

IOWA NATURAL HERITAGE

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



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Being an advocate for nature helps build a legacy of clean water, diverse wildlife and outdoor recreation.

Editor's Note: *Iowa Natural Heritage has adjusted its seasonal production schedule. This issue is the Winter/Spring 2022 issue. The next issue you receive will be the Summer 2022 issue. Subscribers will continue to receive four issues per year.*

INHF Land Acknowledgement:

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



ON THE COVER

An Eastern Bluebird sits on a branch in Knoxville. Migrating bluebirds return to Iowa from late February into mid-April, with young birds often returning to within a mile or two of the area where they hatched.
Photo by Ron Huelse



Iowa
Natural Heritage
Foundation

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

505 Fifth Ave., Suite 444 Des Moines, Iowa 50309

www.inhf.org | 515-288-1846 | info@inhf.org

STAFF

Joe McGovern

President

Ross Baxter

Land Projects Director

Andrea Boulton

Trails and Greenways Director

Jered Bourquin

Blufflands Associate

Jessica Riebkes Clough

Land Conservation Specialist

Kevin Cutsforth

Database Administrator

Brian Fankhauser

Senior Land Stewardship and Blufflands Director

Diane Graves

Administrative Assistant

Anna Gray

Public Policy Director

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Donor Services Coordinator

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Communications Director

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Senior Land Conservation Director

Susan Johnson

Chief Financial Officer

Bill Kohler

Eastern Iowa Land Stewardship Director

Emily Martin

Conservation Programs Coordinator

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EDITORIAL

Joe Jayjack Editor/Publisher

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Conservation requires intentional action

In 1979, Governor Ray knew Iowa needed to do more to protect and restore our Land, Water and Wildlife. He understood that good conservation does not “just happen”; it is a result of intentional and purposeful action. With the help of innovative conservation leaders, Governor Ray created Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to serve as a partner with private landowners and our public conservation agencies. Thanks to Governor Ray’s vision nearly 43 years ago and your ongoing support, INHF has helped permanently protect and restore over 187,000 acres in Iowa. We are very proud of that work, but continue to find new ways to bolster efforts toward a future of cleaner water, healthier soil, more abundant wildlife, and a beautiful state to call home.



JOE MCGOVERN
President

In this edition of *Iowa Natural Heritage*, you will read exemplary stories of Iowans finding a way to further conservation through deliberate planning and initiative. A dairy farmer who values habitat for wildlife, especially Bobolinks, as much as producing milk; a landowner who preserved woodland on our largest interior river so that the public

can always enjoy its quiet beauty; and a Congressman with the foresight to set aside a National Wildlife Refuge just 30 minutes from our largest metropolitan area. These are just a few examples of the dedication to enhancing quality of life, now and for generations to come.

In 2010, thousands of Iowans similarly took action to share in the lasting legacy of conservation. Voters made one of the boldest conservation acts in recent history by amending the state constitution to create the Natural Resource and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, commonly known as IWiLL (Iowa’s Water and Land Legacy). With overwhelming public support, IWiLL provides a framework for protecting soil and water conservation, preserving wildlife habitat, and developing our parks and trails. However, the Trust Fund will only be funded when the legislature raises the sales tax by at least 3/8 cent.

There is no value in waiting any longer to fund IWiLL, and legislators need to find a way to make it happen. Please join your fellow conservation supporters and send a message to elected officials that you value good conservation and want the legislature to finally Fund the Trust!

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is fortunate to have hundreds of volunteers every year that dedicate time and effort to care for Iowa’s land, water and wildlife — such as the people that harvested prairie seed in Polk County for future restoration projects. It’s time for Iowa’s elected officials to also take meaningful, intentional action to protect Iowa’s special outdoor places for generations to come.
Photo by Marlen Kemmet

INHF permanently protects East Okoboji shoreline project

INHF closed on a 50-acre property on the shores of East Okoboji Lake in late December and at the same time ensured it will permanently remain a natural area with the help a conservation easement granted to Dickinson County Conservation.

The preserve will be owned and managed by INHF. An open house and celebration will take place on site on June 11, 2022. The land was purchased three months after the conclusion of a fundraising campaign that saw very generous donations come in from hundreds of individuals and organizations.

INHF is developing a management plan that focuses on wildlife habitat, shoreline restoration, water quality and low-impact public use. INHF and partners will work on ecological restoration of the site, which will start by removing invasive shrubs and hazardous trees, establishing grassland habitat and removing old fencing. Volunteers from East Okoboji Lake improvement Corp have already been helping with the work. There will likely be more volunteer opportunities in future months. Look for more about this project in the next issue of *Iowa Natural Heritage*.

