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Imagine Iowa's prairies in a new light — one that honors the history and illustrates the importance of this still-relevant ancient ecosystem.

Land, Water, Wildlife: Workforce
How parks, trails and wildlife areas support workforce development.

Sky's the Limit
Five generations of looking after the land culminates in a game-changing gift to INHF.

A Milestone in Making Change
Celebrating a decade of volunteers and change on the land.

INHF Land Acknowledgement:
As a land trust it is important for us to continuously acknowledge the land. We honor them on the land.

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation
Protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water, and wildlife.

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INHERITANCE

In the quiet of a fall morning, a Nebraska consultant sat at a computer, exploring the possibility of establishing a foundation that would aid private and local governments in the acquisition of Natural Areas and create new awareness of our natural heritage in Iowa.

In June of 1973, the citizens of the Iowa Conservation Commission and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation for Natural Areas and Species were successful in convincing the Legislature of the possibility of establishing a foundation that would aid private and local governments in the acquisition of Natural Areas and create awareness of our natural heritage in Iowa.

Because of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, we now have a foundation that continues to grow and support the acquisition of Natural Areas. INHF is committed to working with our partners to create more parks, trails and wildlife areas for the benefit of all Iowans.

We are able to continue to serve Iowa because of you, INHF’s supporters, volunteers and partners. We’re grateful to you for your time, your resources and especially your friendship. It allows us to be strong in the face of challenges that can seem daunting at times. So, thank you. Thank you for allowing us to serve Iowa — our home — and make our state a better place.

A Spirit of Service
Recently came across a letter written by then-Governor Robert Ray to Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation in 1979 — INHF’s first year in existence.

The letter prefaced a report prepared by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, then known as the Iowa Conservation Commission, about the state of Iowa’s natural lands. The report was created to facilitate a new public-private partnership that would yield substantial results for Iowans over the coming decades.

INHF was created — with the help of Gov. Ray and business leaders — to serve Iowans. Together with our public partners, we have created or expanded parks and trails, we have protected thousands of acres of wildlife habitat, we have restored pieces of our precious native ecosystems — our prairies, wetlands and woodlands — that make our state unique.

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And we take great pride in working with private landowners across Iowa that share our goals.

We approach our work with a spirit of service, thinking about how land preservation and outdoor recreation opportunities can help our state thrive.

After more than four decades, we continue to work with our partners to create more parks, trails and wildlife areas, hoping to attract and retain young people that prioritize outdoor recreation when deciding where to live. We continue to look for natural solutions to the water quality and quantity issues facing our state. We continue to listen to nature, knowing that protecting and restoring resilient natural lands can help us be prepared for increasing extreme weather events. We continue to advocate for the voiceless — Iowa’s land, water, wildlife and future generations.

We are able to continue to serve Iowa because of you, INHF’s supporters, volunteers and partners. We’re grateful to you for your time, your resources and especially your friendship. It allows us to be strong in the face of challenges that can seem daunting at times. So, thank you. Thank you for allowing us to serve Iowa — our home — and make our state a better place.

INHERITANCE
I know, I know, a cliché pasque flower picture. However, if you’ve read this far, maybe I can get you to sit tight for quick story. You see, there was a reason for this particular photo. The one you see inset here hangs on the wall in my office. Prior to its current residence, it hung on the wall of my room where I grew up. If I’m being honest, I never remember noticing it as a kid. It took an awakening in the world of native plants, sparked by me beginning a career with INHF, for me to notice it on one of my trips back home to see family.

With this newfound education, I was enamored with the photo and desperate for its origin story. Asking my mother for more information revealed who its creator was — my father. Where did he take it? What lens did he use? Was it an overcast day as the coloration implies? Was it taken laying prone in the prairie as I often do to capture the macro flower photos I enjoy so much?

These are the questions I wish I could ask. His passing, years prior, made answers a mystery. But it led me on a quest to recreate it as best I could. A passion for photography ignited in the process (particularly macro photos of native plants) which continues years after my initial journey for the pasque flower re-creation.

Now both photos reside in my office, and the question of where still burns in my mind. Is the prairie where his photo blossomed protected? Was INHF involved? I’ll admit, the thought of those answers being ‘yes’ are alluring.

Oh, and in case you are curious about the answers as to my photo, yes the place is protected, and INHF, along with a plethora of supporters, made it possible. But I’ll leave it there for now. Maybe a little mystery will spur you to seek out spring and the mesmerizing flowers it provides for our contemplation.

– ROSS BAXTER, Senior Land Protection Director and Counsel
LITTLE SIOUX SCOUT RANCH PROTECTED

Following an outpouring of support from hundreds of donors — including lead donations of $500,000 from Polina and Bob Scholt of Crescent, $300,000 from the Iowa West Foundation of Council Bluffs, $150,000 from the Gilbertson Foundation of Sioux City and $250,000 from the MidAmerican Energy Foundation — INHF purchased the Little Sioux Scout Ranch in Monona County. The 1,796-acre property, used as a scout camp for more than 50 years, is destined to become open to the public.

