

THE NATURE OF THINGS

The Benton County Conservation Quarterly Newsletter

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



You Did It!

By Shelby Williams
Director

After 18 months of dedicated work and unprecedented community support, Benton County Conservation is thrilled to announce the procurement of funds for the Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area expansion! Now with the funding secured, the next step will be completing the transfer of the property over the next several months to make this property available for public use. As of now, this land remains private. This transformative project was made possible through generous public contributions, community organizations, business partnerships, and a recently awarded Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) grant. This acquisition has more than doubled the size of the existing park, creating a 325 acre park with exciting opportunities for recreation and conservation.

Through an extraordinary show of support, individual donors from the public contributed over \$600,000 of the \$1.2 million acquisition. The remaining funding was secured through grant awards and contributions from local businesses and organizations, highlighting the collective commitment to this project. The project wouldn't have been possible without the help of John Tuthill and Wendling Quarries for bringing this opportunity to us. Our partnering organization, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), played an invaluable role in bringing this vision to life.

To our donors and those who spread the message, we cannot thank you enough. Your support means everything to us and you have helped us successfully protect a piece of property for generations to come.



Figure 1: Outcropping from former quarry site at the addition



Figure 2: Drone footage of the addition from the Cedar River



Figure 3: Wind erosion in hillside on the addition

You Did It! *Continued from previous page*

The Numbers

60 Individuals from around the United States gave a total of \$600,000 with donations ranging from \$3.00 to \$350,000. Every single cent made this happen.

9 Organizations totaling over \$75,800: Benton County Conservation Foundation, Community Foundation Endowment Funds, Iowa Native Plant Society, Iowa Ornithology Union, Local Pheasants Forever Chapters (counties: Benton, Black Hawk, Marshall/Tama, Iowa, Linn), National Wild Turkey Federation (Local, State, National), Red Cedar Izaak Walton League, State Pheasants Forever, and Vinton Kiwanis Club.

2 Businesses totaling \$26,000: ClickStop Urbana, and Frontier Co-op Giving Fund.

4 Grants/Reimbursement programs totaling over \$505,000: REAP Grant, REAP County Distribution, Mitigation Project, and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Tribal Consistency Fund.

We are immensely grateful for the overwhelming support from individuals, businesses, and our partners, INHF and Iowa DNR's REAP program. This project has been a journey, and it's inspiring to see the community come together to support conservation and expand access to the outdoors.

Thanks to the competitive REAP grant, Benton County Conservation has secured the final funding necessary to complete the expansion, adding significant natural space that will support outdoor activities, protect local wildlife, and preserve the region's natural beauty for generations to come. To learn more about REAP and everything it does for Iowa, visit <https://www.iowadnr.gov/conservation/reat>. There are so many ways you can support REAP!

I must also thank our dedicated staff. Benton County Conservation is fortunate to have a very diverse group of individuals with a common goal, something that you cannot find everywhere. We are able to pull from each other's strengths, and having a diverse group makes us successful in so many areas. While we have so much going on in our personal lives, this crew has pulled off amazing things during this intense fundraising project.

They've assisted with building a new shop at Hannen Lake Park, successfully received multiple grants (for habitat management, restrooms, equipment, and much more), worked on in house habitat management, onboarded additional staff, and so much more. I could write pages on the successes of this group as a whole. I encourage you to read our annual report found on the county website (https://www.bentoncountyyia.gov/files/conservation/bccb_fy24_annual_report_22108.pdf) to grasp last fiscal year.

This new addition, made possible by the community's generosity, stands as a testament to the shared commitment to conservation and outdoor access in Iowa.