Service Enterprise recertification

INHF renewed its certification as a Service Enterprise, a designation awarded to organizations that engage volunteers across all levels of the organization to successfully deliver on its mission. The designation is awarded by Points of Light, the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer services.

"Being certified shows that we understand how working with volunteers better both individuals and INHF as a whole," said Volunteer Coordinator Melanie Schmidt.

Less than 15% of organizations nationwide are certified Service Enterprises. This designation is made possible by our staff who organize and lead volunteer events, and by our stalwart volunteers who continue to demonstrate their support for our mission. Learn more at inhf.org/volunteer.

Our volunteers in 2021

Volunteers are at the heart of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation's (INHF) mission. Our work wouldn't be possible without the helping hands of our volunteers harvesting prairie seeds, removing invasive species, assisting with administrative tasks and more.

924 volunteers
2,910 volunteer hours
40 organized events
20 counties
4 new land ambassadors

Volunteers are among our biggest advocates, and INHF is grateful to each and every one for their dedication.

Let's keep the momentum going in 2022. Visit inhf.org/events to find a volunteer event near you.



QUARTERLY PROTECTION REPORT

A quick look at new INHF protection projects and land transferred between **September - November 2021**.

Newly protected areas

Boone County

59 acres of mature woodland, grassland and a sacred cultural site northwest of Boone. Protects existing wildlife habitat and water quality of the nearby Des Moines River. Expands protected land in the river valley. *(Conservation easement donated by Rex Heer)*

Clayton County

244 acres of grassland with pockets of prairie and wooded draws near McGregor. Provides outstanding habitat for grassland birds and other species. Protects land for continued sustainable and innovative farming practices. *(Portion of agricultural land easement value donated by Phil and Sharon Specht)* ***Read more about this unique farm on page 16.**

Lake Odessa WMA Addition

101 acres of riparian woodland near the confluence of the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers in Louisa County. Protects wildlife habitat and water quality of nearby Lake Odessa, a popular duck hunting destination in the area. Diamondback watersnakes, a state-threatened species found only in the southeastern part of Iowa, have also been spotted here. *(Proposed public ownership)*

RRVT/HTT Connector

Two properties consisting of a combined 28.5 acres of critical trail corridor in Dallas County that will help link the Raccoon River Valley Trail and the High Trestle Trail, two of Iowa's most popular multi-use trails. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Marshall County

144 acres along the Iowa River northwest of Marshalltown. Includes riparian woodland and remnant wetlands that provide excellent wildlife habitat for migratory waterfowl and an assortment of mammals including mink, river otter and beaver. Restoration of other parts of the floodplain will help mitigate flooding downstream. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Iowa River Corridor WMA

515 acres of riparian woodland, unaltered oxbows and river channels along the Iowa River in Tama County. Expands, connects and protects large tracts of surrounding public lands within the Iowa River Corridor and Otter Creek WMAs. Provides quality wildlife habitat and water quality benefits, particularly during flood events. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Addition

10 acres north of Bondurant in Polk County. This property's location within the greenbelt and its proximity to HWY 330 presents a unique opportunity to consider the creation of a future hub for interpretation and ecological research activities at Chichaqua. *(Proposed public ownership)*

***WMA stands for Wildlife Management Area**

Koehrsen Conservation Farm

69 acres of wildlife habitat east of Avoca in Pottawattamie County. The previous owners have already begun the process of restoring parts of the property to prairie. Once fully restored, it will provide critical pollinator habitat and support a diverse range of species. *(Donated by Lawrence & Susan Koehrsen)*

Riverton Wildlife Area Addition

35 acres of floodplain along the Ocheydan River in Clay County. Expands protected land along the river corridor, benefits water quality and helps mitigate flooding within the watershed. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Erna D. Kuehl Family Nature Preserve

40 acres of reconstructed prairie, woodland and a constructed pond south of Bettendorf. Provides important wildlife habitat for pollinators, birds and small mammals including otter, muskrats and painted turtles in an area largely dominated by conventional agriculture. *(Donated by Richard Kuehl. Will be owned and managed by INHF)* ***Family photo below**

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Addition

48 acres along the South Skunk River within the Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt near Bondurant in Polk County. Connects existing public land and wildlife habitat in the area, including a natural corridor connection on the north side of the river, and allows for soil stabilization and water infiltration during high water events. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Coal Creek Marsh

108 acres of prairie grasses and forbs east of Hartford in Warren County. Supports and helps advance a 700-acre marsh restoration in the floodpool of Lake Red Rock. Will provide critical waterfowl habitat once restoration is complete. *(Portion of land value donated by Charles Furnal. Proposed public ownership)*

Land transfers to public partners

Wright County

132 acres of woodland along the west branch of the Iowa River near Belmond. Protects the river corridor and provides wildlife habitat in an area with very little woodland. *(Owned and managed by Wright County Conservation)*

