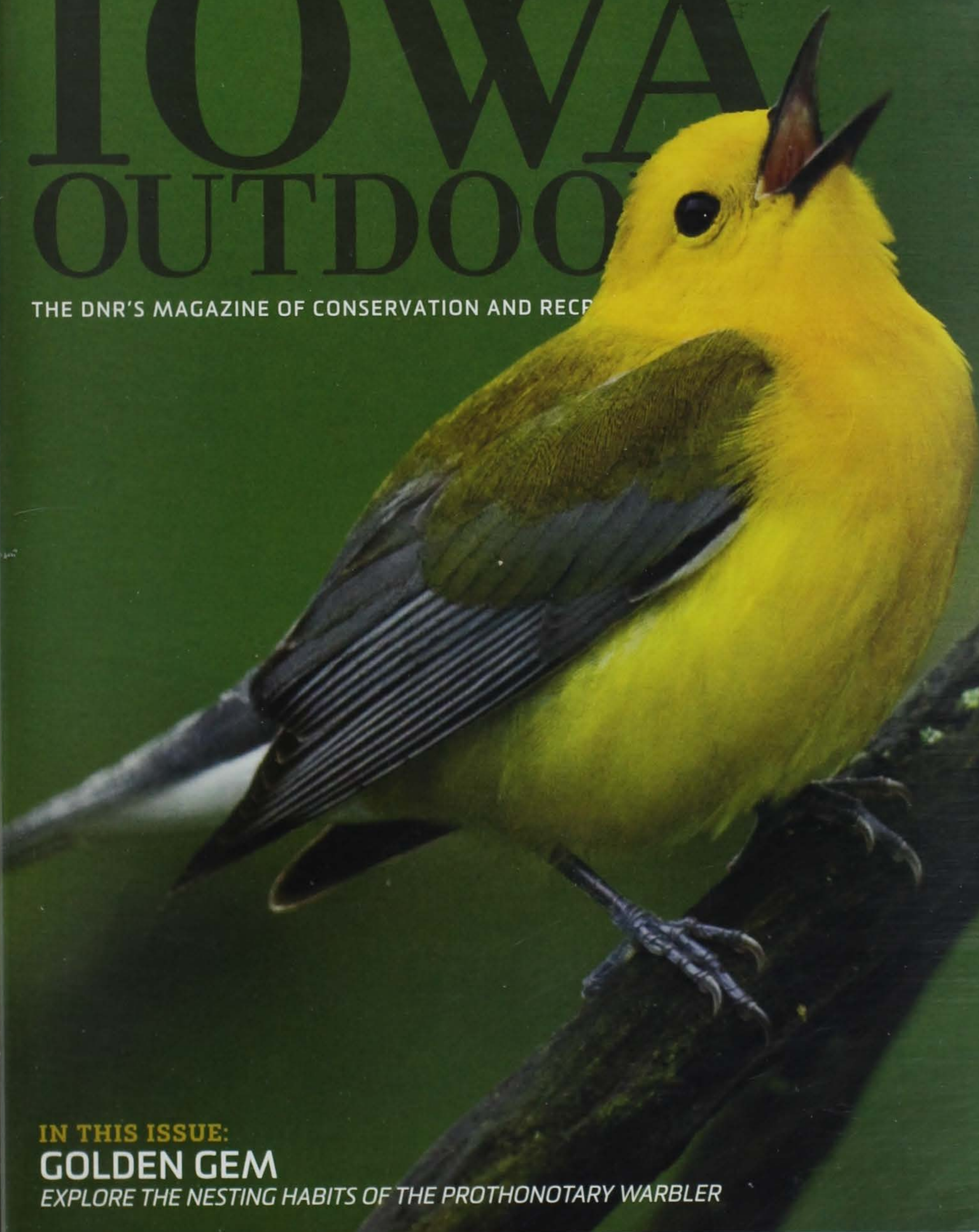


MAY / JUNE 2014

IOWA OUTDOORS

THE DNR'S MAGAZINE OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION



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GOLDEN GEM

EXPLORE THE NESTING HABITS OF THE PROTHONOTARY WARBLER

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The Family Museum is excited to welcome **Professor Gilbert** and his *ThinkShop* to Fox Hollow! Children and families will be immersed in this highly interactive, hands-on, build-it space where kids use **real tools** to build one-of-a-kind inventions. Through real building materials and recycled components, kids **bring ideas to life** in the *ThinkShop*.

ThinkShop is included with paid admission. Parent must accompany child (maximum 3 kids per adult). Everyone must wear safety goggles. You get to keep whatever you make!

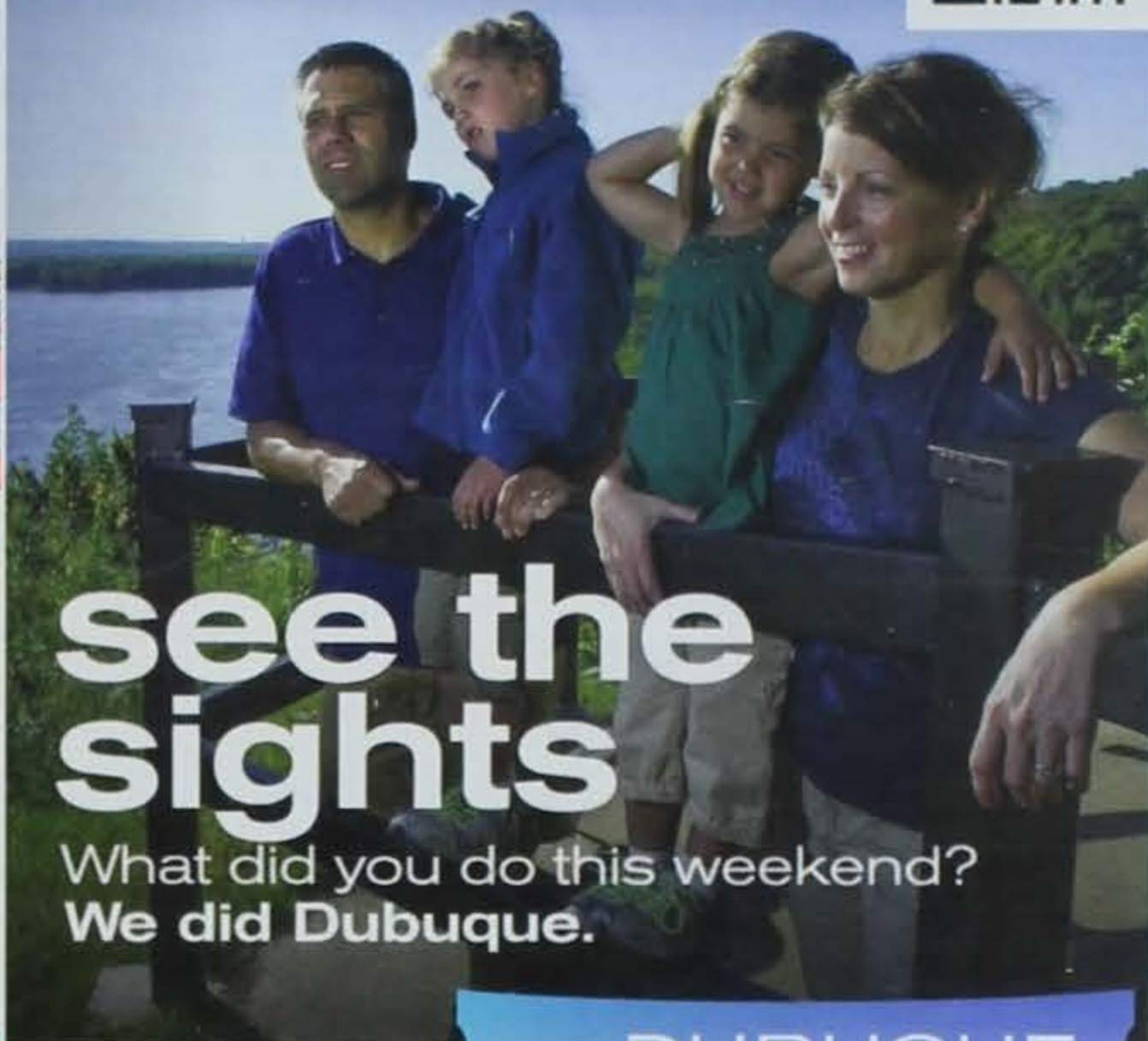


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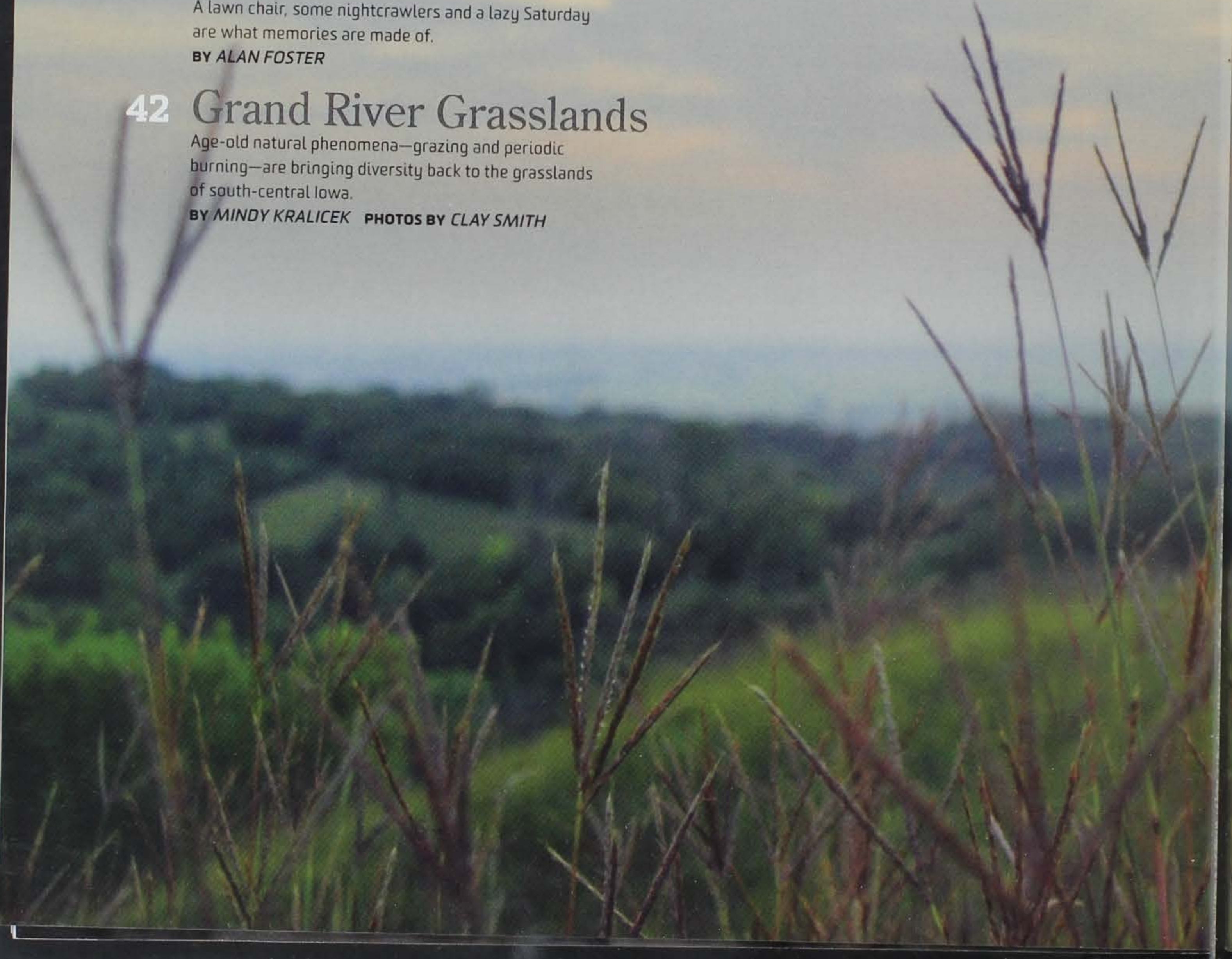
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ABOUT THIS PHOTO

High atop the hills of Preparation Canyon State Park in Monona County offers an inspiring perspective of one of the most unique ecosystems in Iowa. The 344-acre park encompasses what was once the town of Preparation, a Mormon settlement established in the mid-19th century. Monona is a Native American name believed to mean "peaceful valley"—befitting of the park. Relatively untouched by humans, the park offers 10 hike-in campsites. PHOTO BY BEN CURTIS.

ABOUT THE COVER

The prothonotary warbler, an annual, yet rare visitor to Iowa, is one of more than 30 warblers that pays a visit to the state, but only one of two that nests in cavities. An insectivore, it feeds primarily on beetles, larvae and flying insects. It often uses an acrobatic maneuver to snatch a bug out of the air, then hovers like a hummingbird over the gaping mouths of the young. The Dallas County pair featured on pages 26 to 33 would often bring three insects at a time—without dropping a single one. Usually found near water, the young can "swim" across the surface. They are also known to eat small mollusks and isopods, like snails and wood lice, and may supplement their diet with fruit, seeds and nectar. PHOTO BY TY SMEDES.

Contributors



BRIAN GIBBS, Clayton County naturalist, has been addicted to wild places ever since his father first took him trout fishing in Yellow River State Forest.

His passion for teaching others about enjoying and conserving the beauty of this planet has led him to work in such scenic places as Glacier National Park. When not teaching, Gibbs explores northeast Iowa's natural beauty hidden among the bluffs and valleys. brian_claytonccb@yahoo.com



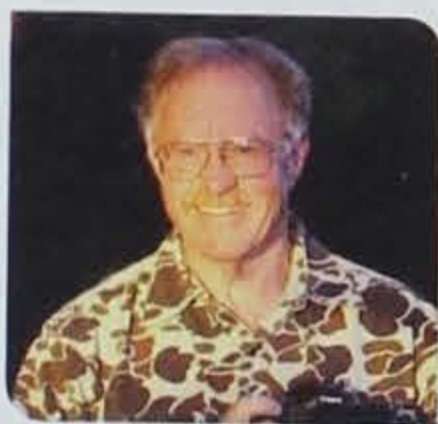
KIP LADAGE is an outdoor photographer and writer living in Tripoli. Look for him paddling Sweet Marsh or the Wapsipinicon River, or exploring the

many other wildlife haunts of Bremer County. His work has been published around the world in books, magazines and reference materials. To view more of his images, search "Kip Ladage" on the Internet.



GERALD MCGRANE of Dyersville has no shortage of fishing partners. He is a husband, father of seven and teacher at Beckman Catholic High School.

When their schedule allows, his family fishes area trout streams, hikes at Backbone or enjoys Pikes Peak State Park.



Writer and photographer **TY SMEDES** from Urbandale is published in dozens of magazines. He teaches photography and leads photo tours to the Sierras and Africa.

His book, *The Return of Iowa's Bald Eagles*, is sold at iowan.com



Des Moines writer **SANDY FLAHIVE** likes discovering the hidden gems in Iowa's many nooks and crannies and spending time at her remote cabin near

Stephens State Forest in southern Iowa.

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Is it true **COWBIRDS** use foster parents?



