

IOWA NATURAL HERITAGE

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

CONVERGING TRAILS

Finding and creating community on Iowa's multi-use trails. **17**

Feat of the Fen

Protecting habitat and honoring a family's commitment to the land. **8**

Sowing Something Meaningful

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A bison stands in the snow at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge in Jasper County.
Photo by Kristie Burns



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

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Stay outdoors

We all know 2020 was an extremely challenging year, but even with that uncertainty, Iowans turned to nature outdoor recreation in record numbers. Hunting and fishing license sales have skyrocketed.



JOE MCGOVERN
President

Our public parks, natural areas and multi-use trails saw record numbers of users. Bike shops couldn't keep up with the demand for new bikes, and people have been stalking the loading docks at sporting goods stores to reserve kayaks and canoes before they hit the sales floor.

There is also no indication that people are heading back inside. Reservation systems for cabin and camping facilities at our state and county parks show above average booking through the rest of 2021, and outdoor recreation equipment sales are still strong.

So, as my mother said thousands of times when I was growing up, "Stay outside!" Many of you already do this, but I encourage you to get outdoors, keep exploring new places with friends and family to connect with nature and return to those special places that bring you joy. My hope this winter, and beyond, is that

this rekindled love of nature continues for everyone and translates into action to protect more of these treasured places.

At INHF, like many other nonprofits, we faced uncertainty, too. But we learned just how important our collective love of the outdoors was, even in a pandemic. You, our loyal friends, donors, volunteers and partners made it possible for us to protect and restore even more of Iowa's land, water and wildlife.

You had a significant part in every acre protected, every prairie seed planted and every section of trail created. You are a part of the never-ending, important work of conservation, and you made 2020 a successful year by any measure. I am so grateful for that.

As the Iowa legislative session picks up steam, you can help us remind legislators of just how important our natural resources have become to so many. Lawmakers have significant challenges in front of them, but we can't afford to turn our backs on safe outdoor spaces, clean water, healthy soil and our precious natural areas. Conservation funding, like the Resource Enhancement and Protection program (REAP), State Recreational Trails program and the Natural Resource and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, still need to be a priority.

You have always understood how important our natural resources are to Iowa. We need to encourage the thousands of new users to speak up, too. INHF will continue to advocate for sustainable funding for natural resources and outdoor recreation in Iowa because it is vital to our quality of life, now more than ever.

A snowshoer follows a woodland trail in Jester Park in Polk County after a recent snowfall. *Photo by Genna Clemen, INHF*

2020 BY THE NUMBERS

Over 41 years, INHF has protected more than 180,000 acres through roughly 1,400 projects. The majority of this is now public land. In 2020, we also surpassed 200 conservation easements — agreements with private landowners that protect their land in perpetuity. Here is a snapshot of INHF land protection in 2020.

51
new protection projects

5,711
acres protected

32
transfers of land to public partners

3,550
acres transferred to public partners

7
new conservation easements

697
acres protected through easements

“We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona virus existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

-Sonya Renee Taylor

Last spring, my feed was full of sentiments like this. After the initial shock of COVID had dissipated, words and images compelled us to slow down, take inventory and reevaluate what mattered. I welcomed them. Many of us did.

But as the months wore on, the posts became fewer and farther between. So too did the words of encouragement in windows and the sourdough recipes. I'm OK with the latter, but have been thinking a lot about the prior lately.

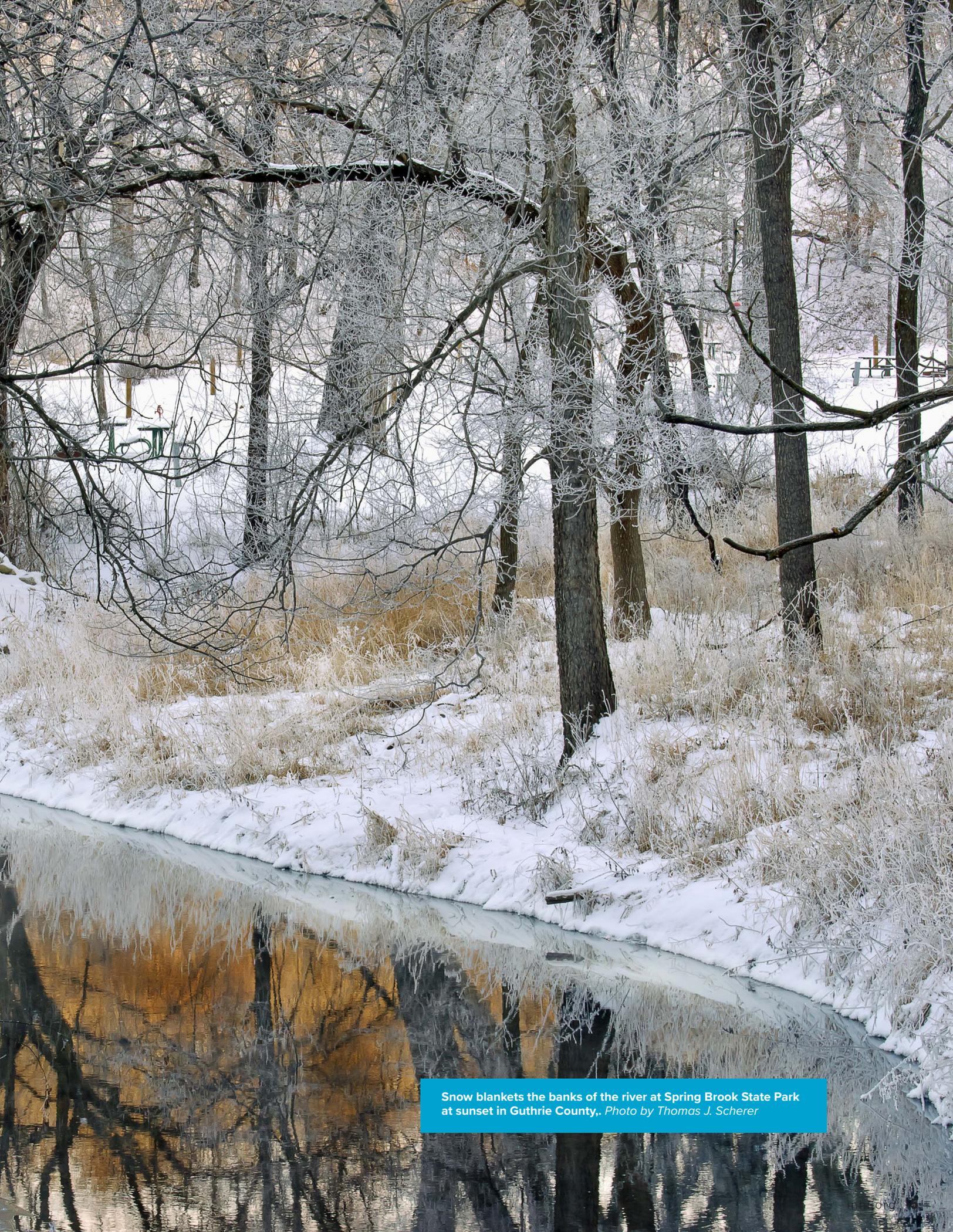
For many, this past year has been and continues to be filled with heartache. But it's also brought perspective and a renewed appreciation for one another and the places we can be together, apart.

