



FALL 2021

# IOWA NATURAL HERITAGE

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

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INHF is partnering to protect habitat for endangered bats in Iowa. **6**

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100 acres in Dubuque County is getting new life as a restored prairie. **10**

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## Bridge Along the Ridge

Oak Ridge Conservation Area is a natural gem just 35 miles from Sioux City — 2,401 acres of public land near the Little Sioux River Valley.

### 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

A Cedar Waxwing perches among the snowy branches of an oak tree. These berry-loving birds can be found year-round in Iowa.

*Photo by Deb Shoning*



Iowa  
Natural Heritage  
Foundation

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

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*Iowa Natural Heritage* is published quarterly by Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation for its supporters and friends. Articles appearing in *Iowa Natural Heritage* may be reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Circulation 10,000



# Serving nature benefits all

**M**ore than thirty years ago, while at Iowa State, I chose my major in Fisheries and Wildlife Biology because I loved everything about being outdoors: fishing, hunting, hiking, nature watching — everything. Early in my career, I could not believe how blessed I was to be employed in the conservation field. Managing prairies, woodlands and oak savannas never felt like a job. Working with natural resources, and getting to be outside quickly became a lifestyle. That love of working outdoors eventually matured from a self-driven purpose to a deep drive to serve nature itself and all those who would benefit. I remind myself every day of INHF's mission and who and what we are here to serve. Our passionate Board of Directors and Advisors, our dedicated staff, our incredible volunteers and loyal donors all reflect the simple fact that we serve Iowa's land, water and wildlife. Yet we also serve more than nature.



JOE MCGOVERN  
*President*

From the time INHF was founded in 1979, we have done our work “for those who follow” — future generations that have no say in what kind of world they inherit. And INHF serves you, the people who appreciate nature right now and want it to remain.

We increasingly feel a sense of urgency to get more work done faster, yet we also know people have been left out or do not feel welcomed in opportunities many of us take for granted. While serving the land with protection and restoration, we must do more to reach out to others so their lives can be enriched, too.



In this issue, you will see how we are collaborating with our public partners to create new conservation areas available to all, including following through on someone's last wish for their land to be restored as a prairie for wildlife to call home and for people to enjoy. Additionally, you will see how INHF is managing land to benefit federally endangered species, protecting highly developable natural shoreline, and working with partners over decades to build complexes of protected land.

Now more than ever, I feel blessed to be a part of the INHF team, which includes you, and the abundance of joy that it brings. I also recognize the need to pick up the pace of land protection while we deepen our commitment to our mission and those we serve and to ensure that we broaden that service to the people that are left out. Thank you for your loyal support!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe McGovern".

**Participants in a Wander Women float trip** co-hosted by INHF paddle down the Upper Iowa River in northeast Iowa. Photo by Genna Clemen, INHF



## A trek through the Loess Hills

This past June, over 30 people trekked 40 miles across the Loess Hills in the first-ever LoHi Trek. They hiked from the Southwood Conservation Area near Smithland, Iowa to the Loess Hills State Forest near Pisgah, Iowa. The route traversed county and state parks, as well as INHF-owned and private land (with permission). Meals were provided by local restaurants and enjoyed at scenic campsites along the way. Due to high temperatures, participants were shuttled for several miles as a safety precaution, but didn't miss any of the beautiful Loess Hills — it just went by a little faster.

"Most of the LoHi Trekkers had not been through many of the areas on the route, and gained a deeper appreciation for the Loess Hills, prairies and Iowa's public lands," said Lance Brisbois, one of the organizers of the trek and project coordinator for Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development (RCD), a longtime INHF partner in conservation.

"I never expected to leave feeling so connected to the hills and the friends I walked them with," said Mason City participant Katie Byerly.

After the success of the LoHi Trek, Golden Hills RCD is planning more hikes in the area. Stay up to date at [www.goldenhillsrkd.org](http://www.goldenhillsrkd.org).

## The INHF intern class of 2021

Twenty-one students spent their summer interning with INHF, protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife. Four interns worked closely with INHF staff in the office. Meanwhile, 17 stewardship interns learned about land restoration firsthand in the field.

"The work isn't always the most important part of what the interns bring in. It's the new ideas, fresh perspectives and school experience they bring that makes us a better organization," said INHF President Joe McGovern.

"The interns that come through INHF are the future of conservation. This is more than just a job—this is about educating and learning from future conservationists."