Historically, cowbirds—classified as brood parasites—followed herds of bison over miles of open prairie, feeding on insects stirred up by the animals. The fact cowbirds are nomadic contributes to why they do not build their own nests and why they do not care for their own eggs. A cowbird perches in wait, and when an unsuspecting bird leaves its nest, the cowbird swoops in and lays an egg. In most cases, the female cowbird will remove one or more of the host eggs.

Common foster parents include red-winged blackbirds, song sparrows, cardinals and yellow warblers. Accepting or rejecting the foster egg is a matter of physical ability on behalf of the host bird. Robins, who have very strong beaks, can puncture the cowbird egg and remove it from the nest. Birds that can't remove the cowbird egg will raise the young as one of their own—generally at the risk of their own offspring. So how do cowbirds raised by foster parents identify their own species for future reproduction and not identify with their foster parents?

This phenomenon is one researchers at Cornell University and the University of California studied intently. According

to Mark Hauber, behavioral ecologist with the University of California, and Paul Sherman, professor of animal behavior at Cornell University, finding a mate is due, in part, to the cowbird's unique voice. Their distinctive chatter and song (which sounds like water-dripping) are easily identified by other cowbirds.

In addition to their distinctive sounds, Hauber and Sherman observed adult cowbirds visiting young cowbirds in the host nest—perhaps teaching them the ropes. Cowbirds are generally much larger than the fledglings of the host parent, and Hauber and Sherman contend they are somewhat instinctive in realizing they are the odd bird out. They have observed young cowbirds congregating with each other after leaving the nests of their foster parents, thus learning from others and meeting a suitable mate.

While cowbirds are considered by some as a nuisance bird, they are native and protected under the United States Migratory Bird Treaty Act. For more information, or to listen to their distinctive sounds, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at www.birds.cornell.edu.

Ask The Expert —Ed in Burlington asks: With the high volume of rain and runoff from fields, I have heard about nitrates in the rivers. Is there any danger of eating fish out of high-nitrate waters?

Nitrates are common in Iowa's waters. They are a form of plant fertilizer easily dissolved in water that tends to move as water flows across the landscape via runoff, tile lines, streams and rivers. Once in streams, rivers and lakes, they can increase growth in aquatic plants, just like fertilizers increase growth of plants in fields, gardens and lawns.

The health risk comes from drinking water with high levels of nitrates. The EPA indicates levels above 10 ppm are unacceptable. Drinking large amounts of water with these nitrate levels can cause methemoglobinemia. Nitrates, once inside your body, are more attracted to the hemoglobin in your red blood cells than oxygen. Nitrates replace oxygen, thus reducing the oxygen-carrying capacity of blood. The nitrate will not exchange in your lungs like oxygen, so these blood cells are "out of commission" until they are replaced. The more this happens, and the more nitrate-contaminated water you drink, the worse the condition becomes. This causes "blue-baby syndrome," and has more impact on infants because they have less blood than adults. There may be other health risks associated with nitrates, but there is little scientific evidence behind those claims. This methemoglobinemia issue is most prevalent, and the reason the DNR reports high nitrate levels to the media.

It is possible fish may have elevated levels of nitrate in their blood in high nitrate water, but I am aware of no research on that topic. Since fish blood isn't consumed,

and nitrates do not accumulate in muscle tissue of either fish or humans, catching and eating fish from water with excess nitrates has no impact on the healthiness of the fish flesh.

When nitrate levels are high, it usually indicates high water flow and lots of runoff. It usually also indicates there may be bacteria in the water. Bacteria can come from multiple sources—sewage treatment plant overflows, wildlife excrement washed out of storm drains (raccoons love these places and leave behind lots of excrement) and runoff from animal farms. Similar to nitrates, these bacteria have no impact on fish. Bacteria come from warm-blooded animals, and cold-blooded animals like fish are not susceptible to illnesses carried by bacteria. Bacteria also do not accumulate in fish flesh, so once again there is no impact on the healthiness of the fish flesh.

However, clean your hands well before eating if you have been fishing or touching the water. Humans are susceptible to bacteria-borne illnesses from the excrement of animals and other humans. These bacteria are more prevalent during high runoff events.

For more information on Iowa water quality, or to find statewide fish consumption advisories, go to lowadnr.gov.

—BY JEFF KOPASKA,
DNR FISHERIES BIOMETRICIAN

ACTIVITIES, TIPS AND EVENTS FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

Wild Weekend IN THE Loess Hills



Grab the kids, hat, water bottle and hiking shoes and get ready for a weekend adventure, May 30 to June 1. Be entertained, educated and inspired at the Loess Hills Prairie Seminar. Delve into the mystique of these ancient hills, guided by naturalists, educators and others.

Some might say the Greek god, Aeolus, keeper of the winds, created these high hills rising 200 feet above the Missouri River floodplain. Created by glacial and wind action, loess soils are found almost everywhere. But deposits this thick reside only in Iowa and along the Yellow River in China.

The yellow dust-like soil erodes easily, producing steep fingers of high bluff, interspersed with valleys running 200 miles along the Missouri River. Inhabited for 12,000 years and home to several endangered plant and animal species, the hills are distinctly different from the rest of Iowa's landscape. And this is the 38th year a hardy group of individuals gathers to learn about Iowa's unique ecosystem and prairie heritage.

In a valley nestled at the corner of Oak Avenue and 178th St. in Castana, cars begin pulling in early Friday. Some will work 9 a.m. to noon, struggling to protect prairie in the Great Race Against Shrubs and Shade, GRASS. By early evening, folks gather at the West Monona High School in Onawa, where exhibits, vendors and silent auction items vie for attention. Here, too, is a chance to chat with Iowa's outdoor writers, photographers, naturalists and educators. Adults soon file into the auditorium for speakers, while children are off to their own fun activities. Saturday night, the entertaining Eulenspiegel puppets of Muscatine County charm the children. (Adults can watch, too.)

For the next day and a half, some 40 activities appeal to the child in all of us, and to scientist, novice and educator, fusing culture and ecology of this unique area. Field sessions vary in physical intensity, from sitting in the campground to gentle walks and vigorous hikes.

Choose writing, photography or sketching. Learn about climate change. Make a puppet, write a poem or learn how to grow native plants in your home landscape. Stay in camp for tales of Native Americans or hop in a car and visit birding hotspots, natural history sites or a pioneer cemetery—host to plants of our forerunners. Sharpen observation skills at a nearby prairie, an orchard or organic farm as landowners share their conservation practices.

Choose from up close and personal encounters with animals, from reptiles and amphibians to raptors, or take a short walk to learn about plants and soils. Search for insects on a Saturday night walk, or take the BugGuide workshop during the day. If a hike is more your speed, scramble up a hill and try plant identification with an expert. There are plenty of plant sessions to choose: edible, pioneers' use, invasives and native prairie plants—where to find them, how they are used, why they are important and how to protect them.

Try the 6 a.m. bird walk with binoculars provided.

And don't miss the campfire readings and stories Friday and Saturday nights, or the Saturday dinner. Immerse yourself in prairie and learn more about its importance in making rich, fertile soils and diverse ecosystems. Listen to the haunting cry of the whip-poor-will as dusk fades to darkness.

Be prepared for a transforming weekend where camaraderie, understanding and a reverence for the hills develop under the tutelage of those with exceptional knowledge. Whether you're 6 or 60, it's an excellent choice for a spring weekend.

Registration is not required, but do order meals ahead of the event or bring your own. Primitive camping is free, onsite. Portable toilets provided, but no running water.

Find out more at www.nwaea.k12.ia.us and search "loess" for details and schedule. Educators can register for a credit through Northwest Area Education Agency, the event organizer.

Trek for Treasures of Spring During Wildflower Month



Experience Iowa's Wildflower Month in May with statewide guided walks, hikes and talks when the woodlands, prairies, savannas, wetlands and native plant gardens bloom.

"People are eager to get out in the spring," says Dianne Blankenship, a board member with the Iowa Native Plant Society that coordinates the events.

Attendees leave invigorated by the fresh spring air and awed by what they've learned. Many organizations, from county conservation boards to colleges, offer events.

She adds that spring bloom times are highly variable depending upon temperature and moisture, so checking the online event calendar is advised. To learn more, find events, locations and times, visit iowanativeplants.org, call 712-255-3447 or email dianne.blankenship@gmail.com.

State Trap Shoot



Young Sam toed the line, took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Ninety-eight. Breathe. Ninety-Nine. Breathe. One hundred. Sam had just captured the individual Iowa State Trap Shoot title with a perfect score, edging fellow high school student Bryce by just one.

Clay target shooting is one of the fastest growing competition sports, attracting more than 10,000 student-athletes nationwide, and more and more schools are forming teams every year. This year, Iowa high school trap shooting teams should surpass 100. Average team size is 40 to 50, but some of the larger schools—like Ankeny—roster 150 to 175. More than 1 million targets were busted in competition last

year, and three to four times that in practice.

“This is a legitimate mainstream letter-sport,” says Ben Berka, who heads the DNR’s shooting sports program. “The beauty of the sport is everyone gets a chance to shoot in competition; everyone gets a chance to shoot at the state championships. There are no benchwarmers.

“The Scholastic Clay Target Program (SCTP) is a team-based clay target shooting program that is changing the lives of grade, middle and high school students nationwide and in Iowa,” Berka says. “The youth are learning lifelong skills such as firearm safety, teamwork, respect for self and others, mental focus and self-discipline.”



Approximately 1,300 athletes from across the state—mostly high school students—will vie for individual and team titles at the 2014 SCTP Trap Championships and High School Trap Championship May 30 through June 1 at the Iowa State Trapshooting Association home grounds in Cedar Falls.



BEN BERKA

Some 5,000 athletes and fans are expected to descend on the Iowa State Trap Shooting home grounds in Cedar Falls May 30 through June 1 for the High School Trap Championships and the SCTP Trap Championships. Participants, parents, grandparents and siblings will take over the complex—and much of the Cedar Falls-Waterloo area—for the competition, Berka says.

“It’s like a three-day tailgater,” Berka describes the event, now in its eighth year. “Tents are set up, brats and burgers are on the grill and everyone is having a good time.”

Hundreds more attend the SCTA Skeet Championships at New Pioneer Gun Club in Waukee the following weekend and the SCTA Sporting Clays Championships

June 14, location to be determined.

For details about camping and vendor space at the state championships, go to iowastateshoot.com or call Debra Oelmann at 319-239-3086.

To learn how to start a team, call 515-281-5918.

For more information about Iowa shooting sports programs, coaches certification and shooting range grant opportunities, go to iowadnr.gov and search “shooting sports.”

Together



One of my all-time favorite athletes is Cheri Blauwet. Few lowans match her combined athletic and classroom performance. When competing in the Boston Marathon, the best overall men's time was just over two hours. Blauwet was flying over the course about 30 minutes faster. O.K. she was in a racing chair, but if those men were put in those chairs, she still would have smoked them.

Blauwet was raised on a farm near Gitchie Manitou State Preserve, about as far north and west as one can go and still be an lowan. I mention this as Gitchie Manitou means Great Spirit and there are few lowans that fit that description better than Blauwet. After a tractor mishap at the age of 15 months, Blauwet was paralyzed from the waist down. But after that tragedy she seemed to have sped up; racing in high school, studying molecular biology at the University of Arizona, then medicine at Stanford, winning seven medals at the Paralympics, winning the Boston Marathon and an Excellence in Sports Award from ESPN, chief resident at Harvard Medical College and gold medal advocate for those with disabilities. Dr. Blauwet's career is breathtaking.

Speaking of Great Spirits, others are promoting adaptive sports in Iowa, for example via the spirit of Ashley Okland. A Des Moines dynamo named Brenna Finnerty has informed me about a Variety Club effort to memorialize Okland, "a person who energetically enjoyed living life to its fullest and was happiest when others were doing the same." This effort will create a Star Playground for children with cognitive and physical disabilities. The Ashley Okland Star Playground will be an all-inclusive playground within Ewing Park in Des Moines.

That same week I hear about this effort, I visited a booth at the Iowa Bike Expo and was reminded of the great mission of All Ability Cycles in Jefferson. Not your typical bike shop, it's where folks from around the country turn for bikes no matter what barriers they face.

At the Iowa Sports Foundation booth I was informed that in September they will have a great tour available in Northeast Iowa to support their impressive array of adaptive sports programs. I heard from Easter Seals Iowa that September will also be the month for their bike ride to help "ensure that all people with disabilities or special needs and their families have equal opportunities to live, learn, work and play in their communities."

The icing on all of this is the 2014 National Junior Disability Championships to be held in Ames in July!

I applaud those at the Iowa Sports Foundation, Easter Seals and Variety Club, working to include all in an increasing array of outdoor activities—ADA approved or adaptive camp sites, trails, fishing docks, shelters, ball fields, equipment and more. I encourage your support of these initiatives and hope you are inspired too. With returning amputees from recent wars, an aging population and continued body damage from accidents—more lowans need specially fit bicycles and other gear to play in our 300- by 200-mile outdoor recreation area called Iowa.

TIM LANE is a nationally recognized authority on public health and physical activity. He is president of the Iowa Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

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

Ice Chest Clean-up

To remove odor from a cooler, wash the inside with hot water and vinegar, then rub with a cloth dipped in vanilla extract.



April Shower Hunt

Experienced turkey hunters know some of the best hunting action is near field edges just after a rain storm. Turkeys will quickly move to fields to dry off. Some theorize turkeys do so as a defense mechanism to escape the sound of raindrops falling from trees which muffles the sound of approaching predators.



Rod Tips At The Ready

If you have never broken a rod tip or guide, you will. Keep extras, available at most bait shops, in your tackle box, along with a lighter and a glue stick for reapplying them to the rod for a field repair.



2-Liter Paper Towel Holder

Use empty 2-liter bottles as campsite paper towel holders. Cut off the top and bottom, then slice down the center. It will easily wrap around the paper towel roll to prevent unraveling from wind or tumbles off the picnic table.



PAPER TOWEL HOLDER PHOTO BY STUDIO Z

A Walk On THE Wild Side

The steep angles and sharp bluffs of western Iowa, known as the Loess Hills, is found in only one other part of the world—Shaanxi, China. The tightly packed grains of quartz, feldspar, mica and other minerals—ground by glaciers and deposited in towering bluffs by wind—is an ecological and geological wonder.

Visiting western Iowa's razor-ridged Loess Hills on a hot, breezy summer afternoon that eventually succumbs to the rulling grandeur of a moonlit night is surely as intense an experience today as it was for renowned naturalist and University of Iowa professor Bohumil Shimek as he describes it in a section of the 1909 Iowa Geological Survey Annual Report.

"During the day these bluffs may burn in the heat of the midday sun, they may be swept by the hot blasts of summer winds, or hidden in the whirling clouds of yellow dust which are carried up from the bars of the great river; but in the stillness of early morning, and again when the peace and quiet which portend the close of day have settled upon them, they are both restful and inspiring when looked upon from the valley; and there is no grander view in the great Mississippi-Missouri valley than that which is presented under such circumstances from their summits—on the one hand over the broad valley and on the other across the billowy expanse of the inland loess ridges which appear like the giant swell of a stormy sea which has been suddenly fixed," Shimek wrote about the

geology of Harrison and Monona counties.

To be sure, settling in for an extended period in this region of topographical mosaics is a dream-come-true for any geologist or naturalist. It's easy to imagine studying these rare, great rolling drifts of wind-blown soil deposits with depths of more than 200 feet that, over thousands of years, water has carved into stair-stepped sugar sand.