INHF and the MidAmerican Council will allow scouts to continue to use the property in the near-term. INHF will also work with partners to open the property to the public and expand use around the adjacent Loess Hills State Forest, which is managed by the Iowa DNR.

INHF continues to fundraise for costs associated with the purchase and management of the property. To contribute, contact Director of Philanthropy Abby Hade Terpstra at terpstra@inhf.org or 515-809-5676.

UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL 8 Joany de la Pasque Flower Hike & Workshop
Sheffield

APRIL 21 Earth Day Trash Bash
Des Moines

APRIL 22 Earth Day Trash Bash on the Trail
Mudcat

APRIL 24-28 Loess Hills Cooperative Burn Week
Papio

MAY 3 Medicine Woodland Restoration
Pella

MAY 6 Into the Wild, Out with the Mustard
Heritage Valley, Waukon

MAY 11 Little Sioux Scout Ranch Celebration
Little Sioux

MAY 20 Spring Into Action
Des Moines

JUNE 3 National Traditions Day
Prairie Hill

JUNE 26-29 North American Prairie Conference
 Altoona

For more information, visit www.inhf.org/events

QUARTERLY PROTECTION REPORT

Newly protected areas

Little Sioux Scout Ranch
1,796 acres of prairie and woodland along the East Fork of the Des Moines River in Monona County.

Boone County
93 acres of oak-hickory woodland and prairie in the Des Moines River Valley near Bozio. The property is part of a valuable corridor providing benefits to wildlife and migratory species, and protects this family’s efforts to restore native habitats (Conservation easement donated by Ray and Jullie Buehner). A Small Project.

Alamere County
165 acres of prairie and woodland along the Mississippi River near Lansing. Rewarded by the family for years and by many generations before them, this presents an area rich in archeological resources, provides sanctuary for sensitive species and buffers future development (Conservation easement donated by Whipple and Jullie Buehner). A Small Project.

Floyd County
35 acres of high-quality remnant and reconstructed prairie and woodland near Rockford. Protection of the perennial vegetation promises to protect the Blanding’s turtle and more than 30 other endangered species (Conservation easement donated by Keith and Lee Ehrman). A Small Project.

Kickapoo Hill Natural Area Addition
123 acres of woodland and grassland near Cedar Rapids in Linn County. Purchase of the property allows access for pollinators and other wildlife (Conservation easement donated by Keith and Lee Ehrman). A Small Project.

Big Wall Lake Addition
65 acres adjacent to Big Wall Lake near Clarion in Wright County. A high priority for protection of the lake’s water quality, future wildfire and prairie restoration benefits this property which has provided buffer and habitat for a known population of Blanding’s turtles. (Proposed public ownership)

Page County
A 524-acre farm near Sherwood along the Mississippi River, which separates the protected Big Wall Lake property from the larger land buyed in INHF’s history. A strong interest in soil quality, agricultural and wildlife preservation led the Blaylors to this gift and is evidenced by the habitat and conservation practices applied to the land. (Donated to INHF by Marin and Blaylor and managed by INHF) Read more on page 11

Lee County-Krossaux State Park Addition
62 acres of woodland and prairie near the Iowa/Illinois State Park in Lee County. This property bridges a gap between the state park and the Illinois State Forest, providing continuity of habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities adjacent to the Illinois River to be inhabited by federally endangered Indians (Proposed public ownership).

Altrona

For more information, visit www.inhf.org/events

A look at INHF protection projects and land transfers between October 2022-January 2023

Benton County
276 acres of remnant prairie near Dunlap in Benton County. Protected by a conservation easement and dedicated to building a teaching laboratory for University of Northern Iowa’s and local high school students.

Boone County
6 acres of woodland and prairie near the Stone Lakes State Recreation Area. This property will provide habitat for wildlife and connect students and future generations with the land by Cathy Vane, proposed non-profit ownership.

Union County
95 acres of woodland and prairie near the South Fork Sioux River. This property provides habitat for wildlife and connects students and future development with the land by Union County Conservation, proposed public ownership.

Brown’s Lake WMA Addition
One acre of shoreline on Brown’s Lake and adjacent to Blackhawk Park near Salko in Winnebago County. This property on the lake and proximity to an existing boat ramp provide an opportunity for future outdoor recreation and conservation education (Proposed public ownership).

Tama County
A 99-acre addition in the town of Dupo in Tama County. Preserves natural space and habitat for local and state citizens for years to come (Proposed public ownership). A Small Project.

