

IOWA NATURAL HERITAGE

Protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife.



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INHF Land Acknowledgement:

As a land trust it is important for us to continuously acknowledge and understand the full scope of history that has brought us to reside on, protect and steward this land. The land between two rivers is home to many indigenous people, historically and today. We acknowledge the value of indigenous communities and work to honor them on the land.



ON THE COVER

You can catch a glimpse of Cape May Warblers when they migrate through Iowa in the spring and fall. They primarily eat insects but will snack on nectar and small fruits when available. *Photo by Terri Dermody*



Protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife.

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Stepping up for the land

Many factors go into assessing the importance of an INHF project. We may be looking for rare native fragments of Iowa's former vast landscape of prairie, wetlands, oak savanna and riparian woodlands. Or, we may be protecting a smaller natural area, family farm or creating a new park that will be important to the local community.

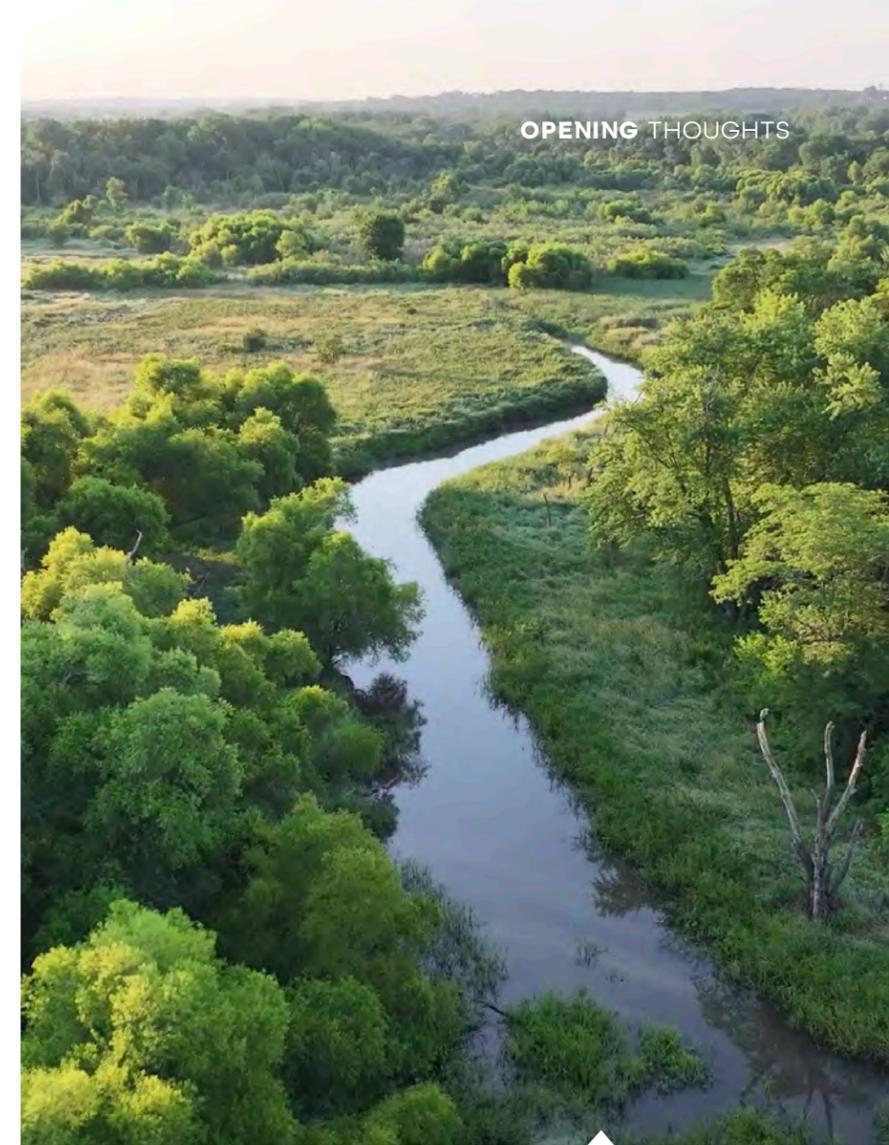


JOE MCGOVERN
President

However, the timing of a project is seldom in our control. When an individual or family chooses to protect their land, either through donation or sale, it is up to them. The Brenton Slough in Polk and Dallas counties is a place we have long desired to see protected, so when the family approached INHF and Polk County Conservation about preserving the property we knew we had to take action, especially when we learned of all the species that call it home.

Even though it is in the fastest developing area in Iowa, it is home to nesting Sandhill Cranes, Trumpeter Swans, Blanding's turtles, and impressive numbers of shorebirds, ducks and bats — in addition to backwater wetlands one can hardly imagine still existing in central Iowa. It truly has a sense of wildness that harkens back to Iowa's former landscape, which is why we are currently trying to raise funds so that Brenton Slough can be transferred to Polk County Conservation, preserved and protected forever, and become a special place for everyone to enjoy.

As a statewide organization committed to making Iowa better for all, we are taking on multiple projects at the same time, regardless of size or scale. We focus on special places that will create more diversity and resiliency in the landscape while serving nearby communities.



That's why we're committed to protecting places like Brenton Slough and equally proud of projects like the Rich Smith Wildlife Habitat Area in Ida County. INHF partnered with Sue Smith, Ida County Conservation and dozens of other supporters to protect this 103-acre wildlife area. Even at that modest size, it will increase the amount of outdoor recreation land in Ida County by 20 percent. This project might seem small, but it has a significant impact on Iowa conservation while enriching the lives of Ida County residents.

In just the last few years, INHF, with the help of many partners, has taken on some of the largest projects in our nearly 45-year history. This simply would not have been possible without your support, your advocacy and your vision for a better Iowa. We are grateful for YOU!

Brenton Slough is a 1,113-acre property in Polk and Dallas counties that INHF is partnering with Polk County Conservation to protect and open to the public. The vast property is home to wetlands, woodlands and oak savanna that serve as an oasis for wildlife.
Photo by Joe Jayjack

Learn more about how you can help save the slough at www.inhf.org/Brenton-Slough

The rising sun was a call for movement. To leap and jump and twist and turn with unlimited energy. Disorderly and awkward, each attempt to coordinate unwieldy limbs thwarted by youth and inexperience. Had you stopped to listen, you could hear as the kits attempted their first bark, poorly mimicked by a high-pitched yelp. Vibrant orange bodies toppled over one another in the grass.

Summer was for fun and play. It was hard to imagine that something so turbulent would ever settle. But, through familial guidance, the kits grew.

Red foxes are highly invested in the well-being of their young, caring for each kit as it learns the means to become independent. Just as humans rely on support and wisdom from others, so too do many of Iowa's native species.

It can be hard to comprehend that others receive no guidance during this tumultuous time. With apathetic parents, snakelets hatch into a world unconcerned with their success or failure, motivated only by their own will to persist. If you produce enough offspring, then surely at least one will survive. Quality is of little importance when quantity can make up for shortcomings.

