



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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New wildlife area drawing wildlife, hunters to southeast Jones County



This prairie, in its second year, is starting to find its identity. Two years removed from being a soybean field, wild bergamot, black-eyed Susan and more native plants have returned. The Oxford Junction area is alive with redwing black birds, grasshoppers, goldfinches, butterflies, dragonflies and pheasants. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Oxford Junction, Iowa - The Oxford Junction Wildlife Area in southeast Jones County might be hard to find on a map made before 2017. That's because it didn't exist.

Oxford Junction wildlife area is only two years old.

The 450-acre public area, split into two parcels, emerged from the Wapsipinicon River floodplain because the river has a habit of leaving its banks. It will grow by 66 acres, possibly as early as this fall, when an adjacent floodplain forest is added.

“We don’t often get to start a new area,” said Curt Kemmerer, wildlife management biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “Here, we’re getting in on the ground floor. Two years ago, this was 80 acres of soybeans. Looking at it today is an amazing change.”

The sea of young prairie is alive with redwing black birds, grasshoppers, goldfinches, butterflies, dragonflies and pheasants.

Establishing a prairie takes time and commitment. In year one, the young plants need to be mowed at certain stages to promote growth. In year two, Kemmerer has allowed the prairie to begin finding its identity and over time, he said, the native plants will out-compete the annuals. Out popped wild bergamot, black-eyed Susan and more.

One benefit of creating an area from scratch is ability to place habitat strategically to help save time and money down the road. Kemmerer added lanes of clover where pheasants and other wildlife will go bugging and will serve as firebreaks when it’s time to burn.

“Floodplains want succession,” he said. “We will need use fire regularly to keep the grassland and prevent canary grass and willows and cottonwoods from taking over.”

His development plan also identified four different areas that were planted with a half-acre of plum, dogwood and high bush cranberry shrubs to expand the habitat diversity. The shrubs will provide a fall and winter food source and winter cover for pheasants and quail. Pollinators will use the blossoms.

He plans to restore a few small pockets along the river from canary grass to oaks, with some sycamores and river birch for diversity.

“We have some big majestic oaks here and we will manage for them which will add the forest component,” he said. He plans to plant seedlings on six acres and go from there.

“Having a diverse bottomland forest would be great. There’s an active bald eagle nest in a large cottonwood on the east parcel,” he said.

Wetlands by the river naturally fluctuate and he hasn’t done much management yet because the area is so new.

“We need to learn the area so we understand how it’s going to react to certain management practices,” Kemmerer said. “Because this area floods regularly, what you want to do and what you can do have to jive.”

Partnerships made Oxford Junction

The Oxford Junction Wildlife Area is here because a who’s who of eastern Iowa conservation partners rolled up their sleeves to make it happen.

One partner in particular, Eastern Iowa Conservation Foundation, of Dubuque, purchased 80 acres that they enrolled in USDA's Conservation Reserve Program pollinator practice, and the Iowa Habitat and Access Program last year. After all the paperwork was done, they donated the land for everyone to use.

The Dubuqueland chapter of Pheasants Forever donated landscaping fabric, a machine to install the fabric and about a dozen volunteers to plant the shrubs. Using fabric prevents other plants from outcompeting young shrubs and allows them to become established. In year two, the shrubs are looking good.

On Columbus Day last year, 15 service members from the Dubuque National Guard Armory volunteered their time and equipment to remove an acre or so of cottonwood trees. The area is now prairie. This group has been in contact with Kemmerer about making this an annual event.

"It's cool what you can get done with determined volunteers," he said.

The Twin Rivers Chapter of Pheasants Forever has been hands on partners as have the Dubuque County Conservation Society. In fact, the broad partnership includes Wapsi Bottoms Whitetails Unlimited, Delaware County Pheasants Forever, Jones County Conservation Board, Linn County Pheasants Forever, National Whitetails Unlimited, Grant Wood Loop, Matt McQuillen, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Residents' fears eased, hunters' pleased

Oxford Junction's northwest property boundary is within the city limits which brought concerns from residents about hunting and safety.

Merle Tank, 82, has been the Mayor of Oxford Junction for 10 of the last 12 years. He said members of the city council had concerns about the area but after they saw how it was designed, those concerns were put to rest.

"I think it's a good area," Tank said.

Located within 40 miles of Dubuque, Clinton, Davenport, Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, the young area will likely be a busy place once the word gets out and Tank said he anticipates the gun dealer and convenience store in town will benefit from those visitors, some who have already stopped by.

"We had really positive hunter feedback," Kemmerer said. "They were excited to be here, satisfied with the areas. It's been a popular place."

The food plots have been popular places for hunters. One plot in particular hosted two tree stands last year and Kemmerer expects more will find the spot this fall. "It's a long hike but a unique experience with trees along both sides," he said.

Bird watching, fishing

The Wapsipinicon River corridor is heavily used by birds during the migration. Kemmerer plans to work with the district forester to create a forest stewardship plan which should make the area attractive to birds and bird watchers.

There are two, three-acre ponds on the east tract that offers good fishing for those willing to explore. The ponds are very different – one is surrounded by trees with little shore fishing access, the other is surrounded by sand deposits with a fish population heavily influenced by the river and little shade. These ponds would also be a good place to take a kayak.

Management

There are a lot of wet spots in the area and it has a history as a pasture. Kemmerer said he plans to continue using a local producer to graze the east section to keep the canary grass down. What has emerged are sedges, bulrush and iron weed – all good native plants. Cattle would be in the area from first week of May to Sept. 1, to minimize conflicts with hunters.

Down the road, the pasture area will be enhanced by creating an oak savanna.

Media Contact: Curt Kemmerer, Wildlife Management Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 563-357-2035.

Fishing regulations relaxed at Hickory Grove Lake

Colo – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources has relaxed the fishing regulations at Hickory Grove Lake to allow anglers to more freely harvest game fish before the lake is renovated.

The lake is scheduled to be drained for restoration in early September. This is part of a larger project to improve the water quality and habitat in the lake.

Anglers with a valid fishing license are allowed to harvest any size or number of all species from Hickory Grove Lake. Any number of fishing poles or jug fishing is allowed. Anglers must remain in sight of these lines at all times, and follow all other fishing regulations and area rules. Trot lines will be allowed (name and address must be attached), however lines may not be set across the entire water body.

Liberalized fishing regulations for Hickory Grove Lake will be in effect from July 10 until the lake is fully drained. Specific regulation changes include:

- Removal of bag and length limit restrictions on largemouth bass.
- Removal of bag limit on channel catfish.

- Removal of bag limit on crappie and bluegill.

Nets, dynamite, trotlines, poison, electric shocking devices, or any stupefying substances are not allowed. It is illegal to sell fish or stock captured fish into public waters. The normal park hours of 5:00 a.m. until 10:30 p.m. will remain in effect.

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