Nahant Marsh Addition
60 acres adjacent to Nahant Marsh Education Center along the Mississippi River in Scott County. Protection and restoration of this property will prevent sediment from entering the marsh and will improve the overall health of the Nahant Marsh system. (Proposed non-profit ownership)

Lyon County
125 acres of remnant upland near Little Rock Creek in Lyon County. Species like eastern bluebird, a well-known indicator that the area supports healthy vegetation, are found on this property. (Proposed non-profit ownership)

East Fork Access WMA Addition
65 acres of prairie woodland along the East Fork of the Des Moines River near Loveland in Hardin County. Proposed public ownership.

McIntosh County
A addition to the McIntosh County Conservation’s headquarters lends opportunity for increased flood storage. (Donated by INHF)

Osceola County
147 acres of remnant prairie near Silverly in Osceola County. Adjoining to existing public land, protects an important water quality buffer and steep slopes not only provides contiguous prairie habitat but keeps the water quality to steep slopes not only provides contiguous prairie habitat. Proposed non-profit ownership.

McCarthy Wildlife Area
10 acres near Bernett in Dubuque County dedicated to public outdoor recreation opportunities (Managed by ISF Ecological Services).

Wickup Hill Natural Area Addition
12 acres of woodland and grassland near Cedar Rapids in Linn County. Includes a portion of the Cedar River offering important habitat and water quality benefits and protecting the greenbelt from future development. (Donated by McCarthy Foundation)

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge Addition
This 90-acre addition to Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge near Prairie City in Jasper County. This fills in a key missing piece of land, ensuring a buffer for migratory birds, and other native wildlife.

River View WMA Addition
8 acres along the river near Benton in Fremont County. Reconstructed prairie, woodlands and wetlands will enhance the floodplain and provide excellent wildlife cover and recreation opportunities. (Donated and managed by Iowa DNR)

Hogback Marsh
The final 77 acres in a 852-acre property traversed by the Long Barn Road in Winneshiek County. Protection of three sandy soils through habitat restoration will provide direct water quality benefits to the river. (Donated by USFWS and Wapsie Valley Land Trust, managed by Iowa DNR)

Little Sioux WMA Addition
This 1,151-acre property in an 1,145-acre property traversed by the Little Sioux River near Gillett Grove in Clay County. Further restoration of the floodplain will mitigate frequent flooding events and improve water quality. (Donated and managed by Iowa DNR)

Foulmire Creek Greenway Addition
60 acres of woodland and wetlands along Foulmire Creek in Pleasant Hill in Pocahontas County. Protection of this property will safeguard a floodplain corridor providing fish habitat, flood storage and other passive recreation opportunities. (Proposed non-profit ownership)

Kirse Woods WMA
240 acres of prairie woodland along the North River in Madison County. The property includes three miles of the North River and protection and increased restoration will have lasting water quality benefits. (Proposed and managed by Iowa DNR)

Falcon Spring WMA Addition
The final 11-acre property of a 119-acre property located near Decorah in Winneshiek County. Protection of wetlands and remnant prairie and wetland will provide habitat for rusty-patched bumble bee, a federally endangered species, and will add on to a marsh system popular with birders. (Donated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; managed by Iowa DNR)

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FIELD NOTES

NORTH AMERICAN PRAIRIE CONFERENCE COMES TO IOWA

This summer, Iowa has the honor of hosting the North American Prairie Conference, the nation’s oldest conference dedicated to native grasslands. This four-day event from June 26-29 will feature the latest findings in prairie research, offers opportunities to connect with prairie professionals and enthusiasts and invites participants to tour some of the most spectacular prairies in central Iowa, some of which aren’t usually available for public access.

Registration, schedule and details on keynote speakers, symposiums and field trips can be found at northamericanprairie.org.

INHF DONORS HONORED AT GIFT TO IOWA’S FUTURE DAY

This March, Iowans who donated land, land value or conservation easements in 2022 will be recognized at a ceremony at the Iowa State Capitol. This will be the annual event’s fifteenth year honoring Iowans who chose to permanently protect the land they cherish.

Last year, INHF worked with 22 individuals, families and organizations who made such gifts, protecting a total of 3,656 acres across 19 counties. Their generosity created new parks, trails and wildlife areas for the benefit of all our state’s current and future inhabitants — people, wildlife and plants.

Cette année, l’Iowa a le honneur de recevoir la Conférence nationale sur les prairies du Nord Américain, la plus ancienne conférence dédiée à la prairie. Cette quatrième journée du 26 au 29 juin, se fera parmi les découvertes les plus récentes en recherche de prairie, offre des opportunités de rencontre avec les professionnels et les amateurs de prairie et invite les participants à visiter quelques-uns des prairies les plus spectaculaires de l’Iowa centrale, qui ne sont pas toujours accessibles au public.

L’inscription, le calendrier et les détails sur les speakers plénières, les symposiums et les visites de terrain peuvent être trouvés à northamericanprairie.org.

Les donateurs de l’Iowa reconnaissent l’APRÈS-JOUR DE L’AVENIR DE L’IOWA

Ce mois-ci, les Iowans qui ont donné des terres, la valeur des terres ou des droits de dotation en 2022 seront reconnus lors d’une cérémonie au Capitole de l’État de l’Iowa. Il s’agira de l’événement annuel de la 15e année de l’hommage aux Iowans qui ont choisi d’emprunter à perpétuité la terre qu’ils aiment.