The intern program is made possible by individual INHF supporters and a number of funds including the Robert R. Buckmaster internship fund, the R.J. McElroy Trust, the Rose Mary Schwent Internship Fund, the Richard "Sandy" Rhodes Internship fund and the Sware Family Internship fund. These donations help INHF bring the best and brightest minds to Iowa's natural lands. If you are interested in supporting INHF's internship program, contact Director of Philanthropy Abby Hade Terpstra at [aterpstra@inhf.org](mailto:aterpstra@inhf.org).

## WADERS-DEEP IN CONSERVATION: TOM MURRAY WINS HAGIE AWARD

Winneshiek County's Tom Murray has been selected to receive the 2021 INHF Lawrence and Eula Hagie Heritage Award for his work protecting and expanding access to cold water trout streams throughout Iowa. This annual award recognizes Iowans who, like Murray, demonstrate extraordinary personal service and commitment to improving the quality of Iowa's natural environment and encourage others to do the same.

Murray is waders-deep in many local conservation groups, notably serving as the first Board President of Iowa's Coldwater Conservancy. He played a crucial role in fundraising, improving diversity on the board and helping local angling groups understand threats to local streams such as runoff from surrounding properties and the loss of public access to cold water trout streams in Iowa.

"Tom is steadfast in his love for Iowa's wild places," said Michael Siepker, one of Murray's nominators and the fisheries management biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "He is willing to listen and communicate to others the conservation challenges facing Iowa and he approaches all challenges with a collaborate spirit that is infectious."

The Hagie Heritage Award was established in 1990 by Janice Hagie Shindel of Florida and Ila Jeanne Hagie Logan of Moline, IA in honor of their parents, Lawrence and Eula Hagie.



**2021 Hagie Heritage Award winner** Tom Murray, INHF board member Kirsten Heine and INHF Senior Land Stewardship and Blufflands Director Brian Fankhauser at the award ceremony at the Decorah Fish Hatchery in October. The hand-carved acorn sculpture is made by INHF supporters Dennis and Linda Schlicht of Center Point. Photo by INHF



## QUARTERLY PROTECTION REPORT

A quick look at new INHF protection projects and land transferred between **June – August 2021.**

\*WMA stands for Wildlife Management Area

### Newly Protected Areas

#### DeKalb WMA Addition

80 acres of oak savanna and grassland located north of Leon in Decatur County. Adjacent to the 2,100-acre DeKalb WMA, both of which lie within the Sand Creek Bird Conservation area. *(Proposed public ownership)*

#### Linn County

95 acres along Otter View Road near Cedar Rapids. 32 acres of crop, 4 acres hay ground and 55 acres of woodland, meadow and a house site. Otter Creek, a tributary of the Cedar River, traverses the southeast corner of the property. Improves wildlife habitat, water quality and soil health within the Cedar River watershed. *(Donated to INHF with reserved life estate by Marjorie Andrews)*

#### Dubuque County

100 acres in southern Dubuque County bequeathed to INHF by Robert McCarthy with the intent to provide a public recreation area. The property will be restored to native prairie by Dubuque County Conservation and partners this winter/spring. *(Owned and managed by Dubuque County Conservation)* **Read more about this on page 10**

#### Raccoon River Valley Trail Addition

1.6 acres outside of Herndon that will serve as a western connector for the Raccoon River Valley trail heading toward Coon Rapids and Whiterock Conservancy. *(Proposed public ownership)*

#### Sedan Bottoms WMA Addition

200 acres of rolling hills, perennial grass and oak-hickory woodland southeast of Centerville. Brush Creek runs through a portion of the property. Approximately 80 acres of the hillside are unbroken and show signs of the original prairie with species such as slender mountain mint, ironweed, black-eyed susan and wild petunia. 60 acres of woodland provides quality habitat for whitetail deer, turkey, fox squirrel and Indiana bats. *(Proposed public ownership)*

#### Story County

320 acres along the west side of the South Skunk River. Native vegetation restoration of floodplain cropland will reduce soil erosion during flooding events and increase groundwater infiltration. Currently, 90 acres of CRP provide habitat for birds, small mammals and reptiles. Protection of the property will allow for additional wetland/oxbow restoration. *(Proposed public ownership)*

### Land Transfers to Public Partners

#### Boone County

389 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 ancient Native American burial mounds. Additional transfer(s) are anticipated in the future for this 1,011-acre-complex proposed for a mix of public and private ownership. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