Figure 4: Field of wild bergamont in the new addition



Figure 5: Snow-capped scene on the new addition

You Did It! *Continued from previous page*

Looking Ahead

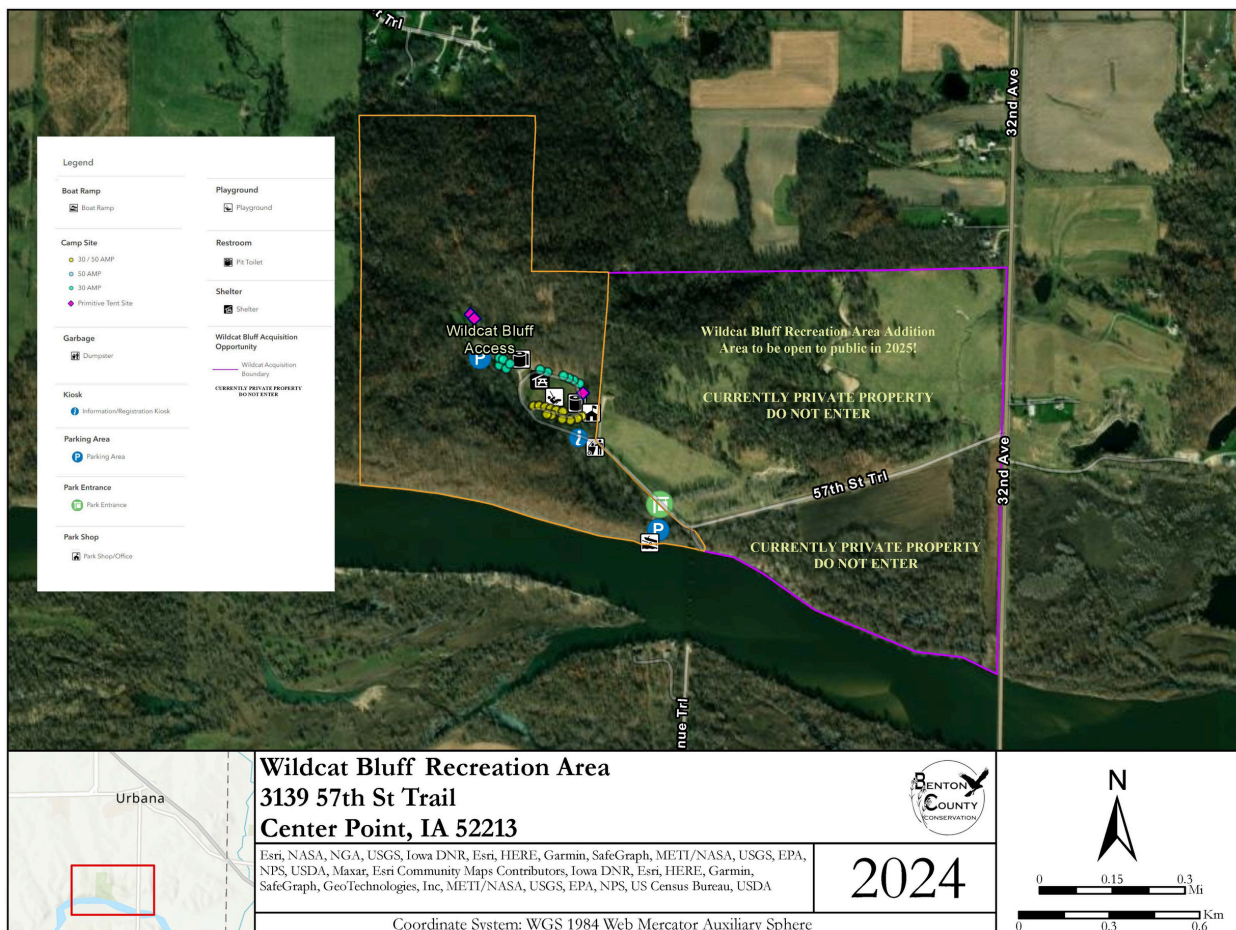
While we are thrilled to announce the procurement of funds for the Wildcat Bluff expansion, we do not yet have possession of the property. As such, the expanded area remains closed and private until further notice. We anticipate the property will officially open to the public spring of 2025, and we are excited to welcome visitors once appropriate preparations are complete.