However, it takes just the single afternoon amid the lower wooded tracts and valleys of the Loess Hills, capped with a night of tent camping atop an imposing, prairie-covered bluff, to provide even the short-stay visitor with a surreal, soul-stirring adventure.

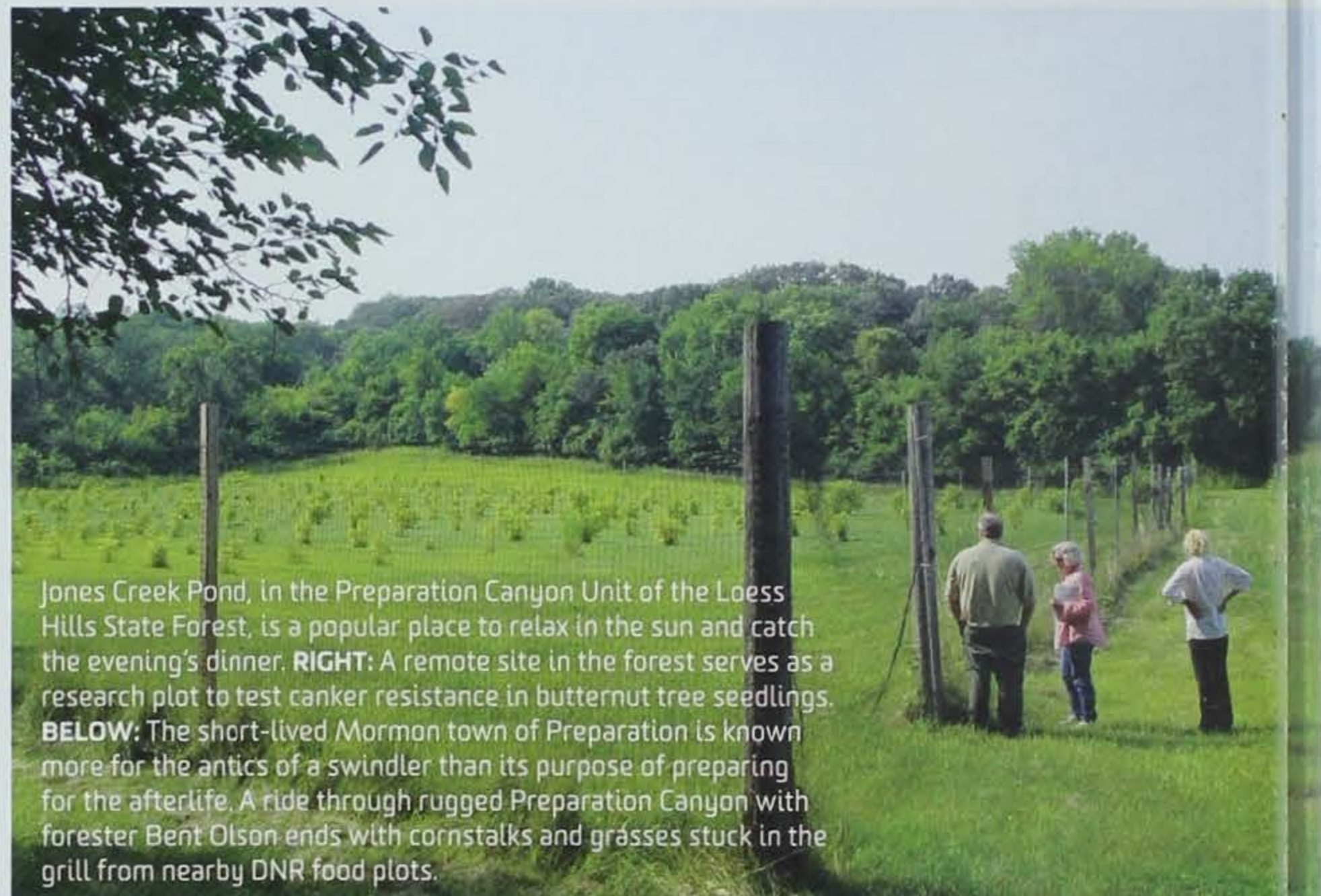
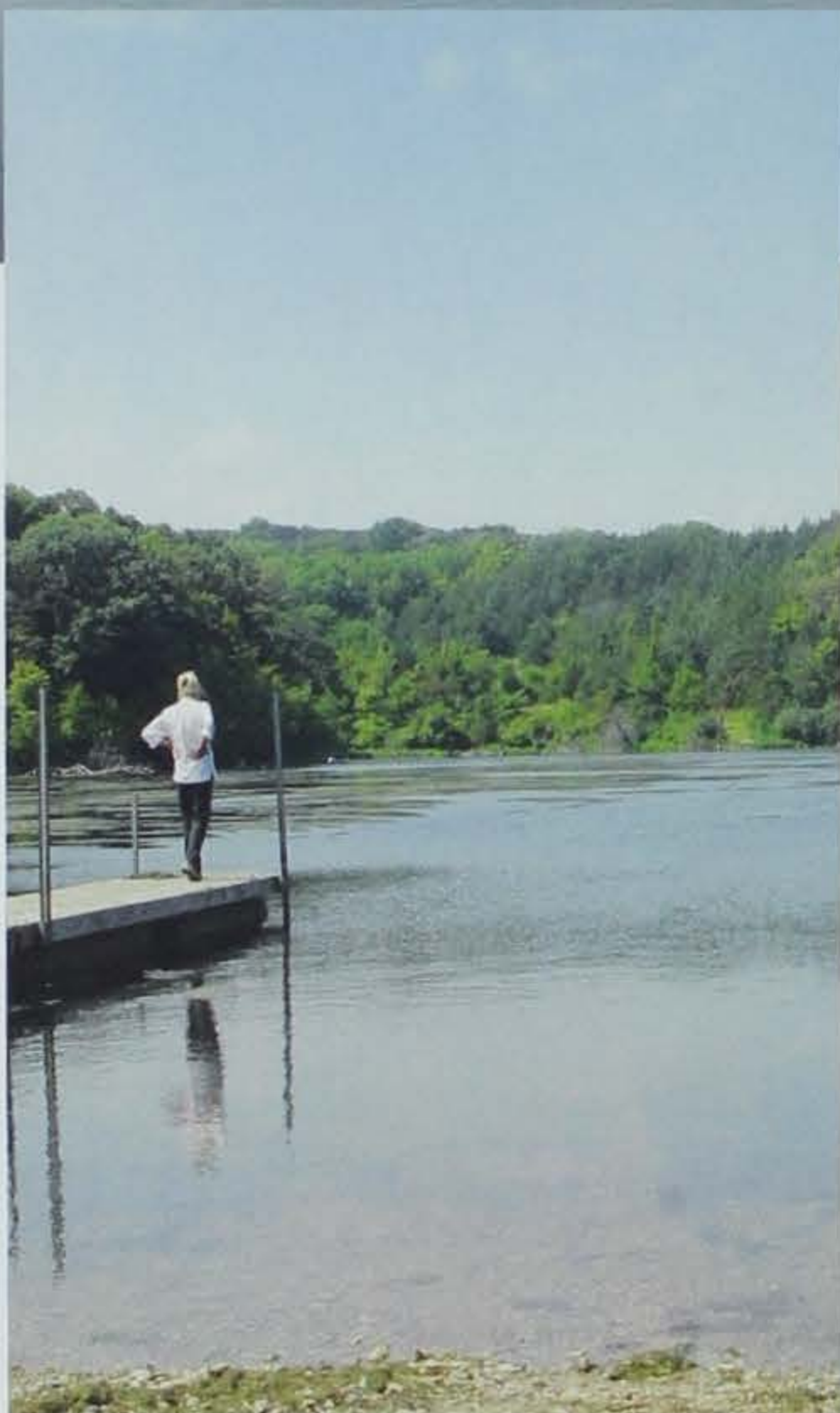
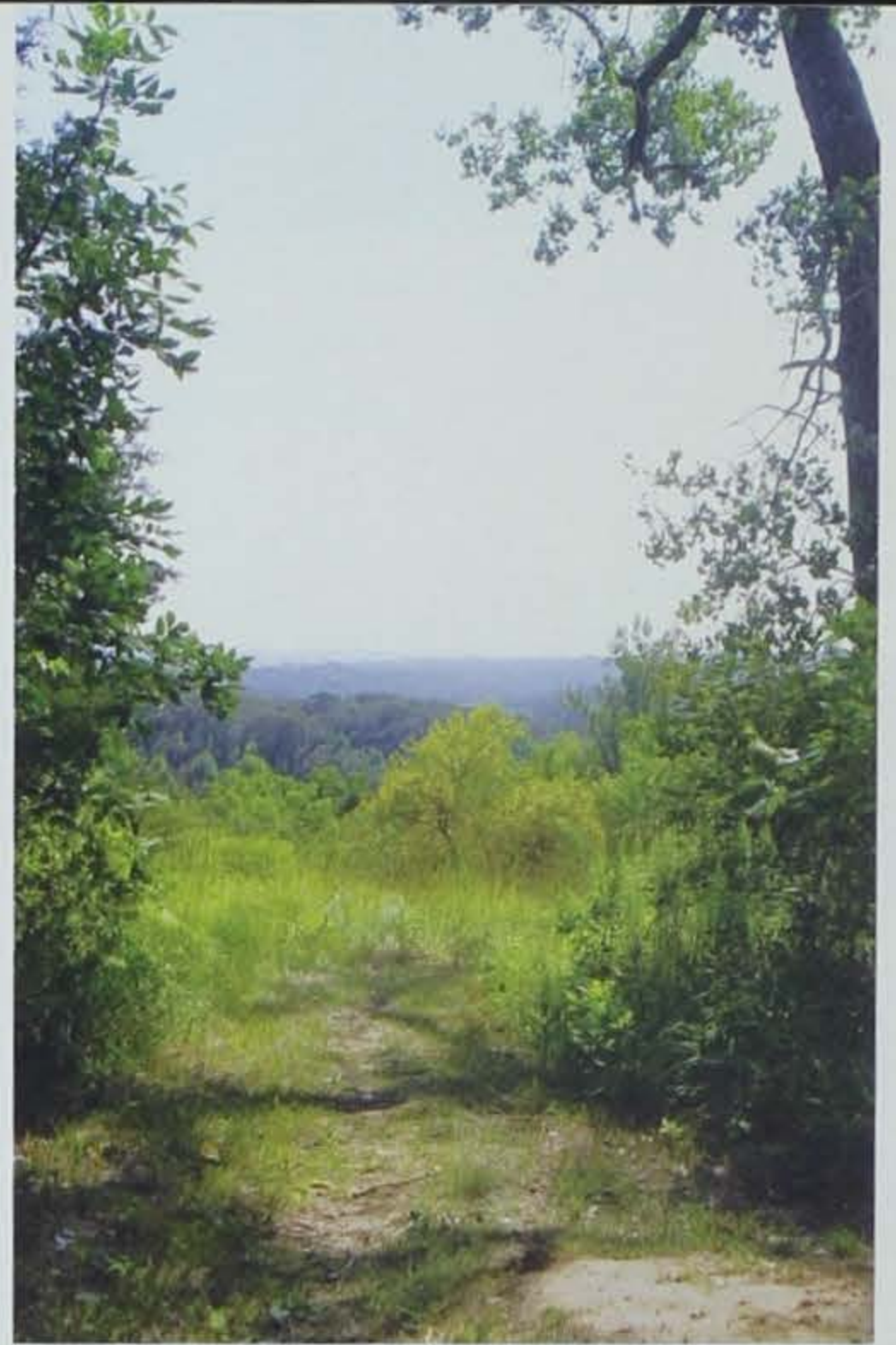
For anyone who has such a day on a bucket list, it would be well to have the DNR's Brent Olson as a guide. As manager of Loess Hills State Forest and Preparation Canyon State Park, which lies within, Olson wears well his comfort with the fairly untouched, idyllic territory he serves.

"People like to come here because it's so remote," he explains with obvious appreciation of the region's isolation. "In fact, we just started getting cell phone service not too long ago."

A unique landform, the Loess Hills includes some of Iowa's most precious cultural, historic and natural resources. The region's approximately 1,080 square miles is a world of native prairies, dense forests, harrowing ridges and spectacular views.



Lost In Iowa



Jones Creek Pond, in the Preparation Canyon Unit of the Loess Hills State Forest, is a popular place to relax in the sun and catch the evening's dinner. **RIGHT:** A remote site in the forest serves as a research plot to test canker resistance in butternut tree seedlings. **BELOW:** The short-lived Mormon town of Preparation is known more for the antics of a swindler than its purpose of preparing for the afterlife. A ride through rugged Preparation Canyon with forester Bent Olson ends with cornstalks and grasses stuck in the grill from nearby DNR food plots.



Indeed there is little high technology in this west central Iowa outpost, nor roiling waves of humanity, nor hustle and bustle—making it the perfect destination for anyone wanting to run screaming from life's daily hassles.

A good starting point for an excursion into the forest is the tiny town of Pisgah. It is true the Loess Hills National Scenic Byway—a 200-mile stretch running from north of Sioux City to near St. Joseph, Mo.—and two byway loops converge here, almost outside the door of the iconic Old Home Filler-up an' Keep on Truckin' Café. Even so, none of that distracts from a wayfarer's quest for serenity and beauty.

To learn the area, it's impossible to do better than hitch a truck ride with Olson along the winding roads and through the wooded splendor of the 11,600-acre state forest he knows by heart. The journey is one of non-stop educational instruction.

"The forest is located in both Monona and Harrison counties," he begins, "and it's the newest state forest, founded, you might say, in 1986. In time, we hope to increase the acreage to 20,000 by acquiring adjacent land that comes up for sale."

Heading north out of Pisgah toward the Preparation Canyon Unit, a stop at Jones Creek Pond is in order. Created by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, the popular clear, clean lake serves up ample catches of bass and bluegill for anglers who find it a relaxing haven on a warm day.

Plenty of all-weather roads and public parking make the four units accessible year-round. "We have hikers, hunters, fishers, bird-watchers and others who just want to come explore and enjoy the scenic views," states Olson. "We have 20 miles of trails that wind through the entire forest and are always working to expand and improve them, as well as add signage. It all takes time and money."

What lucky folks encounter along the trails is roughly 700 vascular plant species—or about a third of what is found in Iowa. The forest is a diverse mix of bur oak to hickory, black walnut, elm, basswood, ash, Kentucky coffee, ironwood and cedar. The prairie consists of short and tallgrass species, including compass plant, locoweed, ground plum, yucca and skeleton weed.

Managing and maintaining the diverse ecosystem is a job Olson finds never-ending but satisfying. "Every year we burn about 2,300 acres of woodland and prairie for vegetation and invasive species management," he reports. "It then renews itself, becoming even healthier."

For the past seven years, extra work has been done expanding—through tree-clearing and burning—segments of the original prairie. What not long ago was confined to narrow bluff ridges and south-facing slopes has now become 400 acres of native prairie with more than 340 species of plants. "We're trying to give visitors a look at how these hills once looked," he says. Occasionally, nature has relied on its own management devices: three naturally occurring forest fires in the past 20 years.

Stringent management goals are observed in tree planting. "We study nursery catalogs and send to the State Forest Nursery, among other places, for seedlings," he says. "Almost a million native trees have been planted."