#### Dickinson County

20 acres of wetland near the Kenue Art Center and Dickinson County Nature Center. Protects water quality, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities and expands protected land in the heart of the Iowa Great Lakes. A portion of the land value was donated by the Okoboji Foundation. *(Owned and managed by the Dickinson County Conservation Board)*



Pilot Knob WMA

#### Green Hollow WMA Addition

99 acres on the western slope of the Loess Hills in Fremont County. Harboring a mostly burr oak woodland with several pockets of remnant prairie. This will be an addition to the 608-acre Blackburn and Green Hollow WMA. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

#### Iowa River Corridor WMA

18.5 acres of riparian woodland in the Iowa River Corridor. Protection of this property prevents destruction of habitat in a large wildlife corridor. It is located within the Iowa River Corridor Bird Conservation Area, which supports nesting for Bald Eagles, cerulean warblers and redheaded woodpeckers. Its protection will also ensure habitat for the many reptiles and amphibians which call the corridor home. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

#### Oak Ridge Conservation Area Addition

83 acres of restored native prairie and mixed oak woodland in Woodbury County. This property helped connect units one and two of Oak Ridge Conservation Area, which together provide 2,200 contiguous acres of woodland, prairie and savannah in the Loess Hills. Expands outdoor recreation opportunities and protects wildlife habitat. *(Owned and managed by the Woodbury County Conservation Board)* **Read more about this on page 12**

#### Pilot Knob WMA

80 acres of to-be-restored wetland and prairie in eastern Winnebago County. Will expand wildlife habitat for neotropical migratory birds and migratory waterfowl, including trumpeter swans, and provide water quality benefits. A portion of the land value was donated by Steve and Margaret Hansen. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

#### Pocahontas County

120 acres of riparian woodland and former cropland along the Des Moines River. Located between Struthers Wildlife Area and Hams Wildlife Area. Permanent protection of the property will preserve the riverine habitat for species such as wood ducks, river otters and a multitude of reptiles and amphibians. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

#### Prairie Pothole WMA Addition

74 acres of restored prairie and wetland in Cerro Gordo County. Provides critical nesting habitat for migratory birds including mallards, Eastern meadowlarks and Sedge wrens and expands outdoor recreation opportunities in the area. *(Owned and managed by the Cerro Gordo County Conservation Board)*

#### Rolling Prairie Trail

5.78 acres of trail corridor in Franklin County that will help complete the Rolling Prairie Trail, a 15-mile multi-use trail that connects several communities and two state parks in Franklin, Butler, Bremer and Fayette counties. *(Owned and managed by the Franklin County Conservation Board)*



A photograph of a winter landscape. In the foreground, several bare trees with snow-laden branches frame the view. In the background, a river flows through a snowy forest. The sky is overcast and grey.

# New Dawn for Night Flyers

INHF is protecting habitat  
for Iowa's endangered bats

BY JESSICA RIEBKES CLOUGH | *Land Projects Assistant* | [jclough@inhf.org](mailto:jclough@inhf.org)



**B**y day, two of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation's (INHF's) newest properties are teeming with life. Here, monarch butterflies forage for milkweed, birds sing in the woodland and the next generation of oak trees reach for pockets of sunlight. Bobcats and river otters have been spotted. The presence of each of these species is encouraging on its own, but none are the main motivation behind these recent protection projects.

Visitors to these properties rarely see the species at the center of INHF's ongoing restoration — bats. These nocturnal fliers are an essential part of Iowa's ecosystem and have become an increased focus of INHF's stewardship work in recent years.

## Iowa's bats

In summer, Iowa is home to nine native bat species. Their role in insect control alone provides immeasurable benefits to humans and agriculture. Unfortunately, threats to bat species across North America — most notably habitat loss and White Nose Syndrome — are currently very high. Consequently, two Iowa bat species, the Indiana Bat and the Northern Long-eared Bat, are now on the Endangered Species List (see sidebar), and other Iowa species are likely to be evaluated for listing in the near future.

Smaller, localized threats, like the growing number of wind turbines, exacerbate the challenges facing bat populations. The United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) often works with energy companies to develop plans that address how to mitigate the impacts of wind turbines to bats while continuing to reap their environmental and economic benefits. In cases where disturbance to bat populations is unavoidable, energy companies may offset the impact by funding long-term protection of bat habitat elsewhere in the state. This is where INHF comes in.

