

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2010

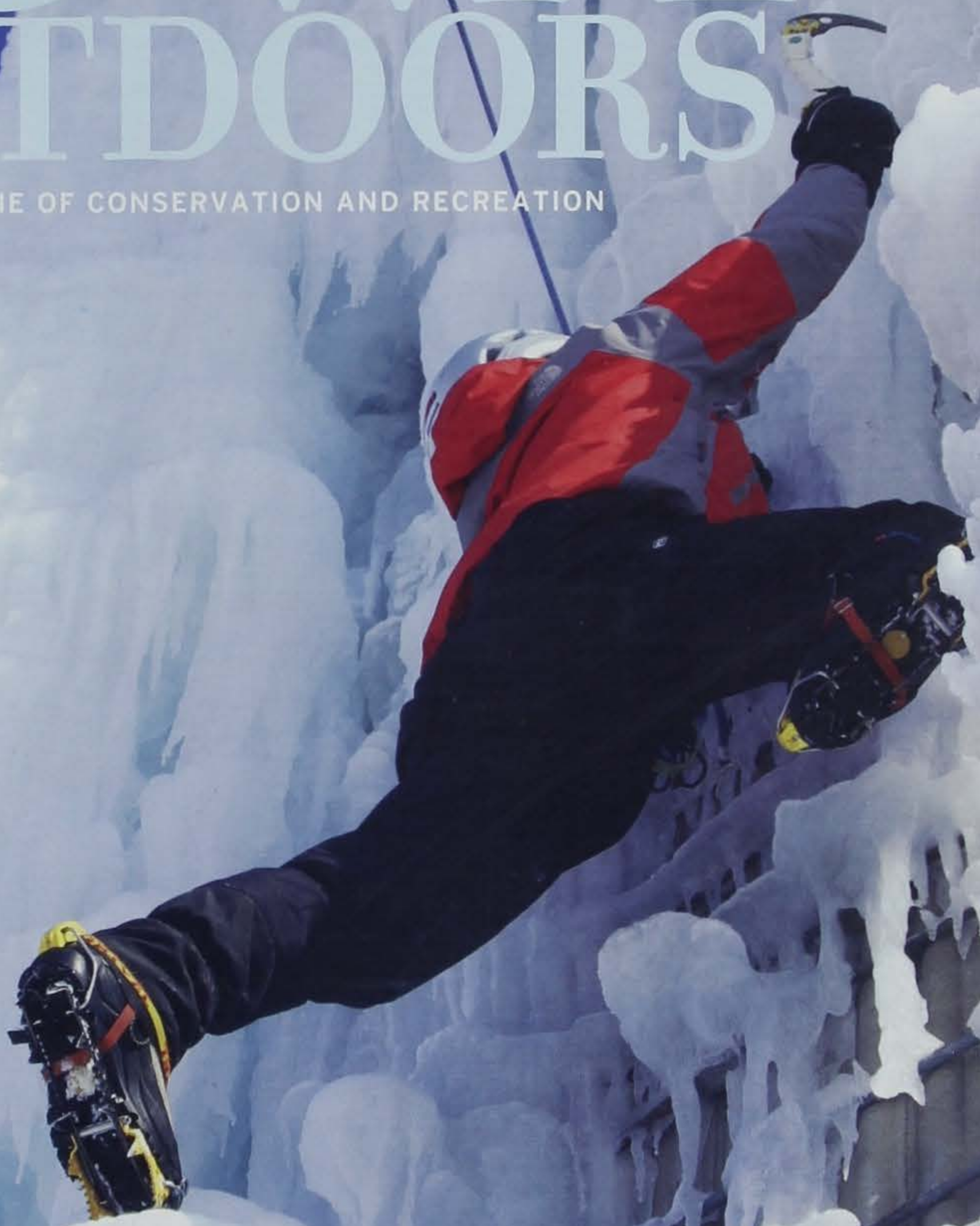
IOWA OUTDOORS

THE DNR'S MAGAZINE OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

IN THIS ISSUE:

HIGH ON ICE

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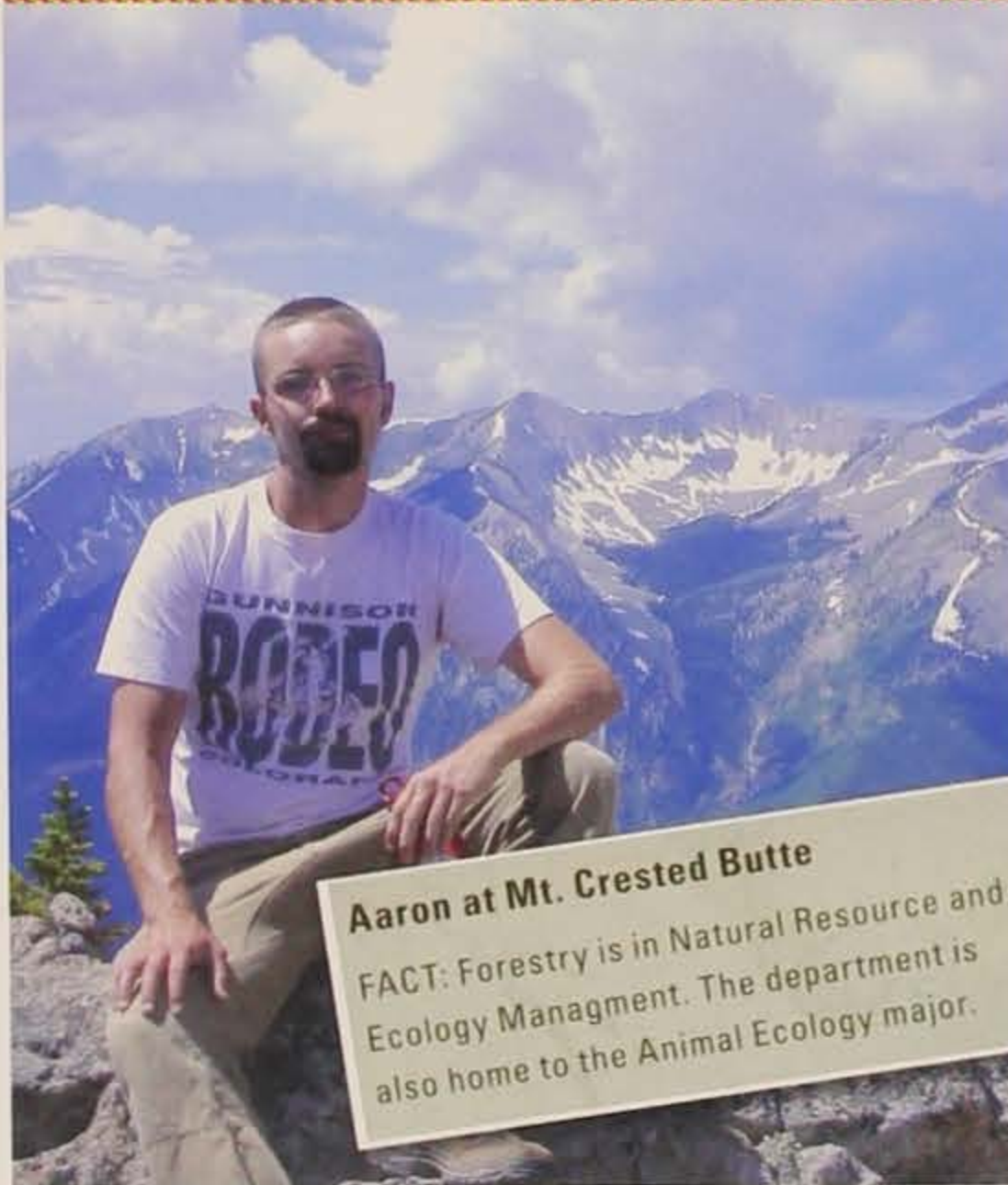
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Aaron at Mt. Crested Butte

FACT: Forestry is in Natural Resource and Ecology Management. The department is also home to the Animal Ecology major.

Forestry student Aaron Rector didn't want a desk job. So he worked for the Colorado State Forest Service where he spent 45 hours in the field for every hour he spent in the office. He had plenty of time to analyze the forest ecosystems in plain sight of lynx, badgers and bobcats. And he landed it thanks to the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Iowa State University. Our resources helped Aaron gain real-life experience to enhance his learning and resume. And, for Aaron, that meant a career outside of the office.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
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Manifesting Your Own Wildflower Prairie Now

At this time of the year and throughout winter, we have the opportunity to start dreaming about our property and envisioning what it would look like. Those of us who have already established beautiful wildflowers and grasses that bloom throughout the season are now watching them go to sleep for the winter. Little does the passerby know that this special place will be a jewel in the sun as the winter wanes and the seasons progress once again into the spring and summer.

We remember walking through our prairie on a cool June morning with a heavy dew and seeing Ohio Spiderwort in full bloom glistening with water drops exaggerating the brilliant blue color. Right next to it, our Golden Alexanders warm the air with their radiant yellow. A gaze straight ahead now reveals the clumps of Little Bluestem dispersed like little soldiers overseeing this special place that we have created.

Jumping to mid summer, we see dozens of wildflowers lighting up like a twinkling fairyland with butterflies darting and landing. One species that catches my eye is Pale Purple Coneflower with pinkish petals pointed downward and its center cone thrusting upward. It appears like a Roman candle streaking across the sky. Only a few short years ago this site was a monoculture of common grasses and like everyone else's property with no special attraction. This transformation came about by seeing it before it actually happened and feeling the positive energy.

The joy and beauty that this prairie brings to me each season has given me the opportunity to interact with nature. Butterflies, birds and beautiful insects appear as if by spontaneous generation. I think back on everything that Donna and I now have and am reminded that those things were attracted by our thoughts and visualizations. I think about our property that was once just a vision as Donna and I described in words on our refrigerator detailing how this property that we searched for would look. It was a vision then but a reality now.

Don't let this winter season pass you by without dreaming about what it is that you want. Maybe it's just a small wildflower bed or a Bird and Butterfly Attractor Station just outside your window. Large fields can become prairie meadows. Small prairies can be instant by planting plugs in the spring. You can even get started now by doing a dormant seeding in the late fall and throughout the winter. Picture your property as you want to see it and feel that you already have it. It will soon be yours to enjoy.

Howard Bright, President Ion Exchange

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DAN WEEKS is a freelance writer and photographer who specializes in profiling extraordinary people, places and experiences. A graduate of Grinnell College and the University of Iowa's graduate writing program, he has written and photographed hundreds of articles for national magazines and the web from his home base in Des Moines. His latest book, *Deadliest Catch: Desperate Hours* is a Discovery Channel best seller. For more of his work: <http://web.me.com/dan.weeks>.



TONY MOLINE is a Dubuque native, where he takes advantage of the area's natural beauty and diverse wildlife to craft his images. His photographic prints are available through Outside the Lines Art Gallery in Dubuque's Cable Car Square. www.otlag.com. 377 Bluff Street, Dubuque. 563-583-9343



JEN WILSON is a travel and features writer based in Des Moines. Her work appears in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Frommer's Budget Travel*, *Midwest Living* and *Esquire*. She is spending 2009 in Europe for her upcoming book, *Touching Up My Roots*. Follow her journey at www.touchingupmyroots.com.

IOWA OUTDOORS

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2010 • VOLUME 69 • ISSUE 1

(formerly the *Iowa Conservationist*)

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Iowa Outdoors (ISSN 0021-0471) is published bimonthly by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0034. Periodicals postage paid Des Moines, IA. SUBSCRIPTION RATES: \$12 FOR ONE YEAR, \$18 FOR TWO YEARS AND \$24 FOR THREE YEARS. PRICES SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE. Include mailing label for renewals and address changes. POSTMASTER: Send changes to the *Iowa Outdoors*, P.O. Box 8462 Red Oak, IA 51591-1462.

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DNR MISSION

To conserve and enhance our natural resources in cooperation with individuals and organizations to improve the quality of life for Iowans and ensure a legacy for future generations.

EDITORIAL MISSION

We strive to open the door to the beauty and uniqueness of Iowa's natural resources, inspire people to get outside and experience Iowa and to motivate outdoor-minded citizens to understand and care for our natural resources.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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 Contact: Diane Ford-Shivers at 515-281-6341.

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Perhaps nowhere on Earth have wildlife biologists more closely examined the delicate relationship between humans and pheasants. Grab your boots and come along.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

ABOUT THIS PHOTO

UNI physical education instructor Don Briggs sweeps away ice chips generated by more than 50 climbers' ascents of this 85-foot grain silo near Cedar Falls. Briggs invented silo ice climbing. With a small group of dedicated volunteers, he makes it available nearly every winter weekend, weather permitting, to anyone who wants to give it a try. He even cleans up afterwards.

ABOUT THE COVER

"I've been bouldering in Joshua Tree, Calif., and technical rock climbing in Estes Park, Colo., but neither can beat the thrill of ascending an 85-foot, sheer-vertical frozen waterfall," says writer/photographer Dan Weeks. Here, veteran Iowa ice climber and UNI student Mike Eaglestem demonstrates the tremendous strength of even the lacy edges of the icy spire and the tenacious grip afforded by cramponed boots and a hardened-steel ice axe. Yes, Iowans, thanks to Don Briggs and his crew, you can try this at home!



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66 *Flora & Fauna*

This animal has something to crow about—from mimicry and counting to using traffic to crack nuts.

CABIN LIFE—Twenty-eight newly constructed upscale cabins at Honey Creek Resort State Park feature 1-4 bedrooms. Three cabins are "pet-friendly," so Fido can join the family fun. See photos and floorplans or make reservations at honeycreekresort.com or call 1-877-677-3344.



ACTIVITIES, TIPS AND EVENTS FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

Go Calling Under the Owl Moon

February's full moon is nicknamed the owl moon, as the crisp night air is filled with the calls and hoots of mating owls.

Crunch the snow and trek into the woods with a child—or the young at heart—to practice calling owls. Use the moonlight reflecting off the snow-covered ground to illuminate the surroundings as you follow the sound of an owl's call. Move slowly and patiently to glimpse owls silhouetted on leafless trees by shimmering moonbeams. When an owl calls, try to mimic the sound and see if you get a response. All eight species of Iowa owls are found here in the winter. The great horned, screech and barred owls are most common. The short-eared is on the state endangered species list and the barn and long-eared are on the threatened list. If you glimpse one of these, you are lucky indeed.

◀ **Barred**—**VERY COMMON**, most often heard in summer, spring and fall. Search along forested areas in river bottoms across the state, except northwest Iowa.

Screech—**COMMON**. Small, but slightly larger than a saw-whet owl. Found year-round in Iowa. Nocturnal, but will respond to calls day or night. Nests early spring and summer.

Burrowing—**THE ONLY OWL THAT NESTS UNDERGROUND**, often using old badger or fox dens. Most recorded sightings are in northwest Iowa.

Short-eared—**ENDANGERED. A PRAIRIE SPECIES, FIND THEM HUNTING OVER OPEN GRASSLANDS**. A summer nester and one of the last to nest. "We have a small breeding number during the summer, but more short-ears are in Iowa during the winter, when they move south from prairie areas in Canada," says Doug Harr, who heads the DNR's nongame program.



FULL MOON SCHEDULE

JANUARY 30 – MOONRISE 6:26 P.M.
FEBRUARY 28 – MOONRISE 6:31 P.M.

Great Horned—**THE LARGEST AND EASIEST OWL TO FIND**, they hoot in a series of five or six in late December and January to attract mates. By following the sound, you can see them sitting in an old red-tailed hawk nest, incubating eggs, even during a snowstorm. Often lay eggs by early February. Their owlets take a long time to mature, so they are the earliest nesters, doing so to take advantage of an early food supply for their young. Owlets can hunt on their own by summer, perfect timing to catch early populations of rabbits and rodents.

Long-eared—**THREATENED. FIND IN CONIFER GROVES IN WINTER AND SOMETIMES IN GROUPS.** The only owls that form flocks. Usually found in the same location year after year.

Snowy—**NOT HERE DURING SUMMER**, when the all-white snowy resides in the Arctic. “They come down when the food base of lemmings and mice has a population crash,” says Harr. That happens about every four years. “Not responsive to calls, you will just happen upon them sitting on a fencepost or on a frozen clod of dirt in an open field. A ground nester, they like to get on a perch to scan for prey.” Most are found north of Interstate 80.

Northern Saw-Whet—**OUR SMALLEST OWL**, “Probably a lot more common than we realize, this owl is very secretive,” says Harr. Often found in winter in red cedar trees. They perch close to tree trunks and sometimes close to the ground. Unafraid of people, they can be approached within a few feet. “This is a species that we are just starting to understand more about,” says Harr.

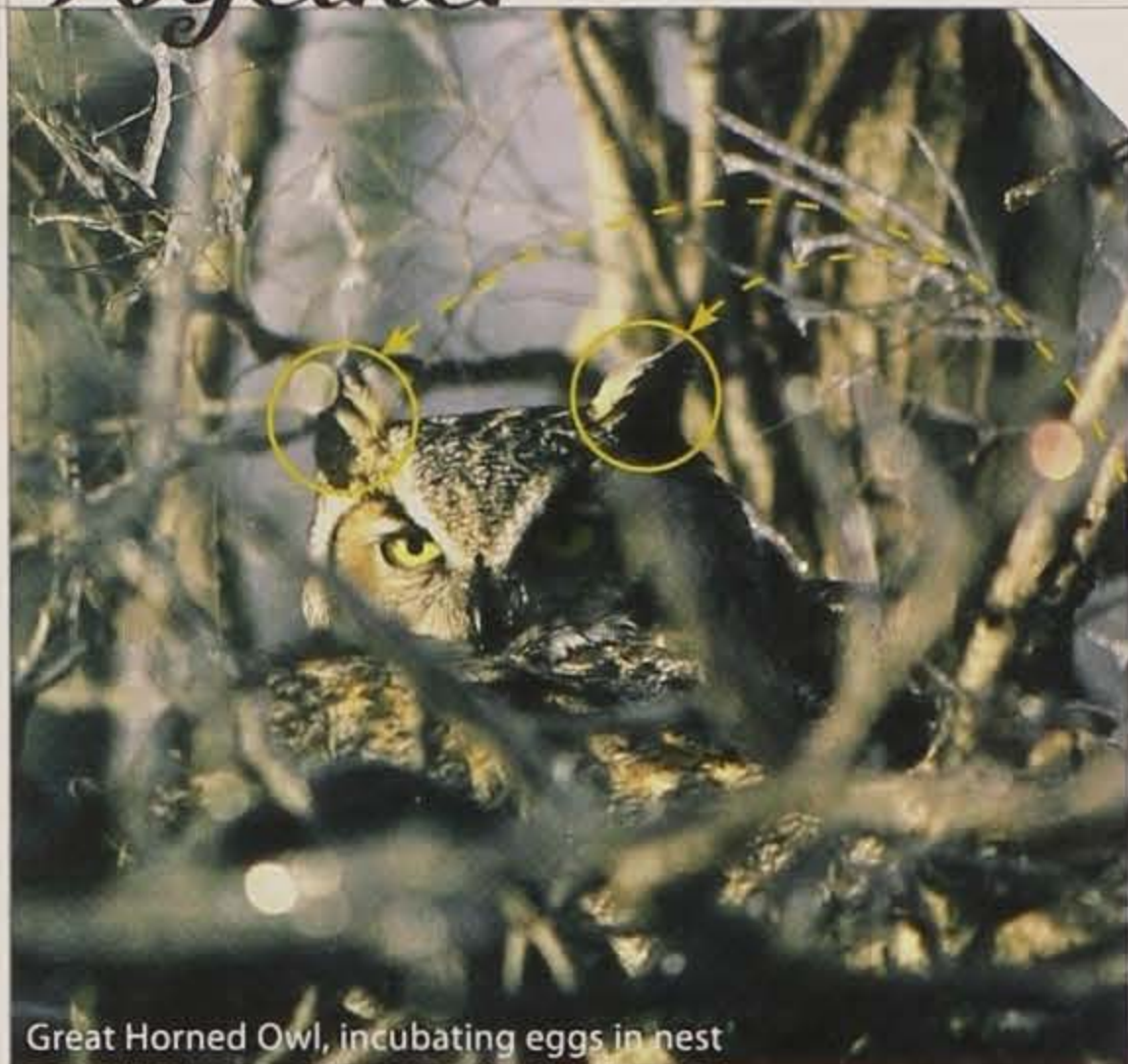
Barn Owl—**RARE**, with less than ten known nests in the state. “There are probably more than that, but they are hard to find,” says Harr. An oak savannah species, they thrived when fire and natural free-roaming grazers such as elk kept the forest floor open, with knee-high grasses. A rare and quickly disappearing habitat, the oak forests are now often choked with above-head tangles of brush and woody plants. Barn owls have a distinctive heart-shaped facial shape. Often found in abandoned barns, they are a year-round resident and a spring and summer nester.

GET ONLINE, LISTEN, HEAD OUTSIDE

Children and adults will enjoy listening to various owl calls online. Visit the famed Cornell Lab of Ornithology at www.birds.cornell.edu and search for owls.



Together



Great Horned Owl, incubating eggs in nest



Screech Owl



AMAZING OWL FACTS

FEATHER TUFTS VERSUS REAL EARS

What appear to be ears are merely tufts of feathers. The actual ear opening is on the side of the head, well below the tufts. Unique to owls, the ear holes are not even, with one slightly higher than the other. Sound reaches the ears at separate times. "This allows the brain to find the exact location of prey by the microsecond difference in receiving sound," says Harr. The offset ears are most pronounced in night-hunting owls, when an owl positions the head so sound reaches both ears simultaneously, its prey is lined up with its face.

SATELLITE DISH-SHAPED HEAD

The distinctive disk-shaped face has purpose. Bowl-shaped feathers collect and focus sound to aid hearing, much like a satellite dish collects and concentrates television signals.

GREAT EYES AND NECK

Oversized owl eyes are so large they cannot move in the eye socket. Humans can roll their eyes, a trick an owl cannot do. Unlike most birds, both eyes face forward, not set on the sides of the head. Lacking eye movement, their neck compensates, able to rotate each way 180 degrees for nearly a 360 degree field of vision.

GREAT MOUSE CHASE

One owl can eat nearly 80 pounds of mice a year—that's nearly 13,000 mice over 10 years.

STEALTH AIRCRAFT

A special feather design eliminates the whistling sound of air passing over the wing so they can fly in complete silence.

BEFORE YOU TAKE A CHILD

Read *OWL MOON*, the story of a father who takes his young daughter owling—calling for great horned owls in the night. The trees stand still as statues and the world is silent as a dream. *Whoop-whoop-whoop*, the father calls to the mysterious nighttime bird. Distinguished author Jane Yolen has created a gentle, poetic story that lovingly depicts the special companionship of a young child and her father, as well as humankind's close relationship to the natural world. Wonderfully complemented by John Schoenherr's award-winning, soft watercolor illustrations, this is a verbal and visual treasure.

