

# The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 16 SUMMER/FALL 2018

## Exploring New Territory *By Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

Benton County Conservation is continuing to expand its programming in new and exciting ways. Two years ago we began an annual canoeing trip for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders down the Upper Iowa River called "River Raiders," which you can read about in this newsletter (see page 3). Next year we are hoping to take the adventures a step further by bringing 10th, 11th, and 12th graders up to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) in Northern Minnesota. This is a big step for us so we are working on being as prepared as possible for leading this expedition. Other counties across the state have led trips to



*Iowa naturalists gathered at the Ingiwanis Woodland in Bremer County to discuss wilderness trips and become certified in Wilderness First Aid.*

the BWCA, the Rocky Mountains, Isle Royale National Park, and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Idaho.

Of course, these trips take a lot of planning and preparation. This summer, our Naturalists and Director attended a summer conference in Bremer County provided by the Iowa Association of Naturalists and Crawdaddy Outdoors. This conference was focused on leading groups into wilderness areas that we just do not have in Iowa. The main component of this conference was teaching the participants Wilderness First Aid.

Wilderness First Aid is essential for any of these trips where help might not be easily available, and can certainly come in handy even at our local parks where an emergency might occur and the victim might be in a hard to reach spot or not have access to immediate care. This type of training is hands on and situational; we were given scenarios and in our small groups we needed to come up with the best course of action to properly care for the victim. While this type of training does not prepare you for absolutely every outcome, it gives you the tools to deal with the most common injuries and illnesses.

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[info@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:info@bentoncountyparks.com)  
to be added  
to our mailing list.

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## Future Projects for the River Parks *By Jon Geiger, Park Ranger*

We have been making a lot of changes in our river parks. During the past few years we have added new playground equipment to Wildcat Bluff and Benton City-Fry. We have remodeled the pavilions at Minne Estema and Benton City-Fry and added a new pavilion to Wildcat Bluff. The Red Cedar Cabin at the Winegar Lake area was recently remodeled and continues to be rented almost every weekend throughout the season. We have updated many electrical sites at Wildcat Bluff and Minne Estema, as well as reconstructed restrooms at Minne Estema.

What is next for the Benton County Conservation River Parks? We continue to look at all of the infrastructure throughout the county and ask ourselves how we can make this better for our park patrons. We received a Benton Community Foundation grant to help offset the cost of adding the new playground equipment to Hoefle Dulin Park. At one time there were a slide and swing located at this park. However, it was removed due to old age, improper fall zones, and other safety concerns. We continue to look at updating our electrical service by upgrading camping pedestals and adding heavier underground wire to allow for more amperage to be utilized by our campers. Hoefle Dulin Park is one area that we hope to update next since most of the pedestals are currently only running twenty amp service. Next, we hope to look at updating the wells in all of our river parks. Currently three of our camping parks do not have an adequate source of drinking water. In these three parks, the wells that existed were unable to pass the testing necessary to be used as a potable water supply. We hope to change this by drilling new wells and adding a pressure system that will allow for an easier and healthier source of water.



*Updated primitive restroom at Minne Estema Park.*

We have recently taken over ownership of the animal shelter east of Vinton. Currently we are in the process of remodeling this facility with intentions of turning this into our main River Park office. This would be a great location for us because it is centrally located between our parks along the Cedar River. We will be able to conduct day to day operations as well with general office work and future planning out of this facility. Functionality of this building is yet to be determined, but we hope to have a plan in place by the winter of 2018.

We are also looking into creating a more diverse habitat for pollinators at this site by planting native plants which in turn will help with water quality. You may notice syrup taps on our maple trees this winter and early spring. One of our current volunteers will be utilizing the trees for his maple syrup source.

These are all large projects that are going to take time and funding and will not happen overnight. Our staff will continue to work on these projects over the next couple years and plan to approach these projects in stages as funding becomes available. We honor your continued support and patience as we move these parks and facilities forward to provide you with new and better opportunities to utilize and enjoy our parks.