Lucky for the fox kits, quality does matter. Yielding only four or five pups, a vixen must meticulously look after her offspring, feeding, housing and teaching the next generation.

The summer sun sets and with it returns steadfast autumn winds. The auburn hue of the adult's fur marks only a memory of the warmth felt by those youthful summer days. Just as the fall wraps up the growing season, it unravels the strings that tie the clan together. No one can be sure that they are prepared to venture on alone, nevertheless, with the toolkit we receive from our kin, we pursue another exciting season of life.

— GRETA SOLBRIG
Communications Intern



Both male and female red foxes care for their kits, taking turns hunting and bringing food to the young. The kits stay with their parents up to seven months. Photo by Ty Smedes

Dr. Ron Eckoff Wins Hagie Heritage Award

With an M.D. from the University of Michigan and an M.P.H. from Harvard, Dr. Ron Eckoff's 35-year career in public health has left behind an impressive legacy. But following this long-lived success and dedication, he had no plans of slowing down. Eckoff has spent the subsequent 23 years dedicating his time to prairie restoration. Now 82 years old, he hopes to spend another 10 years in this field, which he pursued solely out of passion and desire to leave Iowa's natural environment better than he found it.



Eckoff has been selected by INHF as the 2023 Hagie Heritage Award recipient. Endowed in 1989 by Jan Shindel and Ila Jeanne Logan in honor of their parents, Lawrence and Eula Hagie, the award recognizes Iowans who have demonstrated extraordinary personal service and commitment to improving the quality of Iowa's natural environment, while encouraging others to do the same.

For his efforts, Eckoff will receive an award of \$1,500 and a hand-carved acorn sculpture by Dennis and Linda Schlicht, commemorating his commitment to protecting Iowa land for generations to come.

Brenton Slough Update

Earlier this summer, INHF secured the 1,113-acre Brenton Slough and will hold it while funds are raised to transfer it to Polk County Conservation. With some existing funding from Polk County and lead donations from Kenneth Rutledge Brenton and family, we're nearly halfway to our goal of \$8 million. This fall is your chance to visit Brenton Slough with numerous events coming up:

- **Photography Clinics & Nature Hikes, 7:30 a.m.** (except September)
 - Friday, September 15 (at 7 a.m.), with Ty Smedes
 - Monday, October 9, with Marlen Kemmet
 - Wednesday, October 11, with Marlen Kemmet
 - Saturday, October 14, with Ty Smedes
 - Thursday, October 19, with Ty Smedes
- **Plein Air Workshop: Saturday, September 23, 9:30 a.m.-12 p.m.**
- **Fall Family Fun at Brenton Slough: Sunday, October 1, 2-4 p.m.**

To learn more about these events and the protection project visit www.inhf.org/brenton-slough.

A Greener State of Mind

INHF is set to receive proceeds from this fall's sales of A Greener State of Mind, a citrus-forward pale ale brewed by Big Grove Brewery in collaboration with Green State Credit Union. This charitable initiative annually benefits organizations working to create a greener and cleaner Iowa. You can find the brew at a Big Grove location or where Big Grove beers are sold.



UPCOMING EVENTS

SEED HARVESTS

SEPTEMBER 21
Richard W. Pohl Memorial Prairie, Ames

SEPTEMBER 23 & 26
Snyder Heritage Farm, Elkhart

OCTOBER 4
Pisgah

OCTOBER 5
Iowa City (Volunteer anniversary event)

OCTOBER 7
Heritage Valley, Waukon

OCTOBER 10
Breen Prairie Farm, Monticello

OCTOBER 11
Moorhead

OCTOBER 12
Snyder Heritage Farm, Elkhart

OCTOBER 17
Indiangrass Hills, Williamsburg

OCTOBER 21
Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt, Maxwell

OTHER EVENTS

OCTOBER 5 & 6
Iowa Trails Summit
Marshalltown

OCTOBER 7
High Trestle Hawk Watch
Madrid

OCTOBER 14
Kothenbeutel Prairie Workday
Sheffield

OCTOBER 19
Fall Foliage Saunter
Snyder Heritage Farm, Elkhart

NOVEMBER 9
Weimerskirk Woodland Restoration
Bellevue

NOVEMBER 16-17
Iowa Nature Summit
Des Moines

For more event information and the latest events, visit www.inhf.org/events

QUARTERLY PROTECTION REPORT

An quick look at new INHF protection projects and land transferred between **May 2023 – July 2023**

Newly protected areas

Monona County
15 acres of oak woodland and remnant prairie loess ridge located near Turin Wildlife Management Area. Protects contiguous wildlife habitat — featuring species like locoweed, large-flowered beardtongue and prairie turnip — within the Loess Hills Bird Conservation Area. (Conservation easement donated by the Reed family)

Keokuk & Washington counties
55 acres of grassland and woodland on the border of Keokuk and Washington counties. Lies adjacent to the Rubio Wildlife Management Area which includes riparian woodland, prairie and wetland habitat. Protection will ensure habitat connectivity along the South Skunk River, securing soil and improving water quality. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Benton County
183 acres of woodland, pasture, and grassland adjacent to Wildcat Bluff Access. Protection will benefit Cedar River water quality and an abundance of native species including grassland birds. Will provide a scenic entrance to Wildcat Bluff, a popular park for recreation. (Proposed public partner ownership) ***Read more on page 8.**

Black Hawk County
20 acres of remnant prairie and sedge meadow within Waterloo city limits in Black Hawk County. Protection will benefit native prairie plants including blazing star, showy orchids and shooting star. Property also benefits migratory birds, reptiles and amphibians and provides soil retention and water quality benefits. (Owned and managed by INHF)

Grundy County
66 acres near Conrad in Grundy County. This gift will provide INHF with future income to further its mission. (Donated by Janis Leise subject to a reserved life estate)

Madison County
234 acres near Truro in Madison County. Safeguards the water quality of Broadhorn Creek, protects valuable grassland habitat and offers outdoor recreation opportunities. (Proposed public partner ownership)

RRVT-HTT Connector
.45-acre parcel at the entrance into Bouton in Dallas County. Provides safer access to the High Trestle Trail and Raccoon River Valley Trail. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Palo Alto County
31 acres of mixed habitat in Palo Alto County. Protects Perkins Marsh, a wetland connected to the property through drainage systems, and safeguards water quality. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Brenton Slough
1,113-acre parcel between Grimes and Granger in Dallas and Polk counties. Includes a portion of Beaver Creek to the north along with grassland, wetland and restorable oak savanna. Protects critical habitat and an abundance of wildlife in a rapidly growing area. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Land transfers to conservation partners