Iowans across the state ventured outdoors in record numbers this past year. Some were well acquainted with the natural areas in their “neighborhood.” For others, it was an entirely new experience. We went seeking solace, connection and, if nothing else, a change of scenery. If the number of adults I know purchasing snow pants right now is any indicator, many of us have found it.

As we begin 2021, a year that brings with it the possibility for a return to “normal,” let's return, just for a brief moment, to last March and all its introspection. As we let go of 2020, let's not forget what we want to hold on to and the places we can be together safely.

— **KATY HEGGEN**
Communications Specialist





Snow blankets the banks of the river at Spring Brook State Park at sunset in Guthrie County.. Photo by Thomas J. Scherer

ACCREDITATION NOTICE:

The land trust accreditation program recognizes land conservation organizations that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands. Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), Iowa's first accredited land trust, is pleased to announce it is applying for renewal of accreditation – as required every five years – in 2021. A public comment period is now open.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, conducts an extensive review of each applicant's policies and programs.

"This process provides an opportunity for staff and board to take an in-depth look at our policies, programs and procedures to ensure we are continuing to meet the rigorous standards for accreditation, and assures our community that INHF can be trusted to protect Iowa's land," said INHF President Joe McGovern.

The Commission invites public input and accepts signed, written comments on pending applications. Comments must relate to how INHF complies with national quality standards. These standards address the ethical and technical operation of a land trust. For the full list of standards visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org/help-and-resources/indicator-practices

To learn more about the accreditation program and to submit a comment, visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org, or email your comment to info@landtrustaccreditation.org. Comments may also be faxed or mailed to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, Attn: Public Comments: (fax) 518-587-3183; (mail) 36 Phila Street, Suite 2, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866.

Comments on INHF's application are requested by September 15, 2021.



VOLUNTEER ROUNDUP

INHF volunteers had a unique year in 2020. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, volunteer events were halted from March to September. After adding new protocols to fall events, volunteer events were able to resume.

"We had record-breaking attendance at our events this fall. Almost all of our events were at full capacity. It just goes to show that outdoor opportunities in which people can gather in a safe environment are essential for our community," said Melanie Schmidt, INHF's volunteer coordinator.

462 volunteers contributed over 1,300 hours across 20 events or independent projects this year. The Land Ambassador program has also doubled since 2019. Twenty-four people are now committed to a year of volunteer land stewardship as Land Ambassadors, assisting the land stewardship team in caring for INHF-owned properties across the state.

"I am confident that while this year has had its difficulties, our volunteers have become a stronger and more impactful team that can work toward any common goal."

To learn more about volunteering with INHF in 2021, contact Volunteer Coordinator Melanie Schmidt at mschmidt@inhf.org.

New intern joins INHF

INHF welcomed Katy Hull last September. As communications intern, Katy has helped develop social media strategies that continue to uphold INHF's mission.

"I am excited to learn more about land conservation and help others connect to Iowa's land and wildlife. I think giving back to nature not only better the environment but also ourselves. INHF is the perfect place to build connections with Iowa's protected lands."

Katy is from Leawood, Kansas. She attends Drake University where she is studying public relations and digital media production. Katy is passionate about advocacy work and will continue to pursue it through attending law school in the future.



UPCOMING EVENTS

FEB 13

Winter Workday at Mathes Pella, IA
Curb your cabin fever with a morning outdoors! Volunteers will remove brush and non-native plants to help the oak savanna at Mathes, a 51-acre natural area just a few miles outside Pella, thrive. People are welcome to stay and hike around the property's rolling hills and ridges overlooking the South Skunk River after the event.
RSVP at inhf.org

FEB 27

Winter Workday at Perkins Prairie Jefferson, IA
Curb your cabin fever with a morning outdoors! Volunteers will remove brush and non-native plants from the prairie at Perkins Prairie, a 30-acre prairie preserve in Greene County. People are welcome to stay and hike the gently rolling hills of remnant prairie after the event.
RSVP at inhf.org

Please note: winter weather can be unpredictable. Registered attendees will be contacted in the event of a change or cancellation due to weather. Updates are also posted at inhf.org/events

For more information, and more upcoming events, visit www.inhf.org.

QUARTERLY PROTECTION REPORT

An quick look at new INHF protection projects and land transferred between **October 2020–December 2020.**

*WMA stands for Wildlife Management Area

Newly protected areas

Sac County

39 acres of future restored streambank near Lake View city limits in Sac County. Will protect streambank and in-stream habitat and provide water quality benefits to the watershed. Other parts of the property will be planted to prairie, providing additional wildlife habitat.

Linn County

48 acres of prairie and woodland near Cedar Rapids. The land is part of Prairiewoods, a Franciscan spirituality center that invites people of all faiths and cultures to come explore the intersection of ecology, spirituality and holistic health. *(Conservation easement donated by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration)*

Clarke County

473 acres of grassland, woodland and working lands in northeast Clarke County. The land is adjacent to Green Pine Wildlife Area, within one mile of Heritage Hills Wildlife Management Area and Oakwood Grassland Wildlife Area. Preserves wildlife habitat in the area, protects open space and provides water quality benefits to Squaw Creek. *(Conservation easement donated by Mike LaMair)*

Barringer Slough WMA Addition

16-and-a-half acres on the northwest shore of Lost Island Lake in Clay County. The land is adjacent to Barringer Slough WMA and within Dewey's Pasture Bird Conservation Area – home to over 60 Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Once the land transfers, the entire shoreline on this side of the lake will be in public ownership. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Fayette County

66 acres of land that includes a small remnant sand prairie, woodland and working lands in Fayette County. The land is near the Gilbertson Conservation Education Area and within the Turkey River floodplain. The sand prairie provides habitat for ornate box turtles, a State Threatened Species, which have historically been found in the area. A portion of the land value was donated by Rowland and Barb Hackmann. *(Proposed public ownership)*