Named for the scientific name of several bat species that the property will help protect and its bluffs overlooking the Middle Raccoon River in Dallas and Guthrie counties, Myotis Bluffs' 84 acres will be stewarded primarily for the benefit of the Northern Long-eared Bat.

## In partnership

Seeking a respected conservation organization well-versed in land stewardship, MidAmerican Energy Company approached INHF to partner with them on these mitigation projects. Along with a team from the USFWS and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, INHF staff help identify properties across the state that already possess quality bat habitat but lack long-term protection, or properties that have the potential to be restored to suitable habitat. Without the threat of habitat loss and with stewardship tailored to their needs, these areas will become a refuge for bats.

"Energy companies may be required to offset the effects of wind turbines on bat populations, but legally, there's a lot of leeway when it comes to how they go about doing that. MidAmerican wants to do this



**Indiana Bat,**  
*Myotis sodalis*

*Federally Endangered,  
State Endangered*

**Diet:** moth, midges, beetles

**Summer Habitat:** loose tree bark, dead or dying trees, forested areas or forest edges

**Winter Habitat:** caves or abandoned mines



**Northern Long-eared Bat,**  
*Myotis septentrionalis*

*Federally Threatened*

**Diet:** moths, beetles, flies, leafhoppers, spiders, other insects

**Summer Habitat:** tree cavities, loose bark, forest interiors and edges, feed over water bodies

**Winter Habitat:** small cracks/crevices in caves or mine

**Other bat species native to Iowa include:** Big Brown Bat, Little Brown Bat, Evening Bat, Eastern Red Bat, Hoary Bat, Silver-haired Bat and Tri-colored Bat.





**INHF staff and partners** erected artificial bat habitats, left, on the Myotis Bluffs and Bell Branch Timber properties that provide roosts for species that have adapted to living in man-made structures. Mist nets, shown above, have been used to temporarily catch and inventory bat species present on and around the properties.



right,” said INHF President Joe McGovern. “By partnering with them on these projects, we’re able to help select ideal sites, and ensure that together, we’re successful in maintaining high-quality habitat that supports the recovery of Iowa’s bat populations.”

So far, the team has selected two properties: Myotis Bluffs and Bell Branch Timber. Named for the scientific name of several bat species that the property will help protect and its bluffs overlooking the Middle Raccoon River in Dallas and Guthrie counties, Myotis Bluffs’ 84 acres will be stewarded primarily for the benefit of the Northern Long-eared Bat. Bell Branch Timber, which includes 434 acres of mature woodland and open grassland along the Bell Branch of Soap Creek in Davis County, offers a large block of contiguous habitat suitable for the Indiana Bat, among others. More properties will be identified in the next few years.

## A new approach

Some stewardship practices utilized will be unique to the bat properties, such as leaving dead trees, or “snags,” standing. Female bats use snags as roosts to form maternity colonies, which is critical to the success of bat species. In addition, some properties

will receive artificial bat roosts constructed to look like bark. These structures will supplement the live trees on site, providing lasting roost sites for species that have adapted to roosting in man-made structures.

In a way, it’s a change for INHF to approach stewardship work with a specific type of wildlife in mind. But just as bats contribute to Iowa’s outdoors in many ways, managing these sites for bat populations will benefit many species.

“Understanding the needs of endangered bats allows us to tune into how our management, and the timing of our actions, affects different species,” McGovern said. “Our ultimate stewardship goal is the same as usual — high-level ecological restoration work.”

Each property will be part of the bat project for at least 30 years. During that time, staff will provide reports to the team on stewardship activities, use of the artificial structures and changes to the properties. As we learn more about bat conservation, our actions will adjust to fit different needs. Even if we rarely spot a bat while on site, it feels good to know that the woodland will provide a stable, healthy place for them to live in the days — and nights — to come. 🦇

## Endangered Species Act (ESA), 1973

**Purpose:** protect and recover imperiled species. United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) lists eligible terrestrial species as endangered or threatened—special laws apply to prevent or mitigate the killing or harm of species on these lists.

### What does endangered mean?

Endangered plants and animals are ones that have become so rare they are in danger of becoming extinct.

### What are threatened species?

Species listed as threatened are plants and animals that are likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.





# Investing in the Outdoors

BY CJ YOUNGER | *Communications Intern* | [cyounger@inhf.org](mailto:cyounger@inhf.org)

**G**olden-hued prairies, shimmering silver lakes and winding trails are supposed to be an escape from everyday worries, not an investment opportunity. However — especially in Iowa — they have the potential to be both. Projects for the public good such as parks, trails and camping grounds have up to a 300% return on investment, according to the Trust for Public Land, increasing economic development and the quality of life in Iowa communities.