Snuggle up inside and read *Owl Moon*, then bundle up and head outside to try to call owls yourself. Check your local library, favorite bookseller or order online. ISBN 978-0399214578

Winter Readers

Cozy up with these books that inspire all to get outside.

Oneota Flow: The Upper Iowa River & Its People

"The river, like a keen memory, carries a record of the past," says author David Faldet, drawing upon his 40 years in the Upper Iowa River basin. In this peaceful and inspiring book, Faldet tells the river story as it flows through land and people, holding true to Aldo Leopold's concept of land as a community where water, people and soil play interactive parts.

The book "gathers stories small and large—like river tributaries—to form a great, flowing whole, a deep, curving story of an entire watershed and those who have called it home. Tributaries and stories: Spring Creek, South Pine, Coldwater Cave, Canoe Creek, prairie fires, rural electrification, Ho-Chunk ways, PCBs, brook trout and family tales all contribute to this narrative, so much like the Upper Iowa in full summer flow," says Drake Hokanson, director for Mississippi River Studies at Winona State University.

Faldet, a professor of English at Luther College in Decorah, blends contemporary conversations, readings from historical records, environmental research and personal experiences to show that the health of the river is best guaranteed by maintaining the biological communities that nurture it. In return, taking care of the Upper Iowa is the best way to take care of our future.

Available at bookstores or The University of Iowa Press. 1-800-621-2736 or www.uiowapress.org. 256 pages. \$27.50 paper, ISBN 1-58729-780-9

Winter Trees

A perfect book for youngsters aged 4-7, join a boy and his dog as they use their senses to identify seven common trees in a snow-covered forest. Lyrical text and intricate illustrations make tree identification easy even in winter, when only bare branches stand like skeletons against the sky. This book will inspire youngsters to get outside and relish Iowa's northern, winter climate. Includes information about tree life cycles.

Written by Carole Gerber, Charlesbridge Publishing. Ages 4-7. ISBN 978-1-58089-168-4 \$15.95 hardcover, \$6.95 paperback. 32 pages. www.charlesbridge.com or 800-225-3214

First Snow in the Woods

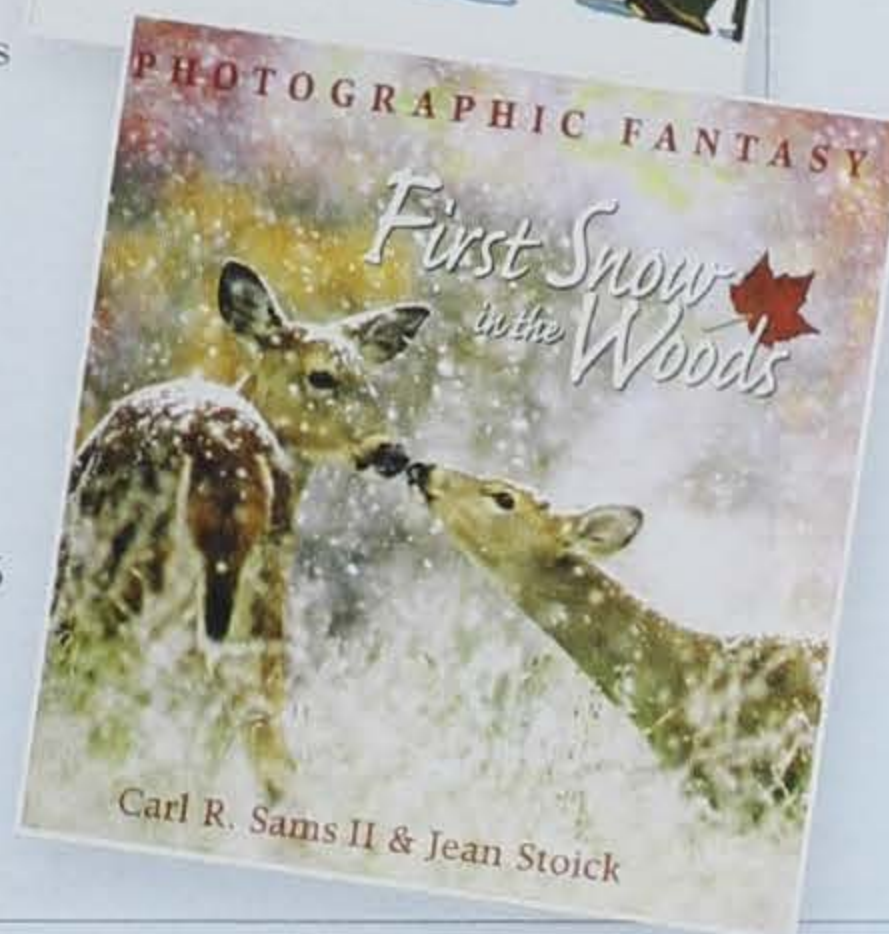
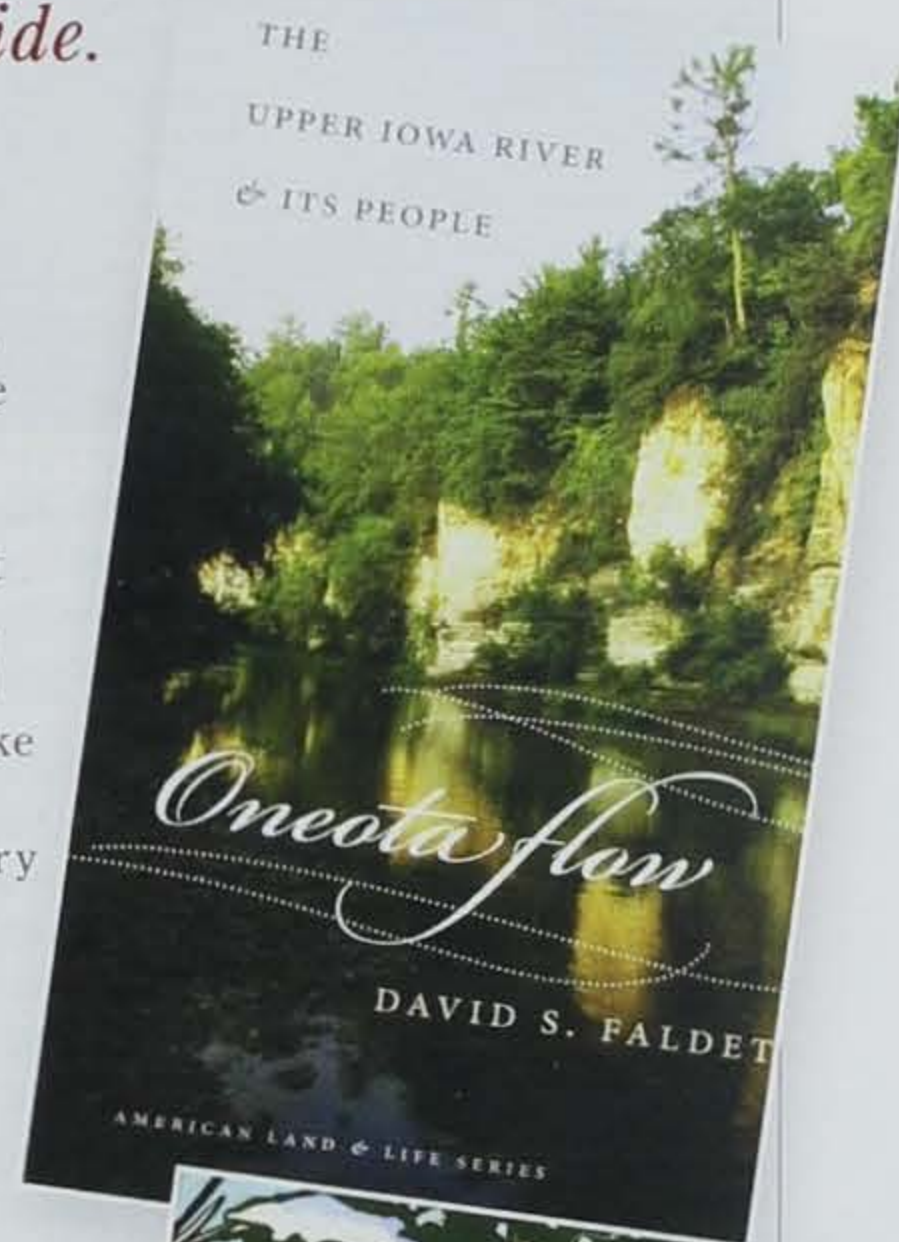
Readers are taken on a beautiful photographic journey deep into the autumn woods as forest animals get ready for the year's first winter storm. They hear the cries from the great gray owl who came down from the far north carrying the warning, "Winter is coming early this year! Prepare."

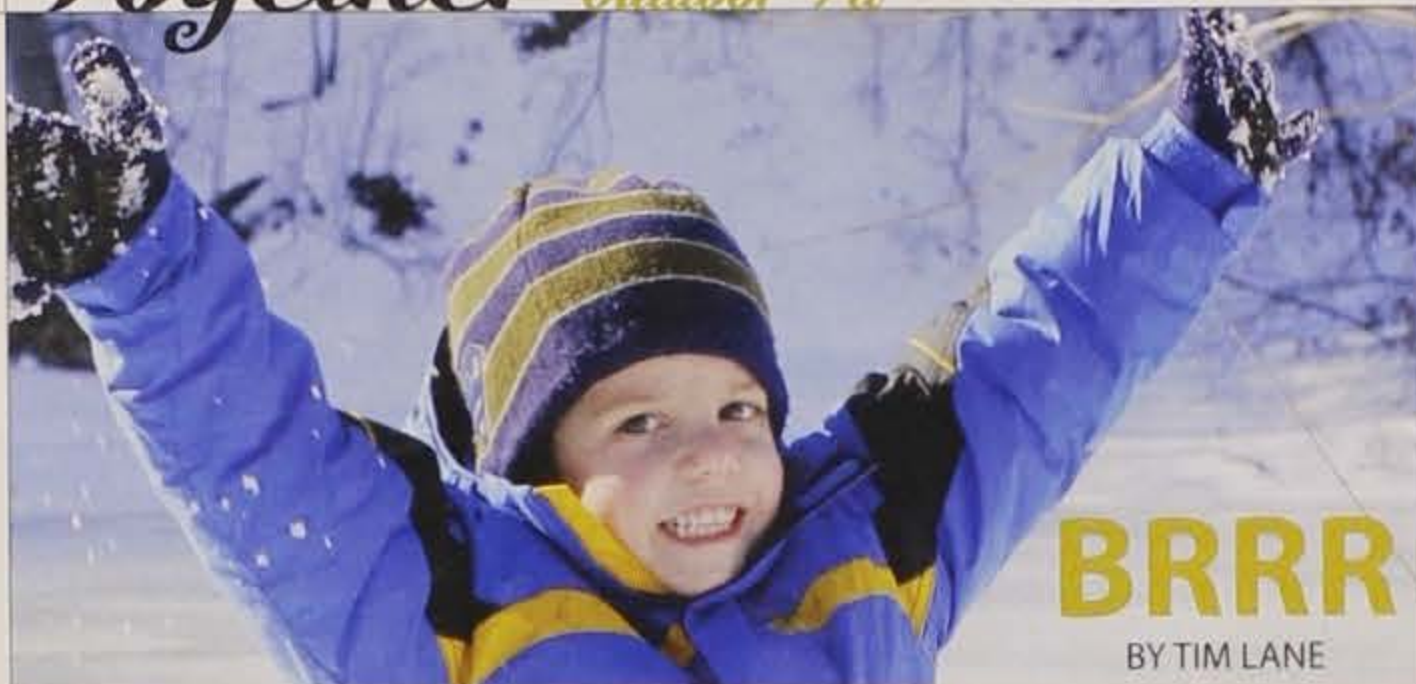
From the very first page, readers will be fascinated by the exquisite photographs of wildlife amid a background of vibrant autumn reds and golds. Will the animals be ready for the cold, hard winter to come?

The story is as enchanting as the captivating images. Gentle lessons of nature are immersed in a story perfect for children of all ages. "Fall is the season of change," explains co-author Jean Stoick, a former middle school art teacher. "We wanted to show how each creature prepares for the winter season in their own way. They must each follow their own heartsong."

First Snow in the Woods is the third in a series by the authors, who self-published their first book, *Stranger in the Woods*, a #1 New York Times best seller that sold over 1.5 million copies. Their second book, *Lost in the Woods*, has sold more than 300,000 copies. The couple has won dozens of awards for both their books and the companion movies.

Story and photos by Carl R. Sams II and Jean Stoick. Hardcover \$19.95. 46 pages. 1-800-552-1867 or www.carlsams.com. ISBN 978-0-9770108-6-8.





Last August I was driving along, contemplating the topic for this article, and finally decided it was time to do an ode to cold. Within two minutes I heard of an upcoming interview with an author about his new book...“Cold.” I took this as an affirmation, if not from on high, at least from Iowa Public Radio.

In an effort to encourage outdoor excursions in January and February, I was going to pay tribute to the noble, yet maligned aspects of colder temperatures. Author Bill Steever beat me to the punch. In fact, he landed 304 pages on me before I even knew the bell had rung.

The book examines the lower temperatures and research that embrace cold subjects like a snowfall covers a field. As one reviewer said, “Cold” is “a love song to science and scientists, to Earth and everything that lives on and flies over and tunnels under it. It’s impossible to read the book and not fully realize that our planet must be protected.”

My original article was to cover my studies in this field. Like when I stuck a hand out the window of my car traveling 70 miles an hour in temperatures well below freezing to test those warnings about wind chill and the quality of ski gloves versus mittens. My article was to share the harrowing yet awe-inspiring Christmas Eve spent stranded at the “Boondocks Corner” of I-35 as the winds and temperature combined to reach 99 degrees below zero. With my car backed up to a snowdrift the size of a barn, I had a front seat to the raw naked power of nature gone wild.

The gist of my point was to encourage Iowans to fight the urge to hibernate and don the appropriate fibers with the appropriate number of layers and venture out to behold the beauty of nature. If one was to create an analogy regarding my outline compared to Steever’s tribute, I am afraid it was akin to Captain and Tennille’s contributions to classical music compared to Beethoven’s.

But in Steever’s book we learn that cold created glaciers and glaciers built our landscape. Cold drove migration of both animals and humans. Refrigeration made Iowa’s large-scale dairy farming viable. Air-conditioning made Iowa more livable. Cold checked the spread of certain diseases and pests in winter. I wanted to mention how long cold snaps could kill red bark beetles and—proving Smokey wrong—prevent forest fires.

That was my original plan. Hype up cold and then encourage you to sally forth and enjoy your neighborhood, your parks and all Iowa...all the time. On that August day, one that was cooler than most, I shifted gears. My new plan is to suggest you read “Cold” and then set out to enjoy Iowa no matter what the calendar or thermostat says.

“Cold has gotten a bad rap, but in my experience, cold helps you feel alive. You walk outside on a brisk day, and there’s nothing like a breath of fresh air. Suddenly you’re awake. It’s better than coffee. It’s just great.” —Bill Steever

Tim Lane is the fitness consultant with the Iowa Department of Public Health. A marathoner, former director of the National Ski Patrol, climber and volleyball coach, he has cycled across America once and Iowa 25 times. He’s a regular on RAGBRAI. Tim also helped design and promotes Live Healthy Iowa.

But Why?

Helping adults answer children’s nature questions

BY A. JAY WINTER

A. Jay Winter educates up to 20,000 Iowa children each year as the DNR’s training specialist at the Springbrook Conservation Education Center.

BELLE IN PERRY ASKS...

“What do snakes do in the winter?”

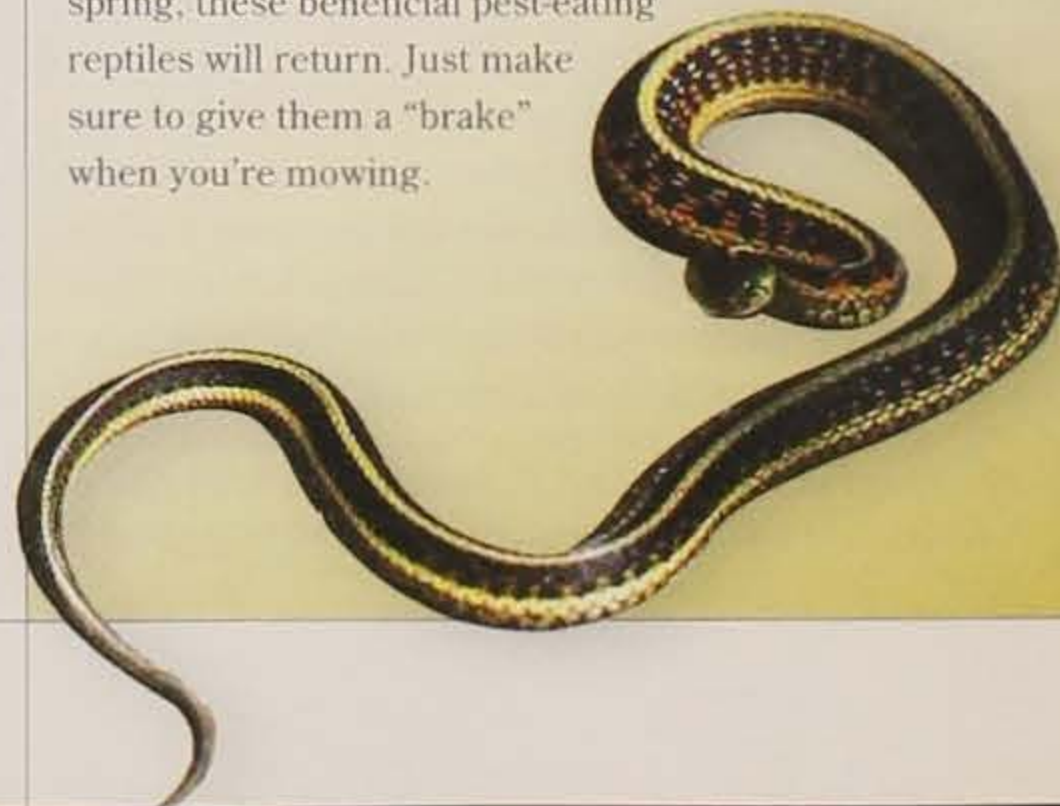
Snakes, being cold-blooded, rely on their surroundings to regulate body temperature. Like other ectothermic animals, they bask in the sun to warm up; seek shade or water to cool down. So, when conditions are not conducive for temperature regulation, they brumate.

Make sure to explain to your child the difference between hibernation and brumation. While hibernators and brumators both experience lower body temperatures, metabolic rate and breathing, brumators do not sleep the season away or rely on energy reserves. Brumators actually are alert—albeit sluggish—and may move around and drink.

Snakes must brumate below the frost line to avoid freezing. If not, ice crystals could form in their body, resulting in death, according to Jeff LeClere, an amphibian and reptile specialist with the Minnesota DNR and author of the online “Field Guide to Amphibians and Reptiles of Iowa.” Since snakes can’t burrow, they search out existing hibernaculums. For some, like milk snakes and rattlesnakes, that means deep crevices in rocky outcroppings. For others, like garter and bull snakes, that means animal burrows, abandoned wells and caves. These locales can harbor a single snake, or thousands.

Cold-blooded notwithstanding, snakes have no choice but to brumate. Winter removes their favorite food sources—mice, earthworms, fish, frogs and insects. Even if food were available, digestion is impossible because metabolism is virtually halted. Thus, food in the stomach would rot—with fatal consequences. Snakes will often quit eating a couple weeks to a month prior to brumation.

Never fear, though. Once temperatures rise in the spring, these beneficial pest-eating reptiles will return. Just make sure to give them a “brake” when you’re mowing.



HOT water freezes faster than COLD water?

MYTH?
OR
TRUTH?

The "MPEMBA EFFECT" is the name for the phenomenon of hot water freezing faster than cold water. This myth first made a splash during the time of Aristotle and since then scientists have been trying to prove if this theory holds water or if it is all wet. It would appear that this myth boils down to the volume of water used in experimentation.


If you place equal volumes of hot and cold water side-by-side in a freezer, the hot water will evaporate faster and the initial volume will be reduced through steam. Through this basic water cycle process, the water placed in the freezer at a higher temperature will freeze first, because the lesser the mass, the shorter the freezing time. While it is true the hotter water will freeze first, the colder water will yield more ice due to less evaporative loss.

Therefore, because of the process of evaporation, this experiment does not compare equal volumes. If you were to make adjustments and increase the volume of the hot water to allow for the loss of volume through evaporation, the colder water would freeze first because it would take less time for the colder water to reach freezing temperatures.

So, the answer to the myth of hot water freezing faster than cold water is not crystal clear, or according to Mary Hall Reno, Professor and Chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy at The University of Iowa, "It's complicated."

Ask The Expert Joe Dralle from Shell Rock asks, "Where have all the screech owls gone?"

BY SHELENE CODNER



Screech owls are one of the most common owls found in Iowa. They are also one of the smallest, standing only eight inches tall, with a 22-inch wingspan. They prefer to live in areas with lots of trees where they can find a hole for nesting.

Although screech owls are among one of the most common found in Iowa, sightings are not as common as they once were. According to Joe Dralle of Shell Rock, when he was growing up in rural Butler County, in the 1950s and 1960s he would often see several screech owls at a time, but this has not been the case in recent years.

Early population declines of the screech owl were attributed to the use of DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), a well-known synthetic pesticide with a long, unique and controversial history. According to Pat Schlarbaum, DNR wildlife diversity technician, "Since DDT was phased out in 1972, the majority of population decline is related to habitat loss." For screech owls this means

large trees that provide cavities for nesting. A lot of these woodlots have been eradicated and dead trees are often removed from yards and timbers. Another impediment to the screech owl's survival is that they utilize the same habitat as great horned owls. Great horned owls will kill any competitors.

A key habitat component for screech owls is a supply of large hollow trees, for nesting, roosting and dining. You may have luck in luring them to your property through the placement of nesting boxes which they also readily use (8 inches square, 18 inches high, 3-inch hole). A variety of instructions for nesting boxes are readily available on the Internet. When placing your nesting boxes, keep in mind that these nocturnal creatures also need a consistent and readily available supply of food (consisting mainly of insects, small mammals, birds, crayfish and earthworms) and water. See page 58 for additional ways to create backyard nesting and food sources.