Dernier année, INHF a travaillé avec 22 individus, familles ou organisations qui ont fait ces cadeaux, protégeant un total de 3 656 acres dans 19 comtés. Leur générosité a créé de nouvelles parcs, sentiers et zones d’oie pour le bénéfice de l’ensemble de la population et de la faune de notre état actuel et futur – les humains, les animaux et les plantes.
When you hear the words “old-growth forest,” an image likely forms in your mind. Trees larger around than a hug and much taller than a two-story, the bark painted with multicolored lichens. An undisturbed ecosystem, with all its visible and underground connections still intact. A relic existing through pivotal points in history, standing by while the constitution was signed or the first automobile was built. We’re inherently protective of old-growth forests; they feel special. So why, when we’re instead talking about original prairies that have most certainly outlived the trees, do we not also think in terms of old-growth?

A forest is generally deemed “old-growth” if it meets a handful of criteria: it developed over a long period of time safeguarded from substantial disturbance; it has a complex structure and rare or unique plant communities; and it usually has minimal issues with invasive species. These same concepts characterize a prairie remnant.

Twelve to fourteen-thousand years ago, after the last glaciers receded from Iowa, our blank slate of a state began to transform into a grassy ecosystem. The grasses and flowers that took root and the wildlife that grew to depend on them for food and cover persisted for the thousands of years that followed. While many aspects of Iowa prairie changed following Euro-American settlement, what has survived — remnants — are artifacts of this ancient landscape. Looking at a prairie remnant is a bit like stepping back in time. Their structure, composition and relationships are ancient, just as in an old-growth forest.

Some of the individual plants are ancient, too. Well-adapted to minor above-ground disturbance like fire or grazing, the bulk of the prairie lives below the surface of the soil. While many forbs are relatively short-lived, there’s evidence that bunchgrasses have the potential to live for millennia. Blue grama (Bouteloua gracilis), mostly found in Iowa in the Loess Hills, can live for 450 years. That’s older than Iowa’s oldest known white oak.

While the individual microbes and organisms themselves lead brief lives, the undisturbed soil structure of a prairie remnant is a well-oiled machine, and we know that Iowa’s fertile soils are owed to the breakdown of thousands of years’ worth of organic material from prairie vegetation and roots.

In short, the soil is important. Dr. Mahdi Al-Kaisi, professor emeritus at Iowa State University and creator of Iowa Learning Farms, spent his career as a soil scientist. Aside from physical properties like porosity or mineral content, Al-Kaisi explains that the living components — bacteria, fungi, nematodes, etc. — are just as critical to soil health.

“Imagine the microbial community is the engine that drives the car,” Al-Kaisi said. “Without the engine, you lack richness in the soil makeup.”

Microbes are a huge component of how nature cleans water, how nutrients cycle, how carbon is stored. They’re mighty machines! Many of our modern agriculture practices like tillage throw this engine off-balance. Again, just as with old-growth forests, the system is healthiest when void of substantial disturbance.

The prairie’s biodiversity — both above and below ground — brought strength to the landscape, making it resilient to changes and warding off invasive species. Prairie held hundreds of plant species, each appearing in something else’s life cycle as a host or source of food or shelter. The connections between these living things are intricate, and we likely only understand a fraction of the symbiotic relationships that have held the ecosystem together for thousands of years.

Some of those relationships still exist; bottle and cream gentian (Gentiana andrewsii and Gentiana alba) rely almost exclusively on bumble bees for pollination, reserving their nectar only for the insects strong enough to open their closed petals. Other pieces of the prairie web of life are on the verge of being lost, like plains pocket gophers or Franklin’s ground squirrels — both critical in cycling nutrients and creating habitat — but now on Iowa’s Species of Greatest Conservation Need list. Or — in the case of bison, wolves or prairie chickens — the pieces are already lost, their absence having a palpable ripple effect. Even our highest quality remnant prairies, the best examples of what Iowa once was, can no longer...
be considered fully intact. The fragmented nature of what remains is a problem, too. Some species continue to vanish from our state simply because there’s not enough prairie left. A study done by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 2019 revealed that North American grassland bird populations have declined 53% since 1970. Henslow’s Sparrows (Ammodramus henslowii), once common throughout the Midwest, are one of those grassland bird species in steep decline over the last half century. Its preferred habitat is at least 250 contiguous acres of moderately tall, dense grassland vegetation with thick litter, free of woody encroachment or the commotion of heavy grazing. In other words, this bird needs large, diverse old-growth prairies. Over thirty million acres of prairie once covered this state. It is estimated that less than 0.1% of that remains. Most of our old-growth prairies are lost to the ages. What exactly have we sacrificed? Can we put it back? A bird needs large, diverse old-growth prairies. And we’ve got to do what we can to protect what we still have, and do our best to restore or reconstruct it where we can.