The intense vegetation management efforts contribute to an abundance of wildlife. Along with deer, quail, swans, pheasant, wild turkey, dozens of bird species and "lots of bobcats"—which thrive in the rich environment—the rare plains pocket mouse, regal fritillary and ottoe skipper butterflies also proclaim this home.

Except for areas around residences and the visitor center in Pisgah, the entire forest is open for hunting, hiking, nature study and cross-country skiing.

"We do set some land aside for crops, too," asserts Olson. "It's cash rented out to local farmers and about a fifth of what is produced is retained through the winter for wildlife food and cover."

A view of one corn plot becomes close and personal when Olson turns the mellow afternoon drive through the tranquil setting into a wild ride. Sideswiping the length of one of the greening corn plots, he gives the stalks along the edge an early harvest in order to drive the truck over a narrow path leading to a tucked-away research plot where butternut-tree seedlings are grown. "This member of the walnut family is known as white walnut, grown in protected sites within the forest to see if they show butternut canker resistance," explains Olson.

Throughout the year, tour buses carry travel groups through the forest, and school buses haul kids from as far away as Des Moines to view the towering, undulating hills and traverse the curvy roads that once served as stagecoach routes. Still, because of the vastness of Loess Hills State Forest, the 25,000 people who visit it annually do not translate into tourist overload by any means. Nevertheless, it's likely somewhere along the trails and byways a visitor will encounter other sojourners and enjoy a conversation. In such a remote location as the forest's main overlook high on a bluff in the Preparation Canyon unit, such an opportunity comes as an especially pleasant surprise.

"We're shocked to find anyone up here, especially ourselves," laughs Tony Meiner from Carroll, who along with his wife, Colleen, and cousins, Harold and Carol Meiner of Coon Rapids, stands on the large, well-built, handicapped-accessible observation deck that offers breath-taking panoramic views of the majestic hills and deep valleys.

"We've spent the day road-tripping and had never been here so we just followed the road," he offers. "We did get a little lost, though," delighted at their good fortune in discovering the scenic overlook.

"A little?" chimes in Harold, poking fun. "He acted like he knew where we were, but he didn't have any idea, and we all knew it."

Hearing the cousins cajole one another, Olson says that despite their particular circumstance, "This overlook is

Lost In Iowa

Possibly the most picturesque view in the Loess Hills is from the observation deck atop a bluff in the Preparation Canyon Unit of the Loess Hill State Forest, adjacent Preparation Canyon State Park. Here, visitors are treated to spectacular 360-degree views.





Lost In Iowa

one of the most visited spots in Iowa. We've had as many as 30 to 40 weddings and receptions right here on the overlook."

"Well, sure, I knew that and that's why we're here," Tony responds to the loud "Harrumph!" of his disbelieving cousin.

As if everything encountered thus far has not been enough to satisfy the curious, there's much more in a visit to Preparation Canyon State Park.

Less than two miles from the soaring overlook, Preparation Canyon is a unique 344-acre park. The name came from its location on the site of the former Mormon town, Preparation, with colorful history galore.

In 1853, Charles B. Thompson led about 60 families away from the Utah-bound Mormon wagon train after the charismatic leader reported receiving a message from the "Spirit" to settle the area. This place was to be their "School of Preparation for the Life Beyond."

To everyone's surprise it turned out to be the richest farming valley in the new territory. The canny, greedy Thompson, pretending to receive further directives from the "Spirit," successfully collected all the deeds and possessions from the settlers.

By 1856, the townspeople realized they had been duped and demanded return of their property. The swindler refused and narrowly escaped being lynched, fleeing the state unable to secure the deeds.

Most of the disillusioned settlers moved on to Utah. Those remaining prospered for a few decades, but by 1900, Preparation had faded into obscurity. Eventually, descendants of one of the original families sold their land to the state and thus came the park.

Preparation Canyon is also the only state park to have entirely hike-in camping. Ten primitive sites, for which no reservations are needed, are equipped with picnic tables, grills and pit toilets.

Olson was devastated in June 2008 when a half-mile-wide tornado ripped through the area and wiped out nearly 300 acres of forest and 175 acres of park. Today, stumps in the storm-damaged earth sprout shoots, and thousands of planted seedlings bear witness to a resolve to restore what was destroyed. "In 10 years, you'll never know there was a tornado," says a determined Olson.

It's always exciting to save the best for last...and despite the sense of accomplishment backpacking into a primitive forest site, it's exhilarating to experience a night of camping atop the uttermost ridge of a loess bluff lit by a moon just past full.

To do so you: 1) need to be a bit of a risk-taker as you will camp where few trek, 2) should be fairly hale and hearty to backpack in—and up—maybe a mile or more, and 3) definitely cannot be a scaredy-cat because on that high ridge you are disconnected from the world.

If Rip Van Winkle enjoyed his nights in the Catskill Mountains as much as one can on a Loess Hill ridge in the middle of summer, well...no wonder he hunkered in

for 20 years, although in truth, a companion or two is a desirable addition.

The ingredients for the evening are simple. Once the tent is up, a campfire is in order, not so much for cooking as for ambiance. In such a location, twigs and smaller tree branches are plentiful. Food and beverage is purposely limited to "the-easier-the-better" rule. After the fire is made and secured and a simple spread of victuals and ice-cold beverages laid out, there is blessedly little to do but kick back and let the night take over.

As ink descends over the tops of tens of thousands of trees, one can see the last breath of coral sky on the distant western horizon. The bottomlands of the Missouri River fade fast, and a few twinkly lights on distant, rural Nebraska farms pop up. And who's the know-it-all who proclaimed Montana the "Big Sky" country? Especially at night, no sky on earth can be as expansive as the Iowa dome.

The glow of a slightly waning moon as it rises over a slope to douse the dark competes with the campfire as the site's light source.

A ragtag band of insects begins to organize as the day fizzles, and before long the hills reverberate with a synchronous, if not melodic, arrangement of "Buzz-z-z," "Hmm-m-m," and "Hiss-s-s," the latter emitted by some strange instrumentalist—and no, the unknown contributor is not a snake.

Though the players drop off one by one throughout the night, it is the wee hours of morning before the last one allows the stillness of the hills to prevail. Before that, the only exception to the non-stop jam session has been the lamentation of a few backwoods coyotes whose wailing and jabbering on a distant eminence manage to silence the performers for a nanosecond.

Inside the tent, sleep descends on a weary camper, but before it does, a warm breeze kicks in, sending the last vestiges of wood smoke from the dead fire through the mesh openings of the tent. A slim shaft of moonlight beams through as well. A lone mosquito, still on the hunt for blood, happily finds its intended victim too lethargic to do anything but whisper, "Shoo."

Then, a companion camper utters a drowsy "sweet dreams." 🐻





After an afternoon visiting with travelers on the impressive observation deck, and hiking the rough stagecoach roads of the past that still span the Loess Hills State Forest and Preparation Canyon State Park, the perfect end to the day is pitching a tent on a high bluff, spreading out a blanket, watching the sun descend over the distant Missouri River and closing the day by campfire light.



Lost In Iowa

NEARBY ATTRACTIONS:

Four units comprise the forest, which is a mixture of native forest, savanna and prairie vegetation. These include Mondamin, 1,096 acres; Pisgah, 2,564 acres; Little Sioux, 3,835 acres; and Preparation Canyon, 4,105 acres.

Pisgah:

- Loess Hills State Forest Visitor Center. Displays show formation and landscapes of Loess Hills.
- Old Home Filler-up an' Keep on Truckin' Café. This local restaurant became nationally acclaimed when it was the subject of the 1970s hit song "Convoy," by C.W. McCall and the Old Home Bread commercials.

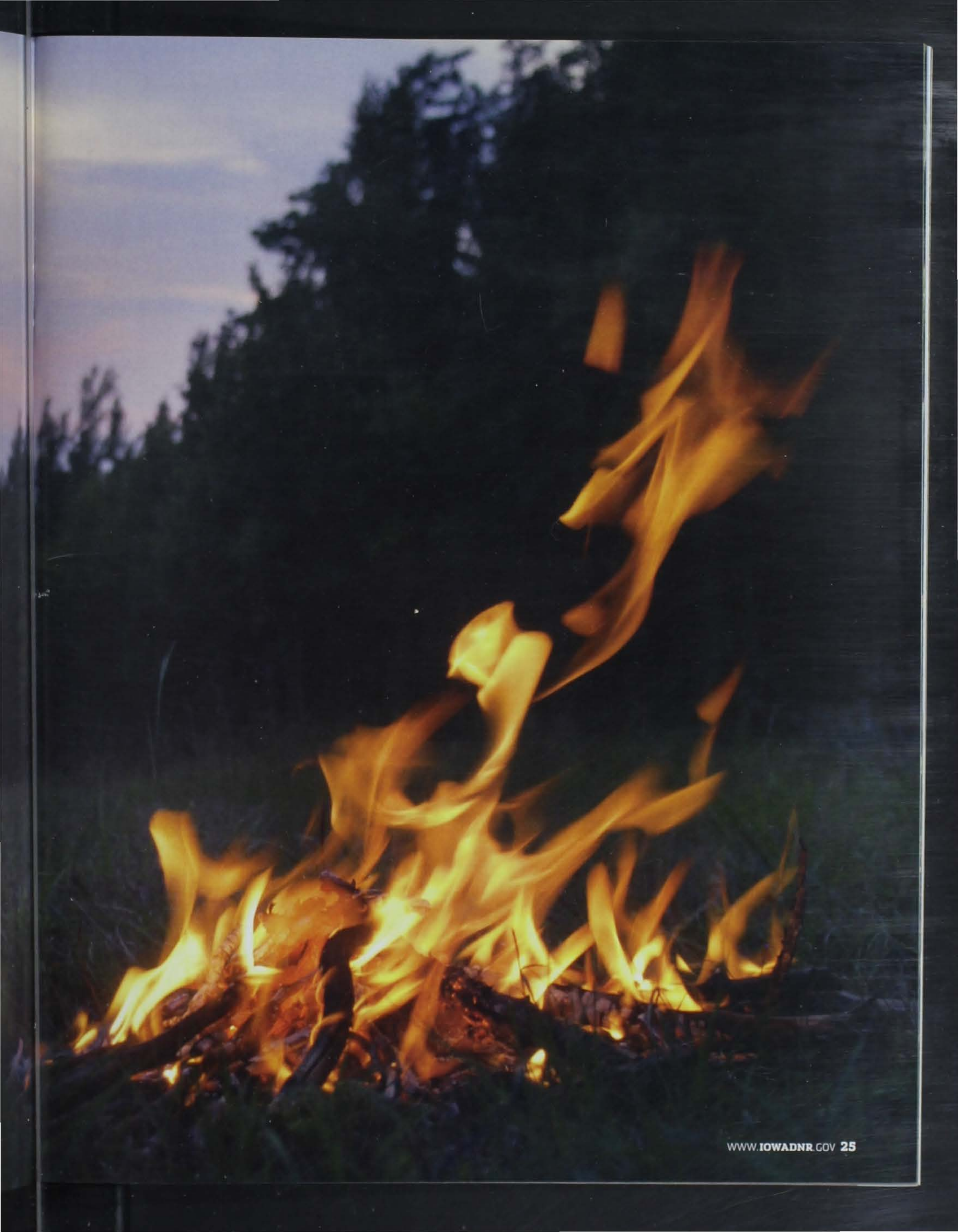
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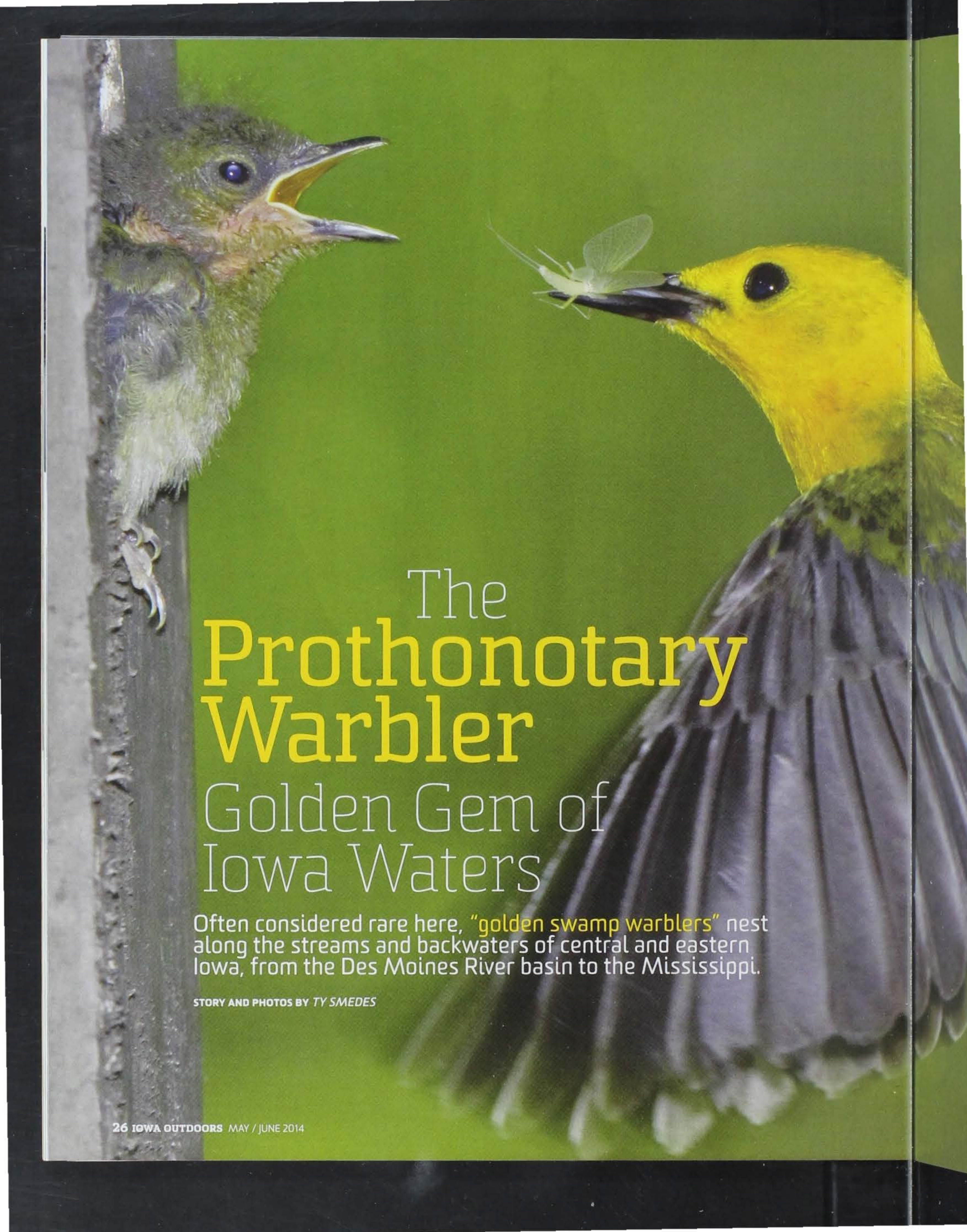
- Monona County Historical Museum. Included are displays on Lewis and Clark and the story of the "invention" of the Eskimo Pie.
- Monona County Arboretum
- Kiwanis Museum Complex
- Monona County Veterans Memorial Museum

Lewis and Clark State Park:

- Replica keelboat, visitor center, trails, camping, boating, fishing
- Lewis and Clark Festival (June 13-15, 2014)






A close-up photograph of a yellow Prothonotary Warbler on the right, holding a large fly in its beak. On the left, a fluffy, downy chick is perched on a branch with its beak open, looking towards the parent bird. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

The Prothonotary Warbler

Golden Gem of
Iowa Waters

Often considered rare here, "golden swamp warblers" nest along the streams and backwaters of central and eastern Iowa, from the Des Moines River basin to the Mississippi.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TY SMEDES



It's early July and I'm wading through flooded backwaters of Beaver Creek, just south of Granger in Polk County.