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## River Raiders *by Aaron Askelson, Naturalist*

Every year around the middle of July, Benton and Buchanan County Conservation partner together to take a group of 12 kids from both counties on a canoeing and camping trip on the Upper Iowa River. This trip is offered to kids entering 6th, 7th and 8th grade. They spend 3 days paddling the scenic Upper Iowa River and two nights camping on its shores. If you have not had the chance to paddle the Upper Iowa River or hike along its banks you are missing some fantastic views. The Upper Iowa River sits in what is called the driftless region of the Midwest. It is an area that includes northeast Iowa, northwest Illinois, southeast Minnesota, and southwest Wisconsin. During the last ice age, it was spared the grinding devastation of glaciers. Because of the lack of glaciation, the topography of the region differs from most of Iowa. The limestone bluffs along the river offer some of the most stunning vistas that Iowa has to offer. When you think of Iowa you do not usually think of waterfalls but this float trip has those and cold springs to boot.



Many of the participants we take on this adventure have never slept in a tent nor have they done a lot of paddling. A mandatory meeting the week before the trip helps to acclimate the kids to what they will be experiencing along the way. The training day helps us to judge the kids' paddling abilities on flat water and introduces the kids to the other participants and the naturalists from the other county. They learn how to set up

their tents, who their tent partners will be, and what and how to pack for the trip. It is also their opportunity to help select items for the food that they will be preparing.



We all meet at the Buchanan County Nature Center (Fontana Park) on Tuesday morning to make the trek up to the Upper Iowa. We put in the river at Kendallville Park and we are immediately aware that this river is different from the Cedar or Iowa that flow through Benton County. The water is much colder and clearer than most of us are used to. After a short time of paddling we are treated to some beautiful bluffs that rise 130 feet up with higher ridges and bluffs to come. The first day of paddling is fairly easy, the swift current makes the 12.6 river miles go by

pretty fast. We pull out at Chimney Rock Campground and set up camp. The kids are in charge of cooking their own meals with a fair amount of adult supervision. Dinner on the first night is usually done and cleaned up as the sunlight fades and the sounds of the night approach. The kids, since they are not used to paddling all day, are usually pretty tired and fall asleep fairly quickly much to the delight of the tired adult leaders.

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## Renovation at Rodgers Park *By Scott Bahmann, Rodgers Park Ranger*

Who can remember those old stinky and disgusting pit toilets? When you lift the lids a foul stench takes your breath away or you get bombarded by flies and gnats. Many parks across the state still have these because water may not be available or there is not any type of septic system. Here at Rodgers Park we still have one of those, but we also have a more modern shower building.

With the constant rise of park users, a shower building was constructed in 1993 to meet the demand for a more modern facility. With four showers, two sinks, and three stools this facility added a much needed service to the campground. Park users could now enjoy a hot shower or simply a quick rinse off after using the beach. As many of us know, when things get old or worn out they need to be fixed or replaced. That is exactly what is happening here at Rodgers Park.

We are not replacing the building, just giving it a little face lift. Over the course of the years simple things were added to help improve its functionality and aesthetics. Hand dryers were added in the late 90's to help reduce waste by eliminating the need for paper towels. Also around this time new plastic partitions were added to replace the old rusty ones. Throughout the years the doors had gotten a fresh coat of paint and so did the walls. The roof has also been replaced after the unforgettable wind storm of 2011 stripped it of its shingles.



This year, 25 years later, it was decided that the little things just aren't enough. The exterior has received a new steel roof. No more shingles! Gutters and down spouts will also be added to help control the run off. The vinyl siding has been replaced with steel. The exterior support posts that were once painted are now wrapped with cedar to give it a more rustic appearance. Underneath the awning was some old weathered glass board, which was recently covered by vinyl. Six new doors will be added to keep everyone secure. When night time falls, three new brighter lights will illuminate the entrance. If you are looking for a place to rest those weary legs or a place to watch the night sky, look no further as two benches were installed out front.

Now for the interior! The interior was completely gutted. The only thing that remained the same is the stools and sinks. Once everything was removed, the walls and floors were given a fresh coat of paint to brighten the room up. The ceiling was also given a white vinyl overlay to give the stalls a clean look. To help everyone with some privacy, all new partitions were added. Sometimes even the simple things help aid in the process such as new shower heads, lighting, waste baskets and faucets.