Clover Woods

220 acres of the former Iowa 4-H camp located along the Des Moines River near Madrid. Contains high quality oak-hickory woodlands, more than a dozen miles of hiking trails and Native American burial mounds. This is the third in a series of transfers in this 1,011-acre-complex proposed for a mix of public and private ownership. *(Owned and managed by Iowa Department of Natural Resources)*

Middle Raccoon River WMA Addition

12 acres of oak woodland half a mile south of Panora. Expands access to the adjacent Middle Raccoon River WMA, protects wildlife habitat and provides water quality benefits to the nearby Middle Raccoon River, one of Iowa's five Protected Water Areas. *(Owned and managed by Iowa Department of Natural Resources)*

Big Wall Lake Addition

77 acres of restorable wetlands and uplands including a portion of the historical lakebed of Big Wall Lake in Wright County. Supports ongoing restoration of the lake, one of the largest shallow water lakes in the region, and creates critical habitat for migrating birds, including Sandhill Cranes. *(Owned by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, managed by Iowa DNR)*



Richard Kuehl, pictured here with Tracey, Deanna and Lisa Kuehl, donated 40 acres in Scott County to INHF to establish the Erna D. Kuehl Family Nature Preserve in honor of his late wife.

A BOLD IDEA

BUILDING ON A NATIONAL TREASURE IN CENTRAL IOWA

BY KATY HEGGEN

Half an hour east of Des Moines, the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge offers a look into Iowa's prairie past — and here, present — complete with roaming bison and elk, native wildflowers, grasses and sedges. But it hasn't always been this way.

Roots

Like the majority of Iowa's landscape, the native habitat at the Refuge, which includes tallgrass prairie, oak savanna and sedge meadow, gave way to subsistence farming during the mid 1800s, and later, commodity farming. Iowa Power and Light Company (now known as MidAmerican Energy) purchased much of this farmland in the 1970s with the intention of building a nuclear power plant. When that plan was scrapped in the late 1980s, U.S. Rep. Neal Smith saw an opportunity.

Spurred by an effort led by Rep. Smith, Congress authorized the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to acquire 8,600 acres of land from willing landowners in 1990 for the purpose of establishing a nature preserve. The first 3,600 acres were purchased from the Iowa Power and Light Company in 1991. Dedicated first as the Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge, the refuge was later renamed in honor of Smith in 1998.

New growth

In the 31 years since its founding, thousands of additional acres have been purchased, restored and permanently protected as part of the Refuge. At over 6,000 acres, it is now one of the largest tallgrass prairie restorations in the world and home to a diverse range of species, a visitor center and many educational,

recreational and research activities.

In recent years, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) has had the opportunity to partner with local landowners, USFWS and the Friends of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge to help purchase and permanently protect four additions to the Refuge. Once fully transferred, these additions will fill in several key inholdings within the refuge.

"With INHF's direct support, over 800 acres in the last decade have been restored back into tall grass prairie, an ecosystem that was almost entirely wiped out from the Iowa landscape during European settlement and beyond," said Scott Gilje, project leader at the Refuge. "The lands provide habitat to many of Iowa's resident and non-resident species and provide the visiting public with many outdoor activities — wildlife viewing, photography, hunting, and exploring the treasures of Iowa. I look forward to working with INHF on our next projects and moving the needle for conservation in a positive direction."

At the time of purchase, all four additions were mixed land-use. The first, a 565-acre addition on the south end of the Refuge, was purchased from the Rothinghouse Trust in 2008. However, at the time of purchase, there was no clear way to fund a transfer to USFWS. The Friends of Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge, an active volunteer group that is a vital part of the Refuge, stepped forward to provide over half the financial capital INHF needed to hold the property long-term while federal funding opportunities were identified.

"The significance of these additions to the Refuge cannot be emphasized enough. These parcels create more continuous, connected



Former U.S. Rep. Neal Smith passed away at the age of 101 in October 2021. Smith served Iowa in Congress for 36 years, from 1959-1995, becoming the state's longest serving representative.

Smith was hailed by people on both sides of the aisle as a true public servant that rarely sought recognition. However, his work left a lasting impression on Iowa's landscape, including a national wildlife refuge in Jasper County and a multi-use trail in Des Moines that now bear his name.

Ryan Smith, INHF's current Mark C. Ackelson Fellow, said his grandfather once told him, "There is something about being in nature, like at the prairie refuge, that gives a person a moment to think, be with their thoughts... that is a hard thing to come by." Read more of Ryan's reflection on his grandfather at inhf.org/blog.

The Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge is more than 6,000 acres of high quality prairie and oak savanna that houses bison and elk herds. Photos by Ross Baxter, INHF

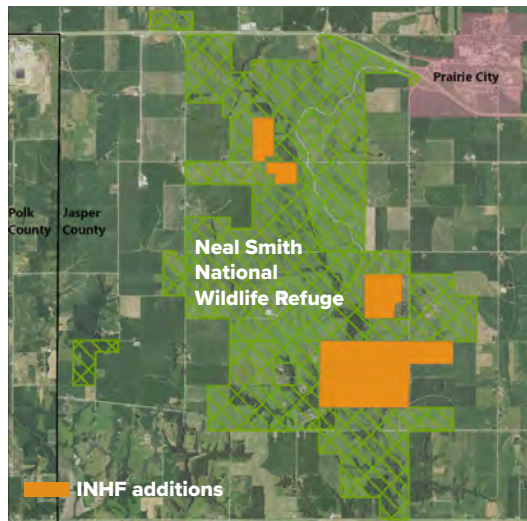
habitat areas that will benefit the water quality of the area and increase wildlife habitat,” said Friends of Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge President Joan Van Gorp. “The Friends are proud to have been instrumental, with the help of INHF, in increasing the size of the Refuge and protecting these areas. I look forward to the day when a visitor driving through the Refuge will have an unobstructed view as far as they can see of the tallgrass prairie’s unique beauty.”

In addition to restoring the property to prairie, USFWS staff will enhance the existing habitat along Walnut Creek, which cuts through the middle of the property. The first 100 acres transferred in 2016 – the first new addition to the Refuge in over a decade. Two-hundred-thirty-one additional acres transferred to the Refuge in 2017 and have already been seeded to prairie, along with another transfer of 82 acres in November of 2020. The remaining 152 acres are expected to transfer within the next 18 months.

The second addition, which includes 49 acres in the middle of the preserve, adjacent to the bison and elk enclosures, was purchased from the Van Ryswyk family in 2015. An additional 74 acres was purchased from the same family four years later in 2019. The first 49 acres transferred in 2020 and have already been seeded to prairie. The second 74 acres are slated to go to the USFWS sometime in the next two years.

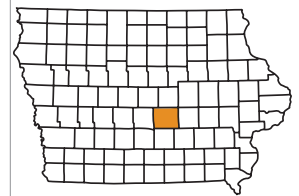
The fourth addition was purchased in-between the former additions in 2017 as part of a land trade with a local family, who wanted to maintain their agricultural acreage but were willing to trade this parcel in the eastern part of the Refuge for land further out. It includes 127 acres that will be restored to prairie, and is slated to become part of the Refuge within the next year. This parcel was particularly important as it includes a scenic area along the primary road through the middle of the Refuge.

“In addition to expanding the acreage of the Refuge, all four of these additions fill in critical inholdings and help create more contiguous habitat, preserve open space and protect the viewshed (the view of an area from a specific vantage point),” said Land Projects Director Ross



Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

Jasper County



LAND: 816 acres of additions to the 6,000-acre refuge that contains prairie, oak savanna, woodland and wetlands

SPECIAL FEATURES: Provides high quality wildlife habitat, open space and opportunities public engagement and education.

Baxter. “This is especially important here, not only for the Refuge’s wildlife, but also for the thousands of visitors who come each year to experience this special place.”

Horizon lines

At its essence, the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge is an ongoing experiment in prairie protection and restoration. Over the years, that experiment has produced some pretty impressive results. The Refuge is now home to well over one-hundred native plant species, more than 200 bird species and dozens of native pollinators, as well as other insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

Equally as important, it continues to be a source of unfettered joy, awe and inspiration for those who come to gaze upon the wind-whipped landscape and its many inhabitants, and serves as an example of what nature and those who love it are capable of, if only given the chance. 🦋

AROUND *the* BEND



BY GENNA CLEMEN



A goat prairie peaks out along the Upper Iowa River. INHF has protected many properties along the entirety of the river, helping establish its many routes as some of the best outdoor adventure areas in the state. Last summer, two INHF staffers paddled along with Wander Women, an Iowa business focused on getting women outdoors across Iowa and the Midwest. *Photos by Genna Clemen*

In the Driftless Area of northeast Iowa, the 150-mile Upper Iowa River is one of the best ways to experience the nature, towering bluffs and wildness that the region has to offer.

The decades of land protection that has happened in this area has provided paddlers stunning views, but has also protected water quality and habitat for an abundance of wildlife. It's often said this area is home to natural treasures that most would not associate with Iowa.

"This area specifically helps you appreciate Iowa as a state that has amazing outdoor recreation opportunities," said Kerri Sorrell, co-owner of Wander Women, a business dedicated to providing accessible and inclusive trips outdoors to women in Iowa. A few of Wander Women's trips each year take place in the driftless area including this day, taking a group on a 14-mile paddle down the Upper Iowa River this past summer.