Appropriately funding state programs like the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) program and the State Recreational Trails program would help these communities realize their vision sooner and bring much-needed economic development to these rural areas. We encourage you to let your legislators know that you support investing in quality of life in Iowa by funding conservation and outdoor recreation. Learn more at [www.inhf.org/natures-advocate](http://www.inhf.org/natures-advocate).

With proper funding and support, local-led, shovel-ready projects like those highlighted here can make their communities a better place.

## Dallas County

Since 2013, there's been a nine-mile gap between the Raccoon River Valley Trail and High Trestle Trail, and Dallas County Conservation (DCC) is working to close it. Connecting two of the most popular trails in central Iowa would increase recreation opportunities and boost traffic to local businesses in Woodward and Perry, the connector's trailheads, as well as other communities along the 86-mile and 118-mile loops it'll create.

"Connecting two major trail networks opens the door for thousands of people to come through these towns," said DCC Director Mike Wallace. "If they're there, they spend money."

DCC has applied for State and Federal Recreational Trails Program grants and REAP grants, and is working with local foundations in the community and the Raccoon River Valley Trail Association to fundraise for the project. Through these efforts, they've secured the funding to build three miles of trail in the past three years. Additional dollars for state recreation would help move this and other critical trails project closer to completion.

## Hardin County

Hardin County Conservation (HCC) has a vision for revamping an old boat club on the Iowa River in Steamboat Rock into a weekend destination, but funding availability is their biggest obstacle.

"There's a lot of demand for these recreation projects in rural communities that are trying to stay alive and current," said HCC Director Wes Wiese. "Funding gets hit hard."

When finished, the community will have a new event space, cabins and a campground, as well as space for a food vendor, boat rentals and a new bathhouse. The project ties in with the fledgling Iowa Rivers Edge Trail and the Iowa Department of Natural Resource's recent removal of the nearby low-head dam on the river. Removing the dam improved fishing, paddling and all-around water quality, creating more weekend getaway opportunities for Hardin County residents and visitors alike.

"We've seen a huge increase in cabin and campground rentals," Wiese said. "People are looking for recreation [this past year] after being cooped up for so long, so this project will be a huge asset."

## Grundy County

Pioneer Trail is a 30-year work-in-progress. Most of the land for the 12-mile limestone trail from Reinbeck to Holland was painstakingly acquired by Grundy County Conservation (GCC) with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation's help when the project began, but several stretches along the route remain in private ownership, leaving gaps in the trail that left the county seat, Grundy Center, out of the loop.

"We want to take our longest trail and make it accessible to our largest population," said GCC Director Kevin Williams.

In 2021, GCC hired a consulting firm to help finish the trail by building along the highway. They plan to close two half-mile gaps by adding trails to bridges across the highway—a creative solution, but an expensive pursuit.

Connecting Grundy Center with the trail would bring people from all over the county to Grundy Center's downtown and expand access to the many natural areas along the existing trail including Holland Marsh, a 46-acre wetland, and Wolfe Creek Recreation Area, a 93-acre space for camping, hiking and hunting.





# ‘HUNDRED- ACRE JEWEL’

## Bequest creates oasis of habitat in Dubuque County

BY CJ YOUNGER | *Communications Intern*  
cyounger@inhf.org

Robert McCarthy left 100 acres of land in Dubuque County to Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Now, that land is being restored to prairie and opened to the public under the management of Dubuque County Conservation.

For the past 50 years, Robert McCarthy's property in southern Dubuque County has been another rectangle in the patchwork of agricultural land that dominates Iowa's landscape. Historic 2020 ended with a new beginning for his 100 acres.

McCarthy first spoke with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) more than a decade ago about his desire to see the land restored to its natural state for recreational use, and his intentions to bequeath the land to INHF to carry out his vision. Now, nearly eight years after McCarthy's passing, INHF is partnering with Dubuque County Conservation (DCC), which will own and steward the land long-term.

DCC Director Brian Preston has big plans for the property, at the heart of which lies an ambitious prairie planting.

"It's not very often that you get to start with a blank slate," said Preston. "It's really exciting for our staff to have a hand in a project that's going to have a huge impact."