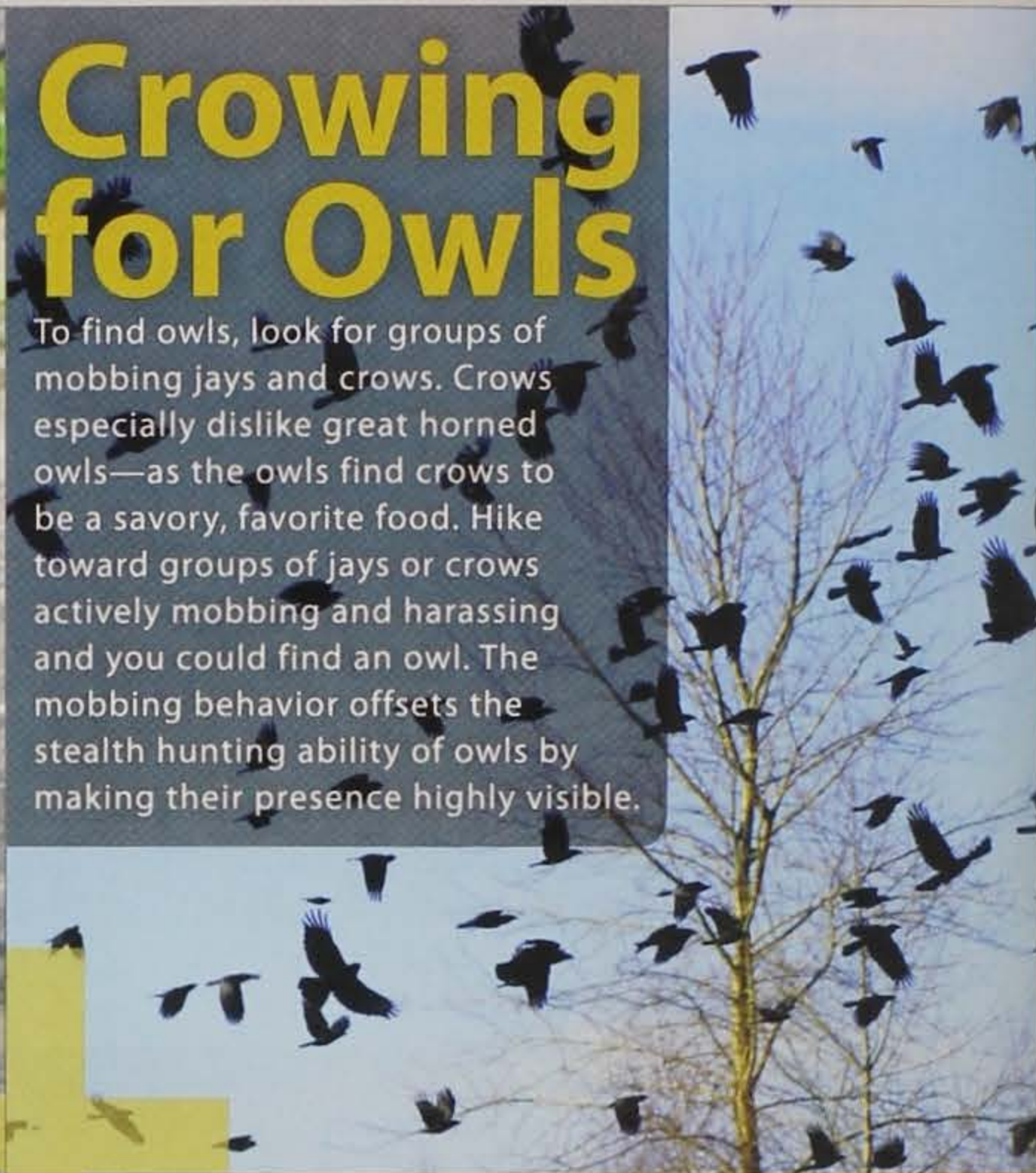
→ GOT A QUESTION? Send to: ASKTHEEXPERTS@DNR.IOWA.GOV ←

TIPS, TRICKS AND MUST-KNOWS TO ENHANCE YOUR OUTDOOR FUN



Crowing for Owls

To find owls, look for groups of mobbing jays and crows. Crows especially dislike great horned owls—as the owls find crows to be a savory, favorite food. Hike toward groups of jays or crows actively mobbing and harassing and you could find an owl. The mobbing behavior offsets the stealth hunting ability of owls by making their presence highly visible.



Winter Cycling

If a winter thaw has you wanting to ride, install fenders to reduce salt and sand from being thrown by the tires onto the chain. After riding, use a hand-held chain cleaner or rag and degreaser to clean and lubricate the chain. Cold temps can sap tire pressure and lead to “pinch flats” when an underinflated tube gets crimped by the rim. Ensure tires are inflated before a ride and always wear a helmet.



SPICE UP YOUR ICE FISHING BAIT

When fish get a case of lockjaw, try adding a little spice to your presentation. Add a few dashes of garlic powder (not garlic salt) to your waxworm tub. The added flavor will often entice fish to take the bait.

Call of the Wild

Try calling a small owl species first before issuing a hoot of a larger owl species. Calling the large owl first may intimidate smaller owls from returning your call. To learn more about owls, see page 8.



HELPING HEROES HUNT

TRENT WRIGHT, HUMBOLDT

Air Force vet creates accessible hunting preserve for disabled military veterans

Trent Wright hadn't owned his 35 acres northeast of Humboldt long before he knew exactly what he wanted to do with the land—he wanted to give back to those who had given so much to their country. Wright, who served 16 years in the U.S. Air Force, envisioned a hunting paradise designed just for disabled military veterans. He set to work, paying for most of the project's first phase out of his own pocket. In just a few months, he and a friend had created 275 yards of level trail that allowed veterans using wheelchairs, canes, prosthetics or other assistance a chance to walk through the woods. Then there's the raised and heated blind for hunting deer, turkey and coyote. Retired Marine Lance Cpl. Joel Klobnak used that blind to hunt deer last winter. "When people do things for you like this, it proves to you that you are still normal, there's life beyond your injury. These little things give you hope," says Klobnak. "Anyone who would think of doing this has heart." Since Wright opened the Enabled Veterans Nature Trail in September 2008, he has planted more than 2,000 trees and shrubs and food plots for pheasants. Wright is continuing to build the trail—extending it to be a mile and a half long—and creating new hunting opportunities, working with partners like Pheasants Forever and local landowners. "It's a good thing to do for all the right reasons," Wright said. "All I need is one (veteran hunt) and it's worth it." More info at www.enabledveteransoutdoors.org.



L TO R: Brent Harris,
Nadine Hogate, Liz Cox

VOLUNTEERS GO GREEN

MEREDITH CORPORATION, DES MOINES

Making better homes with energy efficiency for low-income neighbors

One of Des Moines' oldest neighborhoods saved some green last fall, thanks to a volunteer effort by Meredith Corporation and Rebuilding Together. About 300 Meredith employees helped around 40 homes in the Capitol East neighborhood be more energy efficient at the October event. Volunteers from the publishing and media giant helped homeowners make simple changes to save energy and money, like caulking, weatherstripping, recycling appliances and insulating water pipes. Education was a part of the day, too, as volunteers set up free energy audits through MidAmerican Energy. The team of volunteers also installed playground equipment at Ashfield Park. "It's bound to be a wonderful thing," says Nadine Hogate of the Capitol East Neighborhood Association. "It provided an opportunity for homeowners to get a little bit of help with their home's energy efficiency." While this is the seventh year Meredith has worked with Rebuilding Together, a national organization that helps low-income homeowners through home renovation and repair, this is just the second year for the winterization project. "Meredith is always looking for ways to be more green, and this project really hits homeowners in the pocketbook too," says Liz Cox, who coordinates the volunteer day for Meredith. The project is a partnership between Meredith, the Capitol East Neighborhood Association, Rebuilding Together, the City of Des Moines and the Des Moines Police Department.

CLEANER WATER TAKES FLIGHT

BRUCE VOIGTS, CLARION

Wright County teacher takes to the skies and streams to help water quality

Bruce Voigts may be the eye in the sky for water quality in Wright County, but he's not afraid to get his boots dirty in the field, either. During the Big Wall Lake restoration, Voigts, a licensed pilot for 30 years, flew over the marsh weekly. "When I'd go up, I'd take a few pictures and send them to the DNR," Voigts says. "I liked to see the progression of the project." He witnessed each renovation step, from dropping water levels and the lake drying out, to plants re-emerging and the lake refilling. "The photos were pretty critical in helping evaluate how the drawdown process was going," says Doug Janke, the DNR biologist that worked on the renovation. "Plus, it's just the fact that somebody would be interested to do this on their own time with their own money." Voigts develops grants for water quality projects, monitors streams, checks out areas of water quality concern and serves as an assistant soil and water conservation district commissioner, all on his own time. That's in addition to teaching science at Clarion-Goldfield High School, where his students draw water samples and search for aquatic life in a stream near school. "He probably does the most extensive classroom monitoring of any teachers in the area," says Connie Roys, Wright County District Conservationist. "He's so dedicated. He really wants to see habitat restored and water quality cleaned up."



Lost In Iowa

BY JENNIFER WILSON PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH



DNR fisheries management biologist Mark Flammang of Albia walks with daughter Addy, 9, while pulling Zadie Hoff, 4, of Des Moines on an ice fishing expedition.

Cold Comforts

A winter weekend at *Honey Creek Resort State Park* is as relaxing as a summer one:

Fish, fun and a whole lot of chilling.

“The thing about ice fishing is that it’s about the cheapest kind of fishing there is,” says Mark Flammang, DNR fisheries management biologist, as he walks across frozen Rathbun Lake. His words turn to smoke in the January morning air, his compact body easily hauling a sled filled with the few tools of the sport.

“You need a bucket, a couple of rods and a hand auger,” he smiles from under a thick Carhartt ski hat. “That’s about it.”

Iowa’s second-largest lake is a vast sheet of white in winter—11,000 acres of glittering snow and ice. Save for a few all-terrain vehicles zipping between miniature warming tents—“Any luck?” being the standard greeting for anglers—there is nothing but faint wind, echoing quiet and a passel of sluggish fish below the surface waiting for the frying pan.

For those visitors who have never ventured out on ice before, Honey Creek Resort State Park is a good place to do it. The whole purpose of the DNR’s state-funded wonderland is to be the easiest entry point into deep nature for Iowans. Resort interpreters guide guests to the winter woods and frozen water, through hikes, crafts, snowshoe or cross-country ski runs, snowmobiling, sled outings, ice-

skating or, like Flammang’s morning activity, ice fishing.

It’s a good-looking time in southern Iowa farm country, too. Trees dressed in fine coats of snow surround the lake like tassels on a white afghan. When the sun’s out, everything sparkles as ice anglers set up weekend encampments. Their choices are far from random—travelers can ask at any neighborhood bait shop where the sweet spots for fish are, says Flammang.

The resort looms large on shore. Its beauty is in the details. The stone, wood and stained-glass windows, many of which represent Iowa-native prairie flowers, help it fit in among the white plains of isolated countryside 95 miles southeast of Des Moines. Rathbun Lake is surrounded by sleepy small towns that haven’t yet caught up to the development, and the world is silent even on a winter drive, with a few pick-up trucks ambling slowly along as the only signs of humanity.

LIFE ON THE LAKE

Flammang and his nine-year-old daughter, Addy, huff across Rathbun Lake, studying native gizzard shad that seem to have been caught off guard by the weather. Several are suspended, frozen in the surface ice, making



Lost In Iowa



the walk across the water even more surreal.

"I see one, Dad!" Addy calls. Flammang walks over, then squats to examine it with her. Just about everything in this lake eats gizzard shad. This is about as far north as you find the fair-weather fish, and deep winter throws them for a loop. For this lake, the evidence of plentiful shad is a good sign for anglers.

Crappie are the usual goal for Rathbun's ice fishing crowd. In the summer, fishing boats may be rented from Buck Creek Marina near the dam. The resort's docks are impressive, with several slips and ample space for boats of all sizes and personal watercraft. Opposite the docks: a fish-cleaning station and fishing pier to help families get out on the water without a boat.

But on this winter morning, about a dozen or so people have gathered in simple warming tents or on overturned buckets, hoping to snag panfish for dinner without the fancy details.

"No matter what the season is, Rathbun is known throughout the Midwest as a crappie fishing destination," says Flammang.

It's his business to know. He oversees the management of the fish populations at Rathbun Lake, which include channel cat and white bass in spring and fall. And don't forget the walleye. "The thing about Rathbun walleye is that they tend to be very nice-sized," he says. "These are fish people are going to remember."

For walleye fry, life begins at the Rathbun Fish Hatchery, under the careful watch of the hatchery staff. It's also designated the state's main catfish hatchery, producing 80 million eggs every year. The fish hatchery is open to the public year-round, and though the operation is quiet in winter, a wall aquarium, small theater, visitor center and video about the facility in the

tank room still provide a nice break from the cold.

A state-record muskie mounted on the wall, caught in Spirit Lake and weighing 50-plus pounds, provides a little fishing incentive, too.

ELUDING CABIN FEVER

On a drive from the fish hatchery, visitors cross the massive dam, created when the Army Corps of Engineers backed up the Chariton River for flood control in 1971. (Richard Nixon was the keynote speaker.) Sparse traffic makes it a pleasant drive, interrupted only by the occasional gawker haphazardly pulled over to watch one of the many wintering eagles.

Back at the resort, park staff lead hikes around the surrounding grounds, including a 3.5-mile nature trail that is home to a remnant of native prairie. Even in winter, the Indian grass and switchgrass wave in the wind. At the 850-acre Honey Creek State Park, about an eight-minute drive away, the trail leads past 14 Woodland Indian burial mounds.

"We walked out into the prairie last night and did some owl calls," says Angie Platner, a 38-year-old mother of two from Norwalk doing staff-led snowflake crafts with her kids at the lodge. She cups her hand and blows through it, an imitation of what the park interpreter taught her family last night.

"Our guide was very good at involving my daughter—she got to lead the family out there. It was just so quiet. Being from in-town, the stillness was magnified."

Earlier in the day, Platner and her husband pulled the kids around the resort on a sled. Later, they're going ice skating near the boat ramp. "For us, it's not only about having the resort activities," she says, "it's about the outdoors, too."

Child-friendly activities, such as snowflake crafts, below, make the resort a perfect family getaway with an indoor water park, cabins, lodge and a sprawling outdoor landscape for ice skating, skiing, sledding and ice fishing. FAR LEFT: Taking part in the resort nature programs, Evelyn Platner, 9, of Norwalk cups her hands to practice owl calling. MIDDLE: DNR interpreter Kenneth Hamilton leads a night hike to call owls with Angie and Evelyn Platner.



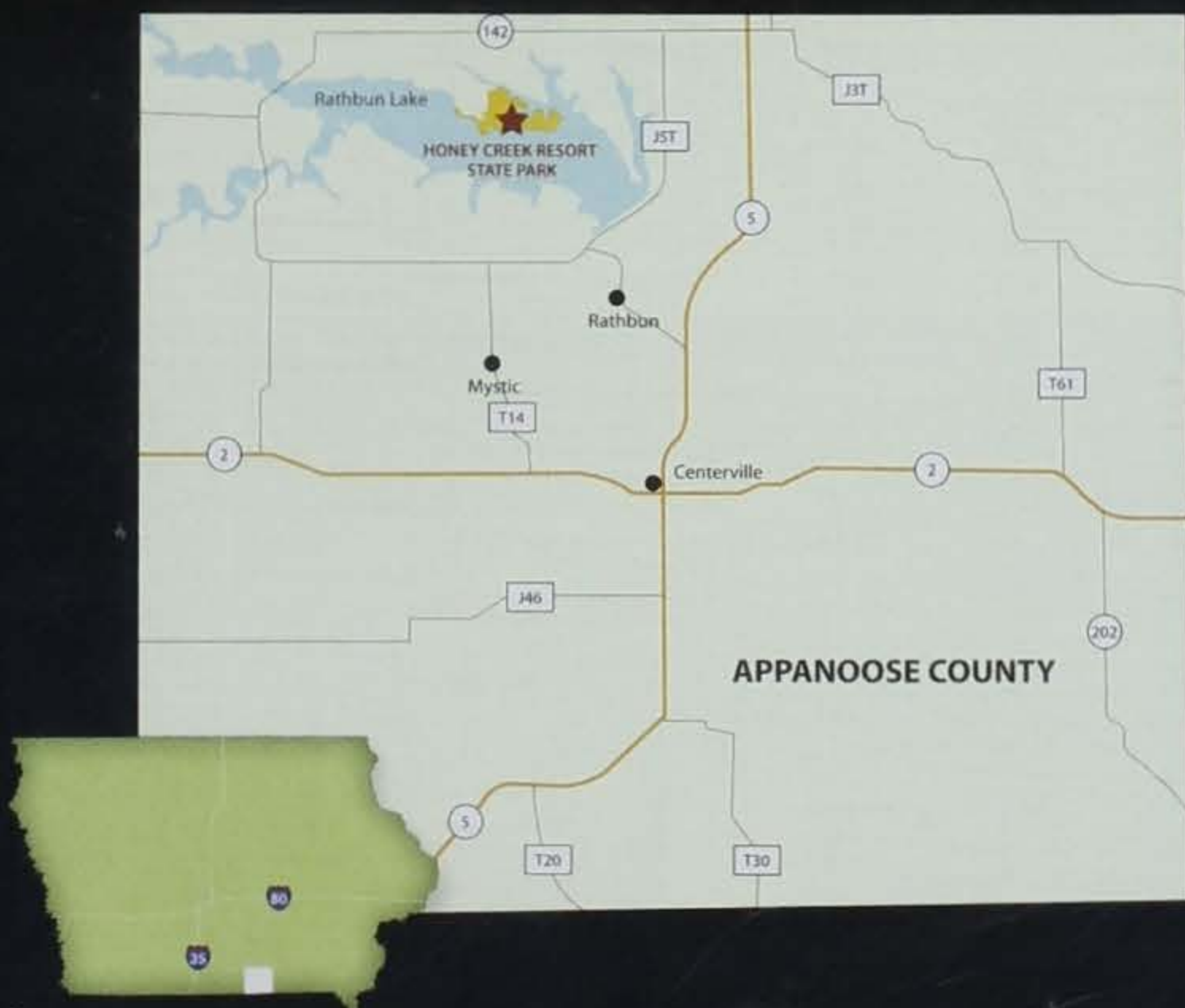
Lost In Iowa

SILENT NIGHT: Nestled against 11,000 acres of snow-clad lake, enjoy quiet nights occasionally broken by the arctic-like sounds of shifting ice or a distant owl or coyote call. After a day ice fishing, ice skating or skiing, friends can relax by the fire, over a hearty meal or tackle a two-story indoor water slide. Regardless, a warm, soft bed is a perfect end to an active day.

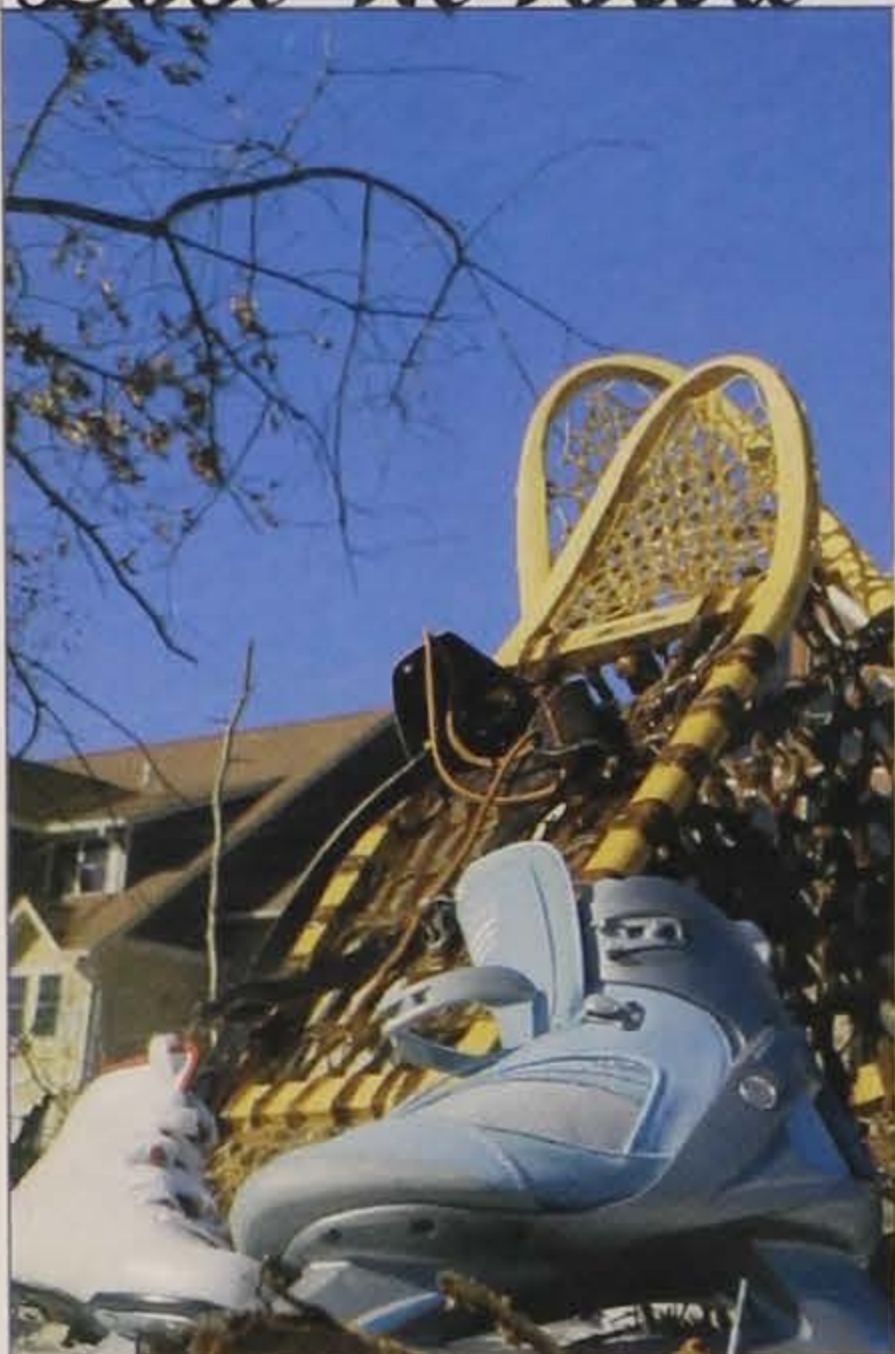


KNOW YOUR ICE

Though the sheet of ice that is Rathbun Lake in winter may look uniform on the surface, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers shows the man-made habitat of the lake that fish love best on their website, www.nwk.usace.army.mil/ra/Fishing.cfm, which includes GPS coordinates.