The paddle began at Canoe Creek Wildlife area, northeast and downriver of Decorah. It is a less-traveled but stunning

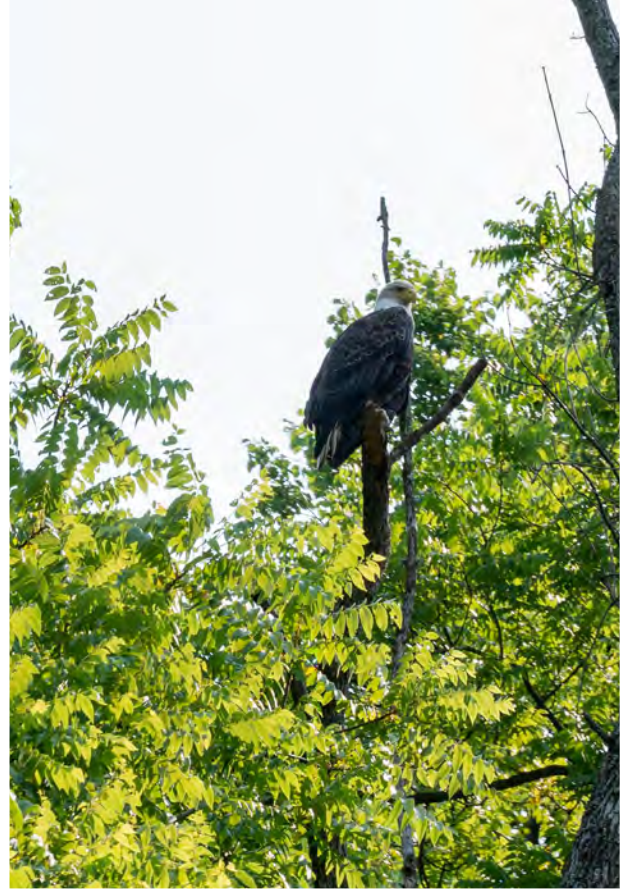
area of the river that showcases scenic views around every bend. The first stretch quickly shifts from familiar cornfields to the vast bluffs of INHF's Heritage Valley. Oak-hickory woodlands line the edges of the river as eagles and kingfishers fly over the water, finding refuge on either side. This place is home to many.

"Even from the river, you can see that the original landscapes of this land now have the room that they need to thrive," said Sorrell. "Through Heritage Valley, you can see in the prairie and the woodlands the room that the land has to breathe."

Since taking ownership in 2007, INHF staff, interns and volunteers have worked

"I don't think I've ever paddled this far in Iowa where we didn't go through any development. The sheer amount of undisturbed space was amazing."

— MEGAN CHRISTNER





Along the Upper Iowa River sits Heritage Valley, owned and managed by INHF since 2007. Here, oak-hickory woodlands cloak secluded hills and bluffs and limestone protrudes from vibrant goat prairies. Three miles of the Upper Iowa River winds through its 1,200 acres. *Photos by Genna Clemen*



to restore the 1,200-acre property through invasive species removal, brush clearing and seed harvests. The results are obvious and astonishing. Through protruding limestone cliffs and colorful goat prairies, this stretch of river provides a clear idea of what Iowa once looked like, and could be again.

“I don’t think I’ve ever paddled this far in Iowa where we didn’t go through any development,” said Megan Christner, a paddle participant who grew up in Iowa City and has since moved out of state. “The sheer amount of undisturbed space was amazing.”

But protecting these areas takes partnerships between private landowners, conservation organizations and government agencies. About 7 miles downriver of Heritage Valley, the 680-acre Iverson Bottoms Wildlife Area is a perfect example of this collaboration. From timber rattlesnakes to bobcats and otters, a diverse range of wildlife calls the expanse their home. INHF worked with the Iowa DNR for over a decade to transfer four additions to Iverson Bottoms. From the river, the importance of places like this becomes clear. “Looking from the water gives you a unique and expansive view. It is a big open valley and

you see wildlife by the water and active on the land,” Christner said.

The final stretch of paddle reveals yet another new landscape, a towering ridge above the Iverson Bridge Road. Solitaire Ridge stretches far above the water and is impossible to miss. A large remnant prairie stands out among the woodlands seen on this stretch. Many of the steep hillside prairies in the Driftless Area, often referred to as goat prairies, have been shaded out by trees or overgrown brush. Bringing them back, restoring the land to its original landscape, was a priority in 2010 when INHF protected the property with the help of funding from the Richard S. “Sandy” Rhodes II Fund.

A journey along the river builds connections around every bend — connections of land projects, and connections between people and nature.