### Land and legacy

McCarthy wrote in his will that the land "shall not be cultivated and shall be left to grow wild in its natural





state,” envisioning a place welcome to “hikers, hunters and horseback riders.”

Carrying out McCarthy’s vision will be one of DCC’s most ambitious restoration projects to date — it’s the largest prairie they have planted in one place in a single year. It’s an exciting challenge, and Preston worked with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to develop a robust restoration plan. Historically, native prairie dominated this area, and DCC will follow nature’s framework by planting 92 native prairie species.

DCC’s biggest obstacle is ensuring the initial seeding is successful. They plan to employ several different techniques, including cross-seeding (where half the seeds are drilled one way and the other half at a 45-degree angle). Ongoing management over the next couple of years will include mowing three times a year and conducting seasonal prescribed burns. Preston anticipates the prairie should bloom for the first time in 2023.

“It’s going to be a hundred-acre jewel of a prairie,” he said.

The costs of the transfer and restoration are also being supported by the Dubuque County Conservation Society, Dubuqueland Pheasants Forever and the Friends of the Dubuque County Conservation Board.

## Bird-like inspiration

Beauty aside, this natural prairie will provide significant ecological benefits. It will filter and reduce runoff from surrounding properties and help re-establish the hydrologic cycle in the area. The prairie will also serve as a new habitat for native species such as eastern meadowlarks and bobolinks.

“This may be a small little patch in an otherwise ag-dominated area, but it doesn’t mean the birds won’t find it,” said INHF Land Projects Director Ross Baxter. “The birds always find it.”

The birds may find it, but will the people? Preston said many in the community are “nervous about the prairie,” but he’s hopeful that the opportunity to experience its beauty and benefits first-hand will put any apprehension at ease, and even inspire others.

“This is a great opportunity for folks to see a prairie and encourage them to do this on their own property,” Preston said.



**The McCarthy property** as shown above is a “blank slate” ready for Dubuque County Conservation to begin native prairie planting and restoration. The goal is to create a prairie landscape, like the one pictured below, that will be a haven for wildlife and people looking to connect with nature. *Photos by Dubuque County Conservation and INHF*



## In defense of the land

The realization of McCarthy’s vision was not without obstacle. McCarthy had several conversations with INHF staff about his wishes for the restoration and public use of his land, during which he indicated the land would be bequeathed to INHF for that purpose. It was these conversations that led INHF to defend what it believed to be McCarthy’s earnest intention for the land in a dispute over ownership in the months after his death, a position that was upheld in court.

Per McCarthy’s wishes, the land remained in trust to benefit his brother, Gerald, until his passing in December 2020, at which point it came to INHF to be protected and restored.

“Deciding the future of land is an emotional decision,” said INHF Director of Philanthropy Abby Terpstra. “When people take the time to discuss their hopes and dreams with us, we feel a great sense of obligation.”

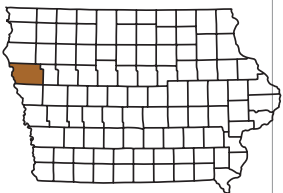
McCarthy is the latest in a historic line of donors who envisioned a bright future for their land. INHF will continue to honor these bequests by protecting their land, one jewel at a time. 🌿





# The Bridge Along the Ridge

**Oak Ridge  
Conservation Area**  
Woodbury County



**LAND:** 2,401 acres

**PARTNERS:** INHF,  
Woodbury County  
Conservation,  
Resource  
Enhancement and  
Protection (REAP)  
program

**SPECIAL FEATURES:**  
Remnant and  
reconstructed prairie,  
woodland, oak  
savanna

BY KATY HEGGEN  
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It's easy to lose yourself in the Loess Hills of western Iowa. The wind whipping up the ridgelines, the rhythmic rise and fall of the region's peak-and-saddle topography, the color that cloaks these hills at golden hour. They have a way of taking ahold of people.

Many Iowans are familiar with the "front range" of this sprawling landmark, but there is much to be found beyond that first collection of ridges east of the Missouri River floodplain, including one recently expanded complex that offers some spectacular places to get lost.

## Room to roam

Oak Ridge Conservation Area is a natural gem just 35 miles from Sioux City encompassing 2,401 acres of public land in the hills adjacent to the Little Sioux River Valley. With half a dozen access points spread between the towns of Oto and Smithland, there's room to roam here, as well as a diverse range of ecosystems to explore, including remnant and reconstructed prairie, woodland and oak savanna. One mile south lies the 783-acre Southwood Recreational Area. Together,

these two public lands provide a protected corridor encompassing more than 3,000 acres.