Lost In Iowa



The one- to four-bedroom cabins are designed for snuggling in for a warm winter's nap, each built like a miniature condominium complete with gas fireplace—a rarity in Iowa cabin stock. Spring brings the prairie flowers, and some of the cabins sit right on the main interpretive trail, where a snowshoe hike takes travelers past ancient farm fenceposts crooking out of high- and lowland forest.

As the hills head toward the lake, the draws fortify a diversity of wildlife through the seasons. Deer, raccoon and turkey are joined by songbirds and other seasonal migrators such as pelicans. On one mid-winter hike, a coyote jogged across The Preserve 18-hole golf course.

"This is similar to what the settlers saw," says Mike Godby, park manager. "We're getting animals in one area that go for prairies, animals that live in the woodlands and animals that are edge-dwellers. It's the whole array in one compact place."

The icefishing crowd tends to stop in for a warm-up in the Lakeshore Bar and Grille, maybe for a nip of Iowa's own Templeton Rye. The bar is a mix of locals and guests, and you get the feeling both are glad to see each other.

Guests on one January night are simply happy to be here—and the locals of the small-town southern Iowa farm country are grateful for new jobs and the faith visitors have shown in the blossoming resort.

"It's gorgeous," says Marlyn Robinson of Moravia, dining in the restaurant with her grandkids. "I like the fact that they left the trees and they left the landscape intact."

"I was here when Rathbun Lake was built and dedicated. My husband helped build the dam...I think it's improved the economy a lot. My family used to camp out here—this place has always taught my kids about the environment."

And with the addition of the resort, it continues that tradition, all year long. 🐾



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RESORT Guided nature activities help novices learn how to get outside and appreciate the outdoors. From bird identification, night hikes and ranger-led walks to cooking classes and fly-fishing instruction, use these myriad of topics as your entry point into the outdoor world. Call the resort for event schedules at 1-877-677-3344 or visit www.honeycreekresort.com.

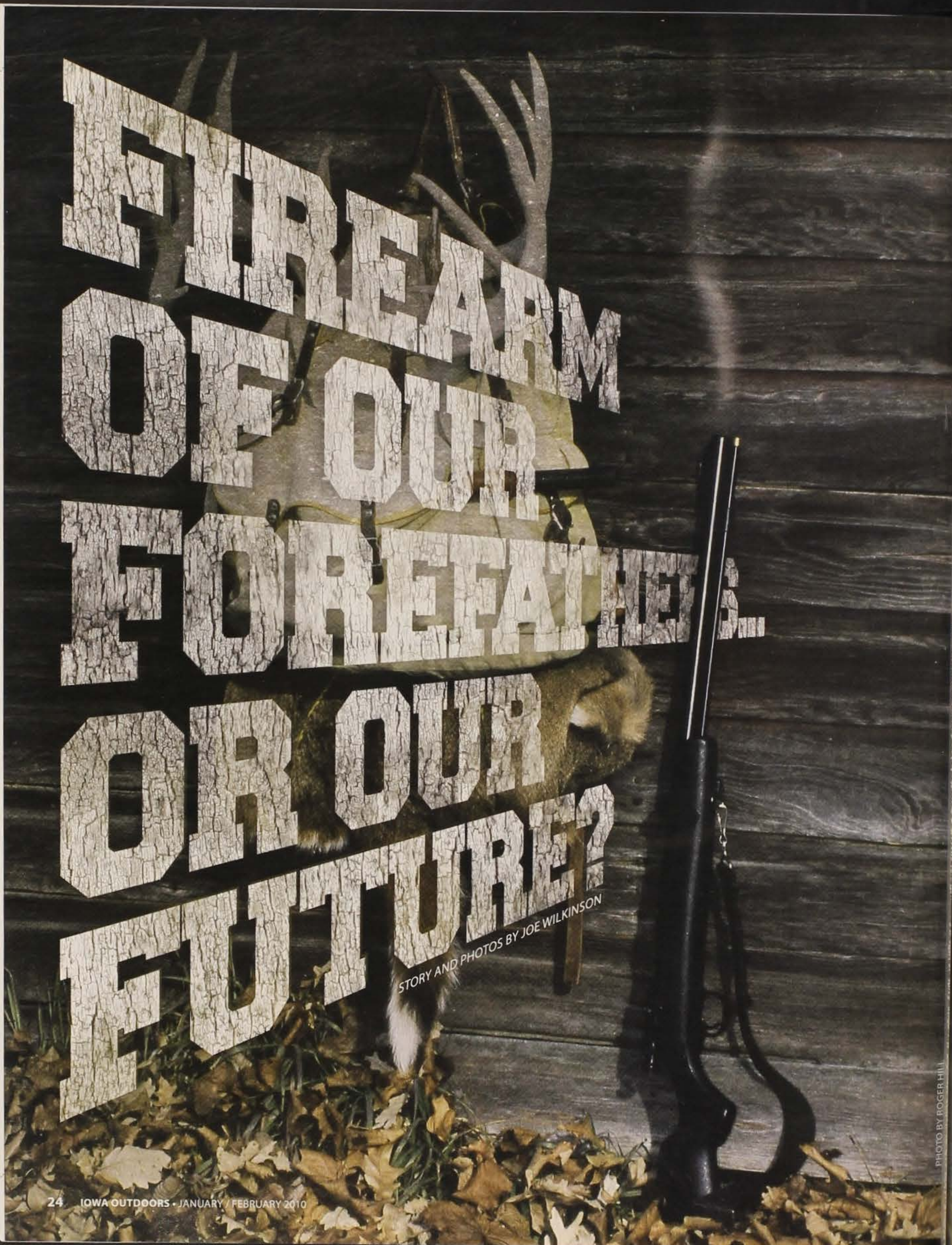
TRAVEL NOTES

Honey Creek Resort State Park, 12633 Resort Dr., Moravia. 877-677-3344; honeycreekresort.com. Cabins from \$169, double rooms from \$109. RV area with pull-through sites, full hookups with Honey Creek overlooks, from \$49. (Cabins and simpler campsites also available at the neighboring Honey Creek State Park, with the state's only year-round campground thanks to a heated showerhouse.)

Rathbun Fish Hatchery, 15053 Hatchery Pl., Moravia. 641-647-2406; www.iowadnr.gov/fish/programs/hatchery/rathbun.html. Located about seven miles north of Centerville on road J5T. Big groups, please call ahead. Small tours are self-guided. Open year-round Monday through Friday, 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m.

KEEP IN MIND A FEW SAFETY TIPS WHILE ICE FISHING:

- Dump all leftover bait out of the lake, far from shore, to make sure no minnows find their way into the lake. Dumped bait doesn't really feed the fish, and chances are there may be an invasive species in the mix.
- Bring a rope and ice-safety picks (or car keys, in a pinch) in case you find yourself on thin ice. Mark Flammang's daughter Addy has been hearing the ultimate rule since she was a toddler: "My daddy told me that if you don't know about the lake, don't go on it." She's right. Check with the resort before venturing out.
- Dress in layers. Get inside and warm up if you start to feel cold or disoriented. Keep a cell phone with you at all times, with the resort number handy. Call if you think you might be in trouble.



STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE WILKINSON

PHOTO BY ROGER HILL

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SMOKEPOLES, KENTUCKY LONG RIFLES, MUSKETS, TRADE GUNS.

**WHATEVER YOU CALL THEM, THEY HAD
TWO THINGS IN COMMON. THEY HELPED
OPEN THE FRONTIER...AND THEY LOAD
FROM THE MUZZLE.**

Muzzleloading rifles underwent dramatic improvement from early Pilgrim fowling pieces to Revolutionary War muskets, to the mountain man's long rifle before giving way to breech load firearms and magazines. Give a soldier or frontiersman a choice and he'd hand over that single shot firearm for multi-shot capability.

However, after loitering in the background for decades, muzzleloaders saw a resurgence in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. Outdoorsmen and women opted for historical re-enactment, fur traders' rendezvous and military camps. The tools were authentic, right down to the curly leaf maple stock, the powder flask and the molded lead balls.

These days, another muzzleloader revolution is upon us full bore. 'Inline' is the catch word. Disc ignition, breech unloading and other features mean modern muzzleloaders are more accurate and simpler to load and care for, helping to introduce a new generation to the sport. With the rush to own, shoot or hunt with these modern marvels, it raises

a question: are we forsaking our heritage or embracing the past with a 21st century twist?

To an untrained eye, most firearms at the Iowa State Black Powder Federation State Shoot look much the same. Long and slender, sturdy and heavy, they are a combination of tempered iron and polished wood. They usually have a distinctive hammer and ignition system, creating a belch of flame as the powder charge propels a lead ball toward a target. Yet these firearms are as diverse as the time periods they ruled. If this was a car show, you'd be looking at everything from a Model T to a '67 Barracuda.

Many shooters bring a variety of rifles. There are different competitions. Maybe someone's interested in buying one. Or maybe you just want to get it out and have fun shooting a replica of American history. Replica? Sounds a little "cheap," but these are no knockoff products. They are re-creations, many built from kits or hand-made.

"You take a big block of wood and just start carving

away whatever doesn't look like a gun," jokes Leon Curran, who bought his first muzzleloader in 1975 and enjoyed years of shooting it—hunting, too.

About 14 years ago, he started building them. It's a deliberate process. Curran, of Oxford, has in mind what it will look like. Still, as he chips away and pieces things together, he has to decide if he is going to need those parts two steps down the road. "It takes me almost two years to build one," says Curran. "I work two hours here, two hours there. Sometimes, I stand and look at it for 20 minutes, to remember just where I left off."

After a competition round, Jim Jaskoviak of Charles City steps back to clean his 1760s look-alike. Now retired, he hits the circuit, traveling to shoots across the country. In addition to his shooting box, itself expertly crafted, to hold all his supplies, Jaskoviak totes a diary with details of his shoots—what loads worked best in which firearm. Targets and photos are tucked into the handwritten pages. "I love the traditional guns and a place to use them," says Jaskoviak. "I'm not necessarily here for the competition."

Flash forward to the modern muzzleloader. On a subzero January morning, a lone hunter takes a reading on his hand-held rangefinder. Setting it down, he brings the composite stock of his inline muzzleloader to his shoulder.

He studies the buck in the crosshairs of his 3x9 scope.

Releasing the double safety, he squeezes

"IT'S ABSOLUTELY THE EASIEST OPPORTUNITY TO KILL A TROPHY BUCK IN IOWA"



the trigger. The hammer strikes the no. 209 primer, creating a spark to ignite two 50-grain Pyrodex powder pellets. The explosion hurtles a spinning, plastic-lined bullet down the turn-in-28-inches-twist rifled barrel at 1,900 feet per second. The buck drops at 150 yards. That night, the hunter breaks down his modern muzzleloader to clean it in just minutes.

Modern muzzleloading firearms and the ammunition, supplies and accessories that accompany them have changed the industry. When the modern era took off in the 1980s, there were about 1 million shooters. Today, some estimate it approaches 4 million.


That surge is fueled by advances in the industry and by more whitetail deer. "Muzzleloaders today, with the powder, the bullets, you're looking at a 200-yard gun. That's certainly better than a shotgun (range)," points out Larry Kauffman, a lifelong hunter from Kalona. He not only has hunted with muzzleloaders, he sells them, too, working part-time at Iowa City's Fin & Feather Outdoor Store.

"Black powder fouls barrels really bad. Fire it a few times and you couldn't reload," recalls Kauffman of the downside of old muzzleloaders. "Clean it in a bucket of hot, soapy water and it smelled like rotten eggs. It took a half hour, minimum, to clean them." Often, guns would go uncleaned season to season; too much trouble. Eventually, owners brought them in, seeking to trade up. "They weren't worth 10 cents. They were solid rust inside."

Pyrodex powder—and now pellets—eased the fouling and smell problems, but it wasn't as reliable to ignite. Today, those pellets have a few grains of hot-igniting black powder on the 'spark' end to ensure that nearly every shot is true. Other innovations followed: solvents to ease cleaning; composite stocks to cut weight; breech unloading; and disc systems.

Oh, and the deer? The increase in deer populations in Iowa and much of North America means more hunters vying for more hunting days. That's met nicely by Iowa's early and late muzzleloader seasons. Legal during the traditional shotgun seasons anyway, 1,500 muzzleloaders got their own season in 1984. In 1986, an earlier season was established. The quota of 500 tag holders grew to 7,500 in 2000. In the meantime, the late muzzleloader season took off. In 2009, those 7,500 tags sold out in less than eight days.

Muzzleloader hunting is big business. Those buying at least one Iowa tag climbed from a few thousand,



Intricate scroll work and initials are featured on the foreplate of Jim Jaskoviak's 1760s replica. Offset from the plate is the stock; its curly leaf maple finish creates a near three-dimensional look. Secured into the hammer mechanism is a flint. As the trigger is squeezed, the flint strikes the pan, setting off a spark. A good, English flint can last 60 to 90 firings. LEFT: A shooters' box holds patches, balls, powder, cleaning materials and anything else used in a primitive black powder shoot. For many, the box is a source of pride, often handmade, just like their rifle.



1, 2, 3 & 8 Muzzleloaders require fire to ignite powder. With old-time rifles, that meant direct flame (matchlock rifles) or spark (flintlock rifles). With modern muzzleloaders, 209 primer caps (1), musket caps (2) or No. 11 percussion caps (3) provide the spark. No. 11s have long been the standard, but musket caps and 209 primers are quickly becoming the preferred choice. The latter two burn hotter, eliminating misfires common with No. 11s.

4 While modern muzzleloaders are still sometimes coined blackpowder rifles, they no longer use the ancient gun powder. Smokeless powder is preferred over the highly corrosive blackpowder.

5 The cap sits over the nipple, and when impacted, creates a spark that is carried through the nipple, past the breech plug and into the powder.

6 Bullets have come along way from the old patch and ball, now made to "mushroom" for greater impact and cleaner, quicker kills.

7 Muzzleloaders, as a whole, require far more care and maintenance than other firearms. Frequent cleaning and lubricating is a must.

maybe 10,000, in the '1980s to 25,435 in 2001 and 35,371 last season. That late muzzleloader tag is legal for a late bow-killed deer and some hunters use it. Most, though, like the challenge of sitting on a wind-whipped January fence line with their single shot 50-caliber, waiting until those shadows of dusk when shotgun-wary whitetails poke their noses out for an evening meal.

"It's absolutely the easiest opportunity to kill a trophy buck in Iowa," proclaims Kauffman. "Give me a quality scope on a muzzleloader in the late season over a good food plot. I'd be shooting from a blind or a shooting house. That's when the odds are best for killing a good buck."

Other than Iowa's bow season, late muzzleloaders have the longest season, too, for waiting out that buck or maybe a doe or two to reduce the area population. "Some farmers will let one or two muzzleloader hunters on their land, but not a party of shotgun hunters," says Kauffman. "Particularly if they are willing to shoot does."

A lot of hunters in the shotgun seasons prefer toting "smokepoles" while their hunting mates go with semi-automatic 12- or 20-gauge models. With improvements in scopes, rifling, powders and sabots, they can really reach out. "You're approaching a 200-yard (accurate) shot. That's certainly better than shotgun range," he says.

As long as the deer herd holds up and muzzleloader tags are available, muzzleloading conditions will get better.

The modern age has just begun. 🐾

MODERN MOVEMENT WITH IOWA ROOTS

The explosion—pardon the pun—in muzzleloader popularity over the last quarter century has its roots in Centerville.

In the 1980s, Tony Knight looked at the sidehammer ignition system on the few traditional muzzleloaders available. They used a percussion cap or even a flint to spark the powder charge...most of the time. Hangfires and no fires were always a possibility. The firearms were also messy and time consuming to clean. That's not the end of the world if you were competition shooting or just messing around with targets. Bad news, though, if you were among the growing number of one-shot deer hunters.

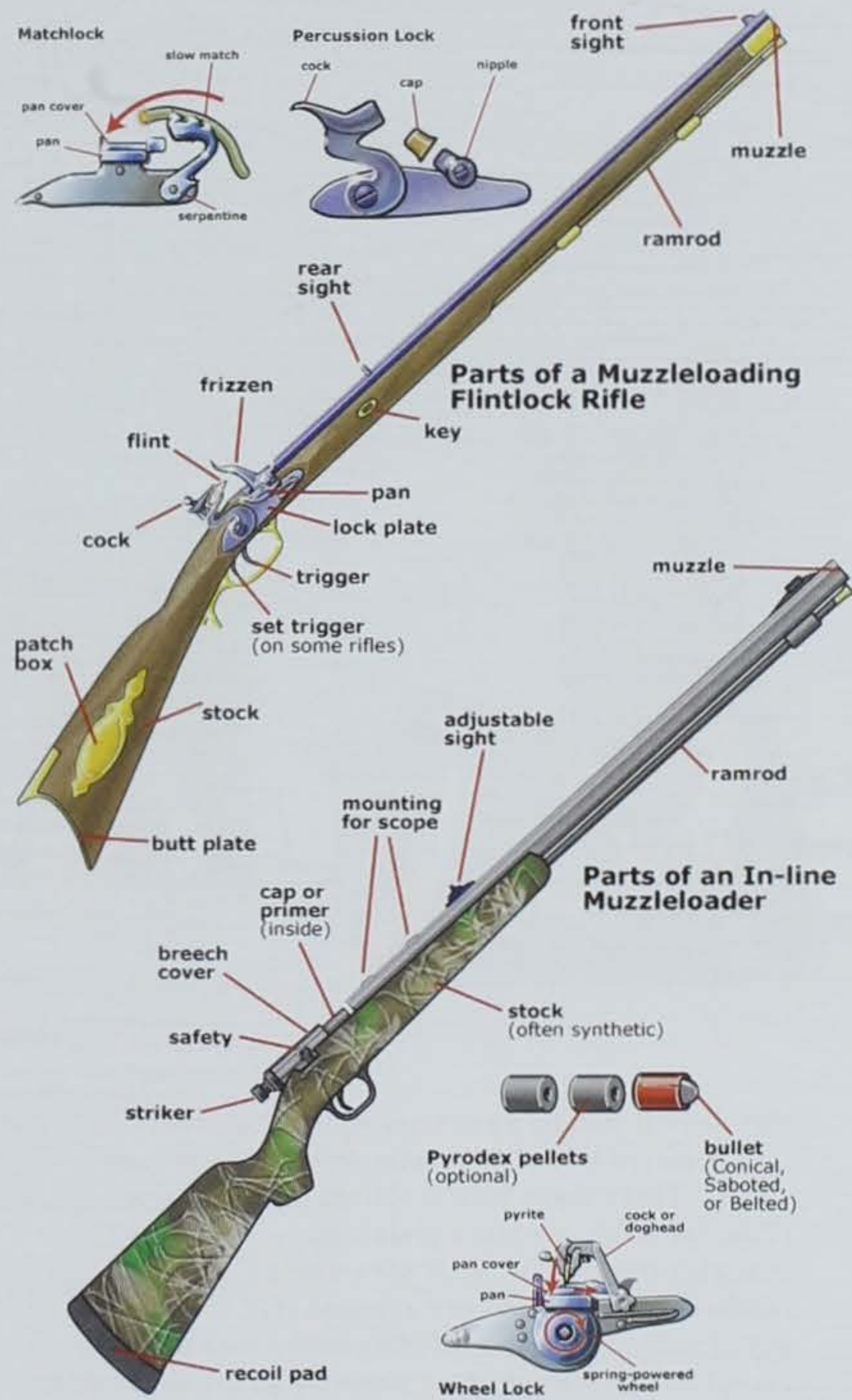
Knight added an ignition nipple on which a no. 209 shotgun primer could be placed. He set the ignition system behind the charge. That inline design sent the spark straight down to the powder to touch off the charge—and a 25-year sales surge of modern day muskets.

Most muzzleloaders of the day had a "turn in 48 twist." That meant the barrel rifling would rotate the lead ball in 48 inches—almost one revolution on its exit from the barrel. Knight worked with supplier Green Mountain Arms for a "turn in 32" and then a "turn in 28" twist. Much like a tight spiral in a football pass, the slug traveled faster and more accurately.

The Knight featured a trigger-and-bolt assembly that could be easily disassembled for cleaning. With a better breech plug and a modern stock, the Knight Rifle (the MK-85 came out in 1985) took the industry by storm. Knight took the best of several worlds, rather than manufacturing everything himself, notes former customer service representative Lee Schwerdtfeger. "Your quality control is best when you have the best stuff coming in to be assembled."

With about 70 employees at Centerville headquarters, the race for customers was underway. Manufacturers pushed to have the next big feature. Breech unloading and easier cleanup could be done in minutes. Single shot rifle sales were surging and Knight (Modern Muzzleloading, Inc.) led the way.

In business, success is usually measured by how much everybody wants you. Knight was sold to the Lotleys, then EBSCO Industries in the late 1990s. Manufacturing eventually moved to Alabama. But the battle to be the best and newest continued. In June 2009, it was announced that Knight would cease manufacturing, citing an overall industry downturn. The company still offers repair and warranty service through its website.



MUZZLELOADER EVOLUTION. Whereas primitive rifles rely on percussion locks, wheel locks or matchlock ignition, modern firearms use a bolt to hammer down a cap or primer to touch off the charge—often in the form of Pyrodex pellets rather than loose powder. A plastic-jacketed bullet rather than a lead ball is shot through the rifled barrel to add spin for a truer shot.

High on Ice

A UNI instructor invents a new extreme sport in Cedar Falls and invites everyone to give it a try.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAN WEEKS



There it stands: a shimmering, crystal tower. A frozen waterfall. A spire of ice.

That's if you look at it from the north side. From the south, it's just a grain silo.

Eighty-five feet tall, built of concrete blocks with reinforcing steel hoops and a domed roof, it resembles any of tens of thousands of Midwestern feed towers—except for the feathery blue-white ice on the shady side. The frozen water is four feet thick at the base, tapering off to just a trace at the tower's top. Its surface is roiled like whitewater.

Today, the ice is this silo's reason for being. Like most such structures, this grain tower has outlived its original purpose. There are no animals left to feed here in this

barnyard of a rural Cedar Falls farm as the cattle and pig operations were shut down years ago. The grain raised here is now stored in low, tin-can-like corrugated metal bins. Other than for decorating the horizon, the silo is now useless. Or is it?

One fall evening 10 years or so ago, Don Briggs, an instructor in physical education at the University of Northern Iowa, was plowing a cornfield for his friend Jim Budlong. Running back and forth in the tractor, he kept looking at the silo, lit bright orange by the setting sun. "You know, I bet I could climb that thing," he thought during one pass.