Lyon County
42 acres of a 152-acre parcel of remnant pasture along Little Rock Creek in eastern Lyon County. A former quarry pond connected to Little Rock Creek provides potential habitat for the endangered Topeka shiner which relies on the oxbows and rocky sediment for its lifecycle and reproduction. (Owned and managed by Lyon County Conservation Board)

Fritz Prairie Addition
16 acres of mixed habitat including remnant prairie and wetlands adjacent to existing public land near Hawkeye in Fayette County. Protects water quality and habitat for a variety of wildlife species. (Owned and managed by Fayette County Conservation Board)

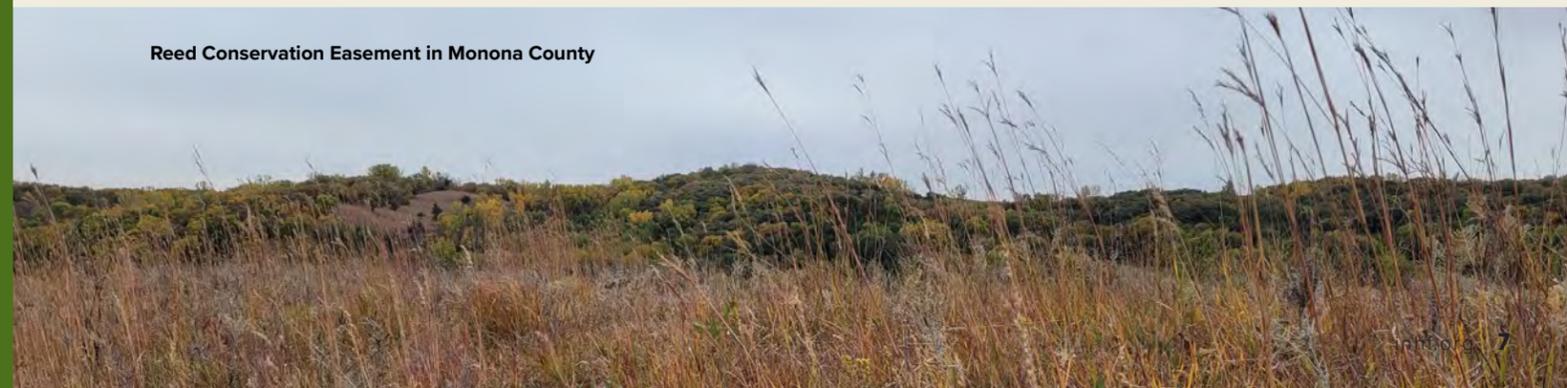
Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge Addition
74 acres within the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge near Prairie City in Jasper County. Fills in a key inholding, providing more of the contiguous habitat so critical for grassland birds and other native wildlife. (Owned and managed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Viola Irvine Nature Preserve
2 acres of open woodland within Dysart city limits in Tama County. Will support recreation opportunities including soft trails for hiking and protects urban greenspace and habitat. (Owned and managed by the city of Dysart)

Chickasaw County
205 acres of riparian and upland habitat adjacent to the Wapsipinicon River in Chickasaw County. Protection will benefit the river ecosystem and species such as Sandhill Cranes and river otters. (Owned and managed by Chickasaw County Conservation Board)

Barringer Slough WMA Addition
16 acres on the shoreline of Lost Island Lake near Ruthven in Clay County. Property lies within the Dewey's Pasture Bird Conservation Area which houses over 60 bird Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Protection will benefit the restoration efforts of uplands and wetlands in the area and builds on existing public land. (Owned and managed by Iowa Department of Natural Resources)

Reed Conservation Easement in Monona County



Park Prescription

Residents of Benton County may soon get more access to nature through a substantial addition to Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area

BY JOE JAYJACK
Communications Director | jjayjack@inhf.org

Winding through a Benton County woodland just south of Urbana is an attraction that brings people from all over. The disc golf course at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area is the highest rated course in Iowa and one of the top 20 in the country.

Benton County Conservation Executive Director Shelby Williams said the 21-hole course can see 200 users on a Saturday or Sunday, and it hosts tournaments that bring in players from around the world.

But the 130-acre recreation area that surrounds the course offers so much more for park users. Five miles of trails run through 131 acres of beautiful woodlands along the Cedar River, with an active Bald Eagle nest across the river from the public boat ramp. The spot is ideal for camping, hiking, birdwatching, fishing and hunting. And, with a little help, the park is soon going to more than double its size.

When Wendling Quarries, Inc. decided to sell the property it owned adjacent to the park, they reached out to Benton County Conservation (BCC) to give them the first opportunity to buy it. Benton County approached Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) about helping to purchase the property.

"This is a phenomenal project," said Ross Baxter, INHF Senior Land Protection Director and Counsel. "We're trying to build on an existing park and expand water quality, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities. But we're going to need significant help from the public to make this

happen."

Earlier this year, INHF secured the 184 acres adjacent to Wildcat Bluff from Wendling Quarries for \$1.2 million. The property is a mix of upland, riparian timber, floodplain lowland and riverbank habitat along the Cedar River. The plan is to eventually transfer the property to Benton County Conservation once funds are raised to cover its cost.

While the project is a significant investment, Benton County Conservation Board member Randy Scheel said they couldn't pass it up. "We really felt that it was the property of a lifetime. I've been on the board for more than 10 years now. My second term expired in 2022, but because of this property I knew I wanted to stay on for another term. I felt so strongly about what it meant for our county and for conservation."

BCC and INHF have already raised more than \$250,000 toward the project, and are in the process of applying for grant funding. The goal is to complete fundraising and transfer the property in 2024 so that it can be opened to the public.

"We took a leap of faith because if we don't do it now it could be developed," Scheel said. "What helped us was that a few years ago we purchased Edna Shein Fen with the help of INHF. That was also a significant investment. It was certainly not easy, but we were able to purchase that property. Seeing success with fundraising in the past, we had confidence."

The 184-acre addition has received support from a wide variety of people and organizations in the community. Local Pheasants Forever chapters and the statewide organization have committed a combined \$50,000. The addition is a combination of woodland, grassland and floodplain that will be ideal for hunting.

The project also received a letter of support from the Benton County Suicide Prevention Coalition, which sees a direct link between access to nature and mental health.

"A recent survey in Benton County said the No. 1 priority for citizens is mental health. No. 2 is physical health. Green space is a priority," said Williams. "Adding this many more miles of trail is huge. They say it's a park



prescription."

Benton County Conservation is also excited about the increased opportunity for education and outdoor recreation for students. There are more than 12,000 students within 30 miles of the property that receive free or reduced school lunch, an economic class that sees the most benefit from increased public park spaces.

"Our naturalists at BCC do a phenomenal job. This is another property that our schools will be able to use for teaching kids about the outdoors," Scheel said.

The Benton County Conservation team has big dreams for this property — including an accessible trail to provide those living with ALS, as well as other disabilities, with the opportunity to enjoy natural places. The vision was inspired by an anonymous major donor to the project who is living with ALS.