Woodbury County Conservation (WCC) first embarked on the creation of Oak Ridge more than 45 years ago, aspiring to create a large-scale complex that would protect the predominantly undeveloped area's natural resources and provide outdoor recreation opportunities.

"[Former WCC Director of 42 years Rick Schneider and the WCC board at the time] had a vision in that area in the hills and started putting the pieces of the puzzle together," said Director Dan Heissel, who joined WCC four years ago. "It didn't all come together at once. It's been a process, but has always been part of our long-range plans."

Over the years, several separate but jointly stewarded parcels were established as land became available, each with its own unique offerings. But connecting the various units of Oak Ridge to create one large, contiguous corridor has always been the end goal.

Creating a complex of this size and scale is no easy feat. And yet, bit-by-bit, the protected



parts of the preserve have inched closer together, the dream of an interconnected protected corridor increasingly within reach.

## Creating connection

INHF has helped protect several additions to Oak Ridge, including an 80-acre addition in 1999, a 530-acre addition in 2000 and a 228-acre addition in 2006. But its largest and arguably most impactful contributions to the complex were two additions purchased within the past year.

In 2019, INHF assisted WCC in the purchase of an 82-acre property between units 1 and 2 near Oto. At the end of 2020, INHF successfully negotiated the purchase of the remaining 240 acres between the two units, providing the opportunity to connect them and create one large contiguous habitat. The first property, which features cool-season meadow and mixed oak woodland, transferred to WCC in June 2021. WCC is raising funds to purchase the second addition from INHF — which includes woodland, wetlands, oak savannas, prairie uplands and ridgelines — and anticipates assuming ownership of that land in spring 2022 thanks to a Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) Program grant.

“It’s really rewarding when we have the opportunity to help add to areas we’ve already assisted with,” said INHF Senior Land Conservation Director Heather Jobst. “When doing so helps create a contiguous complex that will have exponential benefits for the land, wildlife, and people — that’s even better.”

WCC has already begun restoring the upland portions of the property, converting hundreds of acres of brome grass to native grasses, forbs and other pollinator habitat. Cedars are being removed from the property’s oak savannas to allow the understory to flourish. Prairie is taking root in areas that were formerly planted to alfalfa — a project made possible in-part through pollinator grant funding INHF helped secure from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF).

“[The latest addition] just has so much going for it. We’ll go in and do a little prescribed burning here and there, but really, it’s already all there” Heissel said. “With the right management, I think the

native habitat is just going to jump. It’s just been waiting to come back to life.”

On their own, each addition contributes something unique to Oak Ridge, but the collective value they bring to the entire corridor cannot be understated. The same can be said of the projects’ local leaders, partners and supporters.

“We just couldn’t do it without local partnerships,” Heissel said. “When a landowner comes to the conservation board and says ‘I want to see my property go to you’ and we’re able to bring in partners like INHF, the local Pheasants Forever chapter, Iowa Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation and others, that makes things happen. Now it’s a local project being driven by local organizations and individuals.”

## On the horizon

Today, more than 2,000 acres of Oak Ridge are interconnected. If and when WCC will have the opportunity to connect units three and four to units one and two remains to be seen. But, looking out over these hills, Heissel can’t help but dwell in the possibility.

“We have a lot of good relationships with landowners down there, and some have said ‘We appreciate what you’re doing, but this is going to stay in our family,’ and I understand that,” said Heissel. “But things change. Maybe someone in the next generation will want to see it become part of the complex. In the interim, we just strive to be good neighbors and remember that anything is possible.”

**Encompassing more than 2,400** acres of public land between Oto and Smithland, Oak Ridge Conservation Area provides open space, scenic beauty and wildlife habitat, as well as the opportunities for hiking, wildlife watching, scenic views, hunting and other outdoor activities in southeast Woodbury County. *Photos by INHF and Woodbury County Conservation*





## PROTECTING THE OKOBOJI SHORELINE

It took hundreds of people agreeing that now was time to act to protect the largest remaining stretch of privately-held, undeveloped shoreline on East Lake. But the success of this project also took past actions – people who agreed to support an unknown future need through a legacy gift.

When INHF expressed interest in purchasing the 50 acres adjacent to Elinor Bedell State Park in autumn 2020, a willing seller and supportive realtor made time for a quick flurry of fundraising to secure an option. The lake protective associations and a number of individuals contributed to buy time for a campaign to raise the needed funds. So did two important bequests.