The heat index is 96 degrees, and trapped in my chest-waders, I feel like I've entered a sauna. I would rather have waited out the withering summer heat wave and rising floodwaters, but the prothonotary warbler nest I've monitored has hatchlings that will fledge today or tomorrow. Mother Nature has her own wondrous schedule, and I must adhere to it, or lose a rare and wonderful opportunity to photograph the parents bringing worms and insects to their nestlings. The rapidly growing youngsters won't wait for floodwaters to recede or the heat wave to break.

As owner of this floodplain property for more than 25 years, I know where every low spot lurks. Most of my quarter-mile trek is through knee-deep water, but one particular rivulet tests my chest waders. As I slowly enter the fast-flowing streamlet, the water inches closer to my backpack carrying many thousands of dollars worth of photo gear. Reaching back with one hand, I carefully push the pack several inches higher up my back to keep it above the roiling waters. A few more steps and the risk passes.

As the blind and nest box come into view, my spirits lift when the stunning, gold-colored male warbler brings an insect to four hungry youngsters. The nestlings have yet to fledge. The camouflaged photo blind is surrounded by floodwaters, no more than a foot from the front of the blind, but having placed it on high ground, it sits dry. I'm swept with exhilaration knowing I can continue

photographing the life-cycle of this beautiful little warbler.

The prothonotary (pronounced proh-THON-uh-ter-ee) warbler is the only cavity-nesting warbler in the eastern U.S. and southeast Canada. It's one of more than 30 species of colorful wood warblers that migrate through Iowa, and one of only a few warblers that commonly nests as far west as central Iowa. But not many will don hip boots or waders to ply the backwaters of swampy and mosquito-infested habitat to find the "golden swamp warbler." "Prothonotary" is a reference to clerks in the Roman Catholic Church, whose robes were bright yellow. During breeding season, the male's loud ringing



Returning prothonotaries arrive in Iowa in late April to mid-May, with males (PICTURED ABOVE) arriving first to pick and begin building nest sites. They prefer marshes, wooded swamps, flooded bottomland timber and streams with dead trees. They have few enemies—except for the common house wren (LEFT), who will nest in almost any habitat and in some of the oddest places—like mailboxes or planters. They often take over existing nests and toss out material and eggs, rebuilding with the same material they just discarded.

song—sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet—reverberates along water edges during spring and summer.

Ready to fledge—Capturing the Final Photos

As soon as I entered the blind, both parents returned, bringing food to the four nearly grown and hungry youngsters. Big green worms were the menu item of the day, and both parents brought up to three insects at a time—a physically challenging task, without dropping one. The trifecta of insects was always diverse, often consisting of a worm, beetle and damsel or dragonfly. The rapid feeding pace continued, with one parent or the other alighting at the nest box every five minutes or so, taking but a few moments to pop in, deliver the payload and pop back out. A youngster appeared, perched at the entrance window. In a moment, the brightly colored male returned with an insect, and clinging to the entrance, quickly stuffed it into the wide and waiting mouth of the young. I never could have imagined what would happen next. Returning again and again, the male hovered like a hummingbird, stuffing an insect or larvae into the gaping beak of the seemingly insatiable youngster. It was a photographer's dream.

It was a very special day, spent with a very special warbler family, and I could only hope the species survives the challenges of diminishing habitat and competition from the competitive house wren. Back at my truck, I exchanged sweat-soaked clothes for dry ones, and savor memories that would last a lifetime.

The Nest Box Project

Several years ago, while photographing wood ducks at a nest box at the same location, I observed a small bird of rich golden hue at the entrance hole. It was a male prothonotary warbler. Excited by the discovery, I placed several bluebird boxes on poles over water. Several pairs of warblers set up housekeeping the following spring. These charismatic birds have few enemies, except for one—the ubiquitous house wren. Aggressive and unyielding, the male house wren builds several dummy nests made of sticks to attract a mate. And where wrens and prothonotaries occupy the same habitat, the wren always wins, often building his house of sticks atop the nest and eggs of a frantic warbler pair. The larger prothonotaries will swoop at a male house wren singing from the roof of their home but aren't aggressive enough to hit it and drive it away. Needless to say, the house wrens were aggressive, and prothonotary nest box success was mixed.

The House Wren Threat

Prothonotary nest box expert Charles Bombaci of Westerville, Ohio, has years of experience maintaining a nest box trail at the Hoover Nature Preserve in Ohio. According to an Audubon chapter in Columbus, Ohio, Bombaci “has erected 250 nest boxes in the preserve—with impressive results—68 breeding pairs of prothonotaries.”


“Prothonotary warblers have been victimized over the years by loss and degradation of habitat, and these



GET INVOLVED: Build a nest box with plans found on page 60. Go to Audubon.com and search prothonotary warbler songs to hear calls of the bird.

To watch video of a prothonotary warbler building and maintaining a nest box, go to sialis.org/prow.

Having trouble identifying a bird? Go to Audubon.org and download the Audubon Online Bird Guide. Get descriptions, hear songs and learn the habits of more than 800 species in 22 orders and 74 families. Search by quick guide, such as long-legged waders or duck-like; by family, like ducks, geese or swans; or by common name. Learn what put some species in peril, the natural history of birds and which ones are threatened or endangered. Discover the difference between uppertail and upperwing coverts, tertials, secondaries and primaries.



The Prothonotary Warbler Nesting Habits

Excavation or nest site

selection: Arrives in Iowa during mid-May. Males arrive first, and pick nest sites before females arrive. Makes one or more "dummy nests" of fresh moss (1 to 8 centimeters deep, may have nest cup). Displays at nest sites for female, repeatedly entering and exiting cavities.

Nest construction: Females build the actual nest, which is completed within 6 to 10 days, consisting of mosses and lichen, rootlets, small twigs, dry leaves and strips of bark.

Egg laying: Usually three to eight, commonly four to six, and one egg per day early in morning. Eggs: oval, smooth, somewhat glossy shell, with a creamy or slightly yellow tinge. Boldly and liberally spotted/blotched with dull reddish brown and pale purplish gray spots.

Incubation: 12 to 14 days. Female incubates and male often brings food to her during incubation, and

may inspect the nest. Female continues to brood for the first few days after hatching.

Hatching: Usually mid-morning—all eggs usually hatch within 12 hours, sometimes one hatches up to 24 hours later

Development: Nearly naked with sparse downy feathers, orangish pink with gray head. Eyes are closed. Both parents feed young—may feed while perched at entrance. Both parents remove fecal sacs until babies fledge.

Day 2: young readily lift head to gape if nest box is tapped.

Day 3 to 4: female stops brooding.

Day 5: young are mobile, often sitting in star pattern facing different directions from center.

Day 6: youngsters crouch and stay silent when nest is disturbed. Capable of "tschup" call.

Day 7: can now hop and grasp

with their feet. Can often shift position in nest by **day 7 to 8**, and may form a pyramid pattern with all heads pointed towards entrance hole.

Day 9: able to run.

Fledging: 10 to 11 days old, usually in morning, usually all fledge within several hours although sometimes one fledges the next day. Nearly completely feathered except tail feathers are half-sheathed. The young are able to "swim" (propel themselves across the water surface) and fly short distances. This is important since they often nest over water.

Dispersal:

Parents feed juveniles up to 35 days after fledging. Parents divide up the young and feed only part of the brood.

Number of broods: Generally two in the southern U.S., but usually one in the north.

Longevity: Oldest record of a banded female is about eight years. Average male life span is 2.44 years.





The prothonotary is one of only two North American warblers that nests in cavities and the only one outside the extreme desert southwest.

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Prothonotary warbler populations (and some other songbird) populations are in decline due to the destruction of wintering mangrove swamps in southern Central America and northeastern South America, breeding habitat loss, nest predation and brood parasitism. Cowbirds parasitize more than 220 bird species, removing one of the host species' eggs and laying one of its own. If a nest is parasitized, the female may abandon it. About one in four nest attempts fail due to predation by raccoons, snakes, weasels and other predators.

issues continue to be troublesome. Currently the species has another nemesis, the house wren, which are rapidly becoming a major competitor for nest sites, including nest boxes," says Bombaci. "With the ever-expanding housing projects in suburbia, more and more sites once devoid of house wrens are becoming havens for them."

Combating House Wrens

Bombaci offers several methods for combating house wrens:

- Avoid marginal habitat. Install or move nest boxes away from brushy, heavily wooded areas such as thickets, brambles, trees or shrubbery to decrease the likelihood of house wrens using the box. Remove brush near a box as shrubbery appears to be more attractive than trees. Face the entrance hole away from shrubbery. House wren populations appear to be increasing. As nesting pressure increases, or as the season progresses, they may move farther away from what is considered "ideal" wren habitat. The best deterrent is to move boxes away from wren habitat, especially boxes used in the past by wrens.

- Remove extra boxes. Fewer boxes may keep wren populations in check so they don't attack prothonotaries' nests.

- Plug nest boxes using a rubber drain plug in boxes with dummy nests, or leave the box door open for three to seven days, up to two weeks, if wrens attempt to claim the box. The downside is it may encourage wrens to attempt to claim another nest box.

- Dummy nests may be removed and destroyed. They generally consist of loose sticks only without feather or

- fiber lining or eggs. They often lack white fuzzy spider cocoons wrens use on active nests. A nest with a lining is an active nest and must be left alone under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. A nest is a dummy if eggless after three weeks. Repeatedly remove sticks and twigs of dummy nests, or leave the box open or plugged for a week or two. Removing sticks usually requires daily visits, as wrens can fill up a box in a day. If they intend to use the box for a real nest, the pair may begin refilling the box within minutes. Discard sticks far from the nest to discourage rebuilding.

Dedication Is Key

"In places where the breeding ranges of the house wren and prothonotary warbler overlap strongly, the house wren always out-competes the prothonotary warbler. In the northern part of its breeding range, prothonotary warbler breeding success is most strongly limited by highly aggressive interaction with house wrens," according to an excerpt from the Canadian Prothonotary Warbler Recovery Program Annual Report. "Moreover, house wren aggression is so strong that it cannot be countered by any means. As a result, the recovery team strongly discourages people from placing prothonotary warbler nest boxes at sites that are already occupied by house wrens. It is a losing proposition and only serves to bolster wren populations, making the situation worse."

I wouldn't advise placing nest boxes in prothonotary habitat unless dedicated to the project. Boxes require daily monitoring and patrol to maximize nesting success. 🐦

Kayaks and Cameras

A Winning Combination!

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KIP LADAGE




My obsession began decades ago with my first canoe. It was a beauty—an oxidized aluminum canoe with only a few scratches and maybe a small dimple or two. The boat looked near new, so I bought it. I still own that canoe, but seldom use it after switching to kayaking a few years later. About the same time I started paddling, my interest in wildlife photography began. It was a natural fit. I saw so much wildlife while paddling that carrying a camera became second nature. Each trip my camera is with me.

With 30-plus years of paddling and nature photography experience, I am often asked, “How do you do it?” or “Aren’t you afraid of ruining your equipment?” I am seldom concerned with damaging my camera or lenses. I am comfortable with my approach and have yet to have a problem with water and photography equipment.

Tips For Paddling Photography

Be familiar and comfortable with your boat under all conditions before venturing out with expensive equipment. Kayakers sit lower in the water than canoe paddlers and thus are more stable. Do not be overconfident. Get out and paddle, learn how your kayak handles under various water and wind conditions and know your limitations. Be safe—use a personal floatation device and paddle leash. Losing either puts you in a bind.

Have a plan for stowing your equipment. My preference is a waist pack stowed forward of my feet (and out of the way), with a waist strap extending back toward me. When needed, I pull the strap to bring everything to me. I store my tripod collapsed either in front of me or behind the seat.

A white Great Egret is the central focus of the image, standing in a nest. The nest is a complex structure of dry, light-brown sticks and reeds, some of which are in sharp focus while others are blurred in the background. The egret's feathers are bright white, and its long, straight beak is a pale yellowish-orange. Its eye is a striking yellow-green. The bird is positioned in the middle ground, facing left. The lighting is natural, highlighting the texture of the bird's feathers and the surrounding vegetation.

Patience and preparedness are paramount in wildlife photography to obtain images like the great egret shown here. Opportunities vanish as fast as they appear. Paddle slow and shoot often, advises the author.



Belted kingfisher

Approach wildlife photography as if you were hunting the species. Move slowly, be aware of your surroundings and be ready to shoot at a moment's notice. Camouflage everything—yourself and your boat, paddle and equipment. Protect expensive camera equipment with a dry bag. Accidents can happen even to the best-prepared. Purchase a marine insurance policy to cover equipment. Get off the water at the first sign of trouble—especially thunder and lightning.



Ghillie Suit



Two male wood ducks



Great blue heron

Take your camera each outing as wildlife photography opportunities are frequent and unexpected.

Test how your equipment will be laid out when in use. If the water is calm, I almost always use a tripod, even though I have image stabilized lenses. My front-facing tripod leg is splayed fully forward for stability. The other two are opened enough to rest on the outer edges of the cockpit under deck cording. This way I can easily slide the tripod forward and back as needed for compositions or to paddle.

Insure your gear. An inland marine policy covers every

item listed on the policy.

Protect your gear. I generally carry my waist pack in a dry bag. If wet conditions persist, I put everything into the dry bag and seal it. I keep my camera in its own dry bag directly in front of my seat. Once my kayak took on water down a stretch of rapids. By the time I reached calm water, the kayak had several inches of water in it. Both camera bags were floating, but everything was dry.

Recognize when you shouldn't be on the water. Wildlife photography from a kayak is fun and productive.



American avocet



Sora



River otters

However, there are times when no matter how good the shooting is, it is not safe to be on the water. Wind, waves and rapids deserve respect. Get off the water before you get into trouble. Get off the water immediately when you hear thunder.

Time Tested Tips For Incredible Kayak Photography

Hide your boat! When you see many kayakers together, they resemble a box of crayons spilled on the water. Wildlife knows their environment, including when colorful invaders

are present. Paddle a boat that blends with the habitat, like a green/gray camo pattern-colored kayak, preferably with a dull, shot-peened (dimpled) surface to help reduce light glare. I also cover mine in 3D camo with cattails or raffia woven through the 3D loops. I have camo tape on the paddle blades and gun socks on the shaft to break up straight lines.

Hide yourself. I seldom paddle my kayak without wearing camouflage. Often I wear a Ghillie Suit jacket and hat—either tan or green—depending on the habitat. I've had critters and people pass very near me without recognizing I was there.



On sunny days, shoot during the hours of "golden light," the few hours around sunrise and sunset such as in the photo of the willet above. Afternoon light tends to be harsh and robs images of their brilliance. Clouds act as a light filter, so shoot all day.

Hide your camera and tripod. Gear should be out and available, so it must be covered in camo material. I made a camo camera hood and hide my tripod legs with gunsocks.

