

The Nature of Things

THE BENTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 12 FALL 2016

Memories of a Flood *By Karen M. Phelps, Executive Director*

As the water continued to make it's slow ascent on the fortress of sandbags surrounding our beloved Red Cedar Cabin, a dedicated number of employees gave up their normal day-to-day duties and spent September 24-26, 2016, sandbagging and protecting their castle. Following are journal entries written by the sleep deprived staff members as the weekend progressed:

September 24, 2016, 11:52 p.m. - Karen

Tad before midnight and the water slowly creeps up to the wall of sandbags surrounding the cabin.

Yesterday the staff and a handful of dedicated volunteers worked all day building a fortress of bags around our cabin.

Today, they built the wall higher.

Tonight at 11:00 p.m., we stand guard and watch, wait and wonder. We watch as the water creeps over the floor of the now Tobin's shelter, and remember the six feet of water that swallowed her up in 2008. And so we wait...

September 25, 2016, 3:30 a.m. - Zach

Three days in total of hard work and most importantly, team work, has brought us here to this point in time.

As I sit here wondering what is to come over the next 24 hours, my friend and coworker lays asleep in his bed. We are here to watch over the wall we have constructed.

The first signs of water behind our fortress - I can't imagine it will be long before the constant hum of the gas engine pump fills the night air. Earthworms litter the ground surrounding the cabin, desperately searching for dry land.

Our attempt at a fire earlier in the evening would have been met by a watery death if we had brought one to life. "Huh..." said Karen, "Oh well, the water would have put it out in the next few hours anyway".



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to be added to our mailing list.

*Celebrating 60 years
of Conservation in 2016*

Memories of a Flood *Continued from page 1*

Logan and I both chuckled, not truly believing that to the possible, but here I sit just a shot over three hours later and the water completely surrounds the fire pit.

A restless deep breath; is Logan awake? Nope, it's just me, I can't sleep. I have the mighty Cedar River knocking at the door.

As my eyes burn, I can't help but think of Judge Tobin, the Saintclair and Radcliffe families, and the Legend of Unga Chuck.

Thoughts of the days heading up to this event, working with my coworkers, family and friends. Ugh, rain drops on the roof - not a welcome sound. Distant rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning to the North. Just as soon as it started, it stopped. Thank you, Lord, we need no more rain.

I need to stop. I've been awake for nearly 24 hours and I could fill this book with the random thoughts running through my mind. I will end with, I love my job so very much and the family that I work with are all very dear to me.

Loving your job is more important than the money you make.

September 26, 2016, 2:36 a.m. - Logan

Like the penmanship of the former entry, the situation is terrible. At 21 feet, the swollen Cedar continues to wager a lopsided campaign against the best efforts of a strung-out staff. The weight of my grandmother's two-ply, bluejean blanket provides an unjustified sense of comfort as the weight of the rising river sags and springs new leaks through a hastily-constructed sandbag wall: the only thing standing between the planet's raw indifference and mankind's feeble attempts to seek comfort.

The ominous wailing of a harmonica from Led Zeppelin's 1971 cover of "When the Levee Breaks", plays in the back of my mind in chaotic harmony with the urgent hum of the three struggling water pumps outside as they lose ground to Nature's exploitation of our shortcomings.

I better check the fuel on those pumps.

September 26, 2016, 6:24 a.m. - Aaron

She kept a knocking, but we never let her in. She gave us a good shot to the jaw but we didn't go down. The moles all moved to high ground creating underground pathways for the water. The turkey vultures soared, the bats swooped, toads and treefrogs paid us a visit.

With the help of Pepsi and Mt. Dew, we manned three pumps through the night. With some tasty treats to tide us over, we soldiered on.

We checked the pumps every 45-minutes, cleaning out the intakes and filling the gas. We have probably all had more carbon monoxide fumes than one should have in a 24-hour period.

Seeing the sun coming through the trees and Logan's smiling face as he told me the water had gone down two inches, was great news to hear. The worst is over but the road is still long. The worst is over but the road is still long. Our staff and volunteers pulled together to save this cabin and we accomplished our goal. Now to think about clean-up.

September 26, 2016, 9:30 a.m. - Karen

I wish I could show you the picture of the dedicated three Amigos; Zach, Logan and Aaron, exhausted, sitting with glazed-over eyes watching the TV and water pumps, as the mighty Cedar river continues to threaten our fortress. The Cedar has crested here, but water continues to try and eke its way through our barrier of sandbags. As you sit and read this, realize that the sheer determination and pride of our staff kept this cabin dry, rather than allow up to a foot of water to impede the walls of the Red Cedar.

