



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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- [Union Hills checks all the boxes as a destination area](#)
- [Communities impacted by EAB can receive free seedlings from DNR State Forest Nursery](#)
- [Snowmobile and off-highway vehicle registrations expire at year's end](#)
- [Late summer cattail and floating-leaved plant control for ponds](#)

Union Hills checks all the boxes as a destination area



Hunters, hikers, birdwatchers and more visit Union Hills Wildlife Area for its mix of wetlands and prairie that covers nearly 2,200 acres in southern Cerro Gordo County. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Union Hills Wildlife Area's network of wetlands and prairie has that been-here-forever kind of feel to it.

"There's not many places in Iowa where you get a block of habitat like this," said TJ Herrick, wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "You could get lost here on the water. It's the only wildlife area we (Clear Lake Unit) manage that, if you get in the middle of it, you forget you're in Iowa. It's just a cool spot."

This nearly 2,300-acre public area in southern Cerro Gordo County offers a glimpse to what north central Iowa might have looked like when it was settled. The popular Union Hills area is the result of the Iowa DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service working with farmers who felt the ground wasn't conducive to farming.

Development began in the 1990s and wasn't completed until a key 52-acre parcel was acquired in 2012 that allowed the DNR to begin collecting water from a 32-inch tile running under the area.

Today, Union Hills has 48 wetlands, including a 250-acre and a 75-acre basin, and a prairie with 70 different prairie grasses and prairie flowers on it, including a 110-acre prairie that's never been plowed. Since Union Hills has been established, regal fritillaries and Dion skippers have shown up, both butterflies considered species of greatest conservation need.

"When you find those species, it's like finding a remnant prairie, they don't migrate, they stay here," Herrick said.

Northern harriers have nested here, as have trumpeter swans and sandhill cranes. Upland sandpipers, black terns and Henslow's sparrows have been documented here. Union Hills attracts birding groups from Clear Lake and Mason City and has been part of tour by the Iowa Ornithologists who were meeting in nearby Ventura.

Union Hills was dedicated as a Bird Conservation Area in 2004 for its high-quality habitat supporting grassland birds, wetland birds and migrating shorebirds. It also supports rare smooth green snakes among a diverse population of reptiles and amphibians.

But the main draw – and the source of the funding to construct the area – is waterfowl.

"The 250-acre wetland is larger than some of our sovereign lakes that we manage," Herrick said. "We'll get several thousand ducks using the refuge in the fall and several thousand snow geese in the spring."

On this late August morning, those wetlands had attracted several hundred wood ducks, mallards and blue wing teal.

"They come from all around to hunt ducks here," said Ron Richardson, who along with wife Cindy have seen first-hand wildlife's response to the changes on the landscape.

"I saw it go from pasture to farm ground to the beautiful gem it has become," he said. "First it was the waterfowl – they'd migrate through, then they were nesting. Ducks, then geese, then trumpeter swans and now sandhill cranes. I saw a woodcock this year for the first time. I've had two turkeys in my yard – hens – all summer. It's been fun to watch the area get developed. It's truly a gem."

Cindy Richardson said she enjoys starting and ending her day listening to the sandhills.

"Just to hear those ancient songs – its soul stirring," she said. "I don't know if I could do the job I do, if I didn't have that. Union Hills is a treasure."

The prairie is divided into sections by firebreaks used each year for prescribed fire. Those firebreaks are popular with hikers, birdwatchers, hunters, cross country skiers, snowshoers and more. On this day, pheasants were running down the breaks before finally taking flight. It's a place where a person could walk and hunt all day long.

"There's just no way a person couldn't enjoy themselves out there," she said. "We're out there most of the time watching the changing seasons. We are lucky people and we know that."

Union Hills was developed through a partnership including the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Delta Waterfowl.

“It takes a lot of people working together to get something like this done,” Herrick said.

Etcetera

- Union Hills was part of the Linden Ranch in the early 1900s, where its thousands of acres of grasslands were used to feed cattle that were brought north by train from Kansas and Texas. The cattle would be offloaded at Thornton or Meservey, and then led by cattle drive to the ranch. When fall arrived, the cattle would return to the train station to head back from where they came.
- Researchers out of Manitoba, Canada, have studied small white lady’s slipper, a rare orchid found on Union Hills. Grad students from Iowa State University have studied birds here. It’s hosted Ducks Unlimited Greenwing event, served as a tour stop for an Iowa Prairie Conference, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service meeting, and multi state meeting on the prairie pothole region of the Upper Midwest.
- The main basin is at the end of a multi-year drawdown to revegetate the wetland. Its large watershed will allow it to refill quickly, when the rains come.

Media Contact: TJ Herrick, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-425-2814.

Communities impacted by EAB can receive free seedlings from DNR State Forest Nursery

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), through a grant with the U.S. Forest Service, has been awarding communities in counties that have confirmed emerald ash borer (EAB) up to 200 free seedlings from the DNR’s State Forest Nursery. Seedlings have been awarded since spring of 2019, so if a community has not received its free seedlings, there is still time to apply.