Dr. Lisa Schulte Moore, professor in the Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management at Iowa State University and a 2021 MacArthur Foundation Fellow, has been studying what prairie reconstructions can do even on a modest scale. She’s the co-founder of the Science-based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips (STRIPS) project, which integrates small amounts of prairie in strategic locations in agricultural fields. “Reconstructed prairies, once established, can help hold soil and nutrients in place, can help cycle carbon and water, and can provide habitat for a broad suite but not all native prairie-adapted species,” Schulte Moore explained.

Her team’s research shows that by converting 10% of a crop-field to diverse, native perennial vegetation, farmers and landowners can reduce sediment movement off their field by 95 percent, and total phosphorous and nitrogen loss through runoff by 77 and 70 percent, respectively. If that little bit of prairie can do that much good, just imagine the impact of a 100-acre chunk here or there.

INHF’s Conservation Programs Coordinator Emily Martin has been helping guide the creation of the Iowa Climate Assessment, an in-depth analysis of Iowa’s past and potential future climate using the best available science. As work continues on this collaborative document slated for completion next year, it’s clear that prairies need to be a part of our long-range vision. “Carbon dioxide is 79 percent of the United States’ greenhouse gas emissions, and in 2021 made up 66 percent of Iowa’s,” said Martin. “There are many different approaches we must take across all industries to reduce our emissions to meet our national goal of a 50 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. Restoring our natural ecosystems, especially prairie, has a significant role to play. We can put carbon back into the soil through prairie plants, but to do that, we need to let the land rest. Iowa is in a unique position to show the power of prairie in helping to solve the climate crisis — both by mitigating emissions and lessening impacts, like flooding, Iowa’s soils are what make this state; we need to tend to them now before we lose in the span of 150 years what took thousands of years to build.”

Al-Kaisi echoes the sentiment, citing that “prairie is more effective than trees or row crops in capturing and storing carbon. It is important to think about any opportunity to convert any piece of land [back to prairie]. It’s a good investment. The multiplier is unlimited for climate benefits, wildlife habitat, aesthetic value or any other measure.”

In a matter of 70 years, we disassembled something we can never really replace. But we can close, and we have to try. For more reasons than nostalgia, “Our earth has a fever,” Schulte Moore said. “Prairies are the cure.”
“Help Wanted.” Walking down Iowa's main streets, you are bound to find at least a few businesses looking to fill open positions. Workforce development has become a paramount challenge facing businesses across the country. With workers having flexibility to choose where to live and work, the quality of life that Iowa can offer is an essential component for helping businesses and rural communities thrive. But how does Iowa stand out as the place that people choose to make their home and build their careers? A study from the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) sought to answer this question, and the results illustrate the undeniable role that parks and trails play in fostering a high quality of life and ability to move. Iowa's lakes, rivers, forests, trails and open spaces fill it with natural beauty and chances for adventure. Yet, the study found that Iowa is not perceived as having the desired recreational amenities. IEDA's findings underscored the value of our natural resources and identified the untapped potential of our open spaces. As we look to grow and diversify Iowa's population, we must prioritize quality of life initiatives and leverage the opportunity available in our parks, trails and wildlife areas. Fortunately, several programs already lay a framework for successfully promoting community vitality.

Fully Fund the Resource Enhancement & Protection Program (REAP)

For over 30 years, REAP has supported more than 15,000 natural resource and community improvement projects across the state. Local parks, hunting areas, historical and cultural landmarks and soil and water conservation practices have all been made possible by REAP, including some of Iowa's most cherished outdoor spaces. Backbone State Park, for example, has used REAP to maintain its iconic historic structures built in the early twentieth century. Thanks to REAP, Iowa's first state park continues to draw tens of thousands of visitors to rural Delaware County each year. Newer REAP projects like the ongoing Iowa River's Edge Trail in Hardin and Marshall Counties will connect communities to other outdoor spaces that REAP has supported over the years, such as Pine Lake State Park in Eldora and the Iowa River Greenbelt.

REAP was created with broad legislative support and signed into law by Governor Branstad. The program has history of strong bipartisan backing and has been extended by the legislature twice. Although it is currently authorized to receive $20 million in annual funding, REAP funds are regularly diverted, and the program has never been fully funded. Fully funding REAP is a logical first step in investing in our communities and the quality of life they offer.

Increase Funding for the State Recreational Trails Program

Iowa's State Recreational Trails Program supports the development of trails that connect communities, provide safe transportation and serve as a gateway for exploring Iowa's towns and businesses. The High Trestle Trail spanning from Ankeny to Woodward has earned national recognition, attracting visitors from around the world. A staple in the Ankeny community, the High Trestle Trail contributes to the city's reputation of offering a great quality of life and becoming one of the fastest growing cities in the country. But trails also bring life to Iowa's smallest towns. In southwest Iowa, the Wabash Trace Nature Trail attracts over a thousand people each week for the Thursday night Taco Ride from Council Bluffs to Mineola. The ride brings people together for recreation, food, music and fun that generates excitement in the surrounding communities and offers riders a chance to discover places that might otherwise go unnoticed.