Watch your position. I paddle in the shadows along rivers and marshes as much as possible. Use overhanging trees and brush to your advantage by paddling as close to them as conditions allow.

Paddle quietly and slowly. When you think you are paddling slow enough to approach a great blue heron hunting for minnows, slow down even more. Paddle a little and shoot often.

Know your wildlife. Time on the water and a little luck will put you in front of wildlife. Study local species to improve odds of being in the right spot, in the right light, at the right time. I maintain a database of images. Notes are taken and dates are recorded. Through cumulative data over the years, I know within a day or two when migrating species arrive. Learn from every photo outing—the successful adventures and the not

so successful ones. In time you will be able to pre-plan your paddling and photography efforts.

Be ready, shoot as you approach and know your camera. Don't wait until you are near the target subject to begin shooting photos. Shoot often with varied compositions and exposures. Shutter speed and exposure compensation are critical to good water shots. Water tends to be either very dark or very bright. Know how and when to adjust your compensation settings.

Outdoor photography is more than still photos. Today's cameras shoot high definition video with the push of a button. Don't be afraid to shoot video, and share your outdoor experiences with others. More often than not I shoot video as well as still images using my DSLR or a small, camo-covered video camera on the deck of my kayak. My adventures are shared on YouTube (Search Kip Ladage videos).

Practice your skills and refine your techniques and you will be surprised by the results. To see more Kip Ladage wildlife and nature photos, go to ladagephotography.com. 📷



BULL

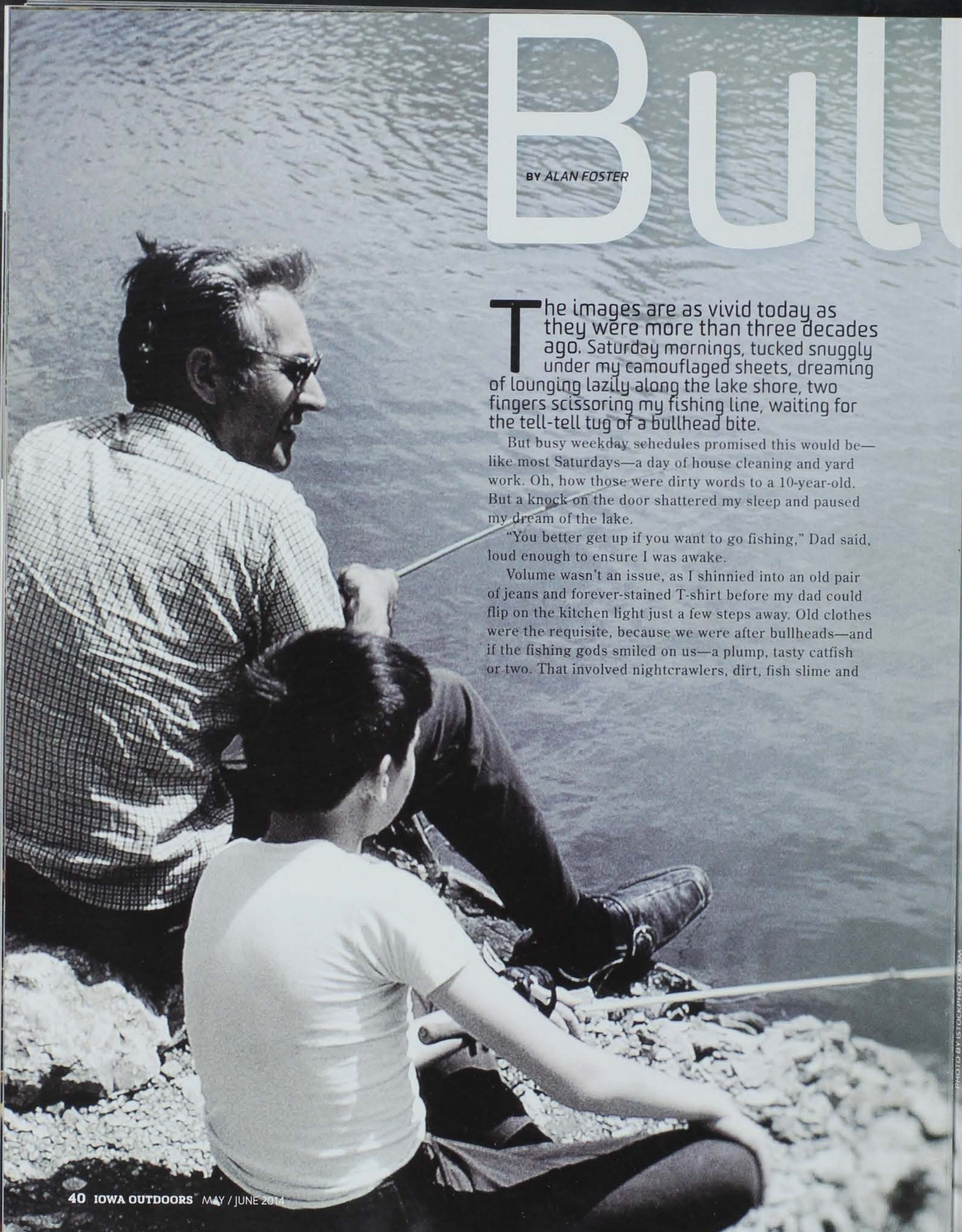
BY ALAN FOSTER

The images are as vivid today as they were more than three decades ago. Saturday mornings, tucked snugly under my camouflaged sheets, dreaming of lounging lazily along the lake shore, two fingers scissoring my fishing line, waiting for the tell-tell tug of a bullhead bite.

But busy weekday schedules promised this would be—like most Saturdays—a day of house cleaning and yard work. Oh, how those were dirty words to a 10-year-old. But a knock on the door shattered my sleep and paused my dream of the lake.

"You better get up if you want to go fishing," Dad said, loud enough to ensure I was awake.

Volume wasn't an issue, as I shinnied into an old pair of jeans and forever-stained T-shirt before my dad could flip on the kitchen light just a few steps away. Old clothes were the requisite, because we were after bullheads—and if the fishing gods smiled on us—a plump, tasty catfish or two. That involved nightcrawlers, dirt, fish slime and



theads

stink bait, and towels would cut into fishing time. A quick brush on the shirt or pant leg and the cast was made.

Mom was already busy in the kitchen, obviously privy to the day's plans I was oblivious to just minutes earlier. The cooler was packed—plain bologna and cheese sandwiches, regular chips and glamorous red delicious apples. But it didn't matter. We would be busy baiting hooks, breathing in the pungent, spring air and, hopefully, removing horned, whiskered torpedoes that croaked at us when we did. Food was an after-thought. A quick stop at the bait-shop-in-a-garage for some sodas and candy bars—a rare treat—and we were off.

Rock Creek Lake in Jasper County was less than 20 miles from my Newton home, but it felt like a state away. Would we make it in time to catch the morning bite? Would someone else beat us to our secret spot? Did we really have to stop for candy and Cokes?

The turn east out of Kellogg to Rock Creek covers three roller coaster hills. I count them. One—past rolling hills of grasslands and pasture. Two—past a tiny farmstead with a couple cows and a mangy German shepherd that thinks it's as fast as our truck. Three—cresting the hill I finally see water. Nirvana. Just a few curves and corners and we will be at our secret spot.

Grabbing the rods, tackle box and cooler, and making the long trek to our secret spot tucked away in a cove, seems to take an eternity. I look back at my dad—burdened with the bulk of the load—to see if he is keeping up. It doesn't matter. I have the essentials: rods and nightcrawlers. I will have hook and line in the water before he sets up his 1970s-vintage webbed, folding lawn chair.

We have no agenda, no set time to be home, no cares—short of hopes of at least a couple tugs on our lines. The fish cooperate. A few whiskered "greenies" still hungry from the night's foray fall to our broken nightcrawlers. The wire basket grows heavier into the afternoon.

The sun settles high in the sky, and the fish take a break. We do too. Sandwiches unwrapped and Coke bottles opened, we relax along the sun-lit shore. Never one to give up, I cradle the rod in one hand,

monofilament under a thumb and over my index finger, just like I was taught. I lay on the cool grass, staring at the bluebird sky, hoping the day would never end and wondering when the next one would come.

As I drift off, I feel my line tighten. I set the hook with muster, thinking another fat yellow belly was going in the frying pan that night. Nothing. The quarter-ounce sinker sales past my head, nearly taking off my ball cap, and wraps tightly around the brambles behind me. I wondered how I missed such a solid bite. I look around, trying to determine exactly where my fishless hook landed, and I see the devilish grin my dad always sported when he was up to no good. The wry smile told me the "bite" I felt was him.

It's time to leave. Fish need to be cleaned, and Mom is waiting with a frying pan. Fried bullheads—in the whole of course—and American fries are what's for supper. I don't want to leave. Just one more cast. The gear is gathered, brought to the truck, and I cling tightly to the line, hoping my dad takes his time loading gear. Alone, the line tightens against my fingers and the hook-set sinks deep into something with "backbone."

The struggle lasts only a few minutes before the 5-pound grey, slick-skinned catfish succumbs to the 8-pound test and Zebco 202 reel. Dad will be happy. His favorite fish will fry crispy next to a handful of bullheads. The rest will find their way to the freezer for another day.

As the spring sun sets on a glorious day, I hope we eat the leftover batch soon, because I know dad can't go long without his bullhead fix. And that means another lazy Saturday with my dad lakeside. Paradise, even if Lady Luck forces us to eat hamburgers that night.

The day is perfect. There was no smart phone. No iPod. No tablet. No Xbox. Just me, my dad, a lazy Saturday and a few cooperating fish. We didn't text, Facebook, Tweet or Snapchat. We fished, we talked, we laughed.

Those days were the better part of four decades ago. A half decade since he's gone, I long to sit next to him one more time, on a rickety old lawn chair, chasing "greenies."

It doesn't matter. Those memories are in high definition. 🐟

Germination in the Grand River Grasslands

BY MINDY KRALICEK PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

To mimic nature as it was before settlers arrived, rotational cattle grazing with patch burning is bringing biodiversity back to south-central Iowa. The Grand River Grasslands study shows plant species reemerging each year, and birds and butterflies moving back, with benefits to cattle owners and recreational landowners alike.

Early Birds

In fading darkness, the three-member bird survey crew joggles side to side in their truck as headlights beam up and down the rolling landscape. Less than a mile from the Missouri border and several miles west of Lamoni, Courtney Duchardt cuts the headlights, the noise of the air conditioning and engine, and the technicians slide out of the truck into the boisterous dawn chorus.


Silhouetted in streaks of sunlight beneath foreboding dark clouds, Duchardt, Matt Kneitel and Annie Meyer

skip surveying birds and start a nest drag, hoping to finish before rain clouds let loose.

They slip on backpacks encasing survey tools and withdraw from the truck bed a long blue rope with aluminum cans tied to it. Kneitel grabs a handful of wired orange fluorescent flags. They cross the road and climb over the gate.

Duchardt and Kneitel grab a rope end and spread out as far as it is long. Meyer takes the rope's center and the three begin to drag the can-lined rope over vegetation.

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Over grazing pastures suppresses the number of plant species that grow, the variety of insects that feed upon the plants and the variety of birds that feed on the insects. But changing land management practices has created a more diverse habitat, and insect and wildlife diversity are gradually returning to the Grand River Grasslands with rotational grazing and patchy use of fire.

The cans make noise and weigh down the rope, but do not harm nests. "When a bird flushes, we fully search the area to find its nest," explains crew leader Duchardt. When found, the nest's GPS coordinates are recorded and the number of eggs, nestlings and cowbirds are noted, she says.

Brown-headed cowbirds are a nest parasite. Rather than build their own, they lay their eggs in other birds' nests, sometimes even pushing out the host's eggs.

"We 'candle the eggs,' hold them up to the sunlight—to see their contents to determine the age and estimate a

hatch date," Duchardt says.

They have found 75 grasshopper sparrow nests and 35 meadowlark nests, and will find more next month, she says. A handful of dickcissel, bobolink, Henslow's sparrow, sedge wren and upland sandpiper nests, and one vesper sparrow nest, were found too.

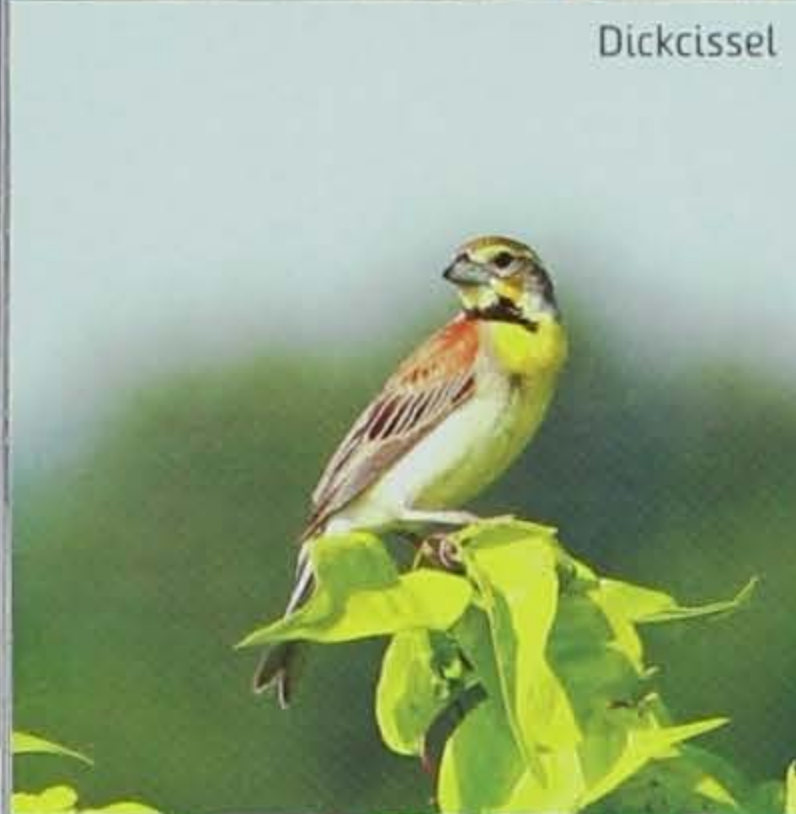
Red-winged blackbirds are technically grassland birds and they are here, but they also nest in shrubby swamps and cattails in ditches along roadsides and farm ponds.

An orange flag marks a searched area, just as a small



Dickcissel

Rough blazing star



ABOVE: A meadowlark nest is discovered. Bird survey leader Courtney Duchardt "candles" an egg to estimate its hatch date. Bird surveyists Annie Meyer and Matt Kneitel drag cans over vegetation to flush birds to determine bird species diversity and reproduction. AT TOP OF PAGE: Cattle grazing encourages plant diversity if the number of cattle per acre is limited and a grazing rotation plan is implemented. BELOW: Grand River Grasslands are burned every three years (some land is burned in a three-year rotation) during the last two weeks of March to stop redcedar encroachment, promote regrowth of high protein forage and encourage dormant seeds to germinate.

Northern quail or bobwhite



BIRD PHOTOS BY TOIRRE HOLVICK

rain cloud passes through. Because the rain looks brief and the crew is at the back of the pasture, they decide to wait it out.

"Generally we make sure we're not scaring adults off the nests, exposing eggs or nestlings to the elements," explains Duchardt.