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. Protection will support ongoing restoration of the lake, one of the largest shallow water lakes in the region, and create critical habitat for migrating birds, including Sandhill cranes. *(Proposed public ownership)*

West Fork WMA Addition

58 acres of wetlands adjacent to West Fork Wildlife Area in Palo Alto County. Protects restored wetlands and wooded areas, preserves open space and expands public recreation in the region. Maintains wildlife habitat for species including the mallard, blue wing teal, muskrat and mink. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Brown & Sons Heritage Land

42 acres of oak/hickory woodland near Ottumwa in Wapello County. Features spring ephemerals, a creek and woodland that provides habitat for species including redheaded woodpeckers, Baltimore orioles, white-tailed deer and small mammals. The land was donated by Shirley Brown. *(Will be owned and managed by INHF)*

Pilot Knob WMA Addition

80 acres of future restored wetland and prairie in eastern Winnebago County. Expands wildlife habitat for neotropical migratory birds and migratory waterfowl including trumpeter swans, and provides water quality benefits. A portion of the land value was donated by Steve and Margaret Hansen. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Goshen WMA Addition

99 acres of Chariton River corridor in Lucas County. Features riparian and upland woodland, river oxbows and grassland. More than half of the property lies in the 100-year floodplain and provides excellent habitat for a variety of reptiles, amphibians and bird species including wood ducks. *(Proposed public ownership)*

Land transfers to public partners

Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge Addition

80-acre inholding on the east side of the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge in Jasper County. Protects and expands wildlife habitat for grassland birds, mammals and pollinators. *(Owned and managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)*

Warren County

137 acres of restored floodplain adjacent to the North River near Norwalk. Provides quality habitat for several species including woodcock, pheasants, deer, turkey and neotropical migratory birds, water quality benefits to the watershed and increases recreation opportunities near the Des Moines metro. This in the first parcel in this 374-acre property to transfer to the Iowa DNR. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

Winnebago County

42 acres of grassland, waterways and sand-laden soil along the Iowa/Minnesota border. Restoration and protection of the property, which includes a one-mile tributary of the Winnebago River, will improve water quality, reduce flooding downstream and create significant wildlife habitat. This is the third parcel in this 612-acre property to transfer to the Iowa DNR. *(Owned and managed by the Iowa DNR)*

Big Wall Lake Addition, Wright County





FEAT OF THE FEN

BY KATY HULL
Communications Intern | khull@inhf.org

Driving along Iowa Highway 1, you could easily pass the pasture and hayfield one mile north of Solon without noticing it. However, upon closer inspection, you'll see that the land itself, its history and future are worth a second look.

Until last year, this land had been cared for by the same family for more than 100 years. Malinda Reif Reilly and her husband, John, were the latest in a long line in Malinda's family to farm it. Malinda and John produced cattle, corn and soybeans for years on this 100-acre parcel, which has provided hay and pasture for a closed cattle herd since 1938. John and Malinda were committed to farming organically, and the farm has been certified organic since 1996.

The land's pasture was always wet, but Malinda, and her father before her, insisted that it not be drained. As it happened, their decision and farming methods helped preserve

the land's special natural features, including a fen – a type of wetland – and associated uphill sand prairie.

By definition, a fen is a groundwater-fed wetland containing a high level of organic matter, and is characterized by water soaked ground and sporadic, sometimes bouncy, earth mounds surrounded by puddles of water caused by water rising to the surface. Fens are considered the rarest type of wetland in Iowa with just 300 known statewide, and are often home to rare plants and animals due to their unique conditions.

"The soil is still alive with microorganisms and bacteria from the retreat of the glaciers thousands of years ago. There are very few land parcels (left) in Iowa with this history," said John.

Native plant species that have been identified so far in this fen include boneset, white turtle head, common tussock sedge, dark green rush and swamp saxifrage. Botanists

Malinda Reif Reilly Fen and Prairie

Johnson County



LAND: 100 acres of pasture, fen and uphill sand prairie in Johnson County.

SPECIAL FEATURES: Home to a fen, Iowa's rarest type of wetland, and more the 225 unique plant species

have studied the entire property for over 25 years and have catalogued 225 plant species.

“We have known how special this place is for over 20 years,” said Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation President Joe McGovern. “I remember standing on the edge of the fen, talking with Malinda about her vision for protecting this land for others to enjoy and learn from.”

But as sometimes happens, circumstances prevented Malinda from protecting the land during her lifetime. Before she passed, Malinda asked John to ensure that the fen and prairie would be preserved forever. Following her death in 2015, John contacted the Johnson County Conservation Board (JCCB) with the hope of honoring her memory by protecting this land.

JCCB Director Larry Gullett asked INHF for assistance acquiring the property. INHF, JCCB and Reilly negotiated a price for the land and INHF purchased it from Reilly in 2018. The land will transfer to JCCB in early 2021.

“It is truly meaningful to be part of fulfilling Malinda’s dream and protecting this special place all these years later,” McGovern said.

JCCB was able to secure a Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) grant to help fund the purchase of the property. This extremely competitive grant helps maintain Iowa’s native biodiversity through the protection of high-quality conservation land across the state.