"This will appeal to a wide variety of people," Scheel said. "Even immediately, one of the advantages of this property is that we don't have to spend much time or effort to do anything to change it. Immediately there will be opportunity for hunting, birdwatching, hiking. But we're going to need help to make it happen."

Learn more about the project and how you can support the addition at www.inhf.org/wildcat-bluff.

Addition to Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area

Benton County



LAND: 184 acres of upland, riparian timber, floodplain lowland and riverbank habitat.

SPECIAL FEATURES: The addition will more than double the size of the park and provide a scenic entrance, protect another scenic bluff and expand on wildlife habitat.

PARTNERS: Benton County Conservation, Pheasants Forever



The aromatic spotted beebalm (*Monarda punctata*) is indicative of sandy soils and primarily found in eastern Iowa. Photo by Sydney Algreen-Hunter

CHASING CHAMPIONS

Cataloging Iowa's impressive trees

BY ERICA PLACE
Communications Specialist | eplace@inhf.org

Although the exact number is tricky to surmise from early surveyor notes or plat maps, it's estimated that somewhere between 12 and 20 percent of Iowa was forested in some way at the time of statehood in 1846. At the very least, the land area occupied by woodlands has since been cut in half — a remaining estimated 5.7%. The majority of this is found on privately-owned land, with only about 8% of Iowa's current woodlands being in state forests or county or state parks.

There are likely few people as intimately familiar with Iowa's woodlands as Mark Rouw. Rouw has been scouring parks, neighborhoods, cemeteries and campuses for big trees since the 1970s.

Becoming a big tree expert

Rouw grew up in a Des Moines neighborhood with a backyard tree he credits to planting his passion's seed. A large elm, bark worn smooth from repeated climbs, provided refuge and an opportunity to learn.

"That's where I'd go to get away from everything," said Rouw. His vantage point afforded him close looks at wildlife like migrating Chestnut-sided and Magnolia Warblers. "I was almost a part of the tree, riding along as it swayed back and forth with the wind. The birds would come close, totally undeterred by my presence."

While his formal tree education would come later through a class at Drake University, Rouw's fascination with trees was already taking shape through experiential learning.

When he wasn't perched high in his backyard elm, he was gleaned skills from a neighbor who took him on drives to his farm in Elkhart, quizzing him as they drove by.

"Most people learn with a twig or leaf in hand," Rouw said. "I learned trees mostly from a distance by their form and silhouette, texture, foliage... things like that."

Rouw had lots of practice with drive-by tree ID while on the road with his father, whose profession as an oil salesman led them on trips through the Iowa countryside. On one particular drive through Hardin County, a massive Eastern cottonwood warranted a quick stop to measure. The trunk's circumference exceeded 20 feet, even bigger than the ones near Birdland Drive not far from his Des Moines home. Though they're now long gone, Rouw remembers those Birdland Drive cottonwoods as inspirational.

"I looked up and they seemed so big. I just couldn't believe it. And that was kind of it... it moved me somehow."

It seemed like big trees were everywhere, just waiting to be discovered. Measuring them was a fine hobby. But during a visit to his local library around that same time, he stumbled upon a listing of the national champion trees — the biggest representatives of each species — in an American Forests magazine. The list brought about a realization: this was something other people also enjoyed. But nobody else was doing it in Iowa.

"Here's the justification for what I want to do," Rouw remembers thinking upon seeing the list. "It gave me a little momentum."

Building an inventory

Though a national Big Tree Program began in 1940, one did not exist in Iowa until created by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources in 1978. In his 45 years of searching and measuring, Rouw has amassed an impressive list — more than 1,000 entries — of native and ornamental Iowa trees. The official spreadsheet is constantly updated, with each entry serving almost as a challenge to see what else is out there. It's a pretty big job for a volunteer, and one Rouw takes very seriously.

"There's more to it than just finding the tallest or widest tree," Rouw explained.

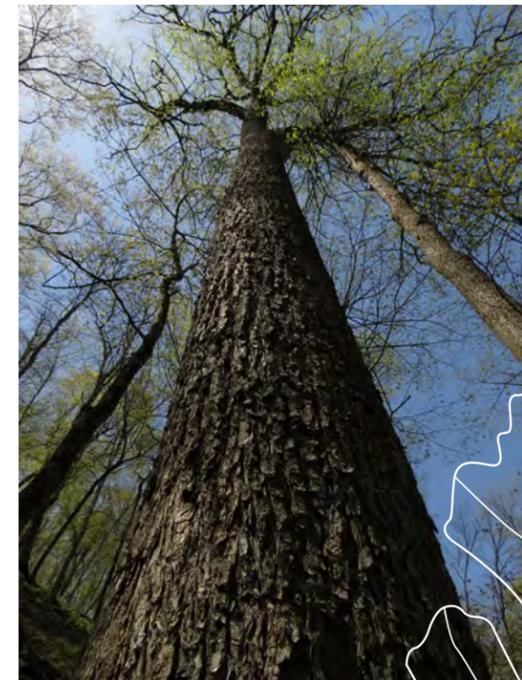
The trees are scored on a point system, with points given for every inch on the circumference, every foot of height and every foot of canopy spread. But all these measurements are taken from the ground with various equipment, leaving room for error for those who are hasty or using outdated methods. And there are rules — Rouw is careful to verify that trees truly have only one trunk, as a double-trunked tree would have an artificially large circumference. It sounds like an easy thing to determine, but it requires a keen eye.

"See how the bark is pushed out there?" Rouw pointed out a subtle clue on the trunk of an Eastern cottonwood in Des Moines' Prospect Park. "And if you look really close you can see a seam where the trunks joined a long time ago."

It's hard to imagine someone with a higher attention to detail, roving the state in search of the upper limits of trees' size constraints. He knows that the data he's collecting might be referenced in field guides or scientific publications. But chasing big trees is not a paid gig — all Rouw's documentation has been done on his personal time, working around his schedule as the Science Center of Iowa's Animal Specialist. Most of his trips are on evenings or weekends, using his own car, gas money and top-of-the-line rangefinder. Why go to such great lengths to catalog Iowa's big trees?



Mark Rouw has been cataloging Iowa's trees for over 50 years, traveling across the state to find them. Here he stands with the champion yellow birch at Fallen Rock State Preserve. Photo by Mark Rouw



Rouw documents the trees both in measurements and photos and often pays multiple visits to the same tree, like this rock elm. Photo by Mark Rouw

Safeguarding specimens

The rationale for such programs extends beyond tree appreciation; the hope is that it will offer trees some protection. Since so many of Iowa's trees lie on private property, bringing awareness to the champion trees might help safeguard them for the future. If people knew they were champions, maybe they would stay safe.

Iowa's trees and woodlands at large are facing plenty of threats: severe weather events, shifts in precipitation or temperature patterns brought on by climate change, invasive species or pathogens, old age or simply a lack of understanding of their value. Rouw has seen many champions fall over the years. He explained that some of Iowa's biggest trees barely made it to this point.