“I think it’s really important to disconnect and understand nature around us to learn how to take care of it,” said Allison Link, another trip participant. “Natural areas like this are a wonderful thing to have in Iowa and I hope the area grows so more of the public can experience it.” 🌿

TREADING *lightly*

Creating an unconventional path in Humboldt County

BY CJ YOUNGER

Communications Intern | cyounger@inhf.org

Early last June, two dozen volunteers came together to build a professionally designed, sustainable hiking trail through an idyllic corner of woodland in Humboldt County. Their hard work honored the vision Vic and Jan Lothe had when they donated the land to Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) in 2009.

Bordered by the Des Moines River and two recreation areas, Henderson Woods provided a unique opportunity to connect existing public land, providing a place for people to wander largely uninterrupted in nature on the edge of Humboldt. At the same time, creating access to and through the woodland in a way that met the donors' wishes was imperative.

"It was a special place for me growing up," Jan Lothe said of the 15-acre woodland and oak savanna property, known locally as Henderson Woods, which raised generations of her family. "I wanted to keep it as pristine as possible."

The Lothes were open to people hiking through the property, but most multi-use trails in Iowa are paved or constructed of crushed limestone, which often requires clearing trees and disrupting the area's natural structures — out of the question for Henderson Woods. It wasn't until Todd Lee, director of Humboldt County Conservation (HCC), which manages the neighboring recreation areas, approached INHF and suggested exploring a natural trail that the pieces began to fall into place.

Forging a new path

Together, INHF and HCC hired Pete Englund of Legacy Trails — an Iowa-based company dedicated to sustainable trail design, education, maintenance and construction — to map out a sustainable route through the property. Maintenance concerns and the property's proximity to the river made drainage an important factor to consider. Englund evaluated where water would run during rain or flooding and laid the trail out along ridges and natural hills to minimize the impact of water flowing over the trail.

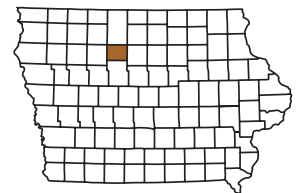
The Lothes' desire to disrupt the land as little as possible may have resulted in a more complex trail build. However, INHF was determined to respect the Lothes' original intent.

"We're donor-centric," said INHF President Joe McGovern. "We will always strive to live up to the donor's wishes. Documenting that vision early and up-front is the key to long-term protection and restoration."

New connections

Once the Lothes gave their blessing to the project, INHF and HCC organized a volunteer event for June 5, 2021 — National Trails Day. Lee and several of INHF's staff were on-site for the weekend, which turned out to be one of the hottest — and most rewarding — of the

Henderson Woods Humboldt County



LAND: 15 acres of woodland along the southwestern edge of Humboldt

SPECIAL FEATURES: New hiking trails connects two public recreation areas along the West Fork of the Des Moines River



Henderson Woods was donated to INHF by Vic and Jan Lothe in 2009. The land is still owned and managed by INHF, but a new trail through the property connects two public recreation areas along the West Fork of the Des Moines River. *Photos by INHF and Humboldt County Conservation*

summer. Volunteers included the Humboldt High School's girls cross country team and members of a local Scouting troop.

"People coming together to work toward a common goal — it's a feel-good thing," Lee said. "At the end of the day, everybody shook hands, everyone was happy. There was a sense of accomplishment, like you gave something back to the community."

The new half-mile trail, which opened this summer, now connects Sheldon Park to Scout's Island, increasing access to natural and recreational areas from the city of Humboldt.

While many people came together to help create the trail, its beginning and end can be traced back to the Lothes' original intent: preserving their land for quiet enjoyment.

"I just hope people will enjoy being out in nature and the natural beauty of what the land has to offer," Jan said. 🌲





NATURE'S ADVOCATE 2022

BY ANNA GRAY
Public Policy Director | agray@inhf.org

Building a legacy.

Our legacy is what we pass on to future generations. INHF protects and restores Iowa's land, water and wildlife to benefit all Iowans—now and for generations to come. Being an advocate for nature helps build a legacy of clean water, diverse wildlife, rich soils, and opportunities for adventure.

Iowa's land, water and outdoor recreation is dependent on program funding that can vary from year-to-year. Reliable, permanent funding is necessary to ensure that our natural resources and communities will be consistently supported. Join us in creating a lasting conservation legacy by advocating for healthy landscapes and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Iowa's Water & Land Legacy

In 2010, 63% of Iowa voters approved a constitutional amendment to create the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, a permanent and protected funding source for Iowa's communities and natural places. More than a decade later, the Trust Fund sits empty, requiring a sales tax increase of 3/8 of a cent for funding. If funded, the Trust Fund would generate around \$200 million annually and provide farmers, local communities and state agencies with reliable and accountable funding.