Briggs is an experienced technical climber who has scaled mountain peaks on several continents. In the past, he occasionally lamented that the highest you could get

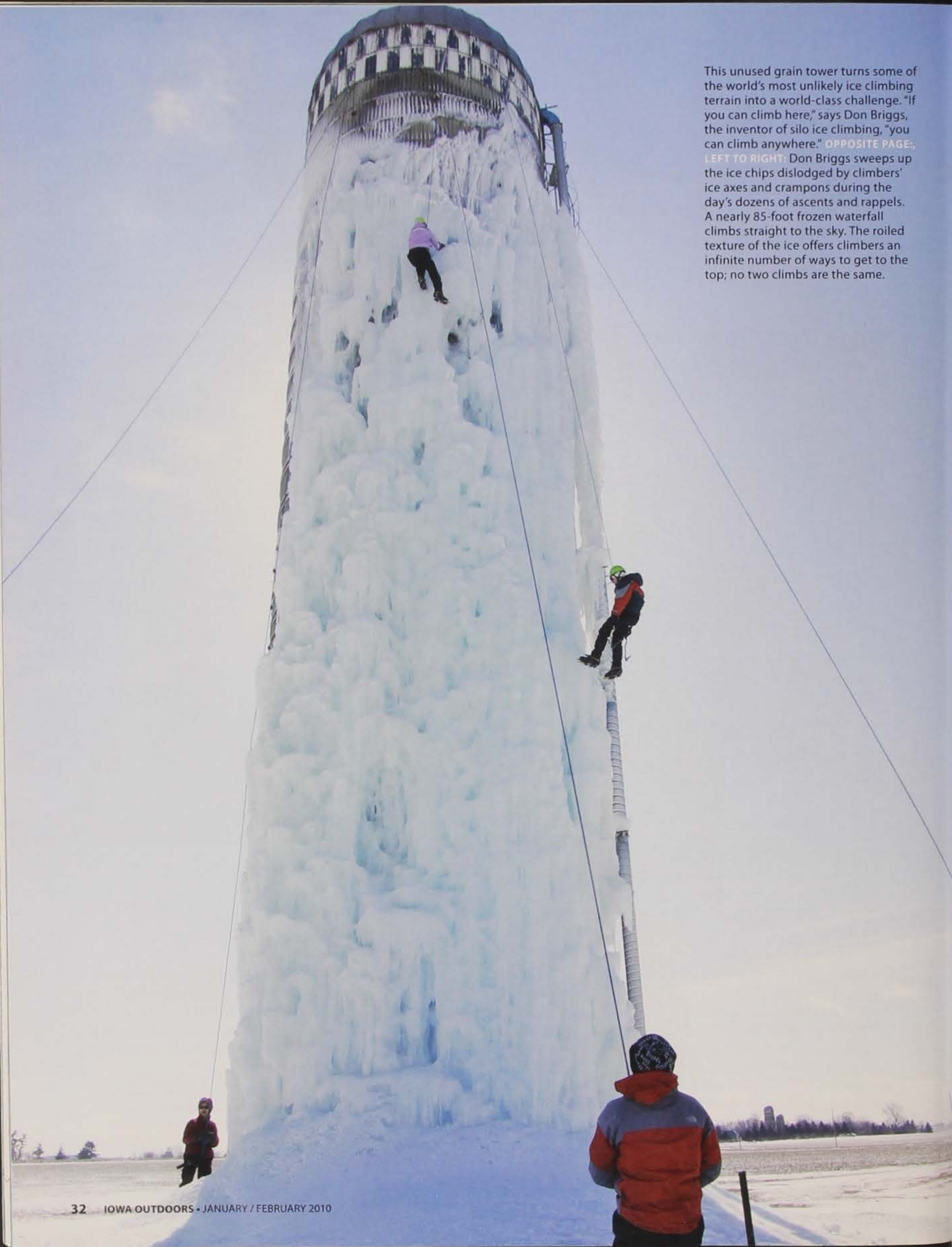
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An ice axe in each hand and crampons on her boots, Sarah Hoy, age 9, surveys her progress up the silo's sheer ice wall on a crystalline February day. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Belayers, each tethered to a robust metal stake in the frozen ground, crane their necks to watch their climbing partners ascend the silo.

This unused grain tower turns some of the world's most unlikely ice climbing terrain into a world-class challenge. "If you can climb here," says Don Briggs, the inventor of silo ice climbing, "you can climb anywhere." **OPPOSITE PAGE;** **LEFT TO RIGHT:** Don Briggs sweeps up the ice chips dislodged by climbers' ice axes and crampons during the day's dozens of ascents and rappels. A nearly 85-foot frozen waterfall climbs straight to the sky. The roiled texture of the ice offers climbers an infinite number of ways to get to the top; no two climbs are the same.



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Don Briggs



Climbing guide Cliff Roy of Cedar Falls



off the ground in Iowa was the top of a silo. He was about to turn that lament into a brainstorm.

"It's going to get cold here pretty soon," he thought on his next pass with the tractor.

"Hey!" he wondered. "What if we iced it down?"

He called some friends in Ouray, Colo., an area that was then in the process of becoming what some call "the ice climbing capital of the world" in spite of its dry winters. Climbers "farm" ice by spraying down the sheer sides of a rocky canyon with sprinklers and climb on the result—with ice-gripping cramponed boots, ice axes and a lot of nerve.

"They told me we needed two ingredients to farm ice," says Briggs. "Temperature and water. Well, we've got those."

Briggs mentioned his idea to Budlong. "Yeah, lets get some hoses and try it!" was the farmer's response. Don rallied some others to help, including Bob Lee, who also teaches physical education at UNI.

"One of Don's favorite phrases is 'Here's what we're gonna do,'" says Lee. "When he says that you want to turn and run, because you're about to be enlisted in some form of adventure. Briggs got me into rock climbing, then skydiving. When he started icing down silos, I thought 'Briggsy, you're doing it to me again!'"

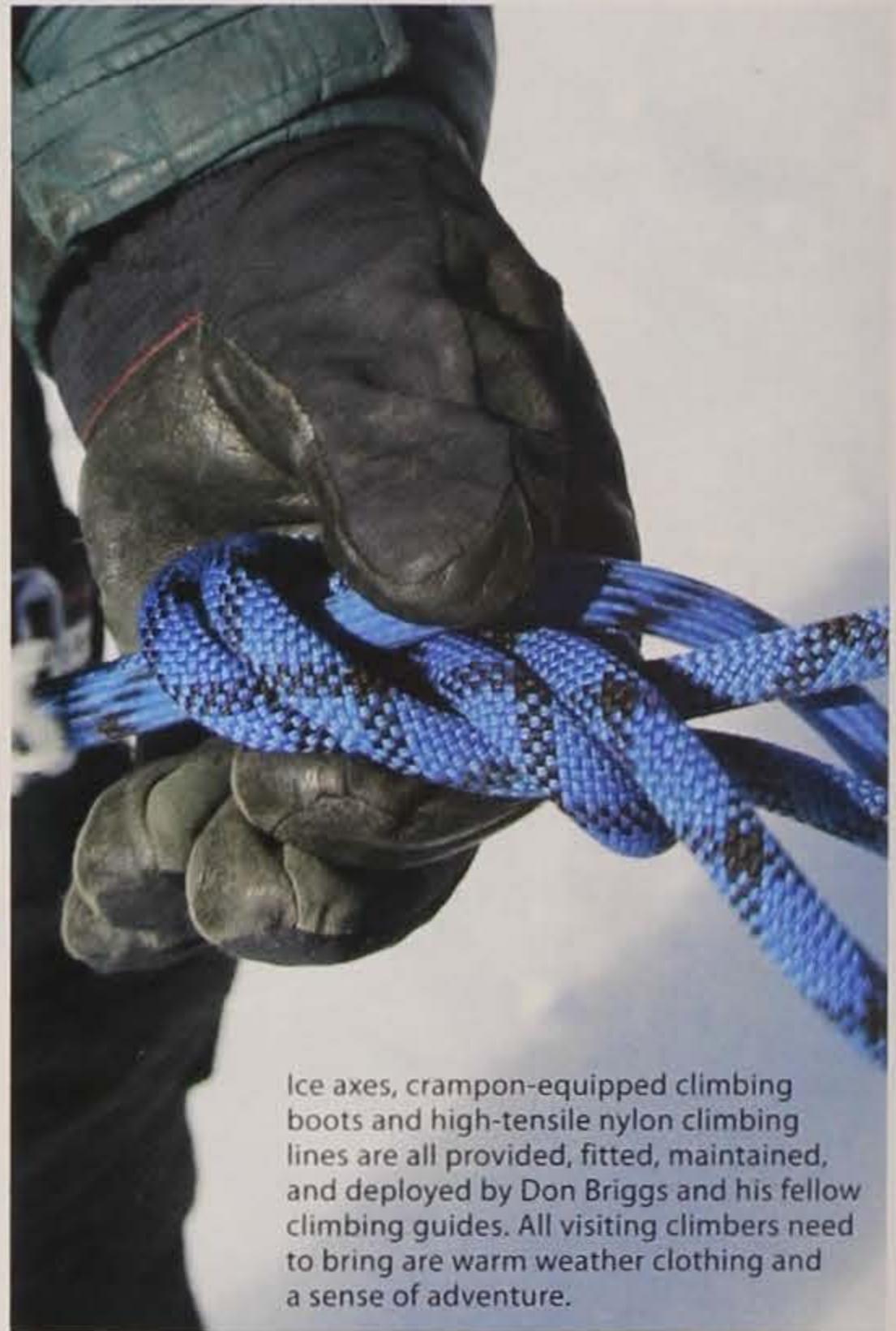
Fast forward a decade. Up to 50 people a weekend now show up at a barnyard in rural Cedar Falls to climb some of the most difficult ice you'll find anywhere. Unlike frozen waterfalls and icy cliffs that generally have some

slope, the silo goes straight up. Every inch of the climb is vertical, testing climber's technique, gear, strength, stamina, and nerve.

"The first time I climbed a silo, I remembered it as being really tough," Briggs recalls. "I'd climbed natural ice before, and I got on this and I went 'Wow!' If you can climb a silo, you can climb almost anywhere."

Briggs wasn't going to the trouble of hauling out hoses and spray heads in subfreezing weather, hoisting them several stories up in the air with a series of ropes and pulleys, and getting up in the middle of a winter's night to adjust their position so the ice would build just right purely for his own curiosity and entertainment. He envisioned adding ice climbing to UNI's outdoor recreation course offerings, and training a first crop of Iowa ice climbers how to hold their own with winter mountaineers anywhere—all without leaving their home state.

And so he has. Briggs teaches a UNI phys ed course that covers basic ice climbing technique and equipment use. Class starts in the barnyard at the foot of the silo and goes up from there. One of the most important skills he teaches is belaying: every climber wears a safety harness fastened to a stout rope that runs through a pulley in the top of the silo and down to a belayer. The belayer is a climber's partner on the ground. His or her job is to keep the line taut and arrest it should a climber fall off the ice. Each belayer is in turn tied in to a stout



Ice axes, crampon-equipped climbing boots and high-tensile nylon climbing lines are all provided, fitted, maintained, and deployed by Don Briggs and his fellow climbing guides. All visiting climbers need to bring are warm weather clothing and a sense of adventure.

iron stake driven deep into the barnyard's hard packed soil, so a light person can belay a heavier climber without being hauled up the silo if the heavier partner falls. Briggs has rigged three belaying lines so that three climbers can ascend simultaneously, each following a different route up the ice.

Eventually, Briggs accumulated enough climbing equipment and trained enough climbers and belayers that he was able to open silo climbing to the public. Now, for a modest \$25 fee to cover the rental of climbing equipment, anyone with the inclination can show up at the ice climbing class' second location. That's at Rusty Leymaster's farm north of Cedar Falls between mid-December and late February, temperatures permitting. There, Don Briggs and his crew will teach you how to ice climb. It has to be the best and most exotic winter-recreation deal in Iowa—and a real thrill to boot.

First, visitors are ushered into the climber's lounge, a toasty, kerosene-heated shed just a few yards from the silo and equipped with snacks and lots of beat-up but comfy couches. There, volunteers help you don stiff-soled ice climbing boots fitted with tempered-steel crampons, a nylon safety harness, a hard hat to protect against falling ice fragments, and a pair of radically-shaped ice axes that look like the pincers of an extremely large and aggressive insect. Clothes are your own responsibility: most climbers

outfit themselves with long underwear, a very warm parka, and a wind shell and wind pants. If it's cold on the ground, it's choose-your-expetive cold when you get above rooftop level and feel the full effect of the prairie wind.

Then it's out to the silo, where your belayer will check your gear and clip you in to the climbing line. Not only will your belayer keep you from going "splat" if you start to fall, he or she also serves as your coach, advisor and lead cheerleader during your climb. (If you do come unstuck from the ice during your ascent, you may drop a foot or two before you hover in mid-air beside the silo. Then you can decide whether you want to get another purchase on the ice and climb on, or get lowered gracefully to the ground.)

You use your ice axes to keep yourself vertical, but rely mostly on the power of your legs to push you up the ice—they're lots stronger than your arms, and tire less easily. You climb the ice like a ladder, looking for knobs and holes and ripples in the ice that can serve as a toe-hold or an ice-axe purchase.

Every climb is different, because the ice changes shape and feel by the day, thanks to nightly spray-downs and changes in wind and temperature that shape the column. Cold ice is brittle, and shatters with a spray of fragments when struck with an ice axe. Closer to freezing, the ice is soft and "sticky."

Cold or "warm," the ice is incredibly strong: you can hang

The only experience more fun than climbing to the top is rappelling down: climbers hang their ice axes from safety harnesses, push off from the ice with their feet, holler "Dirt me!" to their belayer, and float down the side of the silo on a safety line. With rate of descent regulated by the belayer, they drop lightly to the ground in a shower of ice chips.



Climber Hannah Lang of Des Moines raises her ice axes in triumph after reaching the head of the silo's manufactured ice flow. No matter how many times they ascend, climbers say, the rush of topping out never loses its thrill. **OPPOSITE:** A long way down: Eighty-five feet up and clinging to the side of a sheet of ice by a few spikes of tempered steel gives climbers a whole different perspective on their altitude. Climbing partners and spectators are reduced to brightly colored specks and shadows on the frozen barnyard. Climbers Sara Hoy and Omar Padilla take a break from climbing to watch others ascend. Jorge Padilla, a first-time climber, seems to levitate halfway up the tower as he contemplates where to plant the point of his ice axe before taking his next step.



GET OUTSIDE

Climbs begin when temps are consistently below 26 degrees. Heated facility gives climbers a place to gear-up and relax with hot drinks. Gear provided. To arrange group climbs or check for climbing conditions call 319-277-6426. Visit www.siloiceclimbing.com

HOURS: Saturday 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
Sunday 11:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

COST: Daily pass \$25
Student daily pass \$10
Season pass \$150





a human body off a well-placed, 1/8" divot in the ice formed by an ice axe. It takes a bit to trust the ice; to relax, look around for a good purchase, and kick and pull your way up.

As the ground recedes, you tend to focus with increasing intensity on the ice, on where your next move will take you, on the encouraging voice of your belayer growing ever more distant and the whistle and roar of the wind growing gradually stronger. The challenge is as much mental as physical.

Eighty-five feet may not seem that high, but the silo is as tall as a seven-story building. Out on the prairie, it's higher than everything else: barns, trees, old windmills. Nearing the top, the upturned faces of fellow climbers watching your progress are just specks on the snow-covered barnyard. There's a view that sweeps to the horizon in every direction. The view, and the accomplishment of attaining it can be quite a rush. Climbers raise their ice axes and cheer.

"Growing up as a farm girl, I never expected to scale a silo," says Andi Vongert, a massage therapist from Bluegrass. "I skydive in the summer, and this is the same atmosphere: everyone wants to help everyone out, and when you do something good, they all cheer. They really want to see you succeed. And \$25 for a day? You can't beat it!"

Hannah Lang, an outdoor recreation and therapeutic recreation major at UNI, agrees. "You really focus. You're looking for that perfect spot to plant your axe. Your

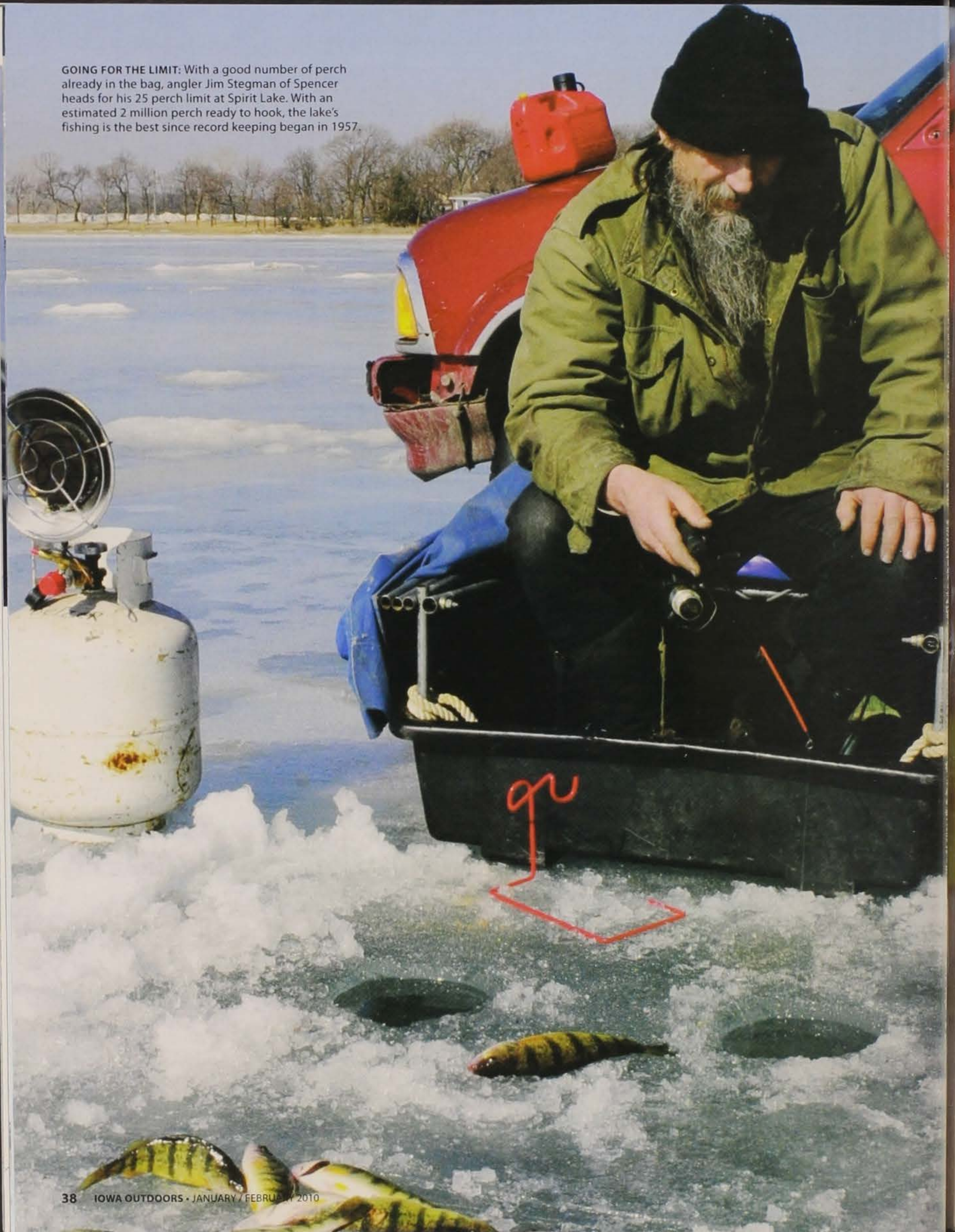
body movements become graceful, smooth, purposeful. I wouldn't say I love the cold, but out here you don't notice it. Wear enough layers, head back into the warming hut every once in a while for some hot coffee and cookies and you're good to go.

"I really enjoy belaying," she continues. "You have a special connection with your climbing partner because you literally have their life in your hands. As a belayer, I offer encouragement and help spot footholds. Seeing your climber get to the top is as rewarding as getting there yourself. I've gotten a lot of thank-yous for encouraging someone to keep going. There's a real feeling of shared accomplishment here."

You don't have to be an adrenaline junkie or even an athlete to enjoy ice climbing here: first-timers, while rarely reaching the top, typically make more progress than they expect, and rappel back down to terra firma elated. Farmer Rusty Leymaster's 86-year-old father who grew up on this spread, suited up just for the heck of it last year. He made it halfway up the tower. He's coming back this season with reaching the top in mind.

Sara Hoy, age nine, climbed past several adults and reached the 3/4 mark on her first day ice climbing. "I just listened to the belayers telling people to put their weight on their legs, not on their arms. I was pretty high. It wasn't scary." Any advice for other newbies? "Don't look down!" she says with a big grin. 🐾

GOING FOR THE LIMIT: With a good number of perch already in the bag, angler Jim Stegman of Spencer heads for his 25 perch limit at Spirit Lake. With an estimated 2 million perch ready to hook, the lake's fishing is the best since record keeping began in 1957.



SPIRIT LAKE ICE FISHING ON FIRE!

With A New All-time Record, Biologists Predict Great Perch Fishing Ahead

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

It's the talk of anglers statewide. Spirit Lake perch fishing is on fire. Following last season's blockbuster action and record catch, the excitement isn't over yet. With the best of winter's ice fishing yet to come, biologists predict angler success will only improve. Last year's late season ice fishing was so fantastic that were the bite any hotter, it's likely the ice itself would ignite.

While that last statement may be a stretch, it is hard to exaggerate just how good the fishing is. Here are the facts. Spirit Lake anglers are enjoying the most extraordinary perch fishing success since biologists began keeping records in 1957. During a 45-day period last winter, anglers harvested more than 114,000 yellow perch and released 300,000 back into the lake. Although we'll still have to wait a few more weeks to see, this year's catch may prove even larger.

"Yellow perch are the literal lifeblood of Spirit Lake's winter fishery and we're truly living in an exciting period of time," says DNR district fisheries biologist Mike Hawkins. "During the past two years, Spirit Lake has really become a phenomenal winter fishery and we've not had a previous ice season that even compares," says Hawkins. "The real story here is the incredible number of people catching an incredible number of fish. Our daily car counts have approached 500 vehicles and there have been more than 17,500 angler trips onto the ice for the season, which easily makes it the highest ice fishing effort ever recorded."

