

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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website
www.bentoncountyya.gov



The Art of Solo Camping

By Faith Hunt
Naturalist



Figure 1: Simple tent set-up

Solo camping is an enriching and fulfilling outdoor experience that allows you to embrace nature on your own and connect more deeply with nature and yourself. For those seeking solitude, self-reliance, and personal growth, solo camping offers a transformative journey that goes beyond the usual camping trip. Here's what you need to know to embark on a successful solo camping adventure.

Why Choose Solo Camping?

1. **Personal Growth:** Solo camping is a powerful way to challenge yourself and develop new skills. Without the support of companions, you'll learn to solve problems independently, manage resources effectively, and gain confidence in your abilities.

2. **Deep Connection with Nature:** Camping alone provides an unparalleled opportunity to immerse yourself in nature. The quiet solitude allows you to observe wildlife in a new way, appreciate the beauty of your surroundings, both big and small, and experience the serenity of natural landscapes without distractions. I find that my footsteps are lighter, I move slower and I see the world around me much differently.

3. **Mental Clarity and Reflection:** The solitude of solo camping creates a space for introspection and mental clarity. With no one to talk to, you have an opportunity for deeper reflection. It's refreshing!

4. **Flexibility and Freedom:** With no one else to accommodate, you have complete freedom to plan your itinerary, choose your campsite, and follow your interests. This flexibility allows you to tailor your experience to your preferences, so that means if you want to lounge all day in your hammock to watch the birds, no one can stop you!

Preparing for Your Solo Camping Trip

1. **Plan Your Trip Carefully:** Select a campsite and area that matches your skill level and preferences. Consider factors such as terrain, weather, and distance from home. For your first solo outing, consider camping in an area you are already familiar with. Know what the local camping regulations are. When hiking, plan your route. Carry a detailed map and a compass or GPS device, especially if you plan on hiking a less traveled area.

2. **Pack Smart:** Include a tent, sleeping bag, and a sleeping pad for comfort. A portable stove, cooking utensils, and sufficient food and water are crucial. Camping gear can get really pricey very quickly. I have found that big box stores have a decent selection of gear that can work just as well as the expensive name brand gear. ALWAYS make sure you check your gear and know how to use it before you go out, every time! Pack a first-aid kit, multi-tool, bug spray, headlamp, flashlight, and a whistle. For clothing, dress in layers to adapt to changing weather conditions. Waterproof and windproof clothing can be invaluable. Avoid cotton clothing as it doesn't dry quickly. I like to pack a stocking cap, extra socks and hand warmers just in case night temps get too cold.

3. **Safety and Navigation:** Share your plans with someone, including your expected return time. When reception allows, I usually shoot a text to someone when I wake up, before a hike and before bed. I also have my location on my phone shared with family. If hiking, stick to marked trails and avoid venturing off into unknown areas.

Enjoying Your Solo Camping Experience

1. **Embrace the Experience:** Take time to enjoy the solitude, relax and reflect. Read a book, journal your thoughts, or simply sit quietly and observe your surroundings. I like to document all the wildlife I see and hear, and make notes on the park, my campsite, amenities and routes hiked. Explore the beautiful area you are visiting!

2. **Practice Leave No Trace Principles:** Ensure you leave the campsite better than you found it. Carry out all trash with you and minimize your impact on the environment. My most recent solo camping trip led me to a pre-reserved site at a hike-in camping spot. The previous campers had littered the area pretty severely. Don't be that person. I spent a lot of time picking up litter from others. It's also important to respect wildlife. Observe animals from a distance and avoid feeding them. Store food and trash securely to prevent attracting wildlife to your campsite. While we don't have to worry about bears in Iowa, the raccoons and ground squirrels will visit your site while you sleep. Don't forget to put away your marshmallow forks - the racoons love to lick them clean!

Potential Challenges and How to Overcome Them

1. **Safety Concerns:** Be vigilant about your surroundings and practice basic wilderness safety. Know how to identify and handle potential hazards. As mentioned before, I let people know where I am and my plans. I sleep with my headlamp and car keys close by. I leave my shoes by the foot of the tent for quick access.