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Grant Helps Fund New Playground *by Jon Geiger, River Parks Ranger*

Playground construction is currently underway at Wildcat Bluff campground.

We are installing a new spiral slide, a climbing tree, stepping logs, and a balance beam to a newly developed playground area. This area was established in the summer of 2015 with the placement of playground mulch and a swing set with intentions of adding equipment as funding became available.



In the spring of 2016 we were awarded a grant through the Benton County Community Foundation in the amount of three thousand dollars. This funding was to be used for the purchase of new playground equipment. These funds, along with one thousand dollars of fund-raised money, helped offset our overall cost of this project. The remaining five thousand dollars will be paid through Local Option Sales/Services Tax.

Our new equipment was ordered in the spring of 2016 and arrived during the peak of the September flood. With a slight delay in construction, we started the last week in October and we hoped to have the project completed and ready for use on November 7th, 2016.



Editor's Note: We are excited to report that on November 8th, staff members Scott and Jon, have finished installing the playground at Wildcat Bluff park.

Our sincerest thanks to the Benton County Community Foundation and all who donated to the Wildcat fund. Your generosity made this playground possible for all to enjoy.

Falconry 101 *by Scott Bahmann, Deputy Director/Rodgers Park Ranger*

While driving down that old country road, you notice a large bird soaring through the air. Suddenly it swoops down to grab something and then flies off. You suddenly realize that it must have been a hawk or an eagle. How cool would it be to have the ability to hunt with one? Well believe it or not this can be possible. This is called Falconry.

Falconry is the art of training a bird of prey such as a hawk, eagle or falcon to hunt specific types of game. Generally it is game or quarry that makes up the bird's diet or natural instinct to hunt. You first must catch and train a bird to hunt for you.



Before you get started there are several things you must accomplish first. Per the state of Iowa, you must first obtain a valid state/federal falconer's permit. This allows you to capture and possess a bird from the wild. You must be at least 14 years of age and have successfully passed the written exam provided by the Department of Natural Resources. Once completed, you must find a sponsor to guide you through the rest of the process.

A sponsor must be a master or general falconer. When you start you will be considered an apprentice. A master falconer is someone who is

at least 18 years of age and has five years experience in the field. They have the ability to possess five birds at one time. A general falconer on the other hand, must be at least 18 years of age and have completed two years of field experience at the apprentice level. They cannot possess more than three birds at one time.

Once the exam is completed and you have a sponsor, you must have a conservation officer check to make sure you have all the required equipment. The equipment that is required is as follows: gram scale, bath pan, jesses, leash, swivel, and an outdoor weathering area. The outdoor weathering area, or mew, must be at least six feet high and six feet square. It must also include one window protected by vertical bars, a floor that can be easily cleaned, and a perch that is designed for the bird that you are keeping.

Now for the fun stuff. It is time to trap a bird. As an apprentice you can only possess and trap a passage red tailed hawk. A passage bird is a first year bird. We don't keep "haggards", or adult birds, because they are nature's breeding stock. These birds can be trapped by using a bow net and blind or a bal chatri trap. Each device uses live bait to attract the bird and then has a means of securing it.

After the bird is caught, you make sure to secure the bird without injury. You do this by placing a hood on the bird's head to conceal its sight and calm it. Next you remove it from the trap and cover the bird with a sock. This will secure the bird during travel.

Training is what takes the most time. You are taming a wild bird to hunt for you. The first 48 hours are the most crucial. You want the bird to be calm and have the willingness to hunt. This is achieved by weight control and rewards. You want the bird to have the ability to accept the hood and the ability to eat from your fist. The bird must be willing to hop onto your fist for a tidbit or piece of meat. Hooding again is used to calm the bird and must be done in the early stages of training and throughout the training process. You also want the bird to be able to come back to a lure. A lure is used to train the bird so if it misses its quarry, it comes back to you. It recognizes that the lure is another source of food. Hopefully after about three weeks of training, it is now time to fly your bird. What can be more gratifying then catching that first cottontail with a bird that you trained?

Hannen Fund Raiser Brings in Big “Bucks” *By Logan Hahn, Hannen Park Ranger*

October is a revered time of year for anyone who enjoys the outdoors. The sudden change in temperature, light, air, and color in the environment is invigorating to the senses. A primal sense of urgency awakens an instinctual vestige from the infancy of our ancient ancestors’ rise to prominence, as they prepared for the looming months of the seasonal, barren snowscapes that many of them had to survive.