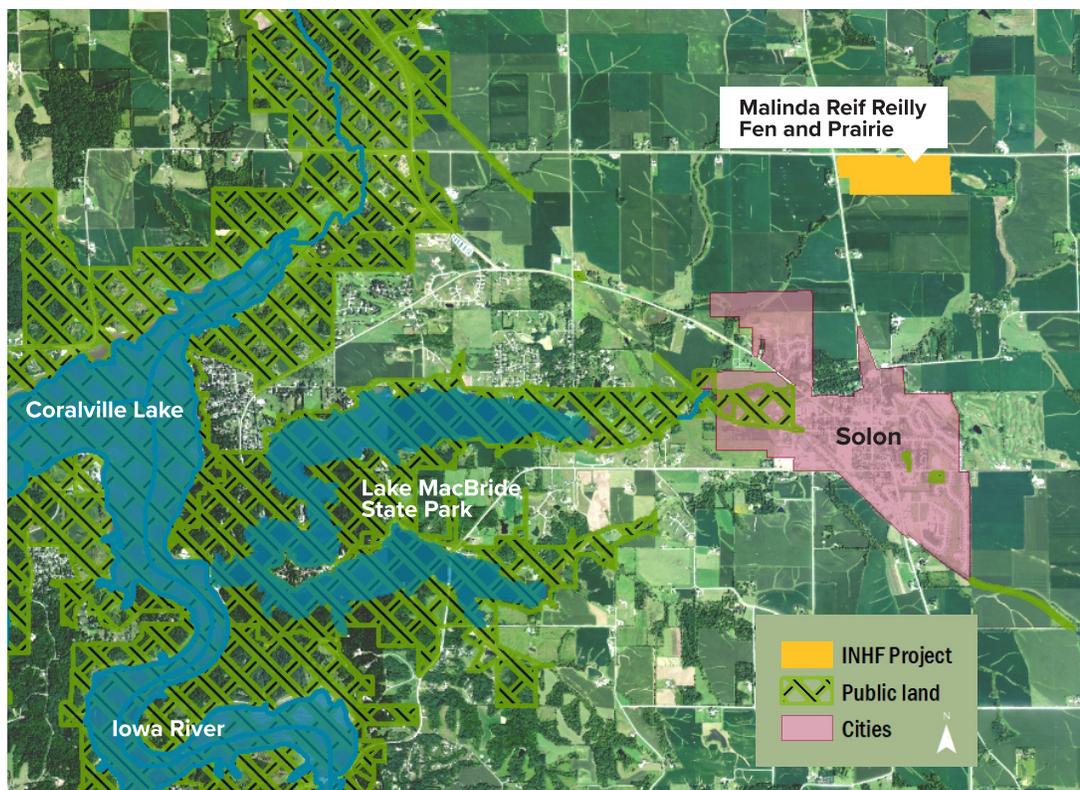
“With more than 90% of Iowa’s landscape altered for agriculture and development of our urban centers, providing space for plants and animals to continue their existence is one of the most important things we as humans can do,” said Gullett.

JCCB plans to restore the fen and upland prairie over several years, providing quality wildlife habitat for neotropical migratory birds, small mammals and insects,

including the federally-endangered rusty patched bumble bee, which has been found nearby. JCCB will manage the site as a nature preserve, providing public access for hiking, educational and nature-appreciation activities.

The site will be known as the “Malinda Reif Reilly Fen and Prairie” to honor the memory of its previous owner.

For John, this is one of the best parts of protecting this property. “This land is her life,” he said. “And she is still present here.” 🍀

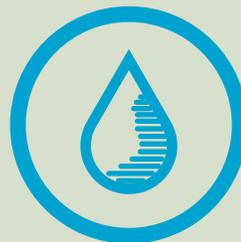




NATURE'S ADVOCATE

Giving a voice to the voiceless.

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





Public policy and funding have a significant impact on how our natural resources are used, managed and protected. In order to maintain a healthy, thriving environment, we must all speak up and give a voice to the voiceless: Iowa's land, water and wildlife.

INHF created Nature's Advocate to help Iowans learn about natural resource issues that impact their communities and to amplify conservation voices. This year, the ongoing pandemic will change how we advocate during the legislative session, so we have adapted Nature's Advocate to be more conducive to virtual and remote advocacy.

INHF's top policy priorities are summarized here, but more Nature's Advocate resources may be found at inhf.org, including:

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

Get Involved

- Identify your legislators and introduce yourself
- Sign up for INHF action alerts
- Follow INHF's social media

How to Connect

While there may be limited opportunities to advocate in-person this year, your calls, emails and letters to legislators will be essential. Here are some helpful tips:

Get to know your legislators. As elected officials, your legislators represent and often welcome input from constituents. Introduce yourself and let them know what issues matter most to you.

Keep it local. Lead with personal experience and discuss how your community will be impacted by legislative decisions.

Find where your interests align. Protecting our natural resources and connecting people with the outdoors has multiple benefits. Find how those benefits align with the interests of your legislators.

Make your request clear. Respectfully ask that your legislator support or fund a specific program that you care about.

Be courteous. Thank them for their time and service.

Questions?

Contact INHF Public Policy Director Anna Gray at agray@inhf.org or 515-288-1846, ext. 41



Trails

Decades of vision, planning and collaboration have helped make Iowa a premier trails destination. The Wabash Trace Nature Trail, High Trestle Trail and Cedar Valley Nature Trail, for example, are staples to their communities and support local commerce and growth. Access to natural landscapes and recreational opportunities are among the top factors that motivate individuals to visit and move to Iowa. Trails help people get outdoors and stay healthy, while making communities a more attractive place to work and live.

Iowa's State Recreational Trails Program has leveraged funding from federal and private sources to construct hundreds of miles of trails. Even so, demand for trail expansion, development and maintenance has consistently outpaced funding, leaving many unmet needs and unrealized opportunities. Funding for Iowa trails is a sound investment in public health, rural revitalization and economic prosperity.



Water Quality

Iowa's lakes, rivers and streams are important sources for drinking, fishing and recreating. The quality of the state's water has a direct impact on the economic stability and health of its communities. Poor water quality poses serious health risks and disproportionately impacts rural areas where the costs of cleaning and processing drinking water is shouldered by a smaller population. When beaches close due to excess bacteria and toxins, surrounding businesses lose opportunities to attract visitors and tourists.

Improving water quality in Iowa requires reducing sediment flow into rivers and streams, cleaning up impaired waterbodies and taking steps to protect our watersheds into the future. This includes funding for natural solutions to water quality, including wetland restoration, river buffers and floodplain management.



Regenerative Agriculture

Creating resilient landscapes and improving water quality starts with land stewardship. With nearly 70% of Iowa land in crop production, conservation must be a priority in agricultural policy in order to protect the state's soils and waterways, and adapt to a changing climate. Regenerative agriculture utilizes a diverse set of practices—such as no-till planting, year-round ground cover and holistic grazing—to actively sequester carbon, rebuild soil and enhance the entire farm ecosystem.

Dependable funding for outreach, technical assistance and infrastructure is needed to scale up the conservation efforts that will help ensure we are passing down healthy and sustainable land to the next generations.



Public Lands

Public lands provide open space for outdoor recreation, protect precious wildlife habitat and create economic opportunity across the state. In the past year, Iowans rediscovered their home state, and our parks and trails saw more visitors than ever before. With a renewed appreciation for the outdoors, many popular destinations are already booked up for 2021. There is clear need for more public open space in Iowa.

The increased 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 support a high quality of life.



Iowa's Water & Land Legacy

Support for Iowa's land, water and outdoor recreation is dependent on program funding set by the legislature that varies from year to year. Reliable funding is necessary to ensure that Iowa's natural resources and communities will be consistently supported.