Please note that once it is open, hunting will be permitted on the entire property, making all of Wildcat Bluff a lead-free birdshot and archery-only area. During certain times, recreation opportunities may be temporarily affected as we manage the site for both public use and conservation needs.

Our work is not done! Please share with your friends, families, neighbors, local politicians, and anyone else you can think of. What a difference a like-minded community can make! It's imperative we share the benefits of your hard work.

About Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area

Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area is a treasured local destination for outdoor enthusiasts, offering a range of recreational activities, including Iowa's number one Disc Golf Course, scenic landscapes, and opportunities to connect with nature. Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area now also has a seasonal shower house, dump station and water available to park goers, thanks to receiving funding through the county utilizing federal ARPA funding.



Coyote or Wolf?

By Ed Hach
North Unit Park Ranger

In recent years, you may have heard of the reports of wolves in Iowa. Several have been confirmed visual sightings - with many more unconfirmed, some photos captured on trail cameras, numerous confirmed tracks, one caught and released from a foothold trap, and sadly, one discovered dead along Interstate 80 in Scott County in February 2024. Also, a few wolves have been shot by hunters or farmers recently, mistaken for coyotes.

The gray wolf (or timber wolf), *Canis lupus*, is a protected species in Iowa, the same listing as another large mammal; the black bear. Like black bears, gray wolves are rare and vagrant in Iowa since their extirpation - locally extinct or driven out by humans - over a century ago. Those found here now are typically young males just searching for food and habitat, often being pushed out of their home ranges in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Coyotes, *Canis latrans*, on the other hand, have remained in Iowa and have populations healthy enough that there is a continuous open hunting season on them. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) has not yet issued fines or citations for those wolves erroneously killed, but may do so with more regular sightings. The IDNR has begun on the path to educate Iowans on the differences between coyotes and wolves, in the hopes that they will no longer be targeted by accident. They have even included a brief identification guide in the most recent hunting regulations, the same image which can be found to the right.

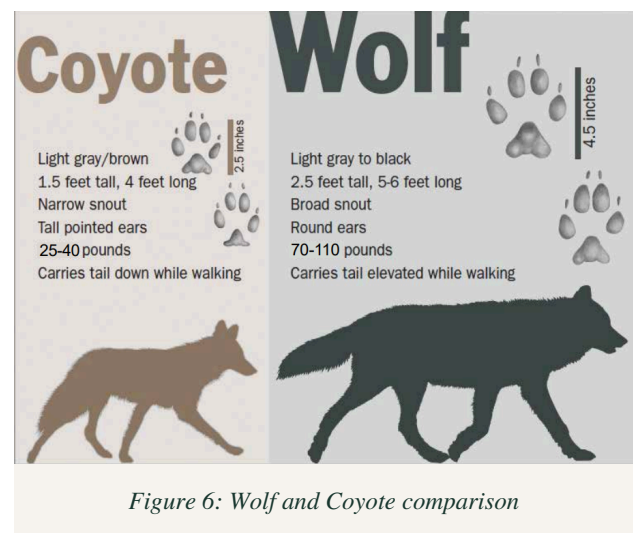


Figure 6: Wolf and Coyote comparison



Figure 7: Coyote on the left and gray wolf on right

The starkest difference between the two canids is their size. Wolves are significantly larger than coyotes, standing approximately a foot taller, stretching one to two feet longer, and weighing twice as much and often more. Even though their grayish colors can be similar, typically coyotes display more tans and browns in their fur, while wolves usually stay within the spectrum of gray to black. You'll also notice on the images to the right, how much broader and more rounded wolves' ears and snouts are, with coyotes having much narrower and pointed ears and snouts. When the animals are moving, a 'tell-tail' identification difference becomes apparent. Wolves will walk and run with their tail held up or out behind them, while coyotes do so with their tails hanging downward.

While there are more various and minute differences, those listed above are the most helpful in quickly identifying and distinguishing between the two species. However, coyotes and wolves have been known to interbreed in certain settings and situations, along with feral dogs.