That makes a unique fishing situation. "Drive around out there and, in addition to the fishing, you'll see all kinds of people huddled together visiting, kids running around playing on the ice, all sorts of things. It's as if the lake is supporting a culture all its own. It's a really good thing to see," he says.

Last season's DNR creel clerk interviews with nearly 2,000 anglers revealed that, on average, people caught more than 20 perch per trip, and took at least seven fish home. Perch become "angler acceptable" at around 7 inches in length and most of the fish being taken this season are somewhat larger, measuring from 8-plus to 11-inches. Extreme fish densities coupled with sky-high success rates are the perfect recipe for creating happy anglers, and fishing devotee Jay Cole is one.

"It's been great," says Cole. "I didn't start fishing until early February [last winter], but once I got going, things really went well. I usually get on the ice around 9:30 or 10 in the morning and then fish 'til noon. I just keep the good ones." He doesn't take home a limit every single day, but usually ends up with at least 10 or 15 good fish to clean.



ICE TOWN: With daily counts of 500 vehicles and 17,500 ice angler trips, Spirit Lake ice fishing is the highest effort ever recorded. Last year shattered records, but fisheries biologists contend winter 2010 could be even better. *Read ice fishing reports and buy fishing licenses online and at www.iowadnr.gov.*





"I love catching perch and they taste great. It's just so great to be out here on the lake. Everything is beautiful at this time of the year," he says.

Retired Spencer police lieutenant Terry Dodson agrees. He gets out on the lake at least one or two days per week and says there are plenty of fish willing to bite. "Yesterday, I caught 37 and kept 18. That's a pretty good average, and I'm getting enough fish to eat," he adds.

Dodson was dropping his first lure down the hole at around 10 a.m. At first nothing, but soon the first group of foraging perch moved through. Things lit up and within minutes, Dodson had four fresh keepers flopping on the clean ice.

Spurred on by tales of their friends' success, Tony Wilson and Hector Alvarez waited until late in the season before conducting their first winter pilgrimage to Spirit Lake.

"We live near Fort Dodge and know 11 guys that came up here and really got into 'em," says Wilson. "They pretty much fished all day for two days, kept the best ones, and came home with over a thousand filets in the coolers. After hearing a report like that, who could stay home? For us, it's nearly a three-hour drive to get here, but we had to come up and try it for ourselves."

The duo ate the first ones they caught. "Couldn't wait until we got home—perch and eggs for breakfast, right out here on the ice. It was great. That's what I call living," says Wilson.

Des Moines angler Bill Roach is another long distance traveler who's been plugging into Spirit Lake's perch fishing bonanza.

"We've been up here four times so far, and we've really done well," says Roach. "We've sorted out the good ones

and have all kept limits a couple of times. The fish we've kept have measured from 8.5 to 10 inches. We've taken a few perch up to 12-inches—the biggest so far."

Longtime Rock Rapids perch fishing enthusiast Dave Hill agrees. "If you can find just one of the big ones—a real jumbo—then you'll usually catch more. There's a good supply of 9 to 12-inch perch out here right now, but you have to hunt to find them. Once you locate the schools of bigger fish, they'll usually stay in the same general area for at least a couple of days, maybe more. They're great to eat and once you get a few of those big ones on the ice, it really makes you grin."

BIG FISH, BIG BUCKS

Anglers aren't the only folks smiling. On Main Street, world class perch fishing is making cash registers sing.

"Spirit Lake's perch fishing is having a very huge impact on our local economies," says Thane Johnson, owner of the famed Kabele's Trading Post and Lodge. "In addition to area residents, I've had anglers from at least 10 states come into the trading post looking for licenses and ice fishing supplies. Our fishing license sales last winter were up 300 percent over the previous year. License sales have remained strong which means new people are still coming into the area to fish."

Bait sales are through the roof. "In one weekend, we sold more than 4,000 containers of wax worms. When the weather cooperates, we can do more business in two days than we normally do in a month. And it's not just me: gas stations, eateries, motels—all have the same story. Everyone is excited and everyone is benefiting from this fishing," he says.



Terry Dodson of Spencer

TWO MILLION PERCH

With clear water, a lot of anglers are using underwater cameras to fish, says Johnson. "Before this year class of perch came on, you'd typically see schools of 10 or 12 fish move through, and you'd maybe get one or two to bite. Now, you have to see the fish to believe it. When the really big numbers come into view it's like watching one of the Discovery Channel films showing those huge schools of ocean krill. It literally appears as if there's absolutely no end to them; the perch are like a fog—a continuous, never-ending ribbon of fish. When those schools come through, fish get super competitive and you catch perch as fast as you can bring them up," says Johnson.

"It's true that Spirit Lake's perch densities are incredible," says Hawkins. "We could have as much as 100 pounds of perch per acre, which translates between 1.5 million and 2.5 million fish." He says perch are extremely prolific and highly cyclic. Populations and individual fish growth rates are driven by the environment, spawning success, overall densities and food supplies.

The good news for anglers is that perch populations are not controlled by fishing.

"We tell people that big populations need angling pressure. We want people to catch fish and take them home," says Hawkins, who adds that perch are a relatively short-lived fish.

"I think the best news for anglers is that perch populations are just coming into their own, and the excellent fishing is going to last for awhile," he says. "I

think what we're seeing now is just a prelude for what lies ahead. Catch rates should remain excellent for the rest of the 2009-2010 season, and again in 2011. After that I'd expect to see perch numbers begin to decline."

Hawkins says Spirit Lake is an extremely diverse and dynamic fishery. As one species declines, another will rise to take its place. In addition to yellow perch, Spirit Lake currently holds excellent densities of catchable bluegill, black crappie and walleye. The 2007 and 2008 harvests for bluegill were the highest in history. Black crappie fishing in '08 was the best in 20 years, and populations of adult walleye are the highest ever recorded.

"Healthy populations of black crappies are an indicator of good habitat and good water quality. Their presence is a very welcome sign," says Hawkins. "Right now, our surveys also tell us that Spirit Lake is harboring more than 30,000 walleyes more than 17-inches in length. That's the highest number of adult walleye on record and is three times above our objective. We're looking at a very healthy, very balanced, very diverse fishery."

For anglers who have yet to sample the excitement of Spirit Lake fishing, there's no time like the present. The remainder of this year's season still offers plenty of opportunity to partake in the winter perch fishing frenzy.

"Regardless of how good the bite has already been, February and March will typically offer some of the season's best fishing," says Hawkins. "As long as the ice stays, people will be out there. Generally speaking, the later the date the better the fishing." 🐟

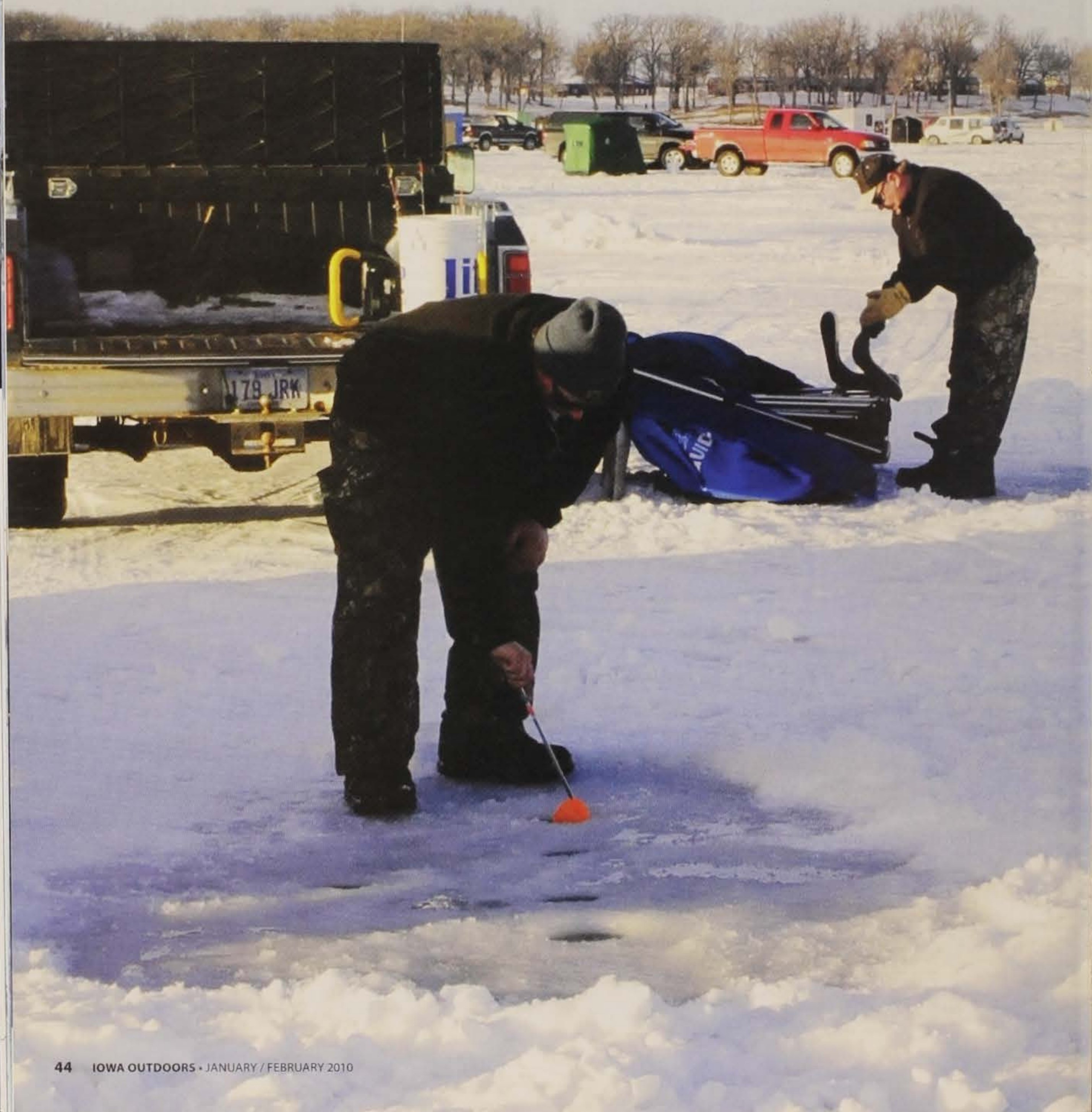


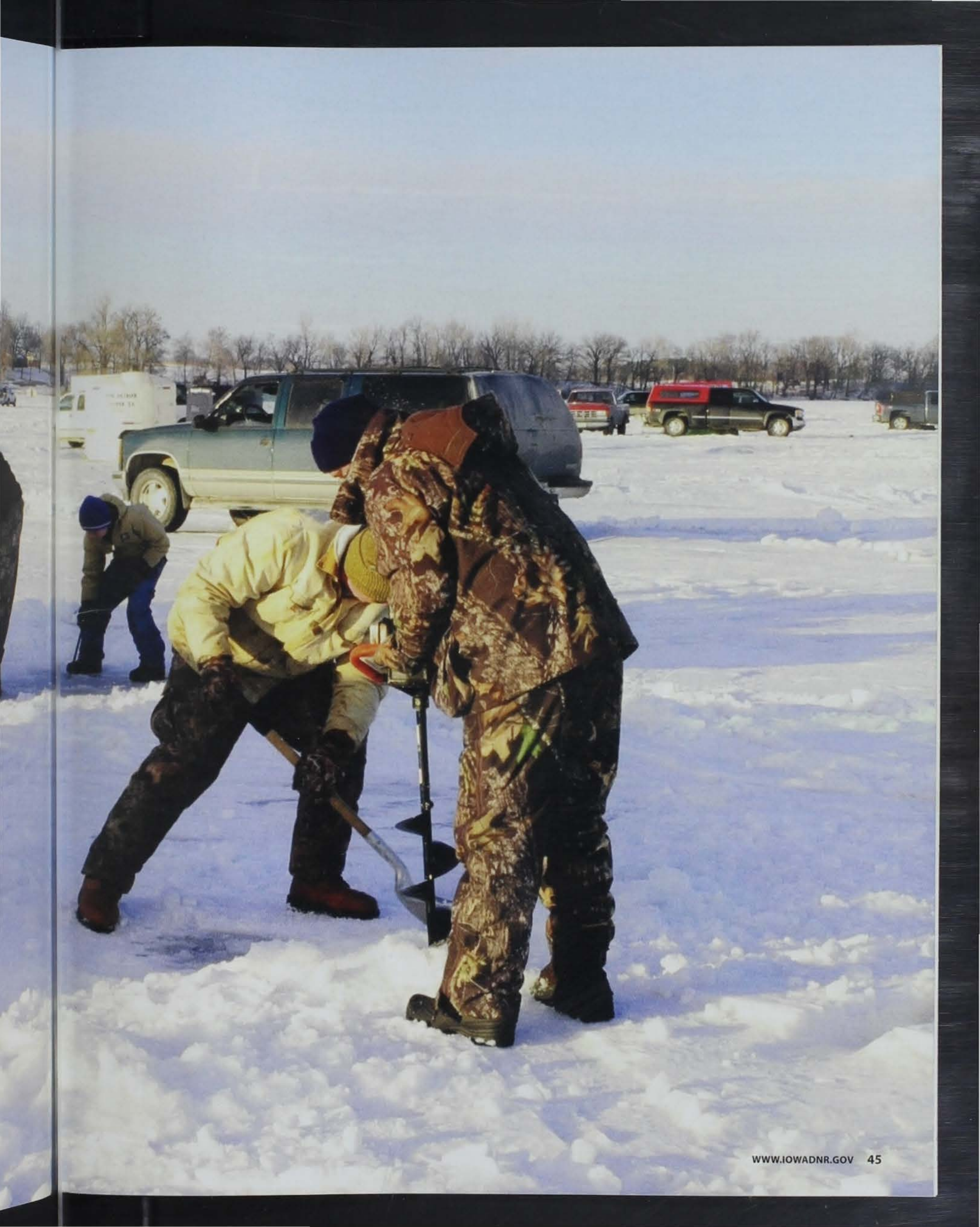
Thane Johnson



LEFT: Thane Johnson, owner of Kabele's Trading Post and Lodge in Spirit Lake, restocks the lure rack. "The perch bite is having a very huge impact on local economies," he says. "Bait sales have been crazy. In one weekend we sold over 4,000 containers of wax worms alone."

HOT TIMES IN ICE CITY: Besides hundreds of anglers, you'll find all kinds of people huddled together visiting, good food, laughter, and kids running around playing on the ice. "The lake is supporting a culture all its own. It's a really good thing to see," says Mike Hawkins, DNR fisheries biologist.





With broken wings set and immobilized at her side, this bald eagle still has a long road ahead. Here, Kristine Lake, from the Macbride Raptor Project, listens for heartbeat and lung functions. After an hour of initial treatment, the bird was still under stress. More importantly, lab workers were concerned about initial signs of organ failure due to high lead levels detected in her blood.





THE FALLEN

Working to save a life, rehabilitators uncover evil

BY JOE WILKINSON PHOTOS BY JOE WILKINSON AND TONY MOLINE

The return of an eagle to the wild is often a great story. Orphaned or injured birds of prey are coaxed along the runway to recovery by well-trained rehabilitators or volunteers. It makes for a great photo op as well-wishers gather around one of those portable pet carriers, maybe along an isolated gravel road. One of them, sporting ultra-heavy gloves, gathers up the now healthy eagle and gives it a toss in the air. Or, the rehabilitated raptor may bolt on its own, flapping its wings, tasting freedom again.

Watching the bird build a little altitude, particularly if it is a bald eagle—our nation's symbol—you can't help but smile and think "this one made it."

The release usually caps weeks of effort. Exercise in a flight cage helps it rebuild strength. Volunteers set out food—dead mice, chicks or fish. They track what is eaten and any changes in behavior. And that follows the initial—often critical—treatment of whatever brought it to earth in the first place. Often, a collision with a power line grounds the high flyer. It might have been a fall from the nest, lead poisoning, maybe a gunshot by some clown who thought it would be entertaining. Yes, it is a good feeling when one of the regal birds returns to the wild. Because not all of them make it.

I was just leaving the DNR's Manchester trout hatchery with Solon High School senior Trevor Irinaka, who had been job shadowing hatchery workers for biology class credit. A worker asked if we could we swing

up to Earlville and pick up an injured eagle. Our route home would go within a couple miles of the Macbride Raptor Project clinic, on the Cedar Rapids' campus of Kirkwood Community College. "Sure," we replied. Irinaka could log a little extra credit.

As we pulled into the farm drive of Randy Allen's place north of Earlville in Delaware County, the bald eagle was slumped in the yard. "It was just sitting there last evening when we got home," reported Allen. "We get eagles perching up there all the time. When this one was still on the ground this morning, we called."

"Up there" was a row of tall evergreens, with a power line threading through. From the way the eagle dragged its wings as it hopped around the yard, it apparently had clipped the line. Though rookie eagle catchers, we were well equipped. The hatchery guys came up with a portable dog kennel and thick welding gloves for us. I had a heavy winter coat to toss over the injured eagle. My bird-holding experience, though, was limited to songbirds, wood ducks and a couple trumpeter swans. None sported razor sharp talons or a flesh-tearing beak. This could take awhile.

As we herded the eagle along the front yard fence, it stumbled right into the open kennel. We congratulated ourselves on our superior strategy. Within a couple hours, though, it became obvious that the eagle was simply in no condition to resist.

"It has two broken wings. One is near the elbow on



For an hour, raptor clinic volunteer Luke Hart held down the seriously injured eagle on an exam table. Lab workers drew blood for testing, flushed debris and matted feathers from the open breaks on her wings and administered fluids in an attempt to stabilize the regal raptor.

the right side. On the left one, the humerus is snapped right through," came the initial call from Kristine Lake, assistant director of the Macbride Raptor Project (MRP). Nearby, a work-study student, Luke Hart, held the eagle down on an examination table while Lake—a registered veterinary technician—assessed the damage.

Dwarfed by larger buildings on the south side of the Kirkwood campus, the two-room Raptor Clinic treats injured birds of prey. The MRP is a joint venture of the University of Iowa and Kirkwood. Besides the often life-saving work on raptors and research into survival of rehabilitated birds, the project tackles several research and management ventures. In addition, it provides experience to students interested in animal health and natural resource programs. Hart and fellow student Brian Smith soon would be up to their elbows in "hands-on" experience. Even I would lend a hand.

With the clinic and the nearby raptor exhibit each just a few minutes away from home, I have had lots of second-hand involvement: articles on osprey reintroduction,

sitting in on education programs, videotaping releases of rehabilitated birds. I've hauled my kids, the neighbor kids and assorted nieces and nephews over to the raptor exhibit area. For the first time, though, I stuck around to see what happens in this avian emergency room.

Lake wiped away clotted blood and matted feathers to survey the damage. "This one could be trouble if the break is at the elbow," she noted. The ulna, one of two "forearm" bones, was broken on the right wing. On the left wing, it was more graphic. The upper humerus was snapped clean, visible after breaking through the muscle. Lake noted labored breathing and only a thin layer of flesh over the eagle's "keel" or breastbone, indicating undernourishment.

She coached Smith through a blood withdrawal. One sample went onto a small slide and then over to a lead testing monitor. "This will tell us in 180 seconds whether the blood tests low, medium or high for lead," explained Lake. In recent years, an increasing number of injured or sick eagles have shown elevated levels of lead. Among the causes are eagles picking over deer carcasses and

Bald eagles are exciting to watch; skimming the tops of the waves below a lock and dam, for instance, to snatch a stunned fish for dinner. Volunteers used to tally dozens of winter eagles in Iowa. That mid-winter count has now swollen to several thousand, as our national symbol continues its fight back from near extinction in the 20th century.



ingesting slivers of lead that broke away as slugs hit the deer. For some reason, slobbs with guns occasionally take potshots at eagles. Even surviving a shooting could spell problems as the bird's system reacts. Lead's toxic properties, combined with the eagle's efficient digestive system, can impair breathing, eyesight and nervous systems. If severe enough, lead poisoning is fatal.

"High," pronounced Lake glumly, as the test results came up on the screen. "We've never brought one back from a high reading before." With two broken wings and now a load of lead reading at least 65 micrograms per deciliter in her blood, this feathered patient was in trouble. Still, the goal was to save the eagle if possible. Lake administered a sterile intravenous solution to flush out the liver and kidney. Another needle prick and the eagle received a double-dose of vitamin B-1 and iron. In a couple days, injections of calcium EDTA would begin. Hopefully it would bind with the lead, removing it from the eagle's system.

After all that, it was time to splint broken bones. It

took three of us to immobilize her and maneuver her wing. By now, Hart had been clutching the eagle's legs and holding down her shoulders for more than an hour. While I pulled up and back under the shoulder, Smith worked with the bottom of the wing.

The sounds of an eagle in pain are not among those you hear on one of those "Music in Nature" CDs. Knowing that we were the cause of the subdued shrieks didn't help either. After four or five long minutes, the wing was in place. Lake could then splint and wrap it. Each wing was wrapped separately and then double wrapped, pinning them to the eagle's sides.

Now, pain medication could be administered. A ration of frozen mice followed. The eagle resisted the first few, but eventually gulped down a dozen. A much calmer eagle was set into a cage to rest. This was Wednesday. Treatment for the lead poisoning would begin Friday. Kirkwood veterinarian Dr. Randy Ackman would be in for X-rays and a follow-up exam early the next week.

On Tuesday, the voice mail message confirmed what



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OPPOSITE PAGE: With a sufficient supply of fish snatched from pockets of open water, winter eagles in Iowa spend much of their day loafing on the ice or in nearby cottonwood trees or other observation points. They expend as little energy as possible to conserve calories to survive the bitter cold. **RIGHT:** Before the eagle's broken wings are set, debris, dried blood and matted feathers are flushed from the wound. In its apparent collision with a Delaware County power line, this bird broke both wings. Her condition was worsened by high lead levels in her blood; which causes sight and nervous system problems. **BELOW:** Within minutes, a blood sample is screened for lead in this compact Lead Care monitor. The small vial holds a lysing solution. When added to the sample it ruptures red blood cell membranes to allow technicians to see what substances are contained in the blood. In this case, lead—at a dangerously high level. Despite the top care, the lead poisoning and critical injuries led to this eagle's euthanization. The lead pellets found in the raptor also led to a law enforcement investigation to find and prosecute the shooters.



we expected. Even with all the special attention, the eagle had been euthanized. "Some of the injured tissue was dead. There were lots of little metallic fragments in the x-rays," explained Lake. Insurmountable odds for the eagle to survive.

Those fragments could not have come from a source other than gunshots. The eagle apparently survived a shooting, but couldn't negotiate past the power lines in her weakened state. The case—it's a "case" now—has been turned over to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

That someone would shoot an eagle is another head-scratcher. Though removed from the federal Endangered and Threatened Species list in 2007, bald and golden eagles still are protected under heavy-duty federal laws. Penalties range up to \$500,000 in fines and five years in prison, depending on the law cited.