"A bunch of swamp white oaks on good central Iowa cropland were being removed in the 50s or 60s. They were using dynamite to blow up the trees — but they decided it would take too much dynamite to remove the biggest one, so they left it. This state champion only survived because it was inconvenient to deal with."

That swamp white oak champion finally came down in the 2020 derecho. Many current and future champions were lost to that storm. It was a hard hit to Iowa woodlands, just like Dutch elm disease and emerald ash borer have been. Iowa communities are mitigating that loss through replanting efforts and tree rebate programs, but it will take time to compensate.

Tree plantings are also part of many INHF restoration projects and volunteer events. One of INHF's largest events in the inaugural year of the volunteer program was a tree planting effort in Dallas County where more than 900 trees were planted and mulched. Series of plantings — a combination of direct seeding and nearly 43,000 seedlings — rebuilt 141 acres of woodland along the Upper Iowa River in northeast Iowa at INHF-owned Heritage Valley. An 80-acre planting is slated for a newly protected property in Lucas County, Sojourn Grove, in accordance with a management plan designed to benefit Iowa's sensitive bat species. The trees will restore a gap in the state forest and fill in the bats' flyway while creating



Rouw first documented this champion basswood in 1979. On another visit in 2020, Rouw documented the circumference to be over 18 feet, an impressive increase of 5 feet. *Photo by Mark Rouw*

habitat for many other species. Just as with other landscapes where we work to replace or enhance the vegetative communities, INHF is working to put woodlands back where they belong.

More than measurements

In his five decades of chasing champions, Rouw has inventoried more than specimens. He's inventoried their lessons. Rouw believes the trees have lots to teach us.

"We don't think in the long-term," Rouw said. "The trees have taught me that we can't be selfish. We need to think beyond ourselves, beyond our lifetimes."

And there are lessons of patience. The oldest trees are not always the biggest. Some, growing in a rocky crag or gravelly soil, might pale in comparison to trees who set roots in more fertile ground or in spots more sheltered from storms. Rouw comes back to check on trees, noting how much they've grown since his last visit, recognizing all that they've been through and all they still face.

"I have to check on all my old friends," Rouw beamed. "These trees restore my peace of mind."

There is no one in line to assume these duties after Rouw. Little funding to make sure the work is continued. No lasting protection for these champion trees. And on a continuously changing landscape, he wonders how many big trees are left to be found. But he has hope.

"After all, even the biggest champion trees start out as seedlings." 🌱

FOR THE GREATER GOOD



A community comes together to protect land for wildlife and add outdoor recreation opportunities for all

BY HEATHER JOBST
Senior Land Protection Facilitator | hjobst@inhf.org

Rich and Sue Smith purchased the first 54 acres of their 104-acre Ida County property in 1992. They contemplated building their home on its rolling topography and scenic vistas, but soon decided the land should be kept for conservation. Rich's goal for the land was to increase wildlife habitat, which he did by enrolling in the Conservation Reserve Program in order to restore 80 acres of grassland. He also created food plots and planted trees with his two sons often working alongside him.

Rich was an avid outdoorsman. He helped start the Ida County Pheasants Forever Chapter, serving as its president for 25 years. Rich especially liked to mentor youth. As chapter president, he worked to include kids

and families in their annual banquets and felt it was important to encourage youth participation. He would often tour clients and customers around his land and take them hunting. He talked with other landowners about enhancing wildlife habitat. He loved to share his passion for the outdoors.

The oasis Rich and Sue stewarded lies adjacent to the 252-acre Crawford Creek Recreation Area and drains to its 62-acre lake. It's one of Ida County's most popular parks. In a county with just 574 acres of public parks and wildlife areas, it didn't take long for people to notice when the Smith's property came up for sale following Rich's passing.

"I immediately called INHF and asked for help," says Zach Hall, Ida County Conservation Director.

Rich Smith Wildlife Habitat Area

Ida County



LAND: 104 acres of native tallgrass prairie and woodland.

SPECIAL FEATURES: Will increase the public land in the county by 20%.

PARTNERS: Ida County Conservation, Ida County Conservation Foundation, Ida County Pheasants Forever and numerous other organizations and individuals. A full list of partners is available at www.inhf.org.

Hall knew the area would make an excellent addition to existing public land and preserve much needed habitat. When Sue was approached about selling the property so it could become a public conservation area, she knew that was exactly how she wanted to honor her husband's legacy. Sue donated a portion of the land value to help ensure the project's success. That gift helped fuel the fundraising, and an outpouring of community excitement and support soon followed.

Local businesses joined the effort with both Rich and Sue's former employers contributing. The Ida County Board of Supervisors contributed \$100,000 to the fundraising along with many individual private donors. Ida County Conservation successfully applied for a Wildlife Habitat Stamp grant through the Iowa Department of Natural Resources with local conservation groups joining forces to raise the needed match funds.

"The collective efforts gave energy and reinvigorated our conservation community," said Hall.

But the support wasn't just local. The Iowa Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers offered up a challenge match to their members, which garnered national attention through their fundraising page and a mention on an episode of a MeatEater's podcast called Cal's Week in Review.

The fundraising is complete, and the land now belongs to the people of Ida County. The Rich Smith Wildlife Habitat Area was opened to public use on September 1.

"It's important to make sure all Iowans have ready access to nature, and we're thrilled to have finally done a project in Ida County," said Ross Baxter, INHF's Senior Land Conservation Director and Counsel.

This park not only preserves Rich's legacy, but increases the amount of Ida County public land by nearly 20 percent. Sue is confident that public ownership is what Rich would have wanted.

"He's smiling knowing that his work to create wildlife habitat will continue and allow for more and more people to enjoy the area," said Sue. 🍷



Rich Smith was an avid outdoorsman. Upon his passing Sue, Rich's wife, decided to honor his legacy by donating a portion of the land value to support the creation of a new wildlife area in Ida County. Photo provided by Sue Smith



The Rich Smith Wildlife Habitat Area includes Crawford Creek which drains into the bordering Crawford Creek Recreation Area. It is INHF's first project in the county. INHF has now protected land in 97 out of Iowa's 99 counties. Photos by Emily Martin, INHF

Room for Everyone

BY SYDNEY ALGREEN-HUNTER
Communications Associate | shunter@inhf.org

INHF offers volunteer opportunities for a community with varied skills beyond outdoor activities

Can you see yourself at INHF?

There's room for everyone to volunteer!

Learn more about volunteer opportunities by visiting www.inhf.org/volunteer/other-ways-to-volunteer.

Every organization has its own set of unsung heroes — the people who put in the work behind-the-scenes without asking for any recognition or glory. The people who do the mundane tasks, who wake up early or stay out late. The people who choose to give their time despite their other commitments. Many of INHF's unsung heroes are our volunteers, enhancing INHF's mission through lending their time and talents.