Before shriveling brown, the lush leaves of the forests flashed a colorful warning of the times to come. The early humans’ focus switched from the bountiful gathering of mid-year wild berries, fruits, and vegetables to the hunting of creatures which formerly did the same.

The leaves spend a fleeting 15 seconds suspended and dancing in the air, a marvelous and peculiar anomaly for an organic structure that spends the other 364 days, 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 45 seconds a year in a state of stationary growth or decay. The urgency grows.

Modern day life has nullified the necessity of many of the instincts that kept the human species alive. However, for those inclined, the ritual pursuit of satiating this instinct is incredibly rewarding. The woods, fields, and skies are full of creatures that depend on our predation to maintain the requirements of their ecosystem.

At Hannen Lake Park in the fall of 2016, three archery hunters were awarded the opportunity to pursue deer in the park in November as their names were drawn as part of a fund-raiser for Hannen Park. Each person will have a 40 acre portion of habitat to hunt for a week, in addition to access to the cabin for that week. Pending a successful outcome of this event, there could be further opportunities to hunt other species during other seasons at Hannen Park.

All three hunters taking part in this hunt were given a tour of the habitat they will have access to, as well as an opportunity to prove their proficiency at making a clean, safe shot with their bows.

Keep an eye out for any potential future opportunities if you want to get involved. In the meantime, be sure to take time to enjoy the beautiful natural resources in your community.

Editor’s Note: The first hunter chose not to harvest a deer. Preferring to take an aging mature buck, the opportunity never presented itself. However, the 2nd hunter harvested this approximate 150” buck on his first day out. As of this writing, our third hunter has not yet started his hunt.

Tom Weigand, Shellsburg, harvested this approximate 150” buck on the Fry property during a special hunt at Hannen Park.



Iowa's Tundra Tourist by Coralee Bodeker

I spent my morning exploring the fields surrounding Hayden Prairie in search of the rare, well-camouflaged Snowy Owl. Several of these Arctic Circle residents had been spotted in the vicinity this winter due to an irruptive cycle. The day broke bright and relatively mild for February, but the howling wind rolled clouds across Northern Iowa's expansive sky. As we drove past tundra-like fields, my objective seemed simple: find a big, white bird perched on a telephone pole



framed against the vivid azure, as I had seen in recent photographs of this particular winter visitor. I quickly realized, however, this visitor might be sitting out on the dormant agricultural fields. A Snowy Owl's feathers would match the brown and white expanse flawlessly, making the bird nearly impossible to spot. Frustration began to simmer as we drove up and down the section's gravel roads. We pulled over to confer with some fellow owlers training their binoculars onto a flanking field. The sun cast a beam of light across a slight rise, about 40 feet out, and a large snowy lump was suddenly illuminated next to a dirt clod. The lump moved its head and a drowsy face was staring right at us. Its thick white feathers ruffled in the wind and the piercing-yellow eyes gazed steadily ahead. The owl had rather light-streaking on its chest, wings, and back {which meant it was more than likely an immature male} and I could just barely make out two heavily-downed talons

nestled beneath the fuzzy mass. The owl's head moved like clockwork—once to the left, then to the right, then to the back as he constantly checked the area. A couple Horned Larks landed only a few feet from him and began to scratch and peck at the ground. He seemed undisturbed. Then, as if a switch was flicked, the sky darkened and a tempest descended, nearly blowing the larks off their feet. The air thickened with horizontal snow and mist. Like a lost sailor, I scrambled to find my lighthouse. Through the raging white din I could barely make out a few fluttering specks and a large, blurry lump still rooted to the spot. The snow blew for close to fifteen minutes and then, just as quickly as the disturbance arrived, it was whisked away.



The owl hadn't even moved.

Old Creamery Nature Trail Gets Face-lift

The Old Creamery Nature Trail is once again open for bicyclists and hikers. After a two-year delay, the stars aligned and we were finally able to secure a bid within the budget of the grant written in 2014. Thanks to everyone on staff who worked so hard to improve the trail for all to enjoy.

Our deepest gratitude goes out to the Guernsey Foundation and the individuals that helped raise the necessary matching funds for our grant.



Top left: Zach Parmater uses the box grader to level out rock base.

Middle: Rip-rap is placed near one of the washouts along a bridge on the trail.

Top and bottom right: Scott Bahmann endures the cold, blustery winds as he compacts the trail.