Now that the shower building is complete, please be sure to let us know how we did and if you have any ideas as to any other improvements, please let our Conservation Board know.

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## **New Conservation Tech Position** *By Shelby Williams, Conservation Tech*

My name is Shelby Williams, I'm excited to say that I am the new Conservation Technician for Benton County Conservation. The conservation system is extremely important to Iowa and I am ready to use my past experiences to help continue to better Benton County Conservation properties.

I grew up in Iowa County and attended Iowa State University graduating with a bachelor's of science degree in Animal Ecology and Environmental Studies. I have always had a passion for conservation and obtained various seasonal and temporary positions in the field before becoming the Iowa County Conservation Park Ranger. After working there for three years, I found myself moving to Benton County! I worked for the Benton Soil and Water Conservation District as the Project Coordinator for the Benton/Tama Nutrient Reduction Demonstration Project for two years. While Project Coordinator, I worked in the Rock, Pratt, and Wolf Creek watersheds to reduce nutrient loading in the waters.

I enjoy traveling and seeing what other adventures nature has to offer from Iowa to around the world. I have recently been to New Zealand, Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, and the Pacific Northwest. I love to find hidden nature gems, go hiking, camping, and spend time with family and friends.

I am glad my path has led me back to the county conservation system. I look forward to continuing to work in the conservation field and I'm excited to work with Benton County Conservation and Staff!



### **Interested in volunteering?**

Volunteer opportunities include gardening, trail work, special events, helping with environmental education programming, staffing the nature center, and assisting with various projects. Feel free to contact us at [info@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:info@bentoncountyparks.com) or 319-472-4942 if you are interested in volunteering!

Visit our website at <http://www.bentoncountyiowa.org/departments/community-services/county-conservation/donatesponsor> to find out more about volunteer opportunities.

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## Changes at Hannen *By Collin Strickland, Hannen Lake Park Ranger*

On April 18th, I graduated from the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy Basic Training Class 278. The academy is 16 weeks of training and covers topics such as medical training, mental health, defensive driving, firearms, defensive tactics, Iowa code, physical training, etc. I was 1 of 45 officers in my class and we came from departments all across the state. There were good and bad days, getting tased and maced were the latter. The good days were the ones where it was beautiful outside and we were on the range. The academy has some challenging times associated with it, but I was able to overcome those. I learned about law enforcement from instructors at the academy and from outside instructors. A lot of the outside instructors are officers from across the state who have years of experience. These officers shared some of their stories with us and they had some pretty entertaining experiences to share. I am thankful for my time at the academy as I was able to learn new things that I can use for the rest of my career. I also met many fantastic people who I plan to stay in touch with.

Now that I've been back, things have been busy at Hannen Park. We opened up for the season on April 24th and saw folks camping right away. The seasonal staff has been maintaining the grounds for a couple weeks now. Fifty oak trees have been planted throughout the park. These trees were obtained through a grant funded by Rockwell Collins and most of the trees are showing promising signs of growth.

After seeing what Hannen Park looked like during the winter months, I was really looking forward to seeing what spring would bring. When the weather was finally warm enough, the color from the trees was a welcoming sight to see. We've also been blessed with some nice rain showers, which has helped spring Hannen Lake Park back into life with flora and fauna. However, the nicer weather and precipitation meant that the invasive species would also be growing. It's a battle dealing with invasive species and trying to get rid of them, but I was able to spend some time working to mow areas where invasive species have taken over. It will still take more time to manage those areas to continue to knock back those invasive species, but we have plans to replace these invasive species with native plants funded by Whitetails Unlimited, that will benefit a wide variety of wildlife, especially bees, butterflies, and other pollinators.

Other future projects include timber stand improvement, assessing the water quality issues and finding solutions to those problems, and improving recreational opportunities for those who love to camp, fish, swim, hike, kayak, and spend time outdoors. I'm really looking forward to meeting those who enjoy being at Hannen Lake Park. If you haven't had a chance to visit Hannen yet, I encourage you to do so and experience all of the wonderful things nature has to offer. I hope you all have a terrific summer and hope to see you at Hannen!



