



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 15, 2021

North Bear Creek Wildlife Area - Home to legendary wildlife, top trout stream and unique plants



A hole in the rock wall at North Bear Wildlife Area is a unique feature. It is hidden during leaf out from late fall through the spring. Twin leaf, a rare plant with leaves that looks like a pair of bat wings, has been found here. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Troy Anderson's phone rang just as he was walking the most recent acquisition to North Bear Creek Wildlife Area. The caller from Florida wanted to know about the deer population on North Bear and if he should put in for a tag in that nonresident hunting zone or should look elsewhere.

As the local wildlife biologist, Anderson is often called for hunting advice, fishing tips, travel suggestions, dining recommendations and serves as the head of the complaint department. That just comes with the territory when you're responsible for one of Iowa's premier hunting and fishing destinations.

North Bear Creek Wildlife Area, in northeast Winneshiek County, is home to legendary Iowa whitetail deer, wild turkeys and the namesake creek that has been voted by trout anglers as the top trout stream in the state three times in a row.

On this early June morning in the middle of the week, a handful of vehicles fill each small parking lot and the license plates indicate that none were local - Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Iowa's Johnson and Lyon counties.

"Even though it's the most popular and the busiest stream, it still fishes as one of the best in Iowa," said Mike Siepker, fisheries biologist at the Iowa DNR's Decorah trout hatchery. "That's likely due to the amount of water available. Over six miles of stream is open to public fishing. It has really great trout habitat and supports a tremendous fishery."

About two miles of that access is provided through a trout angler easement program working with private landowners to open their property to fishing.

North Bear was one of the earliest streams to document wild brown trout reproduction in Iowa which sustains the stream population to this day. Catchable rainbow trout are stocked weekly from April through October. The stream stocking records go back to 1943, but Siepker said it was probably stocked even earlier. The quality of the fishing is a product of a conservation collaboration in the watershed over many years between the Iowa DNR, the NRCS, private landowners and others, he said.

"North Bear gets a lot of attention," Anderson said. "Hunters come here for deer and turkeys and most will bring their fishing gear and try to pick up some trout."

In addition to hunting and fishing, North Bear Creek is also a popular place to hike, birdwatch and hunt for wild edibles.

"If you like to hunt for wild edible, there's morels, pheasantback, chicken of the woods and oyster mushrooms here, as well as wild raspberries," Anderson said.

Managing the Bear

The roughly 950-acre public area was built like a jigsaw puzzle beginning with the first acquisition in 1955. Anderson has been working to restore a 17-acre prairie on a hillside and has a five-acre oak seeding to add to the forest component.

"We're following a forest wildlife stewardship plan on the area to encourage oaks, hickories and other hardwoods that's beneficial to wildlife," he said. There are walnuts on the bottomlands and maple and basswood in the shaded areas, and they've conducted some early sessional management for ruffed grouse.

The prairie is in its third year and is beginning to express itself. Indian grass, side oats gramma, golden Alexander, black-eyed Susan, gray headed coneflower, Canada wild rye, stiff goldenrod will add color once the flowers show up and protection to the watershed as the plants take hold. This is the first year Anderson is working with a new cooperator from the beginning farm program, who helps with weed control and the food plots.

Another section overlooking the valley from the east will be left idle to provide a buffer against erosion and nesting to turkeys and other grassland birds.

The most recent 114 acres was added in 2020 from the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and has a unique feature of a hole in the rock wall. The hole is hidden during

leaf out but from late fall through the spring. Twin leaf, a rare plant with leaves that looks like a pair of bat wings, has been found here.

The Heritage Foundation removed trees as part of a 10-acre prairie reconstruction adjacent to the stream along with a streambank stabilization project before the DNR acquired it.

The forest component of North Bear is home to unique plants, including prince's pine, spotted coralroot, scarlet hawthorn, mountain rice grass, nodding onion, jeweled shooting star, shrubby cinquefoils, sullivantia, yellow trout lily, white trout lily and more. The high-quality stream has buttercup and watercress – both indicators of excellent water quality – and watercress is a wild edible.

If that's not enough, there's always a trip to the Highlandville General Store for some local wines, meats and other supplies to complete the trip.

Winter fun

Iowa's coldwater trout streams don't freeze in the winter. On nice, warm winter days, North Bear Creek has been known to have a bug hatch – usually midges – providing decent fishing with little competition.

There's also snowshoeing, cross country skiing – but not on a groomed trail, and hunting for shed antlers.

Etcetera

There is excellent hiking along the stocking trail that follows the stream and scenic rock bluffs.

Birders can see red-eyed vireo, yellow-throated vireo, American goldfinch, American redstart, Baltimore oriole, black-and-white warbler, blackburnian warbler, blue-winged warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, eastern towhee, golden-winged warbler, gray catbird, house wren, least flycatcher, Nashville warbler, orange-crowned warbler, palm warbler, red-winged blackbird, rose-breasted grosbeak, Tennessee warbler, tree swallow, yellow warbler and the large and noisy pileated woodpeckers.

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