Pretty much everyone knows the history. Our nation's symbol was nearly extirpated from the lower 48 states through chemical poisoning and habitat loss. Decades of cooperation and tough protection guidelines helped the bald eagle rebound. In the Iowa midwinter count alone, volunteers tally several thousand eagles now instead of dozens. We know of at least 200 active nests in 77 Iowa counties.

Perhaps it is because there are so many, that more are injured. Overall, the population is doing well. But there are still those which need a helping hand to get back into the wild.

Maybe that is why a small circle of well-wishers treks out to the countryside, to applaud on the occasion when one more eagle beats the odds.

And maybe that's why a small crew still tries so hard to save one, even with the odds heavily stacked against her. 🐱

Blueprint


STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

For **THE WINNEBAGO STUDY AREA** Success

Nowhere on earth has the delicate relationship between humans and pheasants been more closely examined than on this northern Iowa research plot. Standing the test of time, the wildlife management lessons discovered here remain as true today as when first revealed nearly 75 years ago.



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Without cover, Iowa pheasants face a double whammy of severely limited critical nesting habitat and the brutality that sometimes come with Midwestern winters.

Since the time of mighty Roman legions, wildlife enthusiasts have been helping the ring-necked pheasant expand its range. And although no one can say for sure when the gaudy Asian gamebird finally reached Iowa, it is known that the first major release of pheasants occurred in 1901 when an estimated 2,000 birds escaped from a Cedar Falls game farm. The birds flourished, and by the end of the decade the Iowa Conservation Commission (now the DNR) was beginning to take notice of the species' recreational potential. In a 1910 effort to expand growing populations, the commission distributed more than 6,000 captive-produced pheasant eggs to 178 Iowa farmers in 82 counties.

Although early introductions were spectacularly successful in northern Iowa, pheasants failed to prosper across the south. Assuming large-scale stockings

from wild, rather than pen-raised birds might provide a solution, the commission collected eggs from wild pheasant nests and live-trapped adults in Winnebago and Butler counties. Cooperating farmers were paid a dollar a dozen for gathering eggs.

For local landowners, the buck-a-dozen payoff was a sweet deal. In 1925 alone, 7,000 adult pheasants and 60,000 eggs were collected from the two north-central counties. In spite of these incredible inroads during the spring nesting season, pheasant populations continued to explode and expand.

By the early 1920s, ring-necked pheasants had become numerous to the point of being regarded as pests in north-central Iowa. In 1925, the area game warden received a petition signed by 150 Hancock County farmers who complained of extensive crop damage from pheasants. Political pressure from angry farmers

For Iowa pheasants, it was the beginning of dark days to come. Instead of setting aside conservation acres, farmers were suddenly encouraged to maximize production...



The amount of habitat and the severity of winter and spring weather are the prime dictators of pheasant populations. Habitat is the key, though, to winter survival and nesting success.

continued to escalate until, in October of that year, 13 northern Iowa counties were opened to three days of hunting. According to a news item published in Hancock County's *Garner Signal*, at least one local farmer went so far as to solicit the public to come and shoot his nuisance birds. As the state's first legal pheasant hunt concluded, nearly all of the 75,000 hunters participating in the limited season bagged the colorful new species that would quickly become Iowa's number-one gamebird.

Great Depression-Era Research

Although pheasants continued to expand across Iowa, virtually nothing was known of the immigrant species' biological needs or management. In 1935, the commission established a research tract of 4,900 Winnebago County farmland acres.

Known simply as the Winnebago Study Area, the plot provided the most detailed documentation to ever emerge regarding the relationship between land use and pheasant populations. Perhaps nowhere on Earth has the ring-necked pheasant been more intensively studied during a longer period of time than on these select northern Iowa acres. Three quarters of a century later, the area remains a hallmark example of scientific investigation.

Although originally designed to research a broad spectrum of biological topics, the primary focus involved monitoring and interpreting long-term population trends. Research tools included autumn roadside pheasant counts, direct late-winter counts, spring crowing surveys and August roadside counts. These direct census surveys began in the fall of 1935 and were historically conducted on foot, by horseback or on snow skis. Although simplistic and primitive when compared to contemporary methods, the 1930s pheasant counts nevertheless yielded astounding data.

The Amazing Birds of 1941

Pheasant populations reached an all-time high during the fall of 1941 when researchers inventoried an incredible 400 birds per section. Although research was suspended during World War II, counts resumed on 2,500 acres in 1950. During the early to mid-1950s, direct winter counts dropped to around 100 pheasants per section. In the late 1950s populations rebounded. By 1960, bird numbers soared to 235 pheasants per section.

The welcome surge in pheasant numbers was credited to the Federal Farm Program and the new Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) created by the Soil Bank Act of 1956. The program accelerated from 1959 to 1964 to provide pheasants, along with other upland nesting birds, greatly expanded acreages of secure cover. Iowans cashed in on the bonanza, consistently harvesting more than a million roosters annually. In 1963, the pheasant harvest reached a high with a bag of 1.9 million roosters.

But the good times didn't last. CRP contracts matured and expired and federal set-asides were curtailed. By 1965, Iowa's Soil Bank program had been reduced to less than one tenth of the acreage enjoyed just five years earlier. For Iowa pheasants, it was the beginning of dark

BOY'S-EYE VIEW —BY LOWELL WASHBURN **FLOCKS SO THICK THEY COVER THE SNOW**

My initial introduction to Iowa pheasant hunting occurred during the winter of 1959. For a bug-eyed wanna be pheasant slayer, the sight and sound of the seemingly endless clouds of birds that erupted from those blocks of Soil Bank was simply incredible. For all who were privileged to observe the spectacle, Iowa's "ring-neck blizzards" left an indelible mark. Like most youths of the day, I was packing a .410 single shot. The sight of my very first rooster tumbling into the clean December snow will be forever etched in my memory.

But there are others, too. One of the most vivid came during the winter of 1964 or 1965. It was late in the season and marginal habitats had drifted full, forcing birds to concentrate into the more substantial cover of cattail sloughs or brushy farmstead windbreaks. It was Saturday afternoon when a high school friend and I pulled alongside a large farm grove near the south side of Clear Lake. Both of our jaws dropped at the sight before us—a windbreak so crowded with wintering pheasants that the hard-packed snow was only visible in scattered patches. As we braked to a stop, the birds became nervous and began to move across the drifts like disturbed ants. I can't hazard a guess as to how many pheasants the grove contained, but it was a solid mass from one end to the other. Look as we might, our hungry eyes could not detect so much as a single rooster in the massive flock. It was late in the season, and we'd already noticed that the birds had become somewhat segregated, but this was ridiculous. We eventually moved on, eager to find the immense gang of roosters certainly hiding nearby. Much to our dismay, we never did locate those birds.

Within five short hunting seasons, nearly all of the sloughs, brushy fencelines, and other covers I had tromped as a teenager had been tilled, bulldozed and plowed under. The pheasants, along with other wildlife, had vanished.

days. Instead of setting aside conservation acres, farmers were suddenly encouraged to maximize production as the era of road-ditch-to-road-ditch farming began. From that moment, pheasant populations on the Winnebago Study Area, as elsewhere, began a steady and rapid decline. By 1976, direct winter counts recorded a dismal average of zero pheasants per section on the Winnebago Study Area. Under the strain of sudden and unprecedented land use changes, pheasants declined from a record 400 birds per section in 1941 to virtual eradication by the mid-'70s.

Reasons for the decline became painfully obvious. In 1941, nearly 60 percent of the entire study area consisted of potential nesting cover. By 1980, suitable nesting habitat could only be found on 9.7 percent of

the area. Row crop coverage increased from about 47 percent in 1954 to 86 percent in 1980. During that same period, wetlands and pastures completely disappeared from the research area. Also alarming, as the diversity of crop species decreased and individual farm size increased, a corresponding and rapid decline in suitable pheasant wintering cover occurred.

Iowa as Top Pheasant State

Fortunately, the story didn't end. Enter the 1985 farm bill and a brand new round of federal CRP set-asides. Farmers once again idled large tracts of row crop acreages and restored grassland covers. Iowa pheasant populations quickly exploded into the new habitats. Hunter success soared, and Iowa's annual pheasant harvest became the highest of any state. Pheasant hunting became a multi-million dollar annual industry and the number one reason for tourism in Iowa. There was no disputing that regal ring-neck was again the recreational King of the Hill.

But the good times didn't last. CRP contracts matured and expired, federal set asides were curtailed. Thousands of acres of critical nesting covers were converted back to row crop; and pheasant populations began a steady and dramatic decline. By 2008, Iowa's pheasant population had hit rock bottom. When the fall hunting season concluded, statewide pheasant harvest plunged to an all-time low of 383,000 roosters.

No question for today's pheasant flock, times are tough. But according to DNR pheasant biologist, Todd Bogenschutz, there's little mystery surrounding recent declines. After enduring a back-to-back series of long, hard winters, above-average snowfall, abnormally wet and cool spring nesting seasons, unprecedented flooding during 2008, and a catastrophic loss of habitat, it's no wonder bird numbers have fallen.

"Habitat and weather are the two critical factors driving our populations," says Bogenschutz. "Unfortunately, neither of those factors has been what you'd exactly term as 'pheasant friendly' during the last few years."

"I think that by now, everyone realizes pheasants could really use a break," says Bogenschutz. "If we could get a mild winter followed by a warm and dry nesting season, we would see a big change in pheasant numbers. A series of those conditions would provide wonders."

Omaha to Davenport: An 8-mile-wide Sea of Grass

Wild gamebird populations are highly dynamic and it's normal for pheasant numbers to fluctuate with changing weather conditions. But what birds cannot compensate for is the loss of habitat, says Bogenschutz. In 1993, more than 2.2 million acres of grassland nesting cover was enrolled in CRP. Bird populations soared and hunters bagged nearly 2 million roosters that fall—virtually identical to the record harvest seen when CRP acres peaked under the 1963 Soil Bank.

But as 10-year CRP contracts expired, Iowa's grassland

acreage declined steadily—particularly across the northern half of the state. Current CRP enrollment has dropped to less than 1.7 million acres statewide. Last September, Iowa lost another 85,000 acres, an equivalent of 132 square miles of critical nesting habitat. Another 230,000 CRP acres are scheduled to expire in 2012.

"It's very hard for people to visualize what those kind of habitat losses really look like," says Bogenschutz. "The issue is really a matter of putting things in proper perspective. I tell people to close their eyes and imagine a 300-mile-long, eight-mile-wide strip of grassland running from Omaha to Davenport. That's the amount of CRP nesting cover we've already lost in Iowa, and more losses are on the way. When you describe it to people that way, you can see the wheels start to turn," he says.

Hope For The Future?

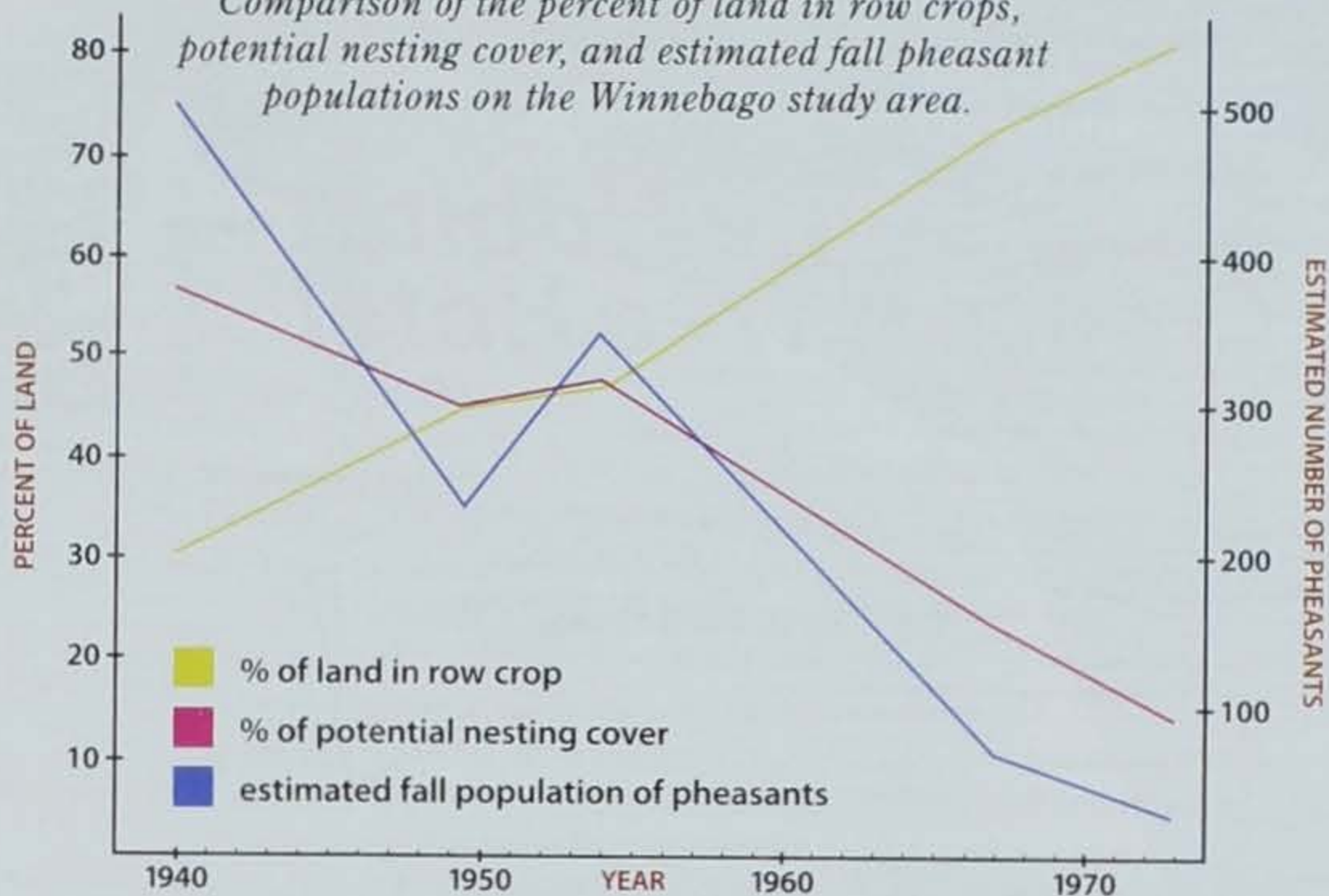
The good news is that, for the first time in a long time, Iowa farmers will soon have an opportunity to sign up and compete for a new round of 10-year CRP contracts. Although no one thinks the program is likely to return to 1990s levels, the new signup has the potential to stem habitat loss and increase grassland nesting cover for pheasants and other upland wildlife species.

"At this point it's really difficult to speculate what will happen, but one thing is sure," says Bogenschutz. "We definitely need to keep CRP on the landscape. We need to fight tooth and nail to keep every single acre that is still out there. At least 80 percent of Iowa's pheasant harvest occurs on private land and pheasants live or die by how those lands are managed. Federal farm programs determine what that management will be." 🐾





Comparison of the percent of land in row crops, potential nesting cover, and estimated fall pheasant populations on the Winnebago study area.



While it might be tough to fathom the amount of Conservation Reserve Program acres Iowa has lost in recent years, imagine an eight-mile wide strip of continuous grasslands running from Omaha to Davenport, roughly 300 miles long. For pheasant numbers to recover to hunter-acceptable levels, habitat loss trends need to be reversed.

Snag Some Habitat— Create a Tree Hotel

Whether you own a backyard or a timber, you can save money by leaving all or portions of a dead tree, while generating a magnet for bird species not attracted to feeders alone. Aided by fungi, lichen and invertebrates the natural decay process returns stored-up nutrients to the soil.

In Iowa, more than 50 animal species need dead trees as part of their habitat. Six woodpecker species are primary cavity nesters that not only create holes while searching for insects, but excavate nest holes. Chickadees, bluebirds, nuthatches, barred owls and wood ducks are secondary cavity nesters that depend upon old woodpecker holes. Raptors will use branches for perching sites. Flying squirrels, bats, gray and fox squirrels, and raccoons use hollow trees as nurseries. Rabbits, shrews and chipmunks use cavities in dead trees to escape predators. Box turtles, skinks, snakes, tree frogs, salamanders and many insects use rotting logs as places to find food, cover and safe places to hibernate.

A timber managed for wildlife includes fallen logs and at least three to six snags, or standing dead trees per acre to provide essential habitat. Homeowners can choose to leave all or part of a tree, such as a hefty portion of standing trunk or log, to create a diverse backyard habitat.

SNAG SAFETY

For standing dead trees, "Make sure there are no targets nearby," advises DNR forester Tivon Feeley. "That could be a house, garage or area where people tend to spend time, such as a bench." In such cases, measure the trunk height to determine how far it would reach if it fell and remove only what is necessary for safety. This leaves a safe amount of standing trunk—habitat to produce wonderful wildlife viewing while reducing removal fees. Use the trimmed sections as landscaping logs.

CREATE YOUR OWN SNAG

In yards without a dead tree, use logs, limbs or stumps as decorative landscaping embellishments. Large holes can be drilled into dead trunks and logs to help attract cavity-nesting wildlife. In a yard setting, tree trunks can be adorned with bird feeders, bird houses or hanging plants. Some choose to have a carving or sculpture made from the trunk to watch the slow metamorphosis of the work over time as nature alters the form through natural decay.

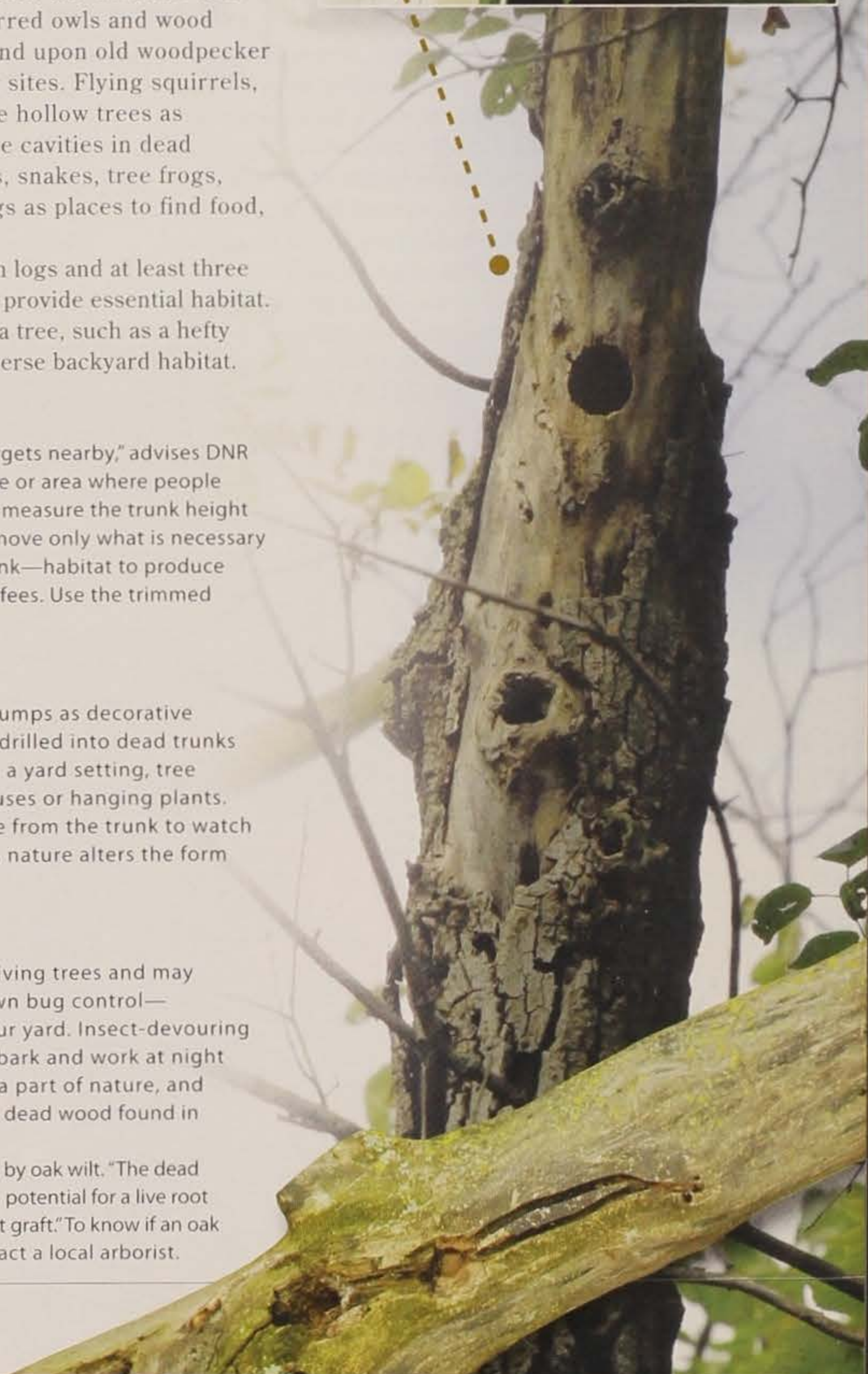
THE MYTH OF DISEASE

Most dead trees do not pose a disease threat to living trees and may prevent insect problems by attracting nature's own bug control—woodpeckers and other insect-eating birds to your yard. Insect-devouring bats can find daytime roosting sites under loose bark and work at night to keep mosquitoes and moths at bay. Snags are a part of nature, and many species rely on an ever dwindling number of dead wood found in cities and rural areas.

The only tree to completely remove is any oak killed by oak wilt. "The dead tree must be removed in the fall," says Feeley. "There is a potential for a live root to spread oak wilt fungus to another tree through a root graft." To know if an oak died due to the fungus a test must be conducted. Contact a local arborist.



Pileated woodpeckers use snags, or standing dead trees, for food supplies and nesting.



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Do you have a soft spot in your heart for wolves? Do you melt when you see a devoted mother wolf snuggling with her pups in fresh snow lit by a silvery arctic moon? The closeness of the wolf family is legendary, and no artist brings it to life with more feeling than Eddie LePage. Now slip into the warmth of this casual style fleece jacket and let the whole world know you're wild about wolves. Decorated on both the front and back with Eddie LePage's heartwarming art, it is fashioned of high-quality mid-weight fleece. This moonlit grey jacket is styled with a flattering princess cut, a collar that can be worn up or down, and a drawstring waist. Silvery wolf-shaped zipper pulls adorn the jacket front and the two zippered pockets. Don't miss this wearable art that'll leave you feeling warm all over!