*Invasive species such as honeysuckle and autumn olive have been removed from the "Baldy" hill.*

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## **Mud Mania!** *By Caitlin Savage, Naturalist*

I have always liked playing in the mud. As a kid, I remember spending lots of time in muddy puddles, making mud castles, and “helping” my family garden, mostly by playing in the dirt. This love of mud has stayed with me through the years.

A large part of our summer day camps is encouraging our campers to get messy. We tell them it’s okay if they are muddy, wet, grimy, or dirty. If one of our campers or kids who are visiting for field trips are worried because they got a little dirt on their skin, I tell them that it is a sign of a good day when you go home a little messy. One of my favorite quotes is from poet/novelist Margaret Atwood: “In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt.” I think this applies through the whole year (at least when the dirt isn’t frozen).



This mindset, that it is okay to be messy, can be a hard thing for people to overcome because our world today is very clean. However, current research is showing that parents are better off allowing their kids to play in the dirt rather than trying to keep them super clean. There are many books and papers with research on this subject. B. Brett Finlay, a microbiologist with the University of British Columbia, and co-author of “Let Them Eat Dirt: Saving Your Child From an Oversanitized World,” says that when kids ingest microbes (like when they are playing in the dirt), it helps to train their bodies’ immune systems. Another book, “Dirt is Good,” says that dirt “exposes your child to a huge array of harmless germs that have complex traits to train up your baby’s immune system.”

As naturalists, we are big proponents of playing in the mud, not just for health, but for fun! This summer was the second year we had a “Fun in the Mud” program in celebration of International Mud Day, which is on June 29th. During the program, kids get to do various mud-related activities, including playing in a mud pit, and are encouraged to get dirty! We hope you can join us for next year’s Mud Day, but below is some inspiration for mud fun at home.

### **Need some ideas for mud play at home?**

- \*Make mud pies/castles from buckets, old baking pans, etc. Add sticks, leaves, & flowers.
- \*Use mud as paint -- use a paintbrush to paint on paper or use as face paint!
- \*Draw a target with chalk on the sidewalk. Make mud balls to throw and try to get a bullseye.
- \*Put hands and feet in mud and put them on the sidewalk to make muddy hand- and footprints.
- \*The internet has a multitude of ideas for more muddy fun!

## The Iconic Owl of Iowa *By Sadie Novotny, Summer Naturalist Intern*

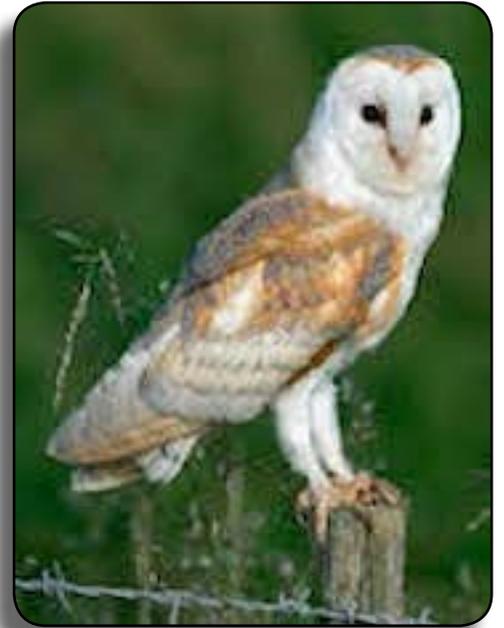
Barn Owls are iconic in Iowa. Iowa is known for its old and new barns and its silent white owl that occupies them. However, Barn Owls had been declining for around 40 years now, due to predation, rodenticides, and habitat loss. They have been considered endangered by the Iowa DNR since 1977.

Barn Owls, *Tyto alba*, weigh around 1-2 pounds, have a striking white to cream-ish belly and head, a heart shaped facial disk, and unlike other owls who hoot, they screech. They are the only one in the Tytonidae lineage that lives in North America. All other owls belong to the Strigidae lineage.