With the tremendous popularity and demand for trails, requests for funding average five times the amount available, hindering Iowa's ability to leverage a favorite recreational amenity in workforce attraction. Increasing funding for the State Recreational Trails program is a proven way of supporting communities working to draw in new visitors and residents that can support their local economies.
Fund the Natural Resources & Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund

The Natural Resources & Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund was created in 2010 when Iowa voters amended the state constitution to create a dedicated fund for improving water quality, enhancing parks, trails, and wildlife areas and conserving agricultural soils. More than a decade later, the Trust Fund remains empty, requiring legislative action for funding and implementation. Polling shows that 70% of Iowans support the legislature taking steps to finally fund the implementation. Polling shows that 70% of Iowans support her hometown.

The connection between outdoor recreation and workforce development is simple: if people play somewhere, they might consider living and working there. Encouraging people to visit Iowa and see what it can offer is an important first step in attracting and retaining new residents. Funding existing programs to provide sustainable, dependable resources to improve community vitality and quality of life is next.

These three perspectives demonstrate the role that parks and trails play in attracting and retaining Iowa citizens. A business owner shares her thoughts on how open spaces and recreation support her workforce development efforts, a community leader who left Colorado shares what he has come to love as an Iowa transplant, and a small-town tourism professional shares what it was like to grow up in rural Iowa, move to one of the largest cities in the country and return to support her hometown.

The Business Owner
Lori Schaefer-Weaton, Fairfield

Founded by Dick Smith in 1978, Agri-Industrial Plastics Co. specializes in the production of fuel tank systems for non-automotive industries and parts for a variety of other products. Our ability to grow and to service our customers is all about hiring, developing and retaining the right people who want to be part of our company for the long run. In rural Iowa, workforce availability is limited, and more than ever, people are looking for more than just a job. They want to feel connected to their company and to the community. In Fairfield, we are lucky to have an Arts and Convention Center, a Parks and Recreation Facility and a beautiful trail system around our community. We also have parks that give families access to a wide variety of outdoor activities. These amenities make it easier to attract and retain employees.

The Transplant
Eric Obergfell, Johnston

Originally from Indiana, I spent time in county and state parks and enjoyed hiking, canoeing or simply picnicking at a nature center or playground. I have always enjoyed being in nature and in 2007 I was able to achieve my dream to move to Denver. My recreation time was marked by countless hikes, summiting 18 of Colorado’s 14,000+ ft peaks (known as 14ers to the locals), regular camping trips, a few whitewater rafting trips, several concerts at Red Rocks, and winter weekends spent skiing. When family and friends contacted me, I described my life as living the dream. And I truly was. I loved my work, was enjoying everything Colorado had to offer, and was building friendships, often with other Midwesterners that had left their home states.

I thought I’d never consider leaving Colorado where my wife and I started our family. But for a variety of reasons, deep down in my gut, the Midwest began to call me home.

Since settling in Johnston, our family has enjoyed visits to many of Iowa’s state parks. No, it’s not the Rocky Mountains, but there is natural beauty right here in Iowa. We just need to help more people recognize it and continue to add to and preserve the natural treasures, destinations and attractions we have.
On September 25, 1881, Louis Fischer purchased 160 acres of land in the Grant township of Page County just east of Shenandoah for $33. Over the subsequent years, the farm passed down to his son, John; his grandson, Carl; and to his great-granddaughter, Dorothy Fischer Boylan. At the Iowa State Fair in 1981, Dorothy and her family — husband Don and children Betty Boylan Miller, Donna Boylan Stewart, and Carl Boylan — were presented with century farm designation.

Carl Boylan met Margie Keller while they were both at Iowa State University and they wed in 1984. They enjoyed traveling together, loved their dogs, and ran Boylan Farms as a conscientious and conservation-minded operation, especially when it came to protecting soil health and promoting habitat for wildlife.

Margie, in addition, worked for 32 years at the Shenandoah Medical Center as a registered nurse, in the oncology department, and as Chief Operating Officer. She served on the board of the Shenandoah Public Library and was instrumental in securing funding to build the new library addition. Margie was a well-respected advocate of access for all people to the things she loved including reading, healthy food, and nature.

“She was a brilliant and kind-hearted woman who was a source of strength and inspiration for our entire extended family and the community of Shenandoah,” said Angie Schmidt, niece-in-law of Carl and Margie.

“Margie was a caregiver. She was principled and articulate and a teacher at heart. She was a mentor to many,” said Laurie McGargill. Laurie and George McGargill were longtime family friends of the Boylans. “She and Carl were the poster children for moderation. They had no bad habits.”