Figure 2: Well-defined trails on a solo hike in Grand Mere State Park

The Art of Solo Camping

Continued from previous page

If you feel someone is lingering near your campsite, don't hesitate to activate your car alarm.

2. Weather Preparedness: Be ready for a range of weather conditions by packing suitable clothing and gear. Always check the weather forecast prior to your trip and stay flexible. Avoid depending solely on fire for cooking, as weather can change unexpectedly. Portable camping stoves are a great alternative and can be quite affordable.

3. Confronting Fear: Often, the greatest obstacles to adventures like solo camping stem from our own fears. Don't allow your doubts to prevent you from embracing new experiences. Personal growth occurs when you step outside your comfort zone. Trust your instincts, plan a short initial trip, and focus on enjoying the journey.



Figure 3: Naturalist Faith's camping site on her first night of solo camping

Solo camping is an opportunity for personal discovery and growth. With careful planning and preparation, you can enjoy a safe and fulfilling experience in the great outdoors. Whether you seek solitude, adventure, or a deeper connection with nature, solo camping offers a unique path to achieving these goals. So pack your gear, choose your destination, and set off on a solo adventure that promises to be both challenging and rewarding.

Take a Kid Hunting

By Cara Harrill
Conservation Technician

I grew up seeing my dad hunt and trap, and remember him bringing home his trophies. A wall of our living room is dedicated to his whitetail mounts, a Canada goose hangs from the ceiling, and a beautiful beaver pelt lays in front of the TV. I remember playing in his deer blind in the backyard, pretending his doe target was a huge buck I was about to shoot. I begged him for a long time to take me with, and finally he agreed. I was the kid who would never sit still and didn't know how to be quiet, so it was a challenge to say the least. But after that first time going out - I was hooked. Even though I complained about it being too hot, too cold, buggy, we didn't see anything or I missed (again), it sure was fun.

I enjoyed it being just my dad and I out in the woods. There's nothing quite like watching the world come alive in the morning, surrounded by nothing but trees. As I grew older, I realized hunting was a passion of mine but I was afraid it was something I would have to put on the back burner while I went to college and started working.



Figure 4: Conservation Technician Cara Harrill with her dad and her first buck

Take a Kid Hunting

Continued from previous page

As I got closer to the end of my senior year of high school, I still had no idea what I wanted to do for my career. I thought about going for veterinary medicine, or something agriculture related, but my heart wasn't set on either. I just knew that I wanted to be outdoors, in the woods, away from a computer screen and a desk all the time.

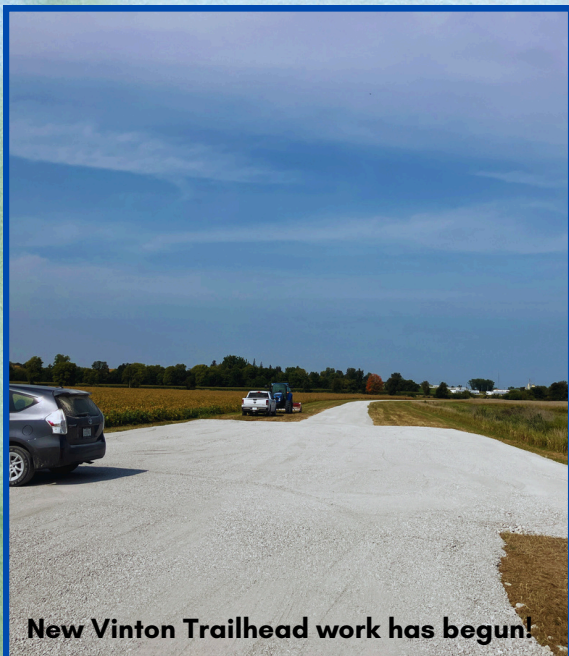
While working a seasonal position at Hickory Hills Park, I learned there was so much more to the field of natural resources than I thought. With the encouragement of my parents, I spoke with an advisor at Hawkeye Community College and enrolled that fall.