Common predators of the Barn Owl are the Great Horned Owl and the raccoon. How do you tell the difference between Barn Owls and Great Horned Owls? The Great Horned Owl weighs more than 2 times the amount of a Barn Owl, weighing in around 3-4 pounds, and looks much fiercer than the Barn Owl. Great Horned Owls have feather tufts, also known as horns hence the name, that make the owl look larger and taller. They have a brindled brown color with white and tan intermingling. These owls are some of the strongest owls living in North America and share some of the same habitats of the Barn Owls.



*Great horned owls are a common predator of barn owls.*



Great Horned Owls have a gripping strength of approximately 800-1000 pounds of pressure per square inch! Humans only have approximately 50 pounds of pressure per square inch. They will hunt anything from skunks, to snakes, to rodents, to juvenile and adult Barn Owls. Raccoons also prey on the Barn Owl by eating the Barn Owl's eggs or juveniles from the nest.

Pesticide use, such as DDT, has been detrimental to Barn Owls and their eggs. DDT was banned in 1972, but the Barn Owls still haven't recovered from it. Barn Owls that ate rodents who ate insects that were affected by DDT, had weak and brittle eggs. Those eggs would often break underneath the parents during incubation. Without a new 'crop' of Barn Owls, one or two times a year their numbers really started to decline. Rodenticides that farmers use to kill off mice and other rodents also are affecting barn owls. Barn owls almost exclusively eat mice and other rodents so when the rodents are poisoned and the owl ingests them, they too are affected by pesticides.

Habitat loss for Barn Owls also is hurting the population. Barn Owls nest in old wooden barns and large dead trees bordering grasslands. With the removal of these habitats, and the replacement of wooden barns with metal barns, the owls have nowhere to nest. This leaves Barn Owls to nest in grain bins, which are unsafe and often leads to the young dying of heat. Ultimately if there isn't enough habitat these owls have little chance of getting off the Iowa DNR's endangered list.

*Continued on next page*



*If you are interested in building a barn owl box, you can find a design by visiting [www.iowadnr.gov](http://www.iowadnr.gov) and searching “Barn Owl Nest Box Design.”*

But there is hope for these heart faced owls. Making a Barn Owl nest box where the owls are seen or heard can be beneficial to their survival. The boxes should be built following the DNR Barn Owl Box guide and they should be predator proof. Barn owls are attracted to grassland areas where rodents are likely to live, so placing a box there would be most suitable. Once the box is placed, the barn owl will act as an excellent rodent control so be sure there is no rodenticide in use so the owls are not being poisoned.

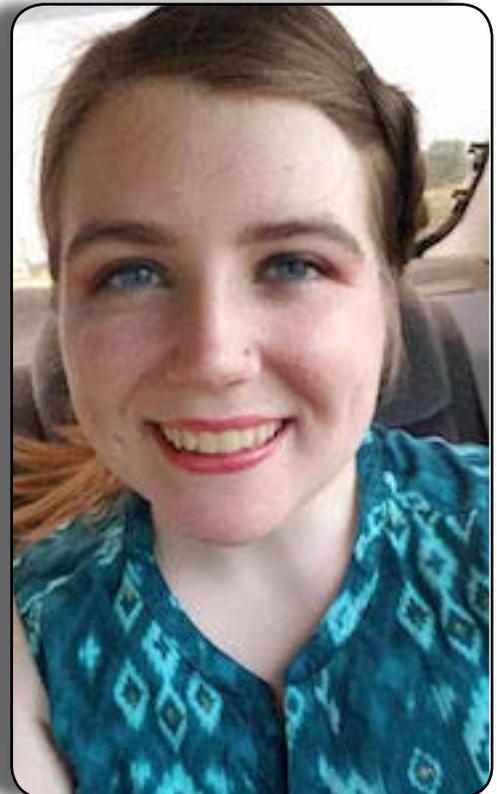
Barn Owls are iconic to Iowa and need more help than ever. Without the stop of rodenticides and the addition of suitable habitat, there could be a day where they don't exist in Iowa. Help save the only member tytonaidea lineage and build a barn owl box today!