“They were just the kindest, most gracious, most intelligent — and most humble — people. The best kind of people they could possibly be,” adds George.

You could often find Carl driving with a dog in his truck, carefully maintaining his John Deere equipment, or joyfully hosting family and friends. His commitment to land conservation is evidenced through the grassed waterways, carefully placed terraces, wide field borders and
help,” he adds. “They helped me get the farming operation started as a young farmer, and I will be forever grateful to them.”

In 2001 Boylan Farms was incorporated and now sits at 1,243 acres with two homesteads. One hundred acres of that are enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and that grassland provides quality habitat for small mammals and nesting birds. The hayfield behind the east homestead is home to many birds including Dickcissels and Bobolinks, bird Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

One mile of the gravel Wabash Trace Nature Trail curves along the property’s wooded south border. The adjacent woodland consists mostly of walnuts, cottonwoods and maples and provides excellent habitat for white-tailed deer, Baltimore Orioles, Wild Turkeys, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. A small creek parallels the trail and provides habitat for mink, raccoon, and muskrat.

“Not only were they great stewards of their land, they were great neighbors for the Wabash Trace to have,” said Rebecca Castle Laughlin, former president and current board member of Southwest Iowa Nature Trails Project. “I was fortunate to know Carl and Margie through mutual friends. They were the type of people you were always happy to get the chance to visit with. Upon hearing that they had left their land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, I can’t say that I was shocked, because it fit with their character. What I knew about their practices made it a natural fit that they would want to see their legacy perpetuated in this manner.”

The fundraising campaign for the Wabash Trace was how Carl and Margie were introduced to Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, and the gift they gave in 1990 was the only time they had contributed financially to INHF, until now. Margie passed in October of 2019 and Carl passed in April of 2021. In leaving the farm to INHF, Carl and Margie laid out their wishes passed in April of 2021. In leaving the farm to INHF, Carl and Margie laid out their wishes. “Carl always referred to the farm as ‘a work in progress’ and I am sure INHF will continue to hold that view,” said Chris Miller, nephew of Carl and Margie, said “They were that strong, quiet type, never really calling attention to themselves, but there to help everyone, and support the community. The gift to the INHF is just another example of their support. They saw the farm as an everlasting place that would produce a bountiful crop for generations, so they gifted the property to an organization that will protect its agricultural productivity, and continue to embrace its natural landscapes, and use the proceeds from farming to expand their vision across Iowa and time.”

“Carl always referred to the farm as ‘a work in progress’ and I am sure INHF will continue to hold that view,” said Cheri Grauer, retired INHF Donor Relations Director. “A gift like this is a game changer. The best thing we can do is keep true to our mission, since that is what compelled the Boylans to make their decision.”

Chris Miller, nephew of Carl and Margie, who farmed some of the Boylan land and continues to do so under INHF’s ownership, shared, “When Carl and Margie first asked me if I would be interested in farming some of their ground, I told them to make sure they told me the names they used for each of their fields. I wanted to make sure I referred to their fields the same way they did from the start to avoid confusion. I soon had an entirely different perspective on what this farm meant to them. One of the first fields Carl pointed out he called “south of the railroad.” While I could see where the railroad had once been, it had been closed in 1938, before Carl had even been born. We then drove by what he called the “cherry tree” which Margie quickly pointed out that in 30 years she had never seen a cherry tree there, but that was how Carl’s dad referred to the field. What started out as me wanting to know which fields were which turned into me wanting to carry on the legacy and tradition that had been put in place over the last hundred years. Carl and Margie always wanted to do what was best for the land, not because they had to but because they knew it was there before them and would continue on after them, and that is something for which I continue to strive.”

“They were always more than happy to begin bearing the fruit the Boylans imagined, there is no doubt that the lasting impact of this gift is tremendous. “It didn’t surprise me at all (that they left their farm to a non-profit),” said neighbor and family friend Bruce Ketcham, “and that says something about them. They looked out for the betterment of the country, the world, the people around them. They were the best people.”

“The care, time, energy and more that have gone into creating Boylan Farms is a marvelous legacy,” said Cheni Grauer, retired INHF Donor Relations Director and one of the INHF staff that worked with Carl and Margie while they were crafting their legacy plans. “Carl always referred to the farm as ‘a work in progress’ and I am sure INHF will continue to hold that view,”

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INHF has been spending the last year while the estate was in probate learning about the farm, meeting with the current tenants, and noting the healthy farming measures that are in place. The long-term ownership of Boylan Farms will allow us to build on the conservation practices that the Boylans modeled and emulated. While we may never be able to fill the big, meticulous boots Carl and Margie left behind, we will strive to be a neighbor that the community of Shenandoah can be proud of in our care of the land.
Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation has been made stronger by volunteers since the organization was founded in 1979. Board members that volunteer their time and expertise to help direct and carry out INHF’s mission. Volunteers in the office that help to keep us organized and running smoothly. And, of course, volunteers on the land — those that hack at honeysuckle, pick prairie seed and tidy up trails. They have all been integral to helping INHF protect and restore Iowa’s land, water and wildlife. But for years, volunteer opportunities were sporadic, and INHF supporters were asking for ways they could do more. INHF also wanted a way to meet new people eager to give time and talent to conservation, regardless of whether they could provide financial support.