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Smoked Duck with Orange Sauce



Located between Amana and Iowa City, this eatery deserves a road trip. The Iowa Pork Producers voted Augusta's tenderloin Iowa's best in 2008. Husband & wife owners, Ben and Jeri Halperin say their Big Easy burger is even better. Both from Chicago, they met in New Orleans and fled north after Hurricane Katrina. Visiting relatives in Iowa, they stumbled across a restaurant for sale. "We thought about it for 10 minutes and said 'yes,'" says Ben. Throngs of loyal patrons are glad they arrived.



Savor New Orleans Cuisine in the heart of Eastern Iowa

AFTER SETTLING IN OXFORD, HURRICANE KATRINA CASTAWAYS DELIGHT AREA WITH HAND-CUT STEAKS, LUMP CRAB CAKES, SHRIMP PO' BOYS AND GUMBO TO CHASE OFF WINTRY CHILLS.

SMOKED DUCK WITH ORANGE SAUCE

Make at home or enjoy this menu item at the restaurant.

1 duck

Brine

- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup salt
- 1 cup pickling spice
- ½ gallon orange juice

Sauce

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup red wine
- ½ cup white balsamic vinegar
- 2 cups orange juice
- 4 cups duck stock, described below

- Mix brine ingredients and bring

to a boil to melt sugar and salt. Cool.

- Cut breast and leg quarters from carcass and soak in brine at least overnight.
- Meanwhile, to make stock, roast duck carcass in oven set at 450° until brown—about 15-20 minutes. Place in a large pot and cover with water. Simmer 2 hours, ensuring the carcass is below water. Reserve liquid.
- To make sauce, put sugar in a pot and cook until caramelized to a deep brown, about 5 minutes. Stir frequently. Be sure not to burn the sugar. Add all liquid ingredients and cook for 20 minutes until reduced by half. Salt and pepper to taste.
- Smoke brined duck pieces in a smoker or on a grill using hickory or

a fruit wood, such as apple or cherry. Cook to about medium, slice meat and arrange on plate. Drizzle with sauce.

CRAB-CRUSTED TROUT WITH LEMON BUTTER SAUCE

One trout cut into two filets

Crust

- 4 oz crab meat
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons minced red bell pepper
- 2 tablespoons minced green pepper
- 1 clove of minced garlic
- 1 cup bread crumbs
- salt and pepper

Sauce

- 1 shallot, minced



Crab-Crusted Trout with Lemon Butter Sauce



Owners Jeri and Ben Halperin



One bite of crab-crusted trout will inspire you to search Iowa's trout streams for your own fresh fish. "A lot of people talk about sustainable food," says Ben. "But I've never felt more attached to the seasonality of food until moving to Iowa. Young chefs should come here and they will get it." Jeri and Ben do—they use local produce, grow their own herbs, tomatoes and greens and have bought meats from area lockers and growers.

Homemade pies, fresh baked bread, locally grown produce, even homemade pickles and dressings satisfy.

½ cup white wine
juice of 1 lemon
1 stick unsalted butter

- Season trout filets with salt and pepper and set aside.
- Mix all the crust ingredients and let rest for 5 minutes.
- Apply a liberal crust coating to one side of filet and dip filet in extra bread crumbs.
- Heat oil in a pan and fry the trout, stuffing-side down, until nicely browned.
- Flip and cook the other side until the fish is cooked through.

Add all sauce ingredients and reduce the liquids by half and then whisk in the butter. Season with salt and pepper. Pour over filets.



Chocolate Filled Beignets

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AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Villified in movies and synonymous with bad karma, the American crow ranks low on the ornithological totem pole. Yet these harbingers of bad omen are truly one of the smartest birds—if not animals—on Earth.

BOMBARDIER

American crows will drop nuts or hard-shelled animals on hard surfaces to crack them open. Some have been viewed dropping nuts onto streets, then perching nearby until passing motorists crack them. It is believed they will adjust the drop height based on how many times the object has already been dropped, or how hard or soft the surface is. Crows will also drop objects to ward off potential threats. During play time, they have been seen dropping items on other crows, or dropping objects and diving down to catch them before they hit the ground.

MURDEROUS GANG

A group of crows is called a "murder," likely because a group will often gang up and kill a dying crow.

GOOD BUILDERS

Hawks and owls will inhabit old crow nests, as will raccoons and squirrels that use them as summer napping platforms.

CARE FOR SIBLINGS

Young crows will often remain with their parents through the next nesting season to help care for the newborns and guard the nest.

CROWS OR RAVENS?

Crows and ravens are among the same family. Size, call, tail feather design and feather shape mark the difference.

NOT PUZZLED

Some studies have shown crows can count as high as six. They can solve puzzles, have good memories and can manufacture, use and manipulate tools to accomplish a task.

CROW I.Q.

Crows are considered among the most adaptable and intelligent birds in the world, behind only the sharp-minded parrot. They have even been mentioned—on an intellectual level—in the same breath with chimpanzees and apes. They boast a sophisticated communication system, capable of mimicking sounds of other animals and even humans. They are known to associate noises with events, especially those involving food.



Pheasant Fest Returns to Iowa!



February 26-28, 2010

Iowa Events Center

Des Moines, IA

www.PheasantFest.org

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- Dogs, puppies & the Bird Dog Bonanza featuring the Bird Dog Parade
- Hunting & fishing destinations
- Habitat seminars & equipment
- Rudy's Youth Village
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- Learn dog training tips from the pros
- Watch wild game cooking demonstrations
- See wildlife and nature art

**Friday 1-9 pm, Saturday 9-6 pm
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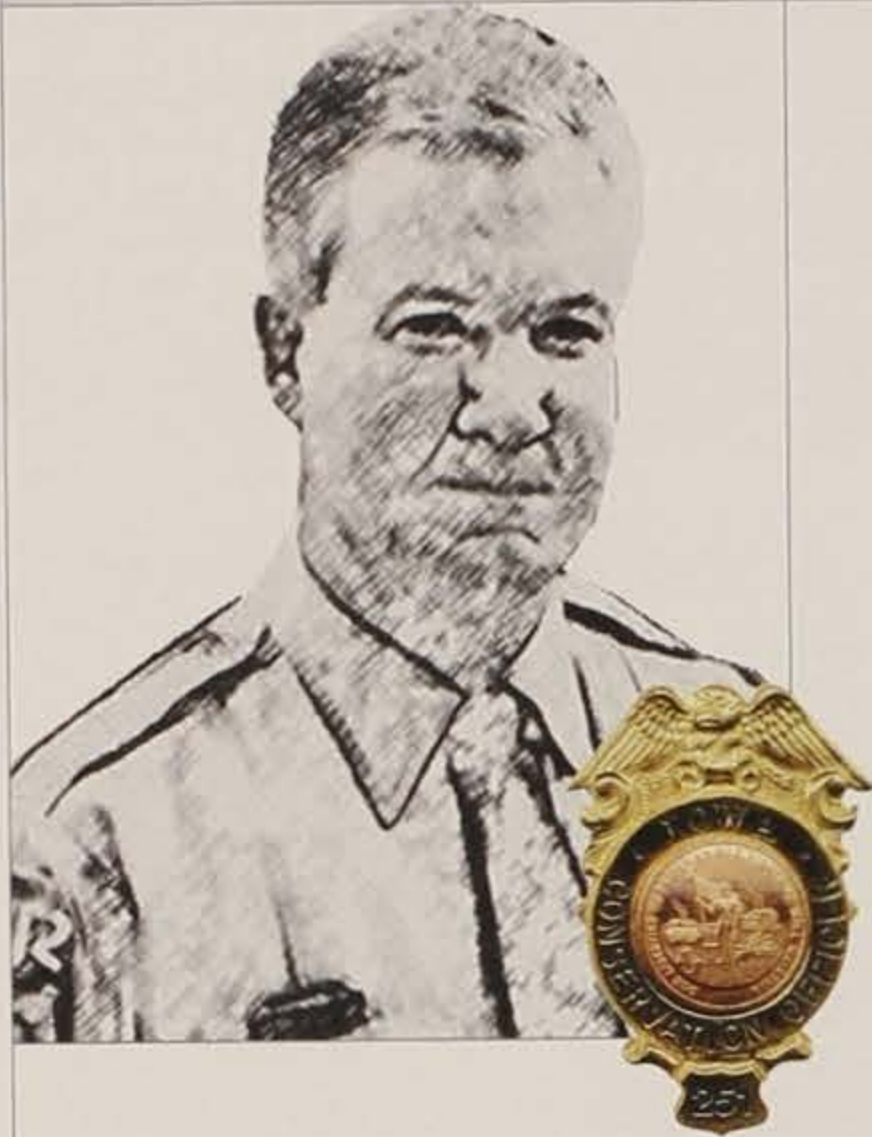
Buy a 3-day admission ticket for \$30 and receive a 1-year membership and a FREE HAT! (\$77 value)

Daily admission: \$10.00 Adults
\$5.00 Ages 6-16 • 5 & under FREE!

www.PheasantFest.org



Last summer, Chuck Humeston retired from the DNR after 33 years of service. For 20 years, his witty columns humanized conservation officers. A long-time favorite of readers, we thought it fitting to run his first column along with his farewell column on the following pages. His first column, below, appeared in July 1989. His last column appears on pages 66 and 67. Officer Erica Billerbeck will continue the column in the March/April issue. She will be the fourth officer to do so.



A Lesson in Boating (1989)

I remember the advice very well. Ben Davis, who was then a law enforcement supervisor, took me aside and said, "Remember, there are two kinds of pilots—those who have landed with their wheels up and those who are going to!"

It would be years before I realized the meaning of those mysterious words.

I had transferred to the Hardin and Hamilton County territory. I had five years' experience on the lakes of northwest Iowa in all kinds of water and all kinds of conditions. I was an expert. Could I handle any boat? Yes!

Conservation officers are at home on the water. Sometimes we entertain ourselves by going to boat

ramps to watch the miscues of others. You've seen them—forgetting to put in the drain plug, leaving the car in gear, driving off the ramp. The mistakes of pilgrims, not of experts.

With this expertise in hand, I set off with a newly issued boat, motor and trailer to the Iowa River in Iowa Falls. It was a nice, hot summer day—the start of a long day.



I drove to the boat landing. About 25 people were there boating or swimming. After loading my equipment into the boat, I unhooked the tie-down and the winch (mistake number one!). Backing onto the ramp, I looked into my mirror to see the nose of the boat rise to the sky followed by the boat promptly sliding at high speed off the trailer into the river. I panicked and jumped out of the car to grab a bow line (mistake number two).

Running down the ramp after my boat, I looked beside me to notice something odd. My car was passing me backwards, still in gear. We always instruct persons in this case in boating safety to jump away to keep from being caught under the wheels—good advice if your

alternative is not filling out a report explaining why your squad car is at the bottom of the Iowa River.

Getting caught under the wheels seemed like a better alternative. I jumped in the car head-first and slammed on the brakes, producing a loud screech as the trunk went into the river. Now the bystanders were getting interested watching the miscues of this pilgrim

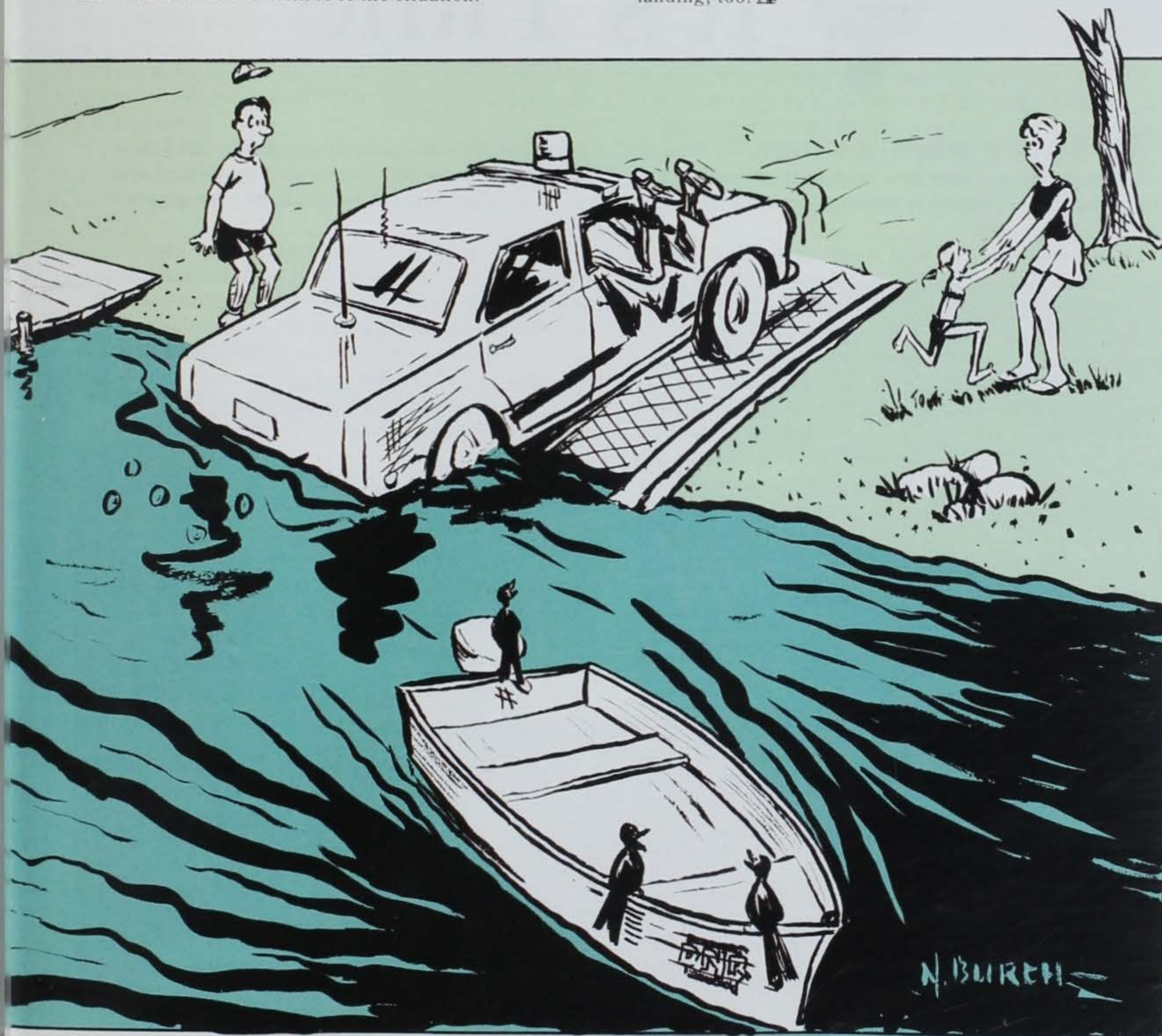
WARDEN'S DOUBLE SHOT

officer at the ramp. Not wanting to explain a wrecker bill, I gave the car the gas. It shot out of the river, and to my relief, up the ramp.

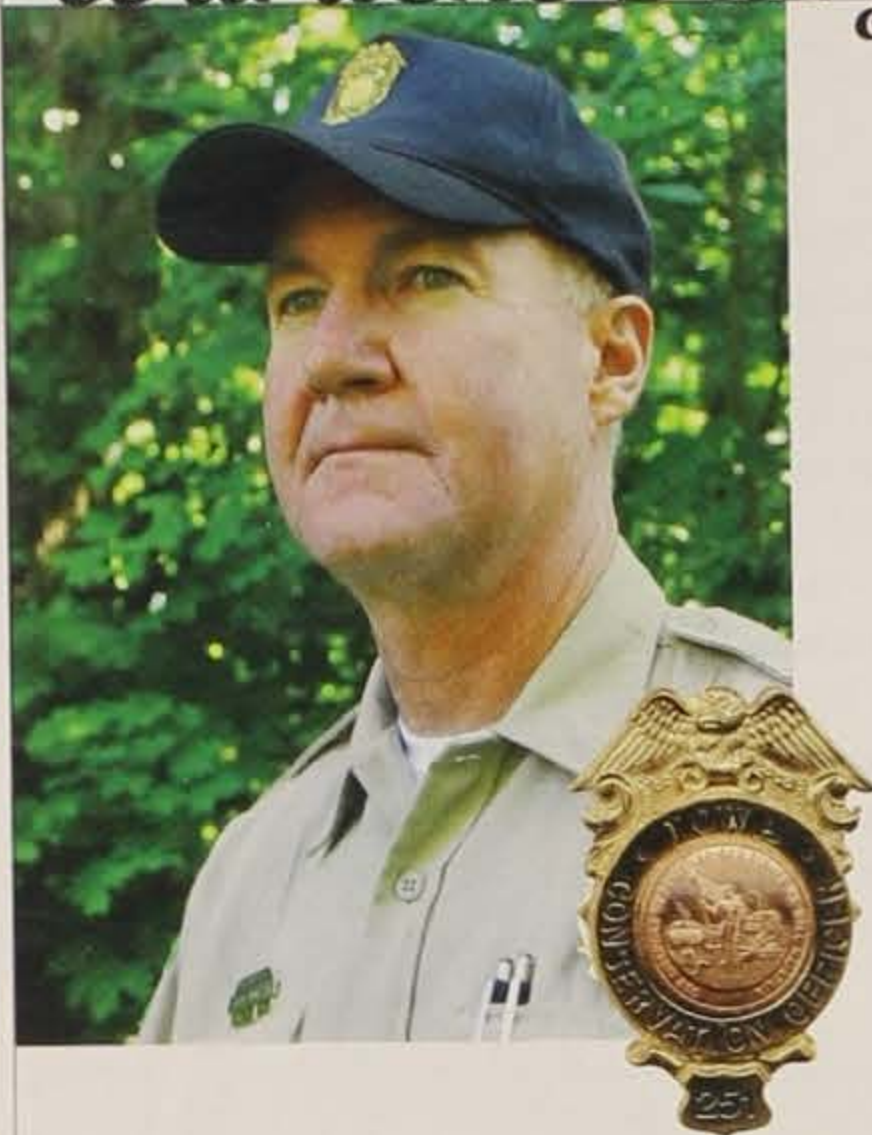
Another problem remained—my boat drifting downstream toward the power dam. I considered swimming as more reports went through my mind. A bystander swam out to the boat and brought it to me. I meekly thanked him and got into the boat to the applause of the gathering crowd. Getting my wits about me, I started upstream. At about two miles, I looked behind me to notice smoke from the outboard from a failing water pump. Shutting down the motor, I started to drift, trying to look like I was in control of the situation.

A ski-boat that had passed earlier (probably watching the miscues of the pilgrim officer) stopped to offer help. We towed my boat to the nearest landing, and the driver offered me a ride to the ramp to get my car. OK, nobody will see me being carried back on my shield. He dropped me off at the ramp, and I walked to my car—to the applause of bystanders.

I picked up my boat and limped home. Deciding to see if the motor was seized up, I decided to start it, but I couldn't find the key (miscue of a pilgrim). I went inside to hide. Yes, there are two kinds of pilots. It was a hard landing, too. 🐼



Warden's Diary



It's Time

"You'll know when it's time."

Whenever I would hear those almost cryptic words uttered by officers who were retiring, I would wonder, "What do they mean?"

I would ask them, "So, what made you decide to hang it up?" Almost every time they would smile and say, "You'll know when it's time."

Well, now I know because I'm retiring, and the only way I can explain it is, "I know it's time."

Law enforcement and this job changed a lot over my 33 years. I started fresh out of college as a park ranger with a pickup, a ticket book and no knowledge or experience at all. Five years later I applied with what was then the Iowa Conservation Commission and was appointed a conservation officer. The pickup and ticket book have progressed to a computer and the world of information at my fingertips. Maybe that's one of the reasons I'm retiring. I always thought Facebook was my high school annual, and Twitter was something the birds did outside my window in the morning.

Was it the greatest job in the world? No. Like any job, it has its good and bad points. Is it one of the most challenging, unique and personally rewarding jobs in the world? Most definitely. The duties varied more every year, and with fewer officers in the field, there was more ground to cover. It's a difficult job done every day by a group

of dedicated, self-starting, professional men and women. We've always had a saying among us, "The difficult—we do every day. The impossible—would take two game wardens."

I consider myself to be blessed to have had the opportunity to be a part of these select individuals, and that's what I will miss. We have a lot of applications whenever we have openings, and the competition is tough, so it still amazes me I was chosen years ago. A tradition of public service and relentless dedication to the protection of wildlife was passed down to me by people for whom I had tremendous respect. They were giants in my eyes.

I am lucky that during my career I had the opportunity to be selected to train new officers going into the field. I tried to pass on that same tradition. I hope I paid it back and paid it forward. One thing I learned early on is when you strip everything away that's around the job, it comes down to being in the "people business" and to serve and relate to people.

This brings me to the part of the job that very possibly has been most dear to my heart, and that's "Warden's Diary." When this tradition, begun by Rex Emerson and continued by Jerry Hoilien, was entrusted to me almost 20 years ago, I never dreamed it would last this long or come this far. I had a dream of writing a column where I could



help readers better know the job we do, and help you feel like you were sitting next to us. I have to admit it still amazes me that anyone would take the time to read anything I would write.

But it seemed to strike a chord with readers. So many of you have taken the time to walk up to me, or write to tell me, that you've enjoyed reading it, and I'm truly humbled every time that's happened. If I've given you anything over the years by writing this, I want you to know what you've given me by reading it. I hope you've enjoyed it, and I sincerely thank you.

I want to thank Al Foster and Brian Button and everyone who has ever been associated with *Iowa Outdoors* and the *Iowa Conservationist*. They gave me a lot of freedom to try different directions as a writer. When I was stuck, looking at a blank screen wondering what to write, they would challenge me. They made me a better writer.

I want to thank the conservation officers with whom I worked. In my eyes they are the elite of law enforcement and public service. They are passionate about the

outdoors, and they are passionate about helping future generations enjoy what we've been able to enjoy.

They don't ask for thanks, but every time you feel the explosion of that bass suddenly hitting your slow retrieve on a still summer evening, or the excitement as you hear the crash of wings as the rooster suddenly launches from the slough you've been walking, take a moment in your heart to thank them. Your enjoyment and experience is our thanks.

Most importantly, I'm thankful for my wife, Deb, my daughters, Heather and Christy, and my son, Tom. This job doesn't make for the most normal of family life. It requires working long hours, nights, weekends and holidays, and without their support and understanding it would be impossible. I'm looking forward to spending more time with them and with my five grandchildren.

Thank you all for the opportunity to have served you. Best wishes and blessings to you all.

So, it's time. My bike is warming up outside, and I have a whole new ride ahead of me. 🚲



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