



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Former resident honors family connections in Fremont County by donating land in the Loess Hills to the Iowa DNR



Stone benches looking west toward the Missouri River valley at the new Blackburn Unit of Waubonsie State Park. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Thurman, Iowa - William and Sara Blackburn, from Long Grove, Ill., donated 151 acres in northwest Fremont County to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources that will be used to create the Blackburn Wildlife Management Area and Blackburn Unit of Waubonsie State Park. The donation is valued at more than \$515,000.

Blackburn traces his family history to southwest Iowa and was looking to buy property in the area when this parcel became available. After acquisition in 2003, he began working

to turn his vision for the property into reality.

The family began hauling away junk and old machinery, and removed about 200 cedar trees and acres of tree of heaven and honeysuckle that were invading the native timber. They researched what prairie plants would likely have been on the area during settlement and searched for those seeds to include as part of the mix used for a 35-acre prairie restoration. They improved the oak timber, installed roads, trails and erosion control, and developed an open-air picnic shelter and performance pavilion, with adjoining boardwalk leading to a viewing platform. The family's investment totaled more than \$300,000.

In more recent years, the Blackburn property has become a popular nature preserve for the family and community, and site for weddings, graduation parties, and a biennial music festival, a charity affair that has helped serve tornado victims, a local library and, last fall, flood victims of Fremont County.

It was Blackburn's wish that everyone could enjoy this property in the Loess Hills that has meant so much to generations of his family. Whether visitors come in October when the leaves are a shock of reds, oranges and yellows, or in June when the prairie is alight with wild flowers and alive with bees and butterflies, Blackburn said his goal was to spark visitors' interest in the Hills.

"I want them to say 'Wow! I had no idea this natural beauty was right here in my back yard! We have to come back!' I want folks to realize this is something rare enough, enchanting enough to take care of, not just for their own use, but for their children, their children's children, and all who come after them," he said.

The 72-acre parcel containing the shelter-pavilion, stone viewing benches, and other facilities—roughly the southwest half of the donated grounds-- will become the Blackburn Unit of Waubonsie State Park.

"It's a natural gem that's been well managed," said Matt Moles, park manager at Waubonsie State Park who will manage the park portion of the donation. "It's definitely a place that people will enjoy."

Moles said the plan is continue to maintain the high-quality natural landscape, hiking trails and open-air shelter. A local fundraising effort and assistance from Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) allowed the park to receive a new pit latrine prior to ownership being transferred. The area does not currently have water or campsites.

"Mr. Blackburn has held charity music festivals here and we are interested in continuing that tradition," Moles said.

The 79-acre undeveloped parcel to the northeast will become the Blackburn Wildlife Management Area and managed by the Nishnabotna Wildlife Unit.

"This is a really nice piece of Loess Hills timber with high quality prairie reconstruction on the edges," said Matt Dollison, wildlife biologist with the Iowa DNR who will be managing the new wildlife area. "The Blackburns did a great job of using a quality mix of native local ecotype plants to reestablish the prairie, and fire to manage it. They've also been vigilant in keeping unwanted invasive species off the property."

The impact on existing and future natural resources is much greater than the value of the donation. The location is important as the Blackburn parcel links a newly acquired 200-acre Wiedel tract to its north and west with the 350-acre Green Hollow Wildlife Area. This resulting 700-acre wildlife area and park abound with turkey, deer, and a wide variety of birds, along with other wildlife.

More than a dozen threatened or endangered species have been documented on the two areas, including the regal fritillary butterfly, the western worm snake, the plains pocket mouse, the great plains skink - a lizard found in few places in southwest Iowa, including Waubonsie State Park, plains spadefoot toad, six-lined racerunner and more.

"That's a big deal," Moles said. "This is some of the best, most cared for prairie that I've ever seen. And the views from the prairie ridges are phenomenal. It has some of the best oak woodland in the area that would be a great place for viewing wildlife."

The addition of the Blackburn donation will significantly increase the footprint and permanently protect the habitat necessary for these species, and more, to survive.

"I firmly believe that the Loess Hills is a rare gem, a jewel, that we must protect," Blackburn said.

A land donation to the Iowa DNR of this size does not happen often. The most recent comparison occurred in 2013 when the Larson brothers donated nearly 150 acres in Humboldt County.

The INHF played an important role in helping this donation happen.

"For years we've helped Bill explore ways that this special place could be permanently protected, so it is exciting to see this happen," said INHF Vice President Anita O'Gara. "We thank the DNR, the Blackburns and local volunteers for their diligence and patience in bringing together the ideas and resources that have protected this land for all to experience and appreciate. We were continually inspired by the Blackburns' deep commitment to this vision for the land and the future."

The land donation was completed in early December.

Bill Blackburn left southwest Iowa, but southwest Iowa never left him

Bill Blackburn grew up in southwest Iowa and traces his family history in this part of Fremont County back more than 170 years.

Blackburn received his engineering degree from Iowa State University and his law degree from the University of Iowa. He taught and promoted sustainability, and environment, health and safety in the corporate world until 2003 when he launched his consulting career.

He said the donation was a way to pay homage to his family, and for him to 'walk the talk.'