While many of our volunteers participate in outdoor stewardship activities like seed harvests or brush removal, there's another group of folks who offer their talents for other, sometimes less showy, projects. These unsung heroes can be found taking photos, completing administrative tasks or working at an outreach event. You might hear their voice in a blog or social media post or through poetry. You could see them in the field monitoring species or setting up for a volunteer event. Each of them makes our work possible and, in many cases, more vibrant and worthwhile.

After becoming certified as a Service Enterprise by Points of Light in 2018, Volunteer Coordinator Melanie Schmidt had a new lens to examine a volunteer's role. Schmidt now focuses on supporting an individual volunteer's skills and expertise to increase INHF's impact across all levels of our work.

"As the Volunteer Coordinator, one of the most rewarding parts of my job is connecting with our volunteers. I value the opportunity to get to know our volunteers better while finding projects that leverage their skills and interests to support INHF's mission. Of all the organizations and places people can choose to spend their valuable time and energy, I am grateful when volunteers want to give back to

our work in these meaningful ways."

Schmidt often works as a matchmaker of sorts, fielding ideas and finding the right fit. This was exactly the case when Hardin County Conservation (HCC) needed a mobile wildlife observation unit. INHF had collaborated with HCC on land donations and in memory of donor Charles Ruby, INHF and HCC thought a wildlife observation unit would be fitting.

An avid wildlife photographer, INHF volunteer Marlen Kemmet had the skills, time and interest to complete the project. Kemmet contributed over 100 volunteer hours researching, designing and ultimately outfitting an 18-foot trailer into a mobile wildlife viewing space. The trailer is still in use today and countless observers have enjoyed the opportunity to see wildlife undisturbed from human interaction.

Over the years, Kemmet has also supported INHF's work through photography, videography, writing, database management and project planning and implementation. If you've browsed our website or read previous issues of our magazine, you've no doubt seen some of Marlen's photos.

"I feel very fortunate that my lifetime in print and digital media as well as project development provided me with the skill sets to tackle several volunteer projects at INHF with little training," Kemmet said. "Simply put, I like to accomplish things, and I find it rewarding that these projects benefit others."

Even office projects require organization, determinedness and persistence. Volunteers like Craig Cummings are more than happy to take on tasks that seem humdrum but are crucial for recordkeeping. Cummings has been volunteering since 2019 to scan old files into a

digital format. "I like the fact that I'm doing a task that needs to be done but would be hard to justify having a fulltime staff member work on when they have more pressing work to do," said Cummings.

Craig has been working in INHF's Des Moines office nearly every week for over three years now. He's such an integral part of the office, Schmidt even made him a nameplate for his workspace matching the rest of the staff. After contributing over 300 hours to this project, there is now an end in sight.

"When I started, I didn't know what INHF was or what they did," Cummings reflected. "I've learned that it is an amazingly important organization needed to protect the natural habitat of Iowa. I think nature is endlessly fascinating, so I will root forever for the success of this organization."

A big part of finding the right project match is listening. Friends Amy Andrews and Stephanie Roush, who first volunteered with INHF at prairie seed harvests, shared that they gained experience with bat surveying and ecology through their time at Central College in Pella. When INHF started to do survey work for the North American Bat Monitoring Program last year, we knew Amy and Steph would be a good pair to help.

For the second summer they headed out for several evenings to record echolocation information on a designated route in Mahaska County. This information will be made available to researchers across North America.

"Doing the bat monitoring with Amy is fulfilling in a number of ways. Knowing that we're contributing to science and larger efforts for bat conservation, beyond INHF, is rewarding," explained Stephanie. "I've heard joy comes from serving others and what better way to do that than to help bats, a creature that can't speak for itself. Our monitoring work can be their voice."

Amy and Steph also recognize their volunteer work as time they get to spend together exploring nature.

"We stopped at the end of our route and the stars were so bright. The next night we were identifying constellations and stars. That

was one of the best moments and then we made sure to do that every night," Amy said. "Volunteering got us out at that time of night, and it was one of the best rewards for our work."

For the staff at INHF, our reward is seeing volunteers use their skills to further our mission across the state. Whether that's scanning files, taking photos or doing surveys out in the field, volunteers are often the workforce pushing us forward. 🦇



Volunteers like Craig Cummings, Stephanie Roush and Amy Andrews are often working behind the scenes. Top, Craig receives a certificate for volunteer hours and below, Amy and Stephanie prepare for bat monitoring season. Photos by INHF

Management Can Be Messy

BY ERICA PLACE
Communications Specialist | eplace@inhf.org

“Don’t touch that!” I hear a mother scold her son in a stern tone. He’d left the pavement for a closer look at puffball mushrooms. “You have to stay on the trail where it’s safe.”

“Ugh, this place is nothing but vines. And look at all these bushes. It’s so overgrown.” I hear these and similar sentiments as I walk through a park near my home. Their ideas that the park is unkempt or the trail edges unsafe bounce around in my head. I wonder why we’re seeing this place through different lenses.

The expectation that things should somehow be neater and tidier likely stems from how we were taught to tend to our yards. The social convention of the perfect lawn — lush grass an inch and a half tall, uniform and free of weeds or pests — is an obsession that began in the 1800s as a way to signify social status and wealth and a mindset that has trickled its way into other spaces like road ditches or field rows and edges. It’s a habit that’s hard to break despite what we know about how those choices impact both our pollinators and pocketbooks. But there’s no parallel here; this park is not a lawn. This is a place where things live.

I pass a standing dead tree whose missing bark makes its silvery skeleton pop against the woodland’s green backdrop. Maybe it’s unsightly to some. But to the Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) it’s

the perfect place to forage and raise young. She hops along the trunk stashing food for later. Once common throughout Iowa, this is one of the oak savanna species in steep decline as we continue to lose the habitat they need. Among other efforts, land managers are trying to combat this by purposely leaving dead limbs and snags where possible.

Perhaps in the cavity above that Red-headed Woodpecker rests a group of Indiana bats (*Myotis sodalis*). Indiana bats roost together in small colonies in the summer, and because they’re a federally endangered species, trees of a certain diameter in their breeding grounds can’t be removed until they’ve left for their wintering grounds. Many land managers are choosing to girdle unwanted trees — cutting a ring into the bark deep enough to kill the tree without felling it — just to maintain the much-needed habitat.

I stop to inventory the “overgrown” bushes. A thicket of wild plum (*Prunus americana*) cradles the nest of a Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*), who favors tangly spots and thorny shrubs. Would I want to walk through this? No. That’s exactly why she chose this spot for her nest. She’s safe against attacks from all directions.

Even the vines have a purpose. Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) is a common vine in Iowa woodlands that announces its presence with brilliant red leaves each fall. Sending tendrils every which way, it can climb six or so stories up trees

and other structures. Maybe the dangling vines look messy, but Virginia creeper offers shelter and berries beloved by birds and small mammals. It is also the host plant for the caterpillars of several native sphinx moth species. In fact, the park is full of these hidden relationships between plants and animals where one can’t survive without the other... including some of our least favorite, “unsafe” plants like poison ivy and stinging nettles. Remember the Red-headed Woodpecker? He eats poison ivy fruits, too.