Coyote or Wolf? *Continued from previous page*

That could potentially make it more difficult to tell them apart when there are hybrid specimens running around. Nevertheless, one should always exercise the same caution as when hunting all animals: if you're not sure what exactly you're aiming at, don't shoot it. And fear not, the wolves that visit Iowa are only doing so temporarily, and do not pose a threat to humans, livestock, or wildlife populations. The IDNR estimates no more than five are within state borders at any given time, and since they are all individuals, they don't possess the ability to hunt large prey as they would in packs. If you happen to encounter what you think may be a wolf or a sign of a wolf here in Iowa, please contact the DNR with any information or evidence you have, as reporting and tracking the animals and their movements is important in better understanding them.



New Year - New Plate

By Faith Hunt
Naturalist

This year, consider getting one of Iowa's Natural Resources License Plates. These plates provide a way for residents to contribute to preserving the state's unique wildlife and natural environments, while sporting a nature related license plate design. You might have seen these plates rolling around - showing illustrations of a goldfinch and wild rose, ring-necked pheasant, bald eagle, white-tailed deer, and brook trout. Each illustration symbolizes various aspects of our great state. The goldfinch and wild rose embody state pride as the official bird and flower. The ring-necked pheasant signifies hunting traditions on Iowa's prairies. The bald eagle highlights Iowa's remarkable conservation success and serves as our national emblem. The white-tailed deer represents Iowa's exceptional hunting opportunities, and lastly, the brook trout symbolizes the state's native trout species and serves as an indicator of clean water.



Purchasing one of these plates is more than just an aesthetic choice for your vehicle—it is a means of supporting essential environmental programs in Iowa. Every penny of your \$45 initial fee and \$25 renewal fee (automatically included in your annual vehicle registration) goes toward trails, habitat, parks, wildlife and more. Let's break that down even further: \$10 of the purchase price and \$15 of the renewal price supports conservation of Iowa's "nongame" wildlife (those not considered sport fish or game). Iowa has more than 1,000 nongame species, with very little dedicated funding sources to support them. These funds go towards collecting data and research, natural resource management to protect threatened and endangered species in the state, environmental education, and matching grant funding to protect pollinators, freshwater species, birds, reptiles and amphibians.



Figure 9: Advertisement for natural resource plates from IDNR website

The remaining \$35 of the purchase price and \$10 of the renewal price supports the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) program. For more than 30 years, REAP funding has supported soil & water enhancement, city parks and open spaces, roadside vegetation management and much more - including County Conservation Boards. Recently, Benton County Conservation received a significant amount of REAP funds to purchase an additional 190 acres at Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area (view the front page of this newsletter for more information). REAP is funded in part from the state legislature, state's Environment First Fund (Iowa gaming receipts), and from the sale of the natural resource license plate. This is your money in action!

Proceeds made from the sale of these plates fund various conservation programs throughout the state, preserving Iowa's rich biodiversity and supporting a wide range of natural resource management activities. This includes: maintaining, restoring, and managing habitats, ensuring the protection of threatened and endangered species, research, increased public land access, and managing the state's parks and wildlife areas. Iowa's natural resources license plates offer more than just a decorative vehicle accessory, they are an important source of funding for conservation programs that benefit wildlife in our state. By purchasing one of these plates, you are actively showing your support for natural resources in Iowa!



We're Hiring!

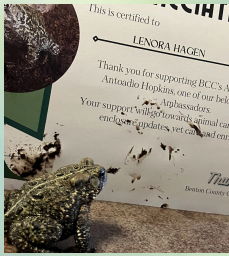
**We are seeking seasonal staff for summer 2025!
Join Benton County Conservation Seasonal Team!
We are hiring Conservation Aides and a Naturalist
Intern for Summer 2025!**

**These positions are great for those who are
interested in conservation, love being outdoors
and enjoy a fun & supportive work environment!**

**Apply today for summer 2025 at
<https://www.bentoncountiia.gov/employment/>**



The Gift of Giving



THANK YOU TO OUR ANIMAL AMBASSADOR SPONSORS!