The next two years of school flew by. It was challenging and stressful, but so worth it, pandemic and all. I really became interested in the land management side of conservation during school. I was where I wanted to be - outdoors, in the woods, not working at a desk.

I spent three summers as a seasonal at Hickory Hills Park before I started with BCC in the fall of 2021 as a naturalist intern. It was a great experience but I still didn't feel like that was what I wanted to do. I took a year off from seasonal work and applied to BCC again in the summer of 2023. After last summer, I knew this is where I wanted to be.

After five years of seasonal work, finding work in the off season, interviews, and rejection emails, I began to wonder if it was really worth it. I told myself last summer that I was done with seasonal work, I was an adult and needed to find a full-time job. But what do you know, I applied again this summer as a Conservation Technician Aide. This summer solidified that I knew this is what I wanted to do.

I'm grateful my hard work has finally paid off. I started as a full-time Conservation Technician with BCC August 5th. I wouldn't have been able to do it without the encouragement from my parents, my friends and family, and my coworkers who never stopped pushing me to continue on and those times hunting with my dad.



OCNT Vinton Trailhead & 1-1 Donor Match

With funds received from a grant through the Max and Helen Guernsey Charitable Foundation, we are relocating the Vinton Trailhead on the Old Creamery Nature Trail! The Anderson family has donated the land to make this project possible. Plans include construction of limestone trail surface, a parking lot, native prairie installation, and tree plantings. The new Vinton trailhead will be located on 59th Street Drive. Completion is set for Spring 2025. Stay tuned for more updates!

Currently, there is a 1-1 match in honor of Bob and Jane LaGrange up to \$4,000 to help with beautification projects on the Old Creamery Nature Trail! Interested in donating?

Your donation is tax deductible!

- Visit our [website](#)
- Donate on [PayPal](#)
- Or reach out to us!

Please include OCNT on your donation memo.

Fossil Finds

By Aaron Askelson
Naturalist

You might have seen the exciting news from Wayne County, Iowa recently where a Mastodon skull and part of a tusk were discovered in a creek. This is a great find due to how complete the skull is. A few years back a young male saber-toothed cat skull was also found in Page County, Iowa along the banks of the Nishnabotna River. In 2010, mammoth bones were found in Mahaska County and I actually was able to spend a day at the dig site looking for additional bones with the archaeological team. I did find several bone fragments of the mammoth but nothing bigger than a fifty-cent piece. As someone who likes to spend time looking for fossils and artifacts along streams and rivers, I always hope for a big find. It has not happened yet but hope springs eternal right. Why not me? Why not Benton County?

My office lately has turned into a disaster area, a collection of random things found in our parks, field trip schedules, and various program materials I have accumulated over the last 11 years. Some might compare it to a dig site. While cleaning my office I sort of found a “fossil” going through some old newspaper clippings. One paper was from the Cedar Valley Daily Times published Tuesday, October 29, 1991. The headline reads “Mastodon jaw found near Vinton”. In 1991 I was still in high school but this was cool to find out. The one found near Vinton was believed to be about 14,000 years old. Roger Fisher and his daughter Jericho “Squig” (15 at the time) found this fossil treasure while hunting for Native American artifacts along the Cedar River. So, we are lucky enough to have this find in Benton County. We must also thank Roger Fisher for contacting Benton County Conservation Director Kevin Kacena and the University of Northern Iowa to help preserve these mastodon teeth, jaw bone, and tusk parts. Without the hard work of all three, this great find would probably have turned into dust. I do not have any information on whether or not more things were found at the dig site other than skeletal remains from elk and other unidentifiable animals.

Mastodon are believed to have been in North America from about 3 million years ago to about 10,500 years ago. Mastodons were giant beasts that once roamed across most of the continental United States. Their teeth are very different from the wooly mammoth which was more of a grass grazer and the mastodon was a browser eating shrubs, leaves, twigs and stems.