This grant will provide the free native hardwood and evergreen seedlings for up to 511 communities across the state. If awarded the seedlings, they can be shipped or picked up from the DNR State Forest Nursery in Ames.

The seedlings can be planted on public property or distributed to residents throughout the community for planting on private property. Cities or public organizations can choose to do both public and private property plantings.

This is another opportunity for cities with major tree damage or loss from the derecho to help repopulate the trees in the devastated communities, as long as the county is a confirmed EAB county.

“We know that several cities and residents within those cities sustained major property damage during the derecho and a majority of that included the loss of thousands of trees across our state,” said Aron Flickinger, forestry program specialist with the Iowa DNR. “Although this grant was in the works long before the derecho hit, it will help many communities begin to rebuild their tree population for free following the devastating loss.”

Any city or public organization interested in applying for the free seedlings, should complete the grant application online at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Portals/idnr/uploads/forms/5420991.pdf>. Applications from communities that have already been awarded free seedlings cannot be approved.

Iowa has confirmed emerald ash borer in 73 of its 99 counties. To learn more about EAB and to see the latest map with confirmed counties, visit <https://www.iowadnr.gov/conservation/forestry/forest-health/emerald-ash-borer>.

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Snowmobile and off-highway vehicle registrations expire at year's end

Registrations for snowmobiles and OHVs purchased during the 2020 registration cycle will expire December 31, 2020. Any decal displayed on a machine with a 20 printed on it will no longer be valid for machines to be used on snowmobile trails, public ice, or the OHV parks. Any registration that is not renewed prior to January 1, 2021 will have a late penalty of \$5 applied to the registration cost.

All permits, which include resident snowmobiles and nonresident snowmobiles and OHVs, also expire on December 31, 2020. There is no late penalty for a permit purchased after January 1 as they are issued for a calendar year. User permits are required for nonresident and resident snowmobiles used on public land or ice. Nonresident off road vehicles registered in their home state must display a user permit. Residents operating an off highway vehicle do not need a user permit.

Late summer cattail and floating-leaved plant control for ponds

Have the cattails in your pond taken over your favorite fishing spot or crowded you from one side of the dock or swimming area?

Late summer or early fall is the best time to kill cattails, Lotus lily and other emergent or floating-leaved plants that are on the pond's edge or are above the water. Spraying certain herbicides this time of year will kill the whole plant, and it will not regrow next spring. There is little risk of depleting the oxygen in the pond with treating these plants; they die-back every year at this time and decompose slowly over the coming months.

Starting in late summer, these plants move food to their roots to survive the winter, making systemic herbicides most effective. The most common active ingredient to use is glyphosate (a few brand names with labels for aquatic use include Aqua Neat, Aqua Pro, Aquamaster, GlyphoMate 41, Pond Master, Rodeo, Shore Klear and Touchdown Pro).

Find these at local hardware, farm supply or garden stores or try an online search for “aquatic glyphosate.”

A surfactant or spreader-sticker must be added to many of these herbicides to help it stick to the plant’s leaves. Read the label and check with your local or online retailer to select a surfactant that you can use in ponds. Spray the above-water part of the plant until just wet and follow instructions on the product label.

When you compare product brands, consider the amount of active ingredient, if a surfactant is needed, and size of the container. A product with a higher amount of active ingredient or one that does not need a surfactant added may provide a better value. The convenience of a ready-to-use (RTU) product that you do not have to mix or add a surfactant may outweigh price considerations.

Be careful to:

- Read and follow the product label for application instructions and precautions.
- Spray when calm, or when winds are low and out of a favorable direction to avoid accidentally spraying other plants valuable to landscaping. Increase the droplet size of the spray to reduce drift.
- Spray plants early in the day with full sunlight after the morning dew has dried to get the best results.
- Obey State law. Shoreline owners on public waters in Iowa may not use herbicides to control aquatic vegetation without a permit. Contact the Iowa DNR fisheries office near you for rules and instructions for removing aquatic plants from public waters.

Learn more about aquatic plants in ponds at www.iowadnr.gov/pondplants.

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The Iowa Department of Natural Resources is working with state and local officials to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and has transitioned employees to work remotely. DNR offices are closed to the public during this time and only available by appointment.

In other efforts to further reduce the spread of Covid-19, the DNR is encouraging the use of the online services for purchasing licenses, submitting applications, payments and other daily tasks and interaction with DNR staff.

The FREE Go Outdoors Iowa app is available at the App store and Google Play. The Go Outdoors Iowa app allows users to purchase and view hunting and fishing licenses and submit harvest and quota reports, all from your cell phone.

Full list of DNR’s online services: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/about-dnr/about-dnr/online-services-databases>.

Up-to-date information on DNR services, facilities and events impacted by Covid-19: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/About-DNR/Covid-19>.

Technical information for regulated businesses in regards to Covid-19: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/About-DNR/Social-Media-Press-Room/Disaster-Assistance#3057321-covid---19-outbreak>.

Thank you for your patience and flexibility during this time. If you need to contact DNR staff you can reach them by email or phone or by calling (515) 725-8200.