**BLACKWALL FITNESS - CINNABAR
LENORA HAGEN - ANTOADIO HOPKINS
TUCKER PRIMMER - SNAPPY
MAX PRIMMER - LP1
MAX PRIMMER - LP2
COLTER WELLS - STINK POT
LUKE ERVIN - DALLAS**



In Memory of Randy DeWight Narveson

Benton County Conservation is honored to have been named a recipient of memorials in honor of DeWight Narveson, a gentleman who valued the beauty and preservation of our natural spaces. Randy's legacy will continue to support conservation efforts in Benton County, including our Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area Addition, ensuring future generations can enjoy the landscapes he cared so deeply about. We extend our heartfelt condolences to his family and friends.



OCNT VINTON TRAILHEAD & 1-1 DONOR MATCH



New tree planting at the OCNT Vinton Trailhead

Our team has already planted eight trees at the new Old Creamery Nature Trail Vinton trailhead using some of the funds raised through this 1-1 match! The improvement plans also include adding native prairie along the trail.

The new Vinton trailhead is located on 59th Street Drive. Completion is set for Spring 2025. Stay tuned for more updates! Support the OCNT's continued success!

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.

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

Cara Harrill, Conservation Tech

Layla Lynch, East Unit Ranger

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 Winter 2024-25

Registration for all events is required by visiting

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

Snow-Fun Camp

January 17th, 1:45pm-3:30pm at Benton County Nature Center; \$5/youth

Snow-Fun Camp is a way for the kiddos to enjoy an afternoon full of snow-related fun at the Nature Center! Activities include playing in the snow, snow science and more! Snow-Fun Camp is for youth in 3rd-5th grade. Snow gear is needed for this camp. If there is no snow, alternative activities will be planned. Camp includes a light snack. Registration is required by visiting www.mycountyparks.com.



Windchime Workshop

February 8th, 10am at Benton County Nature Center; \$20/person

Create your own harmony in the wind! Items to make your bamboo windchime will be included. Registration is required by visiting www.mycountyparks.com.

Avian Adventures

March 20th, 2025, 1:00PM - 2:00PM at Hannen Lake Park Shop Pre-K - 12th grade

Uncover the secrets of bird nests, feathers, feeding habits, migration patterns, and even their catchy tunes in this exciting program! Young explorers will use writing and creative skills to learn more about Iowa's avian friends. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate. Participants must register in advance at www.mycountyparks.com.

Aquaponics

April 5th, 10am at Benton County Nature Center; \$30 per system

Aquaponics is a combination of aquaculture (raising aquatic animals) and hydroponics (growing plants in water). Participants will learn about this sustainability practice and then make their very own aquaponics setup! This program includes aquaponics setup (a voucher for a fish, a few house plants, and a 1 gallon tank). Space is limited. Participants must register online at www.mycountyparks.com.



Patterns in Nature

April 18th, 2025 | 10:00AM - 11:30AM | Rodgers Park - Enclosed Shelter Pre-K - 1st

Swirls, dashes, squiggles, circles, ovals and more! Nature's art gallery, bursting with vibrant colors, whimsical shapes, and unique patterns can be found all around us. During this program we will read a book and venture outdoors to uncover the hidden treasures of nature's stunning designs. Participants must register in advance at www.mycountyparks.com. Participants do not have to be in a homeschool group to participate.

Save the Date

River Raiders 2025

**June 17th-19th, 2025 / Mandatory Training: June 10th at 5pm
Youth going into 6th-8th grade / Cost \$100
Paddle the Upper Iowa River**

Adventure awaits around every bend!

Explore the Upper Iowa River from Kendallville to Decorah.

Campers will canoe, camp, cook outdoors, and learn other wilderness skills on this two-night, three-day excursion.

Enrollment is limited to 14 participants.



**Registration opens MARCH 1st on
www.mycountyparks.com/Buchanan**