One gift created a sea change in how INHF could engage with volunteers and accomplish more together. Geitel Winakor’s bequest (read more about her gift on page 22) allowed INHF to hire its first volunteer coordinator, Mary Runkel, in 2013. INHF’s choice to use part of Dr. Winakor’s unrestricted gift to launch the Volunteer Program was certified as a Service Enterprise by Points of Light, which recognizes nonprofits committed to effectively delivering on their missions by strategically engaging volunteer time and talent. INHF has benefited from volunteers in advocacy, communications and trail-mapping, to name a few areas, and is always analyzing how best to raise its capacity while creating meaningful experiences for volunteers.

The organization has also trained and trusted volunteers to work on INHF properties on their own time through its Land Ambassador program. In 2022, INHF had 25 Land Ambassadors caring for 10 properties, helping staff give the land in these special places the care it deserves.

“The volunteer program shows INHF’s values at work. People choose to volunteer with INHF because they feel it worthy of their free time,” said Conservation Programs Coordinator Emily Martin. “I so appreciate the work volunteers do. But even more, I enjoy connecting with people in a way that is meaningful for both of us.”

With the recent addition of land stewardship directors in the Loess Hills and eastern Iowa, INHF has been able to hold more volunteer events and engage more people in our work. This year, INHF plans to hold more than 40 events across the state, working on woodlands, prairies and trails that benefit Iowa’s wildlife and people.
A LONG-LASTING LEGACY: GEITEL WINAKOR

Born in 1929, Geitel Winakor was an academic and professor in the fields of textiles, clothing, and home economics. She was an author, collector, crafter of jewelry, watercolor painter, and weaver. From 1960 to 1992, Dr. Winakor taught at Iowa State University in the Department of Textiles and Clothing. She enjoyed watching birds, taking long walks outdoors and was drawn to INHF’s protection of wildlife and natural habitats. When she passed away in 2011 she left a third of her estate to INHF without restriction.

Over the years and through visits and phone calls, INHF staff enjoyed Dr. Winakor’s lively and inquisitive mind. She was always curious about new initiatives that were underway, and supported a variety of public land protection projects around the state as well as promoting private conservation by donating to the conservation easement program. Often she chose to put her annual giving toward general support.

Upon receipt of the final disbursements from her estate in 2013, the INHF board of directors discussed how to make best use of Dr. Winakor’s legacy gift to build conservation capacity in Iowa. One way was by hiring a volunteer coordinator to formalize her volunteer efforts. But Dr. Winakor’s impact didn’t stop there. A portion of her bequest went toward a number of short term needs like land protection projects, growing the youth internship program, helping develop the original Iowa By Trail app, and earning a Ph.D. in general support.

Each spring, amphibians head to shallow water bodies to mate. Some years when conditions are just right, American toads will descend in mass quantities to nearby wetlands and ponds all at the same time. Before you see the water, your ears are filled with their constant trill — a drumroll welcoming the warmer weather, longer days and the toadlets to come.

From the golden eyes of toads to the tropical-looking tadpoles of tree frogs, there is so much to discover when it comes to Iowa’s amphibians and spring is the best time to do it! You need few supplies or preparation and are highly likely to find several species at the same time.

Amphibians are often the canary in the coal mine for the health of our ecosystems. They have permeable skin through which they can breathe and drink. This permeability also makes them highly sensitive to chemicals and other environmental factors, and in part explains amphibians’ worldwide decline.

The Iowa DNR has been collecting data on toads and frogs for over 30 years, enlisting volunteers to survey the number and species of frogs and toads they encounter at specified locations. This community science is a significant tool in assessing the health of amphibians and their environments. Visit the DNR’s website or contact wrmp@dnr.iowa.gov to learn more.

Here are a few tips to help you as you search for amphibians this spring and summer:

• Most amphibians are nocturnal or crepuscular so evenings are often the best time to search.
• An aquatic net and flashlight can be helpful in catching them.
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Spring Peeping

BY SYDNEY ALGREEN-HUNTER

Communications Assistant | shunter@inhf.org

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• Most amphibians are nocturnal or crepuscular so evenings are often the best time to search.
• An aquatic net and flashlight can be helpful in catching them.
• Most Iowa species prefer a semi-permanent or shallow body of water for reproduction.
• Many county conservation departments offer public events focused on frogs and toads. Visit mycountyparks.com to find an event near you.
The white spots on a fawn’s back are actually a defense mechanism. The dots mimic sunlight filtering through leaves, helping the young animal blend in and remain hidden from predators.  

Photo by Ty Smedes