They stood about eight to ten feet tall and the males had tusks that we believe were used for fighting. They were also covered in thick fur like the mammoths but unlike the mammoth we think they were solitary animals that weighed approximately five to eight tons.

Well, my office is a little cleaner and I learned a little history about Benton county that I did not know about before. All of these are exciting finds and if you ever happen to come across something cool like this please share the information with us or The Office of the State Archaeologist so this important information about Iowa’s history is not lost. I will keep looking for my big find and you should also.



Figure 5: Mastodon vs mammoth tooth







Figure 6: Mastodon & wooly mammoth comparison

SPONSOR AN ANIMAL AMBASSADOR

The Animal Ambassador Sponsorship Program helps fund animal care such as food, enclosure updates, vet care & animal enrichment.

Sponsorship perks include:

-  Certificate with a picture of sponsored animal
-  Sponsor name on the tank
-  Recognition in our quarterly newsletter
-  Giving to a good cause

Animal Ambassador sponsorships are good for one year - starting September 1st of each year. Animal sponsorships for an excellent gift for any nature lover in your life!

To sponsor an Animal Ambassador, please call 319-472-4942 or email info@bentoncountyparks.com



Gearing Up for Archery Season

By Logan Grabin
Conservation Technician

October 1st is an exciting date for some of us in the deer woods! With archery season fast approaching, here are some things to help you further your success on those hunts.

Preseason preparation is the key component as is for many other activities. Scouting deer and understanding where they are feeding, resting, bedding, etc. is the foundation of the hunt. You can use these key pieces of information to your advantage in pre-rut and during the rut to hone in on those deer daily routines and places that they frequent such as food plots, drinking areas, etc. These key components can help you determine where, if at all, you are going to establish food plots, scrapes, rubs and stand placements.

Food plots can be a great way to aid in the successful harvest of deer but also the preservation of deer by providing a food source in those scarce winter months. Food plots also provide deer with a food source throughout the hunting season. Planting clover and chicory as an early season planting or planting wheat, turnips and radishes as a late season food source are also helpful. These food sources provide deer a consistent source of carbohydrates and protein, increasing your likelihood of encountering deer on your hunts.

Stand placement can be affected by all of the variables discussed already as well as other factors such as wind, foliage cover, clear shooting lanes, etc. Being mindful of the changing wind direction is a big factor when deciding where to put your ground blinds or tree stands. Deer can smell up to 1000 times better than a human. Deer have an astonishing 297 million olfactory receptors compared to a humans 5 million. Playing the wind can be a crucial advantage to gun and bow season. Also making sure that you have good cover or are able to break up your figure in the areas you decide to place a stand, ground blind or a hang on climber stand is also important. The combination of wind and cover is what allows you to get those 10, 20, or 30 yard shots.

Gearing Up for Archery Season *Continued from previous page*

Keeping yourself and equipment ready and tuned well before the season opens is the toughest part. Making sure your arrows are flying true and your bow is tuned are some of the most fun but tedious portions of gearing up for bow season. Shooting as many groups of arrows a week as you can, keeping your bow tuned, adjusting and maintaining your sight can be a challenge, but repetition turns into muscle memory and in turn makes you a more equipped outdoorsman or woman. Keeping all of the less thought about equipment in working order is important too. Ensuring that your harness fits and is secure, not torn or tattered, checking on your ladder stand ratchet straps, aiders, carabiners, lineman ropes, tethers, etc.

With all of that being said, hopefully this will give you some insight into becoming a safe and knowledgeable hunter. We hope to see many hunters recreating in our designated hunting areas this hunting season! Make sure to check the link to the Iowa DNRs archery deer hunting regulations: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Portals/idnr/uploads/Hunting/huntingregs.pdf>. If you have any questions or are unclear on regulations, don't be afraid to reach out to the local Iowa DNR Conservation Officers. Hunt safely, responsibly, ethically, and good luck!