After 10 minutes, sunshine prevails and the crew continues.

They may also find northern bobwhite, killdeer, loggerhead shrike, common yellowthroat, eastern kingbird, eastern bluebird and field sparrow nests.

"Most of these species utilize both shrub land and grassland," she says. "Our crew tracks grassland bird nests to see if they are successful, but we don't routinely track how long fledglings survive after they leave the nest. That requires transmitters to be attached to the fledglings."

They have also seen increased numbers of meadowlark nests recently.

"Meadowlarks typically have five young, sometimes six. As they near fledging stage, you may see the baby birds piled on top of each other, barely fitting in the nest. It's probably because there are cowbird nestlings in the nest," says Duchardt. "It's wild to see."

"When the meadowlarks fledge, you have to watch where you step," says Kneitel. "You're walking along and then suddenly there is a flurry of feathers and little birds are popping up above the grass all around. You're standing there with one foot in the air, afraid to put it down for fear of stepping on a bird."

Rain begins in earnest and the crew beelines to the truck.

Bringing Back Biodiversity

Here, on one of several pastures in a scientific study to examine the effectiveness of fire and grazing as management tools, researchers gauge the response of plants, butterflies and grassland birds.

The Grand River Grasslands project team represents several fields of study and includes faculty from three universities, professional staff and graduate and undergraduate students.

Intensive grazing that uses forage produced each year can change habitat structure and suppress the number of plant species. Fewer species reduce the variety of insects that feed upon the plants. Fewer insect varieties may attract fewer bird species.

"The result might be well-fed cattle, but there is little diversity of plants, animals and insects," explains Diane Debinski of Iowa State University, one of a team of scientists testing alternative grassland management.

Prairie plants can remain in the pastures decades after abusive grazing, albeit suppressed and hidden. The study will show if the plants are out there and will grow, and if changing traditional grazing practices to improve grassland biodiversity will benefit cattlemen and recreational land owners.

Land Management Practices

"The study pastures in Grand River Grasslands are owned by private landowners, the state and The Nature Conservancy," says Debinski. They use three different land management practices of grazing and burning: some fields left idle and burned every three years; others grazed every year and burned once every three years; and lastly, patch-burn grazing that closely mimics the grazing of bison and natural burning that occurred before settlers arrived in the mid-1800s. The land is grazed, and different thirds of the pasture are burned each year.

Cattle Superfood

"When given a choice between dense dried grass, dead grass with some fresh grass growing underneath and a field of newly emerged grass, cattle head straight for the new green supple stuff every time," says Shannon Rusk, in charge of daily operations and working with landowners.

"We have a short burning season—roughly the last two weeks of March. Grazing begins May 1. The cattle definitely go after the new stuff, no matter what it is.

"I've seen a number of landscape changes in our pastures since this began in 2007. Overgrazed lands are still recovering, but in other areas we're seeing Indiangrass, big bluestem, little bluestem, switchgrass and prairie cordgrass," says Rusk. "Among the wildflowers are butterfly milkweed, rattlesnake master, black-eyed Susans and purple coneflowers—those species like fire. Later in the season, mint, prairie purple clover, blazing star, cream gentian, ironweed and goldenrod appear.

"On land we burn and do not graze...we've seen an abundance of sawtooth sunflowers and compass plant. That land also has a patch of wild plum and sumac where there is a lot of bird activity." A spring-fed pond brings in dragonflies that feed on insects.

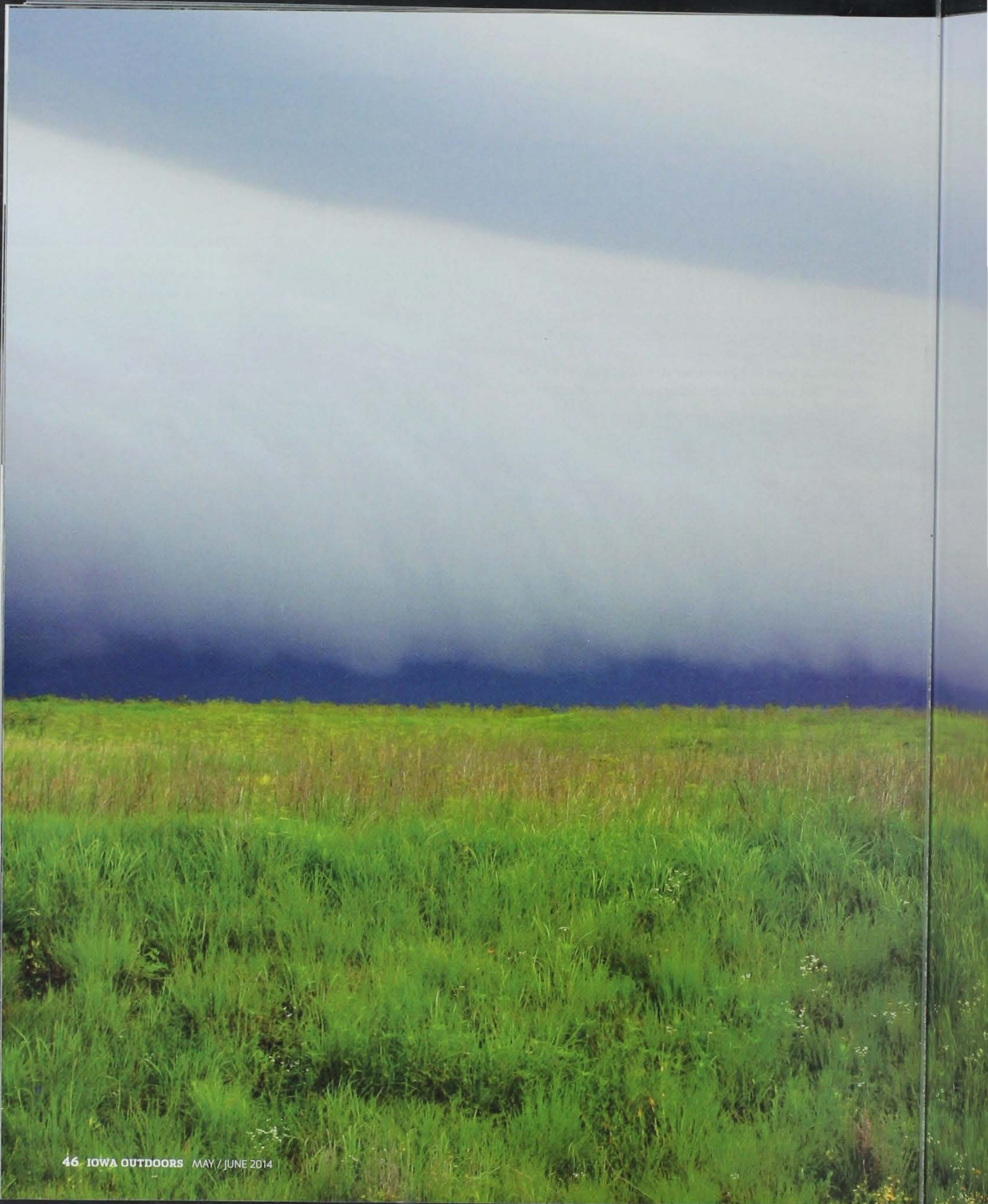
With plant diversity and productivity increasing each year, scientists have identified more than 200 plant species growing on the study sites. But are unburned grassland pastures more nutritious than patch-burned grazed grasslands?

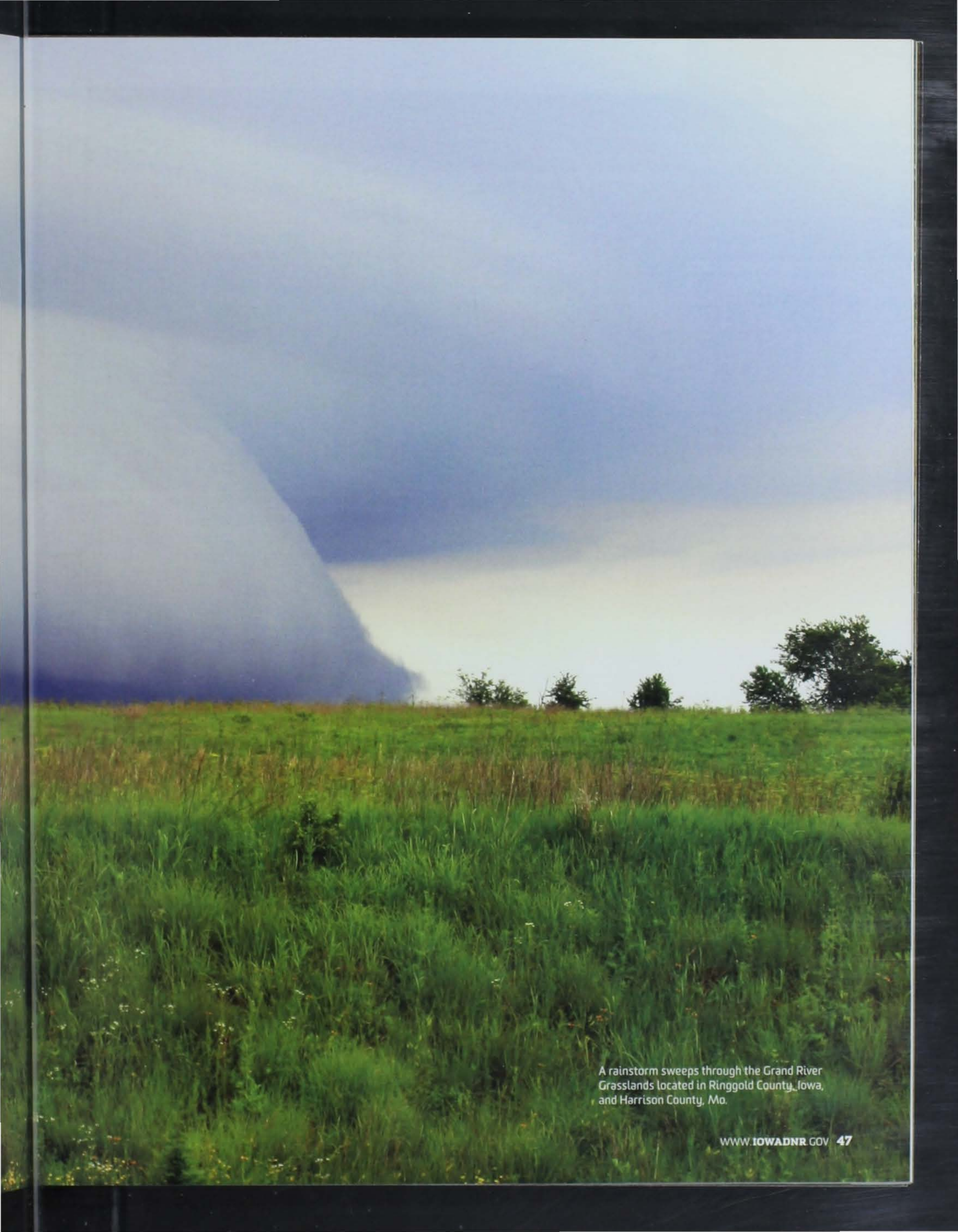
"Not necessarily," says Dr. Dave Engle of Oklahoma State University, another project scientist. He says research elsewhere shows plant maturity is the most important factor shaping crude protein content—a measure of forage quality. Succulent plant regrowth, after fire, is very high in crude protein, but declines rapidly in mature plants. Therefore, burned patches embedded within unburned grassland offer higher quality forage than unburned grasslands.

Invaders

Non-native tall fescue is a deep-rooted plant that forms a dense sod. It exists in each study parcel, but abundance differs.

The data did not indicate if tall fescue abundance increased or decreased under the three management





A rainstorm sweeps through the Grand River Grasslands located in Ringgold County, Iowa, and Harrison County, Mo.

practices, says Devan McGranahan, who as a doctoral student with Dave Engle, researched the effect of grazing and burning on tall fescue. "But it has negatively affected the performance of grassland native species where it dominates.

"Grasslands with more native plants will have more vertical structure and will stand taller, especially later in the season. Native plants keep growing into October, and change appearance as different wildflowers take turns blooming. The grand finale, before the plants go dormant, is when the tall grasses turn purplish-reddish-brown."

Burning Stops Eastern Redcedar Encroachment

"Some woody plants are well adapted to fire...and some are intolerant," says Ryan Harr, project manager for the research team through 2012. "Eastern redcedar is intolerant... However, a large redcedar can be a tough tree to burn. When redcedar burns, it is actually more of a chemical-driven fire, because the cedar oils must be volatilized. Conditions have to be right to get the tree to ignite completely and kill it."

Although some woody plants resprout from roots, eastern redcedar does not.

"The key is to get a good fuel bed underneath the redcedar so fire can climb into the lower branches and generate an ignition reaction. A warm, dry day with a good wind is needed," says Harr. "Once a redcedar gets too big, the fuel bed underneath can be too thin to effectively start the ignition reaction. A big cedar on fire can be dangerous to work around and manage. Thus it's best to use fire every few years to keep seedlings from getting too big."

Fire does not destroy most plants. They may be suppressed while others grow with new vigor. Fire changes the state of a habitat. Habitats may be hurt more without periodic fire. Although "escape cover" may be lost temporarily for some species, the habitat can be an important hunting place for hawks and other birds of prey.

"Fresh regrowth following a fire is a boon for wildlife such as white-tailed deer and turkeys, just as it is for cattle," says Harr. Some species, such as the prairie chicken, rely on fire and grazing to create different grassland habitats. Using patch-burned grazing allows a manager or landowner to create a mosaic of habitats in different states of succession with benefits to many species on one property.

Host Plant Diversity Attracts More Diverse Insects

Butterflies are counted in transects just as birds are, but

plants must be identified too, so host plants are known for each butterfly species.

"Each year we're finding more rare wildflowers coming up in the areas that have a burn cycle," says Ray Moranz, a researcher on his sixth rotation with a butterfly crew on Grand River Grasslands. Reducing the number of cattle per acre helps too, especially at sites overgrazed for decades, he says.

The return of butterfly milkweed is a boon for many

butterfly species. The Edwards' Hairstreak is a species of greatest conservation need and uses only butterfly milkweed as an adult. The rare regal fritillary must find violets to survive as a caterpillar, but as an adult, it feeds on milkweed, bergamot and dogbane.

Adult regals will not leave prairie. If they get carried in the wind to a cornfield, they will turn around and fly back to the prairie. "We've see it happen," says Moranz.

Other rare butterflies here include the two-spotted skipper, wild indigo duskywing, zabulon skipper and byssus skipper.

"More common butterflies, like the great spangled fritillary and common wood nymph are increasing 300 to 400 percent," says Moranz. "Interestingly, the butterflies that like weedy plant species, such as sulphurs and cabbage

whites, have declined in numbers or remained stable."

Changing Pasture Management

"There is a different dynamic in southern Iowa versus other parts of the state where row crops are the norm," asserts Lois Wright Morton, sociology professor at ISU who leads a survey of landowners and community leaders in the Grand River Grasslands. "The cattle industry is the main economic system here. There is little animosity toward non-local landowners who own land for recreation. We see potential for cooperative grazing of hunting land by cattle producers, which will benefit the habitat for deer and turkey hunting."

There is also excitement among conservationists: the potential that some species of greatest conservation need may find a large space to thrive that also serves people and livestock.