But what about the “weeds”? Sometimes things just seem weedy when they aren’t. In this agriculture-dominated state, we’re conditioned to see all thistles as a threat. But Iowa has six native species of thistles — misunderstood plants that belong on the landscape and serve vital roles. Flowering in late summer and fall after the blooms of many plants are long gone, they provide food for songbirds and insects when there’s not much else available, including the federally endangered rusty patched bumble bee (*Bombus affinis*). Their fluffy seeds line the nests and fill the bellies of our state bird, the American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*).

These “untidy” components of habitat are all maligned; not everything needs intervention. But there are also misconceptions surrounding the times when land managers do intervene. In the case of dealing with invasive species or restoring habitats, oftentimes things look worse before they look better.

Lake restorations come to mind. It’s a jarring sight from the second the notch in the dam is cut. The water’s sudden departure yields a smelly aftermath. Large equipment removing decades of sediment build-up seems heavy handed. It’s often a years-long project that (temporarily) wipes out the aquatic life

and prevents us from visiting. But every aspect of a project like this has been calculated by a qualified team of biologists and engineers; the lakebed has to dry out before you can safely do earthwork; vegetation is allowed to grow before refilling to provide improved structure for fish; fish species are added slowly and in proper amounts to produce the healthiest and most complete ecosystem. Each detail is backed by science and training.

Back to the thistles. In the control of any noxious weed or invasive species, timing is critical. Attempt at the wrong time and not only will you not succeed, but you could make things much worse. Problematic species are often left to grow until the moment is right; this might look neglectful to the untrained eye. People making these decisions have education and certifications to not only identify these problems but to choose and use the right tool, be it a chainsaw, chemical, mower or fire. It takes time to make progress. Seeds of some invasive species — like wild parsnip or garlic mustard — can remain viable in the soil upwards of a decade. Land managers come back to tend to the same spots year after year. It’s not a one and done process.

Even native species are sometimes targeted when doing habitat restoration. It’s easy to understand why this looks destructive at first blush. But a land manager knows the prairie ecosystem she’s restoring is more sensitive, more critical and more scarce than the dogwood, willow or cottonwood patch growing in the middle of it. She knows the splintered bits of ironwood or elm left in the



wake of a forestry mower were never meant to be a part of that oak savanna ecosystem. Those decisions aren't taken lightly, though. The collateral damage is weighed carefully as the land manager's choices foster a healthier, more complete picture. Back to the way things were before.

Management can be messy, but it's rooted in science.

Sometimes there's an obvious and urgent issue, but the solution might be far outside the scope of any single land manager's abilities. I think about the beaches in many of our parks. In the peak of summer heat, the time of year you'd most want to take a dip to cool off, many Iowa beaches are plagued with an abundance of vegetation and the stench (and danger) of blue-green algae. Why isn't someone doing something about this? In most cases, the answer lies outside the park boundary, across the many other parcels of land that make up that lake's watershed. Change must happen there to improve the lake.

How does a land manager decide what to tackle? They'll opt for projects that yield the most benefit for wildlife or plant communities. Those areas might not be in the highly disturbed (but more visible) park edges along roads or trails which tend to have the least amount of natural habitat intact; they will choose to make progress on the interior where the native habitat and plant diversity is more stable. And the "issues" pose different levels of ecological threat — time is spent addressing the most worrisome concerns first. A forest of honeysuckle takes a backseat to a small patch of *Sericea lespedeza*; their potentials for ecological disaster are not equal. Implementing a targeted approach helps

managers more feasibly reach larger ecological goals.

"Our stewardship focuses on the overall health of the natural community, which includes native plant and animal diversity, proper habitat structure and function," explains Brian Fankhauser, INHF Senior Land Stewardship & Blufflands Director. "We prioritize stewardship that perpetuates and enhances these qualities and allows the natural community to thrive."

This park, along with nearly every other, has a management plan detailing what should be done when. Management plans take a wide number of considerations into account — everything from historical perspectives to current issues like ecosystem health and intended use. Decisions balance the needs of the visitors seeking outdoor recreation opportunities with the needs of those who live there day in and day out — the dragonflies, salamanders or fungi. In some situations, maybe in city parks or areas with high traffic volumes, we do need more infrastructure, more mowing, more human involvement. But not every space requires the same upkeep. It's time to shift our mindset, perspectives and expectations when we enter a park, wildlife area or trail.

In fact, maybe the word 'manage' — and the idea that we are in control — is part of why we have these struggles in the first place. Consider the definition from Oxford Languages:

"Manage" — To be in charge of (a company, establishment, or undertaking); administer; run.

How well does that jive with the natural world? It's because of this discord that some are moving away from that word.

"I prefer the word 'stewardship'; it's a better descriptor for the work that we do," said Ryan Schmidt, INHF's Central Iowa Land Stewardship Director. "It's almost a sacred word. To me, it means that we're following nature's lead, but we're here to help."

There are a variety of ways INHF stewardship staff help Iowa's native and diverse habitats thrive. Each project — on private, public or INHF-owned land — is uniquely stewarded. No matter if it's brush removal, invasive species control, prairie plantings, prescribed fire or other land management practices, the wellbeing of natural resources is always at the forefront. We make choices, watch for the land's response and adjust accordingly.

"We take the time to listen to what the land needs, where it needs some help," Schmidt said.

But let's take it a step farther: imagine that a piece of land doesn't have a caretaker at all. Left entirely to its own devices, the prairie fills in with trees, the woodland fills in with invasive plants, the habitat is degraded. It's not suitable for hiking or hunting, paddling or biking. Is it still worth something? Independent of our intervention, that land is still offering refuge, sequestering carbon and storing and filtering water. Services to the earth and its inhabitants, including us. The tangliest, most overgrown place you can picture still matters. It's still worth having.

For Mike DeCook, INHF Board Member since 2004, these wild places hold tremendous value. He's spent a great deal of effort "rewilding" places in southern Iowa, focusing on creating spaces where nature can have refuge from us and going so far as

to "undevelop" them by removing human elements like roads or fences.

"This is wild nature on nature's terms," DeCook explained. "Wild nature has intrinsic value regardless of its economic benefit or worth to us."

Following nature's lead. No, this park — and any other wild space — is not a lawn. It's a place where things live. Here, we are rectifying harm where we've caused it and restoring balance where we've thrown it off. I continue my walk, trusting nature and trusting those who steward it. 🌿





ESTATE PLANNING – IN THE AUTUMN OF YOUR LIFE

Autumn is a time of transition and a time for reflection. It can also be a good time for contemplative thinking about plans for the future of your family and community when you may not be there; a time for thinking about your estate plans. Estate planning doesn't have to be complicated — rather, approach estate planning as a way to create your legacy and impact generations to come. It can be as straightforward as establishing a connection with an attorney and formally writing your will. Spelling out your wishes for the future is the best way to protect your family and the causes you love.