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 ten years 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 at least \$171 million annually and provide farmers, local communities and state agencies with reliable and accountable funding.

SOWING SOMETHING MEANINGFUL

BY KATY HEGGEN
Communications Specialist | kheggen@inhf.org

A short drive from Ames, Mike and Linda Meetz's reconstructed and remnant prairie and wetlands are a sight to behold.

Pale purple coneflowers, black-eyed Susans and prairie blazing stars compel you to look their way as you wade through the tallgrass. Circling hawks shift your line of sight to the sky, while the calls of frogs from the marsh bring your gaze back to the ground.

But what can't be seen here – all of the individuals that have invested themselves in this place, and the countless others that have received something from it – is even more impressive.

Taking Root

Mike and Linda were married in 1979 and moved into an old farmhouse rental on the southwest side of Ames that same year later. They spent their weekdays in Ames; both were employed at the ISU Veterinary College. On the weekends, they'd drive out into the country in search of a place of their own, "a few acres with space for a garden."

It was on one such drive that the couple saw a sign advertising a few acres for sale a couple miles north of the Union Pacific tracks southwest of the former Milford

Township School.

"We called immediately. The guy who put the sign out said 'I haven't even listed it yet!'" Mike recalled.

After securing a starter loan, the couple purchased the land, made the move out to the country, and never looked back.

Over the years, they came to know the land, its character and subtle charms well. Mike, an ardent conservationist, also developed an affinity for the surrounding 40 acres, which included pockets of remnant prairie and wetland. When the land was offered for sale nearly 20 years later, they leapt at the opportunity.

"It was a big deal when we were able to acquire it, so we bit the bullet and went for it," Mike said. "We were living on a shoestring to keep the payments up."

After acquiring the land, the Meetzs began the process of planting it to prairie. Ready[®] soybeans, planted that first year helped suppress annual weeds and woody invasives. Native prairie seed was hand harvested from nearby prairie remnants. Other local ecotype prairie seed came from friends and fellow prairie enthusiasts in the area including Carl and Linda Kurtz, Cindy Hildebrand and Roger Maddux, and George and Trish Patrick.

The first seeds were sown in the winter of '98.

Meetz CE

Story County



LAND: 38 acres of reconstructed prairie and wetlands near Ames.

SPECIAL FEATURES:

Provides high quality wildlife habitat, open space and opportunity for community conservation.



Subsequent years were spent mowing, adding seed, applying prescribed fire and waiting as the prairie took root, a process that takes several years. Twenty-two years later, the prairie is a model reconstruction and a representation of the tight-knit community that played a part in its planting.

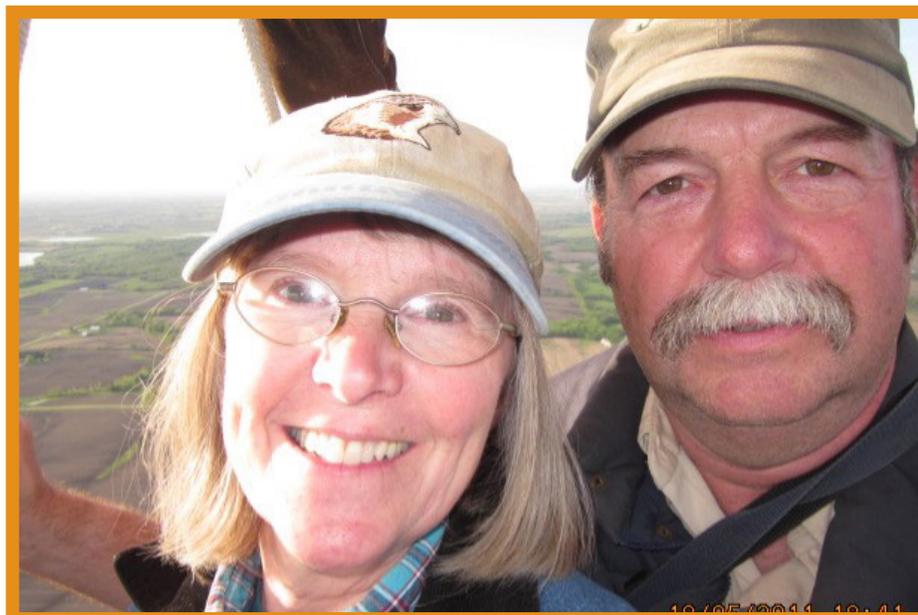
“I had more than one person say 36 acres is a lot to plant in one shot, but I had a lot of assistance and good advice from those folks,” Mike said. “They were really instrumental in helping me.”

Over the years, Mike has restored the remnant wetland and reconstructed another, providing additional wildlife habitat and water quality benefits. Hand collected acorn and walnuts along with a stand of 100 bare root Burr oak and White pine seedlings were planted around the homestead that first year, a nod to his own northeastern Wisconsin roots. As the landscape has continued to evolve, so too has the part it has played in shaping the lives of others.

Sowing Seeds

Sharing this land and using it to introduce and instill a love of nature in others – especially youth – is as important to Mike as the land itself.

Mike’s spent many summer afternoons



walking through the prairie with the children of friends and neighbors, pointing out different plants, catching frogs, answering questions and encouraging exploration.

“Some will look at it and see a scrambled up mess. Others will see connection,” Mike said. “The more times they come out here, they start to see the interconnectedness around them and begin to realize we’re not that far removed from that web.”

The land has long-been a research site for Iowa State University graduate students

studying a wide range of topics related to Iowa's land, water and wildlife. Years ago, Mike established an education agreement with Story County Conservation that allows staff to use the site for youth programming.

"The earlier we can get little minds out there, the better," Mike said.

Countless friends, neighbors and acquaintances have come to enjoy the prairie over the years. Mike's taken special care to cut trails and provide benches at scenic spots in the interest of creating ways for people of all abilities to experience the prairie.

Regardless of when and how they experience it, Mike just wants this to be a place for people to learn about and engage with nature.

"There's value in keeping your feet on the ground," Mike said. "It's also good to take your shoes off and walk around every once in awhile."