We urge the legislature and governor to include a sales tax increase in any future tax reform efforts to finally fund the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund.

The Trust Fund would bolster key conservation programs such as the Resource Enhancement and Protection program (REAP), State Recreational Trails Program, and Nutrient Reduction Strategy, while expanding opportunities to invest in water quality and economic development. Each of INHF's top legislative priorities would be directly supported by funding the Trust.



Public Lands

As a safe place for recreation and respite during the pandemic, Iowa's parks, trails and wildlife areas have seen more visitors than ever before. Many popular camping destinations are reserved two years in advance and sales of hunting and fishing licenses remain strong. The sustained increase in use and demand for outdoor amenities has underscored the need to expand, develop, and maintain Iowa's public lands. Greater conservation funding will help enhance the state's valuable natural assets that draw visitors to all corners of the state and stimulate local economies.



Trails

Access to natural landscapes and recreational opportunities are among the top factors that motivate individuals to visit and move to Iowa, making trails a



powerful workforce development tool. Trails help people get outdoors, enrich quality of life, and make communities a more attractive place to work and live. Funding for trails is a sound investment in public health, rural revitalization and economic prosperity.

Water Quality

Iowa depends on its lakes, rivers and streams as important sources for drinking water, fishing and recreating. With over 700 waterbodies listed as impaired, investing in natural solutions, such as wetland restoration, river buffers and watershed management, is an efficient and cost-effective strategy for improving water quality. The majority of Trust Fund dollars are designated for water quality improvement projects, including lake restoration, wildlife habitat projects, watershed planning and enhancing flood protection efforts.



Regenerative Agriculture

Iowa can continue to lead the nation in agriculture by investing in regenerative practices that improve water quality, build soil health, and enhance farm ecosystems. The Trust Fund emphasizes sustainable agriculture and will aid farmers and landowners in adopting voluntary conservation practices outlined in the Nutrient Reduction Strategy.



Nature's Advocate resources can be found at inhf.org/natures-advocate:

- Tips for engaging with legislators
- Detailed explanations of key conservation policies
- Data and supporting statistics
- Regular legislative updates and action alerts

For *the* Birds

BY LARRY STONE
Special to INHF | Istone@alpinecom.net

Phil Specht's philosophy when it comes to managing his Clayton County farm overlooking the Bloody Run Creek valley in northeast Iowa is to keep grass on the ground and keep his cattle moving.

"And the birds will come," Specht might add. And the wildflowers, insects, amphibians, reptiles and other wildlife that have become his "pasture buddies" over the years.

Specht and his wife, Sharon, and their son, Jon, recently partnered with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to permanently protect 244 acres of land – and its diverse inhabitants – with an

agricultural land easement.

Formerly the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) Program permanently protects agricultural lands, particularly those that implement conservation practices and elements of sustainability. NRCS provides both partial funding and oversight of this USDA program, which pays the landowner to “protect croplands and grasslands on working farms and ranches by limiting non-agricultural uses.”

“The Specht family has long employed conservation practices on their farm that attract and support a variety of native and migratory species,” said INHF Conservation Easement Director Erin Van Waus. “These practices, along with the land’s location within a National Audubon Society Globally Important Bird Area and the Effigy Mounds-Yellow River Forest Bird Conservation Area, made it an excellent candidate for the program.”

In 2020, Phil sold approximately 20 acres of what he calls his “Grassland Bird Sanctuary” to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to create a walk-in public access to the neighboring Bloody Run Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

In addition to expanding access to the WMA, from this strip of public land, hikers may observe Bobolinks, Meadowlarks and other grassland birds, as well as diverse prairie wildflowers, Monarch butterflies, and Rusty patched bumble bees on the Spechts’ adjacent private land.

The start of all these efforts can be traced back to a love of the land that spans generations, an enthusiasm for innovation and a desire to better understand the interconnectedness that exists in this corner of Clayton County.

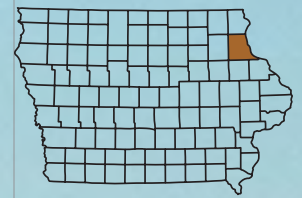
Ever-expanding understanding

Until 2020, Specht maintained a grass-fed Holstein dairy herd. The intensive management that kind of grazing requires – Phil moved his cows among 51 grass paddocks every three or four days – led him to understand the diversity and complexity of his farm. He learned, for example, that Bobolinks thrived with his grazing regime.

He credits his late brother, Dan, who managed a grass-fed beef herd, with first making that connection. “If you’ve got Bobolinks, you’ve got a working grassland ecosystem,” Dan liked to say.

The brothers enlisted personal friend and prairie ecologist Mary Damm to study the amount and diversity of grassland

Specht ALE Clayton County



LAND: 244 acres of rolling grassland and woodland.