Blackburn is a recognized corporate leader on sustainability. As president of William Blackburn Consulting Ltd., his firm focused on sustainability and environment, health and safety management, and emergency and crisis response. He is a published author of

“The Sustainability Handbook – The Complete Management guide to Achieving Social Economic and Environmental Responsibility,” which is in its second edition.

Revenue from his consulting business and book sales funded more than \$300,000 worth of improvements on the property.

Media Contacts: Matt Dollison, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, at 712-350-0147, or Matt Moles, Park Manager, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, at 712-382-2786. Joe Jayjack, Communications Director, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation at 515-288-1846.

Winter community trout stockings start Jan. 11

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources will release trout in seven locations across Iowa this winter in areas that would not support them in warmer months.

Winter trout stockings are a great place to take kids to catch their first fish. A family-friendly event is paired with most stockings to help anglers have success and fun while fishing.

The popular program is supported by the sales of the trout fee. Anglers need a valid fishing license and pay the trout fee to fish for or possess trout. The daily limit is five trout per licensed angler with a possession limit of 10.

Children age 15 or younger can fish for trout with a properly licensed adult, but they must limit their catch to one daily limit. They can buy a trout fee which will allow them to catch their own limit.

Winter trout stockings are dependent on favorable weather and safe ice conditions. Check the DNR Trout Fishing website at www.iowadnr.gov/trout for possible changes to the schedule.

With this year’s mild winter weather, use caution when venturing out on any ice. Find tips for staying safe on the ice on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.gov/icefishing.

2020 Winter Community Trout Stocking Schedule

Jan. 11, Blue Pit, Mason City, at 11 a.m.

Jan. 18, Moorland Pond, Fort Dodge, at 11 a.m.

Jan. 18, Big Lake, Council Bluffs, at 2 p.m.

Jan. 25, Bacon Creek, Sioux City, at 1:30 p.m.

Jan. 25, Lake Petocka, Bondurant, at Noon

Feb. 1, Ada Hayden, Ames, at Noon

Feb. 1, Scharnberg Pond, Spencer, at Noon

Media Contact: Mike Steuck, Regional Fisheries Supervisor, Northeast Iowa, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 563-927-3276.

Iowa DNR in Sergeant Bluff to host Jan. 15 public meeting on chronic wasting disease

Sergeant Bluff, Iowa - The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is hosting a public meeting to discuss chronic wasting disease and a new, enhanced monitoring effort on Wednesday, Jan. 15, at the Sergeant Bluff Community Center, 903 Topaz Drive, in Sergeant Bluff. The meeting is scheduled from 6-8 p.m.

Woodbury County is part of a new chronic wasting disease zone after a road killed wild deer tested positive for the always fatal disease. Doug Chafa, local wildlife management biologist for the Iowa DNR, is coordinating the meeting.

“We will discuss the increased surveillance effort here in Woodbury County as well as our focus along the Missouri River and will provide hunters and landowners an opportunity to get their questions answered and to discuss their concerns with our staff,” Chafa said.

The Iowa DNR will present information on CWD and inform the public about surveillance sampling effort.

There are several things hunters can do to stop or slow the spread of CWD, Chafa said, including not using feed or salt-mineral to congregate deer. Bringing infected and susceptible deer into close contact can increase the rate at which the disease is spread.

“Deer hunting is an important tradition and, for some, a large part of their identity. It is also important to us and we need to work together to combat this disease. Our goal is to provide quality deer hunting for future generations,” he said.

CWD is a neurological disease belonging to the family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) or prion diseases. It attacks the brain of infected deer and elk causing the animals to lose weight, display abnormal behavior, lose body functions and die. It is always fatal to the infected animal.

The Iowa DNR has more information about CWD and other infectious disease online at www.iowadnr.gov/cwd.

Any person attending the public meeting that has special requirements such as those related to mobility or hearing impairments should contact the DNR or ADA Coordinator at 515-725-8200, Relay Iowa TTY Service 800-735-7942, or Webmaster@dnr.iowa.gov, and advise of specific needs.

Media Contact: Doug Chafa, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-420-2437 or Pete Hildreth, Wildlife District Supervisor, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712- 254-0955.

Gates removed on Upper Iowa River dam

An emergency project to remove damaged gates from the southern segment of Lower Dam on the Upper Iowa River in Winneshiek County is underway. The \$60,000 project restores flow to nearly a mile of the Upper Iowa River that was dewatered after the dam was built.

This initial project helps preserve downstream river access and the parking area by diverting scouring flows away from infrastructure, and releasing sediment from the upstream section in a controlled manner.

A second phase of the project will address the issues of fish passing through and boaters navigating the river in the area of the gates after sediment movements throughout high water events.

“Canoeists and kayakers will not be able to navigate the river through the dam until the second phase of the project is completed,” said Nate Hoogeveen, River Programs coordinator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “They will need to land upstream of the dam as they have before. Conditions will still be hazardous as at any dam.”

Stability issues have been ongoing at the Lower Dam area since a large portion of the dam peeled off the top in 2008, changing the course of the river. Since then, chronic bank failures have led to bluff slumps. Two projects to stabilize banks and set back the parking lot have cost \$215,000 since 2010, and a future project may cost several hundred thousand dollars to further stabilize the banks and bluff to keep the parking lot in its existing location.

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