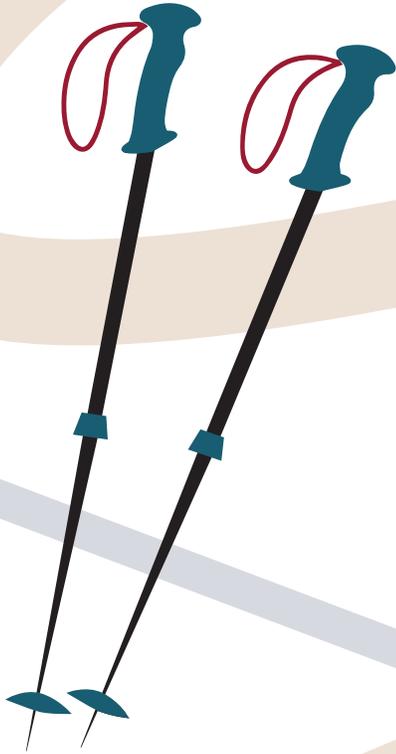
"If you're going to do that in the prairie, wait until after a rainy day," he added, chuckling.

Perennial Plantings

Mike's many contributions to conservation on his own land, other projects and organizations in Story County, as well as his inexhaustible efforts to teach others about Iowa's outdoors, have earned him many recognitions, including the Olav Smedal Conservation Award, the Story County Citizen of the year in 2016, the Iowa Association of Naturalists/Iowa Conservation Education Coalition's Outstanding Volunteer Award in 2015, and INHF's Lawrence and Eula Hagie Heritage Award in 2002. These honors speak to his conservation legacy, as does his decision to permanently protect his land with a conservation easement, which he donated to INHF this past December.

"From the partnership with Story County Conservation to contributing seed to other prairie restoration projects, this property keeps giving in ways that go way beyond its 38 acres," said INHF Conservation Easement Director Erin Van Waus. "It's been a privilege to work with Mike to protect it in perpetuity." 🌿





CONVERGING TRAILS

BY KATY HEGGEN
Communications Specialist | kheggen@inhf.org

This story is part of an ongoing series, Lay of the Land, that seeks to explore the different ways people engage with nature, and how those experiences both on and off the land have informed their relationship to it. We believe that the more we understand about our own and others' experiences on the land, the better we'll be able to work together to protect and care for it. To view other stories in the series, visit inhf.org/about-us/publications

It's customary for thru-hikers to assign one another trail names as they make their way from one trailhead to another. It's less common for multi-use trail users to adapt a moniker. But there are always exceptions.

Apocalypse Meow, Dee Flesher, Chachi, Tzenda and Skatie aren't trail names in the traditional sense. After all, they were established indoors, not out. Nonetheless, this past year, they've made the transition to the trail.

The individuals they're affiliated with belong to an ever-expanding array of Iowans who are using the trails for personal enjoyment as well as a space for staying connected, discovering and reconnecting with communities that extend well beyond the trailhead.

Crossing Over

Emilee Asher was equal parts anxious and excited the first time she attended a Des Moines Roller Derby (DMRD) meetup.

"I was terrified," Asher said. But she left her home in Redfield and drove to the rink



on Des Moines' south side anyway. "I couldn't even skate halfway around the track. I was shaking the whole time and getting lapped by little kids."

But her fellow skaters cheered her on. Their support gave her the courage to attend the team's next practice. A year-and-a-half later, Asher, aka Apocalypse Meow, is still skating and roller derby has become a fixture in her life on and off the flat track.

"I've made some of the best friends I've ever had in derby," she said.

Last March, DMRD made the difficult decision to suspend all scheduled practices and events in the interest of slowing the spread of COVID. This left many on the tight-knit community looking for a safe way to stay connected.

"We were all really missing skating and each other," said Katie Akin, aka Skatie, who joined the team shortly after moving to Des Moines in 2019. "So we started skating together on the trails."

For many on the team, skating outdoors

was an entirely new experience that brought with it a unique set of challenges ranging from contending with rocks, hills and the weather, to learning how to stop, slow down and fall on pavement.

"It's a great way to work on different skills and a really good way to get out, see nature and other people," said Heather Gibb, aka Dee Flesher, who's been playing derby and trail skating since 2012.

"Skating on the trails is just relaxing," said Tre Manken, aka Tzenda, who's been involved with derby since 2014 and trail skates regularly. "My trail skating has always been separate [from derby], it's never been training-orientated for me. You have the ability to look around and take in the scenery, stop at the bar and have a beer, and just enjoy it. I'll skate all winter long as long as the trail is dry."

Being part of a community that welcomes, affirms and embraces people of all abilities and backgrounds also appeals to many skaters.

"I like being a part of something that reaches out to people who maybe aren't mainstream and gives them a place to belong, something to be a part of. Trails provide another way for them to find us."

- CHARISSA THORNTON-RAYSBY

"Everyone is just so welcoming. It doesn't matter what size or shape you are, whether you've been skating forever or this is your first time," said Asher, who was three-hundred pounds when she started skating. "As a teammate and coach, I always try to make people feel that same sense of inclusion I felt when I first started."

"In roller derby there's a spot for everyone," said Gibb. "I think trail skating's the same."



There's a trail out there for everyone."

Skating on the trails has also brought to light opportunities to welcome others into the community.

"As the summer went on, we were getting more and more requests from people to join the team," said Charissa Thornton-Raysby, aka Chachi, who's been playing derby for several years. "We realized that there are a lot of people that want to skate."

In response, Thornton-Raysby, Akin and another skater launched @rollerskatedesmoines, an Instagram account aimed at promoting "all things roller skating in Des Moines."

"I like being a part of something that reaches out to people who maybe aren't mainstream and gives them a place to belong, something to be a part of," said Thornton-Raysby. "Trails provide another way for them to find us."

A different kind of connector

Whereas trails have provided a way for the skating community to stay connected, for Emily Medina, they facilitated an introduction to a community that is akin to family, and provided possibilities as she adjusted to a new

way of moving through the world.

Medina has been cycling her whole life. She took a brief break when she was diagnosed with ataxia, a rare degenerative disease similar to multiple sclerosis that affects the nervous system. But it wasn't long before she was back on the bike.

"After my diagnosis, my two-wheel bike went away," said Medina. "I wasn't able to balance it anymore. I ended up getting a recumbent trike and it was really great."

About a year later, Medina learned about the Adaptive Sports Iowa Cycling Team, a RAGBRAI team of adaptive and support cyclists. Created in 2011 to reduce barriers to access at RAGBRAI for cyclists with physical disabilities, the team has grown exponentially in its eight years.