## Meet the Author

Hello my name is Sadie Novotny, and I am the naturalist intern for the summer. I am a Kirkwood Community College student and I am studying Parks and Natural Resources. I am very excited to intern at Benton County, as I am a Vinton Native, and I even remember former Naturalist, now Director, Karen Phelps stopping by and teaching in the classroom when I was young!

When I am not in school or working, I enjoy horseback riding, working with raptors on the glove, and just being outdoors in general! I was a volunteer intern at the Iowa Raptor Project in Solon, Iowa last year and I really enjoyed assisting with raptor programs and tours. Now I am so excited to expand my learning and teach a diversity of programs and develop new program skills along the way.

After I graduate from Kirkwood I will be transferring to Upper Iowa to continue my degree in Natural Resources. I hope someday I will be able to become a full time naturalist and make it my career!



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*River Raiders, continued from page 3*

The nice thing about the section of river we paddle on is that it gets a little more technical each day as the kids grow in their confidence and abilities. By the third day they are ready for most everything the river has to offer. Stops along the way include lunches on sandbars, skipping rocks, some swimming, and Malanaphy Spings State Preserve which is a delightful reprieve on a hot summer day. This is a beautiful cold spring waterfall that all the kids enjoy.



If you know a kid that likes a little adventure that will be going into 6th, 7th, or 8th grade next summer, see if they want to sign up for this unique experience to become a River Raider. Oh, I almost forgot one of the kids' favorite parts. After pulling off the river we always stop at Culver's in Decorah for a treat and a little something to eat. You would think the kids had been away from civilization for months the way they devour the cheeseburgers and ice cream.

Happy Paddling!

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*Exploring New Territory, continued from page 1*

Part of our role at Benton County Conservation is educating both children and adults about outdoor recreation opportunities that are available, and helping them discover new ways to explore the outdoors. Currently we do not offer any adult wilderness trips, but this may change in the future. Some outdoor recreation opportunities may seem daunting, but with some planning beforehand, are very accessible.

On October 24th at 6:30pm at the Nature Center, local Boy Scout leader Jay Lash will begin a series of classes to introduce people to "trekking." These classes will explain the ins and outs of backcountry camping. He will cover both backpacking and canoeing treks. He has had a lot of experience leading Boy Scouts to wilderness locations all over the United States. If you get a chance please sign up for one of his classes at the Nature Center (see "Calendar of Events" insert for further details).

*Thank You!!*

*Our deep appreciation to everyone who drops off cans/bottles for our Nickles for Nature fund. If you have donations for us, please contact us at 319-472-4942 or [info@bentoncountyparks.com](mailto:info@bentoncountyparks.com)*

## Eco-Corner: Leaf Confetti

Planning a celebration, but want to keep it earth friendly? Confetti is a fun addition to a party, but most confetti is made of plastic that takes a very long time to decompose.

Try an eco-friendly alternative: Collect fallen leaves of a variety of colors. Use a hole punch on the leaves to make circular confetti to add colorful decorations to any party! You can also find hole punches with fun shapes to make your confetti even more unique.



## Fall Word Search

Look for words going forward, diagonally, or up and down!

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

MONARCH  
MIGRATION  
ACORNS  
FALL  
LEAVES  
CAMPFIRE  
HIKING  
APPLE  
TURKEY  
AUTUMN

## ***Conservation Board Members***

Daniel Gibbins: Urbana, Vice Chair  
Dan Hill: Vinton, Member, Chair  
Denni Randall: Belle Plaine, Member  
Randy Scheel: Garrison, Member  
Vacant

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

## ***Conservation Staff***

Karen Phelps	Executive Director
Scott Bahmann	Rodgers Park Ranger
Aaron Askelson	Interpretive Naturalist
Caitlin Savage	Interpretive Naturalist
Jon Geiger	River Parks Ranger
Collin Strickland	Hannen Park Ranger
Zach Parmater	Conservation Tech/Ranger
Shelby Williams	Conservation Tech

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