Many Iowans have chosen to include INHF in their will or estate plans as a legacy gift. Your legacy gift with INHF can provide straightforward support for our mission or directly benefit a specific project, program or area of Iowa that you feel passionate about. When you talk to and involve INHF in your planning, our staff can help you craft your conservation legacy in a way that is most impactful.

An INHF supporter since 1985, David Dickinson wanted to ensure his gift could continue into the future. After visiting with staff to explore options, Dickinson chose to direct his gift to support trail work across the state. Dickinson encourages other supporters to do the same, saying, "I think more people should consider including charitable organizations in their wills as a way to provide meaningful support into the future."

Planning ahead in this way not only provides INHF with stability, but leaves a legacy of conservation for future Iowans.

— STACIE COUVILLON, *Planned Giving and Major Gifts Officer*

Interested In Learning More?

If you're interested in including INHF in your estate plans, please reach out to Stacie Couvillon at scouvillon@inhf.org or by calling (515) 288-1846 ext. 45.

TRIBUTE GIFTS

IN HONOR OF

Don's 76th Birthday
Mark Ackelson
Bruce Ecker
Janssen
Janet A. Lovell
James and Mary Byron Norton
Earl and Isabelle Salterberg
Kate Mendenhall, Zach Borus and
Elias and Hattie Mendenhall-Borus
Tyler Samuels
Becky & Jim Zahradka

IN MEMORY OF

Michael Axon
Robert "Bob" Brown
David Buresh
Dennis Carter
Steven B. Caryl
Tony Clark
Mike Donnelly
John R. Fairchild, Jr.
Tom Fisher
Duane Herron
Gary Howell

Doris Kruckenber
Dean and Lillie Maddux
Paul Mumm
Helen and Clayton Ringgenberg
Sandra Ostwinkle
Jerry Parsons
H. Rand Petersen
Robert R. Peterson
Don Peterschmidt
J. Edward Power
Steve W. Rees
Sharon Ryan

Kirk Shore
Ron Smrha
Lenora Speer
Gayle Strickler
Kendra Lynne Thorgaard
Brett Turpen

On the Hunt

BY GRETA SOLBRIG
Communications Intern

As summer ends, we are often preoccupied with thoughts of bonfires and football games, coupled with our admiration for the changing fall leaves above our heads. But if you look down, you may find something even more intriguing. Unbeknownst to many, Iowa is a hotbed for sparkling crystals and gems. Mild conditions make fall the perfect time to hunt for Iowa's state rock, the geode.

How geodes are formed

Geodes are peculiar oddities that demonstrate the artistry of nature. Rocks formed under pressure, such as Iowa's sedimentary limestone, are prone to forming cavities that allow groundwater to seep in and leave behind mineral deposits. The once hollow cavity will gradually fill with beautiful crystals. Geodes can be found in areas where the bedrock is exposed.

Keokuk geodes

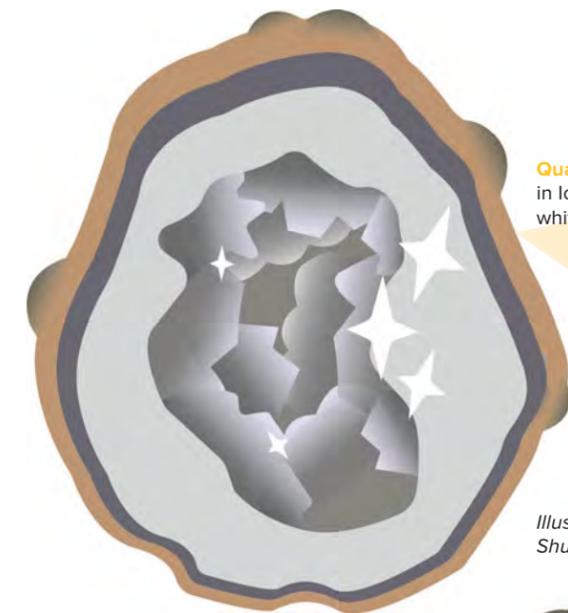
Named for their abundance in the region, 'Keokuk Geodes' are a popular attraction for geologists across the country. Most of these geodes are found surrounding the intersection of the Des Moines and Mississippi riverbeds. Geode hunting is not confined to this region, however, and Iowa parks are also popular search destinations. When traveling to public parks, be sure you're aware of the site's rules and regulations if you are planning to collect your findings.

Spotting a geode

Geodes are encased in porous, irregularly shaped rock. If you find a promising specimen, pick it up and weigh it in your hands — geodes are lighter than rocks of similar size. Once you are confident in your findings, break it open and see what is inside! Iowa geodes can contain a variety of crystals; however, the most common are chalcedony, calcite, and quartz. More rare, colorful finds typically are made up of malachite or pyrite.

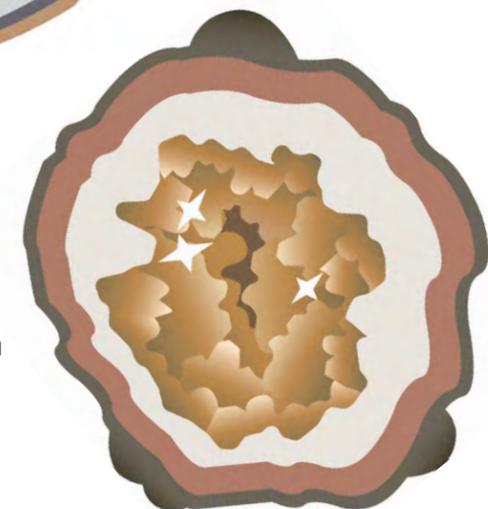


Chalcedony, a form of silica, appears to be pale blue or white, with a microscopic crystalline structure. Due to its unique structure, it may take on a bumpy texture, different than the jagged appearance of traditional quartz varieties.



Quartz is the most frequent finding in Iowa, distinguishable by sharp, white hexagonal crystals.

Illustrations by Madeline Shumaker, Design Intern.



Calcite, which is composed of calcium carbonate, typically appears white or in shades ranging from yellow to brown. A key method of distinguishing calcite from quartz is by toughness. Calcite is softer and easily scratched, while quartz is harder, rarely exhibiting markings from metal tools.



Iowa
Natural Heritage
Foundation

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Muskrats and beavers are often confused for one another. Both are semi-aquatic, build lodges/dens in banks or waterways and have a similar rusty, brown coat. Muskrats have a thinner, rat-like tail and are much smaller in size. In addition, muskrats do not fell trees. These rodents prefer herbaceous species, like cattails or grasses, to build their lodges. Can you tell if the lodge below was constructed by a beaver or muskrat?

Photo by Gary Hamer