The Okoboji Protective Association was able to contribute to the option by making use of a bequest from Peppy and Norm Bahr. Peppy's family cabin was on West Lake, and Norm was an avid outdoorsman. Now, even after their passing, they are part of a project that will keep a natural space here for future generations to enjoy.

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation was able to put forward a quarter of the option cost using the LaVonne and Dale Foote Fund. The Foote bequest is intended for use in Dickinson County to support our mission to protect and restore Iowa's land, water and wildlife. The Footes were long-time residents of Spirit Lake and LaVonne's love of birds gave her the moniker "Bird Lady of the Lakes". Ten years after the Foote bequest came to INHF the number of projects it has supported that provide important habitat for birds and other wildlife continues to grow.

Legacy gifts like the Bahr's and the Foote's make nimble responses to incredible and fleeting opportunities possible.

If you are interested in learning more about shaping a legacy gift that contributes to your passions beyond your lifetime, please contact INHF's Director of Philanthropy, Abby Hade Terpstra, at [aterpstra@inhf.org](mailto:aterpstra@inhf.org) or 515-288-1846.

— ABBY HADE TERPSTRA,  
*Director of Philanthropy*

**Look for more about the East Okoboji Shoreline** property, including plans for management, restoration and public use, in the Spring issue of *Iowa Natural Heritage* magazine.

**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 Abby Hade Terpstra at [aterpstra@inhf.org](mailto:aterpstra@inhf.org) or 515-288-1846, ext 15.

## TRIBUTE GIFTS

### IN MEMORY OF

Marilyn Arndorfer  
Charlene Lorraine Betsworth  
Lawrence Beving  
Kim and Bob Bredensteiner  
Jeanette Bush  
Craig Cave  
Mark DeCook  
Fred and Diane Dowden  
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Find more Iowa places to explore at [www.inhf.org/blog](http://www.inhf.org/blog)

# Cemetery Secrets

**A Full Moon Night.** Illustration by Kayleen Mercer, Graphic Design Intern

BY CJ YOUNGER  
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**O**n a crisp fall night, the graveyard gate stands ajar. Creeping fingers clutch the iron bars and a gust of wind sends the cemetery rattling. The clouds part and moonlight illuminates a massive crooked shape looming over the gravestones. The gate creaks further open with a wail — the graveyard is stirring.

The next morning, the sun shines down on a magnificent remnant prairie among the gravestones. A grand oak tree spreads its limbs over them protectively. Tendrils of grass climb the gate posts, playfully tangled, and meadowlarks dip in and out of the tall grass with soft trills. Someone has closed the gate.

In the autumn, old cemeteries become haunts for fictional zombies, vampires and werewolves. They may be frightful by night, but during the day the remnant prairies, oak savannas and other native habitats found around the gravestones serve as living history.

Rochester Cemetery (Cedar County) and Fairmount Cemetery (Scott County) were established by European settlers in the early 1800s and have remained unplowed and

largely untouched since then, providing a glimpse into Iowa's prairie and pioneer past. Deloit Cemetery (Crawford County) is home to a huge pre-settlement bur oak, a rare site in modern Iowa.

Uncommon plant species such as New Jersey tea, which was almost eradicated due to the harm their roots did to plow machines, can be found thriving in many of these cemeteries.

"Those aren't weeds," said Glenn Pollock, who leads tours to some of these cemeteries as part of the annual Loess Hills Prairie Seminar. "They're an important part of Iowa's history, and Iowa's future, too."

If you're looking for a unique outdoor activity, grab a native plant guide and explore one of these Iowa haunts.

Visit [www.iowaprairienetwork.org/find-a-prairie](http://www.iowaprairienetwork.org/find-a-prairie) to find a remnant prairie cemetery near you.







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**Volunteer Cait Caughey and her children harvest prairie seed at INHF's Armstrong property in Harrison County.** This fall was an incredibly productive season for INHF volunteers, and we are grateful to each and every one of you. Together, we accomplished: 19 volunteer events; 372 volunteers engaged; A total of 1,035 hours of work recorded; Events in eight counties (Polk, Dallas, Marion, Johnson, Allamakee, Monona, Harrison and Boone); Activities included prairie seed harvest, prairie restoration, woodland restoration and shoreline cleanup. *Photo by INHF*