Bottom left: 3/8" minus limestone is spread across the trail prior to being graded by Zach.

Joining the Conservation Team *by Caitlin Savage, Naturalist*

I am thrilled to join the Benton County Conservation team as a naturalist. Prior to this position, I worked as a naturalist for Iowa County Conservation for two years. My childhood was spent exploring the wild places of Iowa. I grew up in Iowa County, in the town of Williamsburg. Any activity that involved playing in water, mud, or trees, or picking up and investigating critters, was time well spent. This passion remained with me throughout my life, leading to my desire to find a career that suited these interests. I attended Iowa State University and pursued a degree in Animal Ecology and Environmental Studies, with the intent of entering a career related to wildlife biology.

During the summer after my junior year, my ambitions changed. I applied for a job as a naturalist intern with Louisa County Conservation, thinking that it would be a great opportunity to spend more time outside, while also gaining some teaching experience. Helping kids learn about nature while exploring, fishing, and canoeing sounded like an exciting way to spend a few months! The job far exceeded my expectations - it was exhausting, but it was also incredibly rewarding. I truly enjoyed seeing nature through the eyes of children and helping them to guide their curiosity into a true love of their natural environment. This experience was the spark to my passion for environmental education.

Following this pivotal summer, I decided to pursue a career in environmental education. Upon graduation from ISU, I received a naturalist internship with Johnson County Conservation. After this internship ended, I decided to explore the Midwest. I have completed a variety of internships and seasonal opportunities, including working at a nature center in Faribault, MN; working at an Audubon center near Dayton, OH; teaching at a YMCA camp in northern Wisconsin; and spending a summer as an environmental interpreter at a state park in North Dakota. Each of these experiences has shaped me as an environmental educator, but my heart truly lies with Iowa, and I made my way back to my roots in the county conservation system.

Upon my return to Iowa, I accepted a naturalist position with Iowa County Conservation, in which I have spent the last two years. As a neighbor to Benton County, I have had the opportunity to work with Benton County Conservation staff for various events. I am excited to become a part of this dedicated team and to help continue to expand the county's respected environmental education (EE) program.

My personal EE philosophy involves as much hands-on, interactive learning as possible. One can teach children about the outdoors and nature, but if the kids don't get the chance to experience it at a personal level, they won't develop a passion for it. My goal is to teach others, both kids and adults, about Iowa's natural resources and to inspire them to spend more time outdoors, immersing themselves in nature. When people develop a personal relationship with nature, they begin to strive to protect and conserve it not only for themselves, but for future generations.

In addition to my love for environmental education, I enjoy hiking, kayaking, observing wildlife, cross-country skiing, reading, and baking. If you see me out and about in Benton County, feel free to stop by and say "hi". I look forward to meeting new people and serving the residents of Benton County through environmental education and outdoor recreation!



Memories of a Flood *Continued from Page 2*



The children of Tilford and Shellsburg face disappointment this week as well, as we have had to postpone a week of field trips due to all our staff dealing with flooding.

Watching Mayor Ron Corbett of Cedar Rapids on TV emphasized the extreme situation all of us are in. Having been here in 2008 and witnessing our beloved Tobin's Cabin succumb to over six feet of water, stirs emotions in me that I can't put into words. As the new director of this department, I feel like the lioness protecting her cubs. I can't say enough about the dedication of our guys!

Again, Zach, Logan, Aaron: Stoic!

Craig: provider of sustenance and photography

Dave, Andy, Tess: Sandbag pros and provider of the pumps and moral support

Pat and Bill: DNR volunteers and sand-baggers extraordinaire

Sean and Scott: Sandbag pros

Casey: You rock!

Jon: You did what you could...keeping your parks and family safe; now you're mowing what little bit of green grass you can find at Wildcat.

We're more than a team, we're family!

September 26, 2016, 6:00 p.m. - Karen

It's quiet now except for the steady flow of water from the sump-pump, diligently working to contain the water level between the sandbag wall and the cabin. Gas water pumps are shut off and gone. The guys have been sent home and it's my turn to man the "girly" pump. I can handle her.

Peaceful place: Barred owl is waking up, frogs are frolicking in their new-found lake and even small fish have moved in and surface for air in flamboyant vaults as they break the calm surface of the water.

What a weekend. What a team.

September 26, 2016, 9:45 p.m. - Karen

Pumps are off. Water is going down. Lights off. Doors locked. Stars are brilliant. Goodnight cabin. You were worth the effort. You taught us so much this weekend.