"We started with 24 riders," said



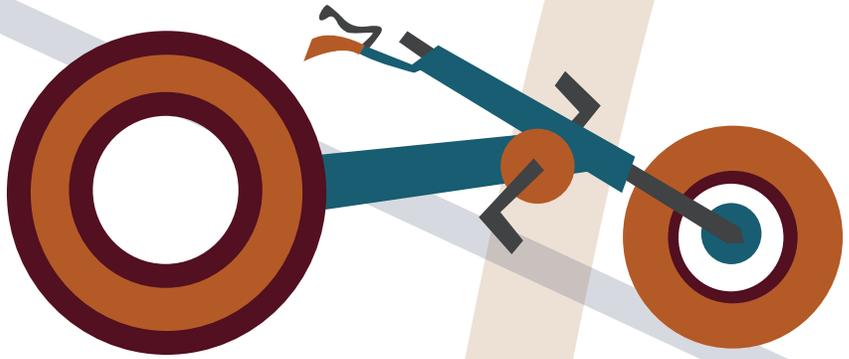
Adaptive Sports Iowa Director Hannah Lundeen. “Now we have about 80 riders each year. The majority of our riders – about 70% – are from Iowa.”

Since joining the team, Medina has completed the last seven years of RAGBRAI, riding the full river-to-river stretch. The months in-between are spent training, much of it on the trails, which offer a range of routes and a safe place to ride.

“Trikes are a bit wider, so they don’t always fit on sidewalks, so you run the risk of getting stuck in a rut. Trails are wide so you can get anywhere you want,” explained Medina. “I feel so much safer being on a trail, especially when I’m training alone. You have a lower profile on a trike. Not everyone will see you on the road.”

While Medina appreciates the independence that comes with having the option to train on her own, she revels in opportunities to ride the trails alongside her teammates and others in Iowa’s adaptive cycling community.

“There’s this sense of camaraderie. I would actually say that’s the best thing about being an adaptive cyclist. Cycling itself is probably right behind that,” Medina said. “When you’re on the trail, everyone is looking out for everybody else. If someone gets a flat, people you don’t know stop and try to help. It’s nothing like the rest of the world. It’s the world as it should be.”



Trail links

Over the years, John Brunow has taken countless cyclists of all ages, abilities and backgrounds on their very first bike ride.

“When I ask someone when the last time was they rode a bike and they tell me they’re 95-years-old and it’s their first time on a bike, it just makes my day,” said Brunow, who owns All Ability Cycles, LLC, a bike shop one block from the Raccoon River Valley Trail trailhead in Jefferson, Iowa that specializes in adaptive

“Inclusive cycling isn’t just about equipment and having places to go ride, it’s about being part of the community.”

-JOHN BRUNOW

bikes, equipment and maintenance. “More often than not, it makes theirs, too.”

It’s the opportunity to provide experiences like these that have led an increasing number of care communities across Iowa to reach out to John about purchasing bikes for their residents.

“Our bikes get A LOT of use,” said Spencer Steffy, director of programming at NewAldaya Lifescapes, a retirement and assisted living community in Cedar Falls.

NewAldaya purchased two bikes – a side-by-side tandem and a wheelchair accessible model – two-and-half years ago, and haven’t stopped using them since.

“If it’s over 55 degrees, we’re out on those



bikes from 9 a.m. until 4 or 5 in the afternoon every day of the week,” Steffy said.

“The bikes have been so beneficial,” said Diane Watts, activity director at Spurgeon Manor, a continuing care retirement community in Dallas Center. Spurgeon Manor purchased two bikes, a side-by-side tandem and a wheelchair accessible bike three years ago. “They get people out of the building, into the fresh air and sunshine, which is a great sensory experience. There are the social benefits of being out in the community. It’s good for their memory, too. They remember the days they get to go on a bike ride.”

Between serving a wide range of residents with differing levels of mobility and the centers’ proximity to nearby trail corridors – NewAldaya the Cedar Valley Trails system and Spurgeon Manor the Raccoon River Valley Trails system – both Watts and Steffy say the bikes were kind of a no brainer.

“The activity department makes sure that everyone that likes to be outside gets to go for a ride,” said Mavis Jensen, a resident at NewAldaya. “Whether they pedal or don’t pedal, are in a wheelchair or not, they still get to go.”

“I help pedal,” added Jensen, 91, who uses the tandem bike often. “I feel like I need the exercise.”

But for Jensen, adaptive cycling and access to trails have provided much more than a bit of exercise and the opportunity to get outdoors. They’ve offered her a chance to reconnect with a part of life that she thought was in the past and through it, her community, especially during the pandemic.

“I used to be a cyclist, but got rid of mine [my bike] a few years ago,” she said. “It’s just a good feeling to get outside, ride the trails, see people and new things. It feels good when you get back in, too.”

“Seeing other cyclists, having conversations, exchanging waves – that’s a big thing, just normalizing social actions,” said Brunow, who’s also sold adaptive bikes to individuals, families and organizations throughout Iowa and beyond.

“Inclusive cycling isn’t just about equipment and having places to go ride, it’s about being part of the community,” he said.



Trails for all

Trails are often synonymous with connection. Connections to neighboring towns, the outdoors, economic opportunities... But the impact of connections forged on the trail – in our individual and collective communities – are immeasurable.

In the last 40 years, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) has helped create more than 2,000+ miles of multi-use trails across Iowa. Many trails cited as favorites of those featured here, including the High Trestle Trail, the Raccoon River Valley Trail and the Great Western Trail, are projects INHF has played an integral part in.

As INHF continues to help communities across the state create and connect trails, we look forward to learning more about the many ways people use Iowa’s multi-use trails, and the impact those trails have had on them and the way they relate to Iowa’s outdoors and each other.

“I really don’t know how to explain it any other way,” said Jensen. “It makes you feel like you’re part of something. It’s just a good ride.” 🚲

Editor’s note: Sometimes the hardest part of getting outdoors is finding a community to do it with. If you are part of or know of groups welcoming people outdoors, please consider sending us a note so we may consider uplifting them here and in other INHF communications. Emails may be sent to Editor Joe Jayjack at jjayjack@inhf.org

GET CONNECTED

Des Moines Roller Derby
desmoinesrollerderby.com

Roller Skate Des Moines
[@rollerskatedesmoines](https://www.instagram.com/rollerskatedesmoines)