SPECIAL FEATURES: Provides high quality wildlife habitat, open space and buffers public land.



The goal of the Specht family's conservation easement — protecting and creating habitat — will require managing interconnected biological communities.

cover that Bobolinks most favor. Wildlife researcher Jon Stravers and biologist Paul Skrade also worked on the project. During their research, Stravers and Skrade discovered thriving populations of Cerulean Warblers in mature trees on Phil's farm. This finding led Phil to cancel the sale of the trees he'd intended to cut, resulting in thousands of dollars of lost income.

Phil's passion for conservation is matched only by his interest in innovation. Although he built a large dairy operation, his approach was always unconventional. Early on he experimented with managed grazing, different feed rations and bought hay from neighbors to increase the acres under the protection of long rotations. Phil transitioned to grazing his Holsteins on pasture following Dan's success with raising his beef herd on grass.

"The keys to grazing are how much to take, how much to leave, and how much to let rest," he said.

That approach – along with Phil's attention to good genetics in his animals – led to him having the top producing dairy cow in Iowa in three different years.

The Specht brothers' approach also led to a research project with the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University to measure the prevalence of beneficial insects in pastures. Phil has also conducted his own studies of the effects of grazing and mowing on habitat and soil fertility, and is continually seeking fellow scientists interested in conducting research on his property.

Protection and perspective

A leg injury and subsequent surgery forced Phil to reduce the size of his dairy herd in 2020. Shortly after, he learned that more cattle can



At right, the Specht family celebrated signing the Agricultural Land Easement with staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Photos by Phil Specht and Larry Stone



actually increase the quality of grassland bird habitat as Bobolinks prefer to nest in grazed areas.

After years of observing interactions like these between livestock and wildlife, Phil became convinced that cattle on the land should be part of his conservation easement. Grazing tops the list of permitted uses spelled out in the conservation easement, while tillage and row-cropping are expressly prohibited.

"Since I will never regain full mobility, I will be looking for cattle owners that will assume some of the management day-to-day as they rent the grass in future years," Phil said. "I need more animals to make the desired habitat."

The goal of the Specht family's conservation easement – protecting and creating habitat – will require managing interconnected biological communities, Phil said. And the human element is critical to that working lands partnership.

Phil likes to quote an old proverb: "The best fertilizer is the footsteps of the farmer." 🐾

SEE THIS PROJECT

The Specht family will host a Birding Field Day at the farm northwest of Marquette, 28304 Pleasant Ridge Road, on May 14, 2022. There also will be a companion program and potluck at the Driftless Area Wetlands Centre near Marquette. For details, call **563-873-2498**.

LEAVING A LEGACY

Giving through your Individual Retirement Account

For those who are in a position to do so, making a donation to a favorite charity through your individual retirement account (IRA) can be a savvy way to make a gift. At your request, your IRA custodian will issue a check for your desired amount directly to a charity – all you need to provide is the charity’s name, its EIN/Tax ID number, and the mailing address.

An RMD – required minimum distribution – is the minimum amount you must take out of your retirement savings plan to avoid tax penalties, once you’ve reached a certain age. The SECURE Act, which became law in 2019, changed that age from 70½ to 72 for anyone whose 70th birthday is July 1, 2019 or later.

“Donors over age 72 taking annual RMDs from IRA accounts can receive a tax benefit for charitable giving with Qualified Charitable Deductions (QCDs).

Their distribution can go directly to any qualified nonprofit charity. This strategy helps minimize the tax burden from an IRA withdrawal by satisfying a portion or all of the RMD obligation,” said John Fisher, Senior Vice President/Financial Advisor/Senior Portfolio Manager at Fisher Wealth Management Group and current chair of INHF’s board of directors. “It also allows families to conveniently meet their philanthropic goals.”

Donors considering using QCDs should speak with their tax advisors. For questions about donating to INHF using an RMD or QCD, call Abby Hade Terpstra, Director of Philanthropy, at 515-288-1846 ext. 15.

And, here’s that info your paperwork:

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation
EIN/Tax ID 42-1127544
505 5th Ave, Ste 444 – Des Moines, IA 50309

Leave a legacy of clean water, healthy soil and beautiful outdoor places for future generations.

To see how including INHF in your will or trust can help make your vision for Iowa a reality, contact Director of Philanthropy Abby Hade Terpstra at aterpstra@inhf.org or 515-288-1846, ext. 15.

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A Great Blue Heron perches along a creek during a snowstorm. Though herons do typically migrate, the Great Blue Heron are able to withstand colder locations than most other herons, even areas where water freezes completely, due to their varied and flexible diet. *Photo by Kip Ladage*