Changes on the Hannen Hillside *By Karen M. Phelps, Executive Director*

Within the past year, the former ranger residence at Hannen Park was taken down. Some of you may remember that prior to being the director/ranger residence, the building served as the offices of Benton County Conservation. At some point the offices, were moved upstairs and the lower part was used for equipment storage. Only in the last 30-plus years did it become a residence.

With constant water issues on the lower level caused by poor drainage from the hillside, it was decided to remove the house which had stood vacant for several years.

Enter Louis Guynn of Mt. Auburn. Louis and his small team of men removed the remaining foundation and miscellaneous debris from the area and then reshaped the hill into a bio-swale/catch basin. This area will be planted with the proper prairie seed mixture by our staff and will help to prevent unwanted water runoff into our lake. Much of the clean foundation was then used to rip-rap the shoreline near the boat ramp.

We are constantly striving to improve the watersheds surrounding our lakes, and this one small act will help to improve Hannen's water quality for years to come.

Logan, our Hannen Park ranger, has been slowly chipping away at the invasive species in the park. He, along with our state forester, Mark Vitosh, have developed a plan to replace Ash trees over the next few years with native hardwoods. The Emerald Ash Borer was discovered at Lake Iowa, in Iowa County, and it's only a matter of time before we see the affects of this destructive insect in our county. Removing invasives and replacing them with native vegetation will also help to improve our watersheds as well as provide essential habitat for the animals that call Hannen Lake their home.



A backhoe is parked for the evening after Louis Guynn and his team worked for several days reclaiming the hillside at Hannen Park where the former office/ranger residence was located.

Below: Louis and his team survey the area at day's end.

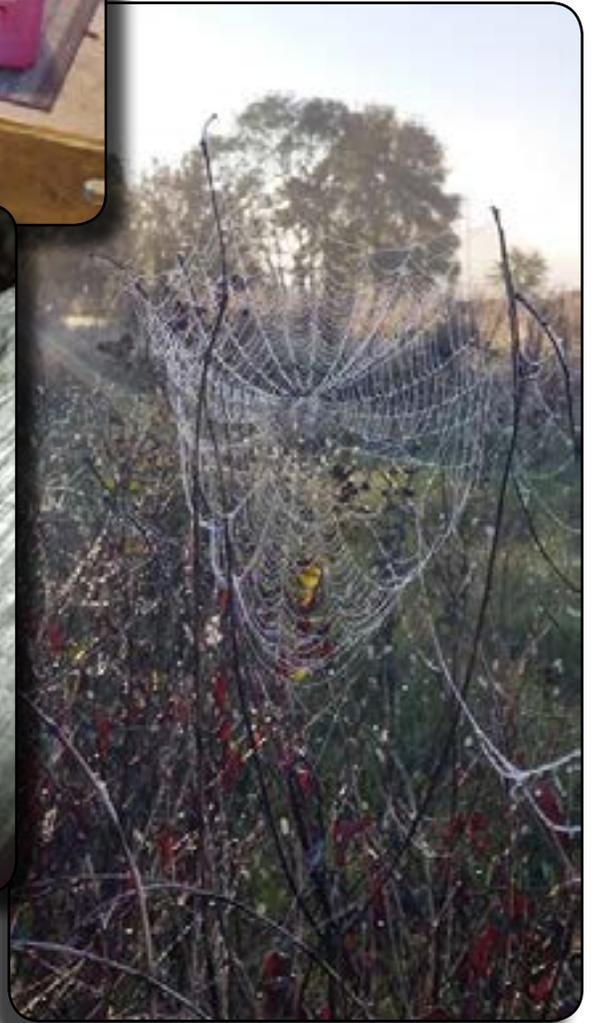


Memories of a Flood



Aaron Askelson, Zach Parmater and Logan Hahn zone out while taking a much deserved break from flood patrol at the Red Cedar Cabin.

A treefrog keeps the staff company during the long sleepless nights.



A spider web shows promise of brighter days ahead .



Rising waters on the Cedar river lap against the barrier of sandbags constructed in haste to keep the waters at bay.

Conservation Board Members

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

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	Deputy Director/Ranger
Aaron Askelson	Interpretive Naturalist
Caitlin Savage	Interpretive Naturalist
Jon Geiger	River Parks Ranger
Logan Hahn	Hannen Park Ranger
Zach Parmater	Conservation Tech

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Celebrating 60 Years of Conservation in 2016!