Adaptive Sports Iowa
adaptivesportsiowa.org

All Ability Cycles, LLC
302 E. Lincoln Way
Jefferson, IA

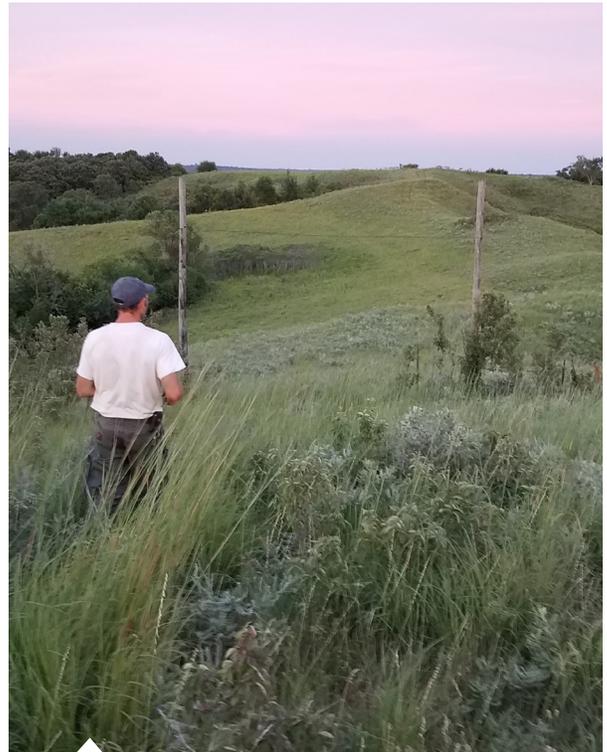
LEAVING A **LEGACY**

Catherine Nielsen, a longtime resident of Council Bluffs, bequeathed her estate to Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) with the provision that the gift be used to fulfill INHF's mission to protect and restore Iowa's land, water and wildlife in the Loess Hills.

When Catherine passed away at the age of 102 in the fall of 2018, INHF established a special fund to leverage her generous bequest. Every project Catherine's gift has aided resulted in protection of the Loess Hills landscape that was so dear to her heart.

To date, the Nielsen fund has supported five land protection projects that have helped preserve over one thousand acres of the Loess Hills for public use through County Conservation Boards and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. This includes the incredible sweep of Green Hill Ranch, a rare prairie remnant, and expansions of existing protected complexes.

By strategically using Catherine's gift to match funds and reduce project costs, INHF is able to stretch her generosity beyond its face value and through numerous projects. Catherine's legacy will extend for years to come and have immeasurable impact. Her generosity will shape the face of the Loess Hills far into the future.



Katherine Nielsen's gift helped protect this 160-acre prairie property in Harrison County, among others.

— **ABBY HADE TERPSTRA**,
Donor relations director

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 or 515-288-1846, ext 15.

TRIBUTE **GIFTS**

IN HONOR OF

Brady Belcher
Donald A Beneke
Marty & Mike Boesenberg
Michelle Devine
Patricia Dinsmore
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Mary C Fritz
The Garst Family
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Anita O'Gara
Dick & Carolyn Ramsay
Don and Luella Reese

Pat Ryan
Earl and Isabelle Salterberg
Ken & Ethel Mae Schneberger's 70th wedding anniversary
Tim Sproul
Laura Fischer-Walter Wilkins Family
Carol Winter

IN MEMORY OF

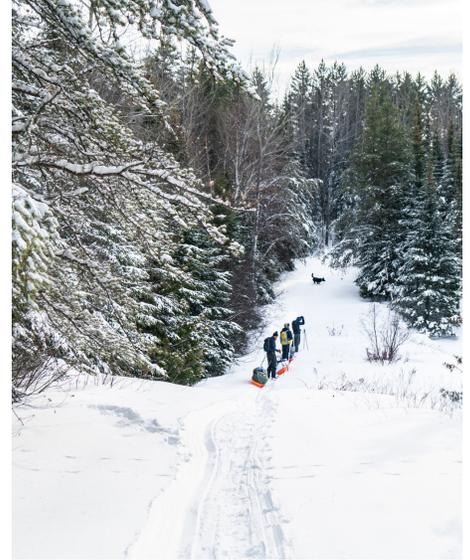
Lila Andersen
Pat and Dorothy Appgar
Murray and Alice Applegate
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Dennis L Beck

Phil Beelendorf
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Alberta Brosnahan and Mary Brosnahan Terpstra
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Glenn Leggett
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Sandra Ostwinkle
Wallace Parker
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Virginia H. Richards
Mercer Richter
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Joe Ruperto
Dick Sempel
Dean Sandstoe
Beulah Schelle
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Art and Verna Sessions
Arlis Sorensen
Ed Steinbrech
John Strain
Conrad Svoboda
Avis Sweers
Barb Urdil Zahradnik

Find more Iowa places to explore at www.inhf.org/blog



Warm up to Winter Camping

BY KATY HULL
Communications Intern | khull@inhf.org

While maybe a somewhat unconventional activity in the Midwest, winter camping can be a rewarding and peaceful way to experience the outdoors in the colder months. Take advantage of Iowa state parks, many of which offer winter camping options, and enjoy the outdoors.

Before beginning your trip, make sure you're fully equipped and plan ahead. As a first timer, pick a winter night with low winds and manageable temperatures and consider camping closer to your home in case you need to leave sooner than expected. If you're more experienced, consider exploring areas such as the Luster Heights Unit in Yellow River State Forest as well as the Loess Hills, which offer more rustic options

Layering up is the best way to keep yourself warm. Start with a base layer such as thermal underwear, then a mid-layer and finally a top layer that is waterproof, such as snow pants.

"Having wool layers is incredibly

important," said Zac Bales-Henry, an avid winter camper who runs the travel blog [@miles.two.go](https://www.instagram.com/miles.two.go) with his wife, Emily. "Wool will push moisture away from the body and help keep you warm and dry."

Bring a sleeping bag rated for below freezing temps with an insulated layer such as a foam pad, and sleep with your water bottle inside the bag so it doesn't freeze overnight. Having an insulated bag for food as well will help keep your meals from freezing. Three or four-season tents have smaller windows and stronger poles to help secure your tent against the ice and snow. Bring a travel-sized shovel to dig out the snow so you can easily pitch your tent.

Not only can you hike while out camping, but depending on where you go, you can also go snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and sledding around your campsite.

"There's nothing like this at any other time of the year," said Bales-Henry. "It's still and perfect." 🏡

To see more of Zac's traveling adventures, check out his Instagram: [@miles.two.go](https://www.instagram.com/miles.two.go)



Iowa
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505 5th Ave., Suite 444
Des Moines, IA 50309



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Cross county skiers trek around the lake at Dale Maffitt Reservoir, which falls in the four corners of Polk, Warren, Dallas and Madison counties. Many parks, nature centers and county conservation boards have winter recreation gear for rent to allow lowans to get outdoors all seasons. *Photo by Genna Clemen*