Figure 7: Conservation Technician Logan in a tree harness

**Thank you for
another great
camping season!**

**Park gates close October 31st, 2024.
Parks are still open for use by foot
traffic only.**

Conservation Board Members

Mike LaGrange: Vinton, Chair

Dan Hill: Vinton, Member

Samantha Hunter: Mount Auburn, Member

Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member

Becky VanWey: Vinton, Member

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

Check www.bentoncountya.gov

For times and locations. Meetings are open to the public.

Conservation Staff

Aaron Askelson, Interpretive Naturalist

Cecilia Dirks, Office Coordinator

Logan Grabin, Conservation Tech

Camryn Grubic, South Unit Ranger

Faith Hunt, Interpretive Naturalist

Ed Hach, North Unit Ranger

Layla Hagen, East Unit Ranger

Cara Harrill, Conservation Tech

Zach Parmater, Conservation Tech/Ranger

Shelby Williams, Director

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

@bentoncountyparks.com

Find us online at: www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/

or www.mycountyparks.com

Find us on [Facebook](#): @bentoncountyparks

To donate visit <https://www.bentoncountya.gov/conservation/donate/>

Calendar of Events Fall 2024

Registration for all events is required by visiting

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

Rodgers Fall Family Fest

September 27th, 7PM at Rodgers Park - Enclosed Shelter

On Friday, join us for the 3rd Annual Rodgers Fall Family Fest at Rodgers Park. BCC will have s'mores ingredients for those with a sweet tooth. There will be yard games set up for all ages and a warm campfire to enjoy. A self-led moonlight scavenger hunt on the trail starts at 7:30pm. Call Ranger Hach at 319-560-9803 with questions about this event.

Registration not required.



Rodgers Fall Family Fest

September 28th, 6:30PM at Rodgers Park - Campground

On Saturday, Trick-or-Treating will be from 6:30pm-7:30pm. Traffic will be restricted to lower drive only, while park goers can take note of their favorite decorated camp site and vote for them at the host site! The winner will be announced shortly after 7:30pm. Prizes are the following: 1st place: 3-night camping certificate, 2nd place: 2-night camping certificate, 3rd place: 1-night camping certificate. Traffic at the campground will be reopened once trick-or-treating has ceased. Call Ranger Hach at 319-560-9803 with questions about this event. Registration not required.

Nature Knowledge Day: Orienteering and Archery

October 3rd, 9:30AM - 11:30AM at Rodgers Park; Geared for 4th-12th grade

Discover the art of using a compass to unravel a riddle, and practice your archery skills in this two-hour session. Due to the nature of this program, it is best suited for kids in 4th grade and up. Participants **MUST REGISTER** in advance by visiting www.mycountyparks.com. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate. Please note that youth under 4th grade will not be able to shoot archery.



Hannen Lake Chilli Cook-Off

October 5th, 12:00PM - 3:00PM at Hannen Lake Park - White Oak Shelter (East); Chili entry fee: \$20/recipe, Free to enjoy!

Bring your best chili to enter into the contest, or come and enjoy all the delicious chili presented! Competition entrance fee is \$20/recipe (limit 1 per person). Judging categories are: smoked chili, white chili, and classic chili.

Don't want to compete from 1-3pm? Enjoy some chili, bake sale, and live music by Scott, Annette & George. Win a portable pizza oven, Grizzly Cooler, and more! \$10 raffle tickets will be sold at this event for cash only. Raffle winner must be present to win. Chili judging will be held at noon with a grand prize of one week of camping for 1st place in each category. 2nd & 3rd places will be entered into a drawing for a weekend in the Hannen Lake Cabin. Call Ranger Grubic at 319-560-9804 with questions about this event.

Flora, Fauna & Females: Wild Rose Campout

October 12th at 11AM - October 13th at 10AM at Winegar and Tobin Wildlife Area - Wild Rose Cabin

Come join us for a night under the stars and make new gal pals! This overnight adventure is for women 21+ years of age to forge fresh friendships and strengthen the bonds you already have. Join us for a range of activities such as yoga, a mindfulness hike, nature journaling, nighttime scavenger hunt, candle painting, Dutch oven cooking, a coffee/tea station, team building exercises, stargazing, and much more!

