <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton/Park/Benton-County-Nature-Center/Events/21865/Full-Moon-Snowshoe-Campfire-Desserts.aspx>

Ice Fishing at Rodgers Lake Park

Saturday, February 11th, 8:30AM - 1:00 PM; \$5 for individuals +16 years

It's that time of year again for Benton County Conservation Ice Fishing Tournament! Parking and arrival starts at 7:00am with parking available at designated marked areas. During this event ONLY, gates will be open to vehicle traffic to access the North end of the lake.

Tournament registration starts at 7:30am with auguring and fishing starting at 8:30am. Registration will be located at the Enclosed Shelter. Individuals 16 and older must present a valid fishing license to participate. To enter into the tournament, it is \$5 for individuals over 16 years old and free for kids 15 and younger. Cash raffles for sale the day of along with 50/50 & more! Prizes will be given to the longest Bluegill, Crappie, & Bass. Fishing on the main lake only. Cash prize for 16 and older and prizes for 15 and younger. Cash raffles will be sold the day of only. Food will be available for purchase. Must be present to win raffles or 1st place fish prize.

Visit our [Facebook](#) for more information. Contact Ranger Hach at 319-560-9803 with questions.

Toddler Time: Numbers in Nature

March 3rd, 10:00AM - 11:30AM at Benton County Nature Center; Free

Come on out to the Nature Center to learn about numbers in nature! This program will include a book and a counting activity. Numbers in Nature is suitable for kids under the age of 5. Registration is required by visiting: <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Benton/Park/Benton-County-Nature-Center/Events/21866/Toddler-Time-Numbers-in-Nature.aspx>

Prairie Chicken and Sandhill Crane Bus Tour in Nebraska

March 23rd-March 25th, 2023 to North Platte, NE

Each spring, more than 500,000 sandhill cranes gather in the Platte River valley during their northward migration. Cranes have been making this migration annually for thousands of years. Approximately 80% of all sandhill cranes come to the Platte every spring. The concentration of cranes here is the greatest of anywhere in the world.

This 3-day trip will be packed with professional guided tours by Dusty Trails, LLC to view prairie chickens and sandhill cranes, a visit to the Henry Doorly Zoo, Golden Spike Tour and Visitor Center, Buffalo Bill State Historic Park and Recreation Area and more! Trip fee includes motorcoach transportation, lodging, professional guides, entrance fees, two breakfasts, and tips. Participants will be responsible for lunches and dinners. Registration and \$100 deposit due by 2/23/2023. This is a joint trip with Buchanan and Benton County Conservation. Contact Sondra Cabell at 319-334-3436 or Faith Hunt at 319-472-4942 for more information. Visit: <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Fontana-Park/Events/21840/Sandhill-Crane-and-Prairie-Chicken-Bus-Tour.aspx> to register today!

Cost per person:

Single Occupancy Hotel Room: \$737

Double Occupancy Hotel Room: \$637

Triple Occupancy Hotel Room: \$604

Quad Occupancy Hotel Room: \$587