Campers will share a tent provided unless you opt to bring your own. If you prefer your own tent for added comfort, kindly bring your own. Campers will need to provide their own sleeping gear (sleeping bags, sleeping pads, pillows, etc.). Please bring a reusable water bottle, coffee cup, and lawn chair. Additionally, we will be having a drink and snack exchange, so feel free to bring your favorite non-alcoholic or alcoholic beverage or snack to share with others. Participation is optional in snack/drink share.

Cost includes food (lunch, dinner, breakfast & warm beverages), camping, supplies for activities and yoga instruction. Space is limited to 10 women. Registration is required by October 4th at 5pm at www.mycountyparks.com. Questions? Call/text Faith at 319-560-9809 or Cecilia at 319-560-9806.



Artistry with Aaron: Full Moon Painting

October 17th, 6:30PM-8:00PM at Benton County Nature Center; \$30/adult & \$20/kid

This painting class led by Naturalist Aaron will include step-by-step instruction, one 11x14" canvas, and painting supplies to make a Hunter's Moon painting, \$30 for adult, \$20 for kid. No refunds. Registration is required by October 11th by visiting www.mycountyparks.com



Upcycle Gift Bags, Bows & Tags

November 14th, 6:00PM - 7:30PM at Benton County Nature Center

Reduce, reuse, recycle, gift! We will be making gift bags, creating unique bows and custom gift tags during this program. Bring in old calendars, wrapping paper and cards to give them new life! BCC will have some items to create a gift bag, tags and bows. Feel free to bring snacks and beverages. Registration is required for this program by visiting www.mycountyparks.com

Nature Knowledge Day: Herpetology Investigations

December 12th, 9:30AM - 11:00AM at Benton County Nature Center; Geared for 1st-12th grade

Young explorers will become mini herpetologists, studying reptiles & amphibians and learning what makes them different. Young explorers will collect quantitative and qualitative data to better understand some of Iowa's herps in this hands-on activity. Participants MUST REGISTER in advance by visiting www.mycountyparks.com. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate.

Woodburning: Coasters & Ornaments

December 12th, 6:30pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$5/item

Join us at the Nature Center to wood burn drink coasters and ornaments with a nature theme. This beautifully simple project is designed for all abilities. Some of the patterns might be animal tracks, mushrooms, or feathers — you decide! Cost is \$5 per person (Includes one coaster or one ornament, paid at the time of registration). If you would like, and time allows, additional items can be made for \$5 each. This program is suitable for participants 10 years of age and older. Anyone under the age of 18 must be accompanied by an adult. No refunds. Please register for the class by November 30th by visiting www.mycountyparks.com



NATURE TRIVIA



- A. WHAT IS THE IOWA STATE ROCK?
- B. WHAT BIRD CAN FLY BACKWARDS?
- C. WHAT IS THE ONLY MAMMAL THAT CAN FLY?
- D. WHAT ARE SQUIRREL NESTS CALLED?
- E. WHAT INSECTS BELONG TO THE ORDER ODONATA?
- F. TRUE OR FALSE: DADDY LONG LEGS ARE SPIDERS
- G. WHAT ANIMAL CAN BREATHE THROUGH ITS BUTT?
- H. HOW MANY OWLS ARE NATIVE TO IOWA?
- I. WHICH BENTON COUNTY PARK HAS THE LARGEST LAKE?
- J. HOW MANY CAMPGROUNDS DOES BCC MANAGE?
- K. HOW MANY ROWS OF WHISKERS DOES A BOBCAT HAVE?
- L. WHAT IS NORTH AMERICA'S SMALLEST FALCON?
- M. HOW MANY MILES IS THE OCNT?
- O. WHAT IS THE IOWA STATE FLOWER?