"The more we learn about the long-term effects of these practices, the more helpful the information will be to landowners as they contemplate the benefits of managing their land as a part of this larger grassland ecosystem," says Debinski. "Just imagine the possibilities if this could happen." 🐞



Mountain mint with common eastern bumble bee

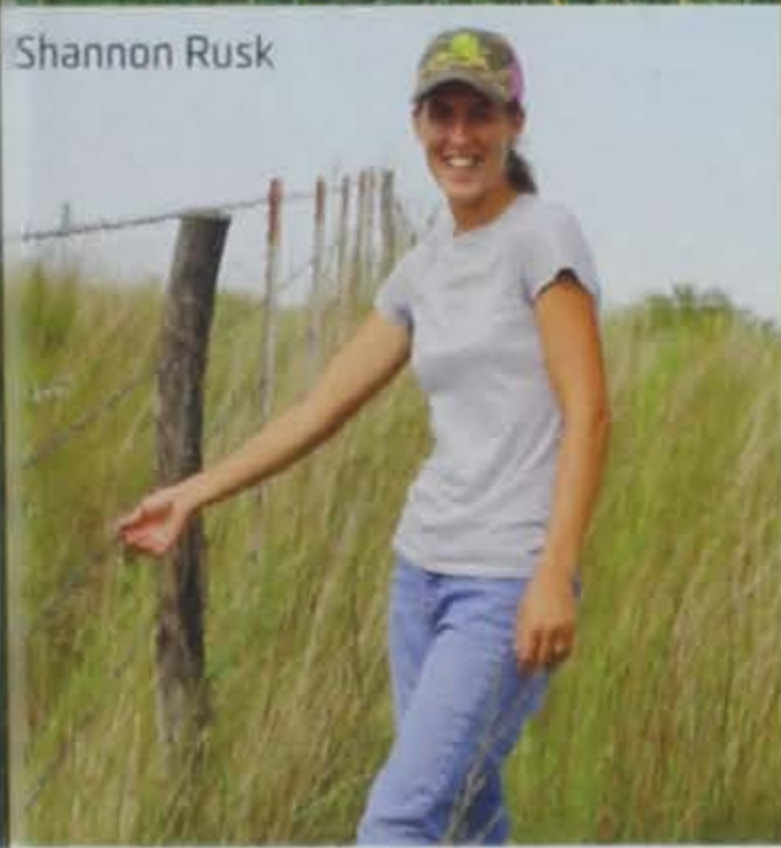
Shannon Rusk

TOP: V Grand operat species

BIRO PHOTOS BY TORRE HOLVICK



Shannon Rusk




Henslow's Sparrow



TOP: Views of rotated burned and grazed acres and rolling hills of Grand River Grasslands. Shannon Rusk is responsible for day-to-day operations for the Grand River Grasslands project. More than 200 species of plants have been identified so far.





Why We Camp

BY GERALD MCGRANE
PHOTOS BY BRIAN BUTTON

Struggling to set up his fold-down camper, my brother-in-law asks, "Tell me again why we do this?" "So our kids will take their kids camping" was the response, but not really an answer.

Over the course of three hours, food is packed in two coolers, one cardboard box and two cloth shopping bags. The back of the Suburban is jammed with backpacks and duffle bags, fishing poles, sleeping bags, a cook stove, an air mattress and a plastic tote with cooking and cleaning essentials. The tent, stroller and folding love seats are strapped to the top. Why? We're going camping.

We camp because it's one way we stay in touch with what's really important. You get this sense from browsing the pages of any *Iowa Outdoors* issue. Flip through and what do you see: family, respecting nature, learning, ethics and more. For a family there are few ways to do this as simply and economically as camping.

I admit I went through a phase where I didn't really

care to camp. In my mind it was too much work for too little benefit. My wife Becky, who did a lot more of the work than I did, never forgot how important it was. Camping was and is a family priority.

My kids have kept me going too. As soon as the snow melts, we hear, "When are we going to go camping?" A dollar for every time we hear that question would fill our gas tank for a month.

We take our kids camping because there are things we only do camping. While we have fires in our backyard, we can't usually have the stars. How often do we normally encourage a 10-year-old to use a flint and steel to start a fire? When else does a 5-year-old get to cook Polish sausages over a fire? Without camping, there would be no backgammon played by lantern light. There would be no wading in the stream, followed by hiking the Backbone Trail.

When we camp, we're outside all day—taking walks through the woods, chasing fireflies and eating s'mores. Can we do some of this at home? Sure. But at home there is TV, the internet, bills to pay, projects to finish and a

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BOY AND GIRL COOKING PHOTO BY CLAY SMITH

dozen other things to keep us from each other.

I've come around. Now I get as anxious to get out as the kids do. Yes, it can be work. But there is a lot more work to do at home. When you make the work of camping fun, it's not really work. It's part of the experience. My oldest son likes to help put up the tent. My younger ones like to gather sticks to help get the fire started. Breakfast baked in a Dutch oven is cool, even if Dad isn't very good at controlling the temperature and it takes a little longer. Most importantly, we do it together. When we camp we are together in a way we just aren't at home. For my family, nothing says togetherness like nine people sleeping in a tent.

Pack the cooler. Toss in some chairs and a tent and go be together. 🏕️



New in Parks!

Upgraded campground, new shower building, riverside picnic area and playground, redeveloped river access, new roads and new park office at **Wilson Island State Park** after devastating Missouri River flood of 2011.

New campground shower buildings at **Springbrook, Beeds Lake, Elk Rock and Pilot Knob** state parks. New picnic area restrooms at **Pleasant Creek State Park**.

By mid-summer to early fall, look for **Lake Darling State Park** to reopen. "This will basically be a brand new park," says Tom Basten of the DNR parks bureau. A new dam, sediment catch basins, increased lake surface area, ADA-accessible fishing trail, roads, campground, boat ramps, improved beach sand, shower facilities and park lodge will drastically improve the park from the original 1950s-era structures.



Get Involved: Reserve Sites and Learn About Parks—find a listing and map of Iowa state parks, learn about amenities and make camp reservations at lowadnr.gov. Reservations can also be made by calling 1-877-IAPARKS (1-877-427-2757).



Tips for Park Users

Be Considerate of Others

- Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.
- Let nature's sounds prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises.
- Yield to other trail users.
- Avoid foul language. Be courteous.
- If consumed, use alcohol in moderation.
- Report destructive or illegal activities to park staff.

Dispose of Waste Properly

- Never litter.
- Inspect campsite and trails and remove litter or spilled foods.

Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

- Use established trails and campsites.
- Walk single file in the middle of the trail, even when wet or muddy.

Leave What You Find

- Do not touch cultural or historic structures and artifacts.
- Leave rocks, plants and other natural objects as you find them.
- Avoid introducing or transporting non-native species.

Minimize Campfire Impacts

- Use established fire rings.
- Keep fires small. Only use sticks from the ground that can be broken by hand.
- Burn all wood and coals to ash, put out campfires completely.
- Burn only wood. Never burn trash or garbage.
- Buy firewood locally to prevent spreading emerald ash borer and other pests. Packaged wood must be labeled with the state and county harvest location.

Respect Wildlife

- Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them.
- Never feed animals. Feeding wildlife alters natural behaviors and exposes them to predators and other dangers.
- Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely.
- Leash and control pets, or leave them at home.
- Avoid wildlife during mating, nesting or winter seasons, or while raising young.

Bordered by Rivers

A Family's Healing Journey Back into Nature

BY BRIAN GIBBS PHOTOS COURTESY BRIAN GIBBS

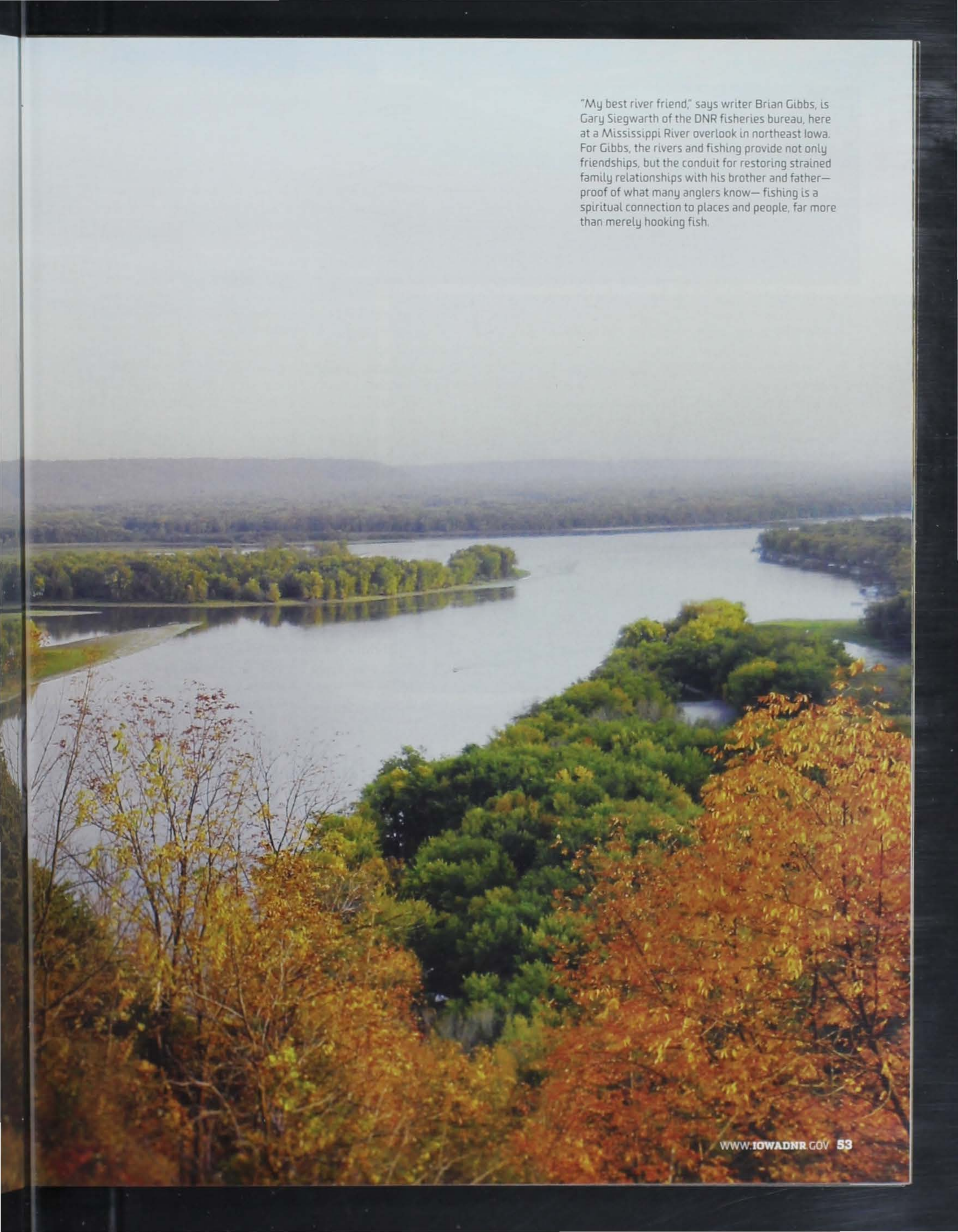
"Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in"

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

This quote is ingrained in the following memory I had fishing on the Turkey River last fall. The river water was so clear I could see the tiny first-year smallmouth bass dart out from the boulders in front of me. I watched in amazement as red horse, walleye and smallmouth all swam perfectly within my reach. Even the crawdads could be seen scurrying between the rocky bottoms. Yet it's not just the fish that love the clean water—the birds do too. A belted kingfisher was on patrol—an avian rebel known to take the plunge. While the kingfisher prefers to rattle in flight, the preacher of patience prefers to stalk.

Many times in this river I've seen the heron half

submersed in water, looking half asleep, statue-like with eyes focused on the movement of water below his dagger. I watched patiently until he caught a fish and took flight, a croaking call stood as an ode to the Mesozoic past. Flocks of cedar waxwings danced over the river, their flight patterns mimic gypsies in the sky. These birds were feasting on newly hatched aquatic insects; in bunches, the birds called in a high pitched whistle of joy. Just downstream, I watched an eagle rise-fresh from catching a fish; the bird perches in a box elder tree. Looking downstream, late evening sun shines heavily on the eastern bluff, turning the hillside peach. In front of me the early turning trees, walnut and ash, have shed their leaves down into the stream. Sometimes I catch



"My best river friend," says writer Brian Gibbs, is Gary Siegwarth of the DNR fisheries bureau, here at a Mississippi River overlook in northeast Iowa. For Gibbs, the rivers and fishing provide not only friendships, but the conduit for restoring strained family relationships with his brother and father—proof of what many anglers know—fishing is a spiritual connection to places and people, far more than merely hooking fish.

more leaves than fish.

But on this perfect night, I've nearly caught my fishing limit when I hook into a trophy smallmouth bass. After a tight fight and a few acrobatics, I landed him for a picture to capture his beauty. As I admired the old brown fish, the bald eagle I saw fishing downstream now flies gracefully overhead—his white head covering up a perfect half-sliced silver moon. On the other bank, a mink scurried on limestone rocks. The mammal swam from rock to rock, seemingly frolicking in the river, catching a few fish, but having more fun whirling in the cool waters.

It's nearly dark and the growing concern of tripping over rocks drives me home. My fears are cooled as moonlight reflects out of the crystal clear waters and into the pupils of my eyes. Bats were flying in reckless abandonment over the moonlit waters. I walked between them knowing if I fall down, it will not be out of fear, but of love for a place.

For me, fishing is not just a life skill; it is a way of life. Yet it wasn't until recently I was able to circumnavigate the storied waters that have bonded my family back together. Though this is one family's chronicle, it also tells the story of countless Iowans who are retracing their steps and reconnecting back to nature. If we need peace and relaxation, we need to look no further than the healing powers of a river. Rivers shape perspective, navigate the past through the present and nurture the essential hope of all beings. They are accessible medicines that invite every living thing to soak up nourishment—one of these available forms of sustenance is fishing.

Bowstring Lake in northern Minnesota is one of my earliest memories fishing with my brother and father. I was a curious 8-year-old fishing on the edge of a shiny aluminum boat dock. I remember watching a large dead fish float out into the lake and being awestruck as a bald eagle swooped down to capture the fish. Soon after the eagle flew off, my father came to greet me. To welcome him, I put my hand into my shorts pocket and pulled out a handful of mushy nightcrawlers. I've been hooked on fishing ever since.

Later on during that same fishing trip, my father, brother and I were heading in from a slow afternoon of fishing. I was restless and decided to cast my black and white bumblebee lure out onto the water. As it buzzed atop the water, my brother told me to watch for a fish to grab it. I stared in wonder as the lure danced across the water, creating small ripples on the surface until, wham, an enormous fish struck the lure and bit it off. Almost immediately, my brother, who is eight years my elder, teased me to the point that I began crying. This incident marked the first significant tension between us since our parents had divorced several years earlier.

After my parents divorced, a tumultuous custody battle ensued. In the end, my father gained custody of my brother and me. My brother and father had a very

good relationship, yet my brother and mother rarely spoke. Because my alliance was with my mother, I was regularly at odds with my father and brother. After the Minnesota fishing trip it would be some years later until my brother and I would fish together again.

Being placed in the middle of an intense custody battle caused me to avoid navigating the uncomfortable waters of my father and brother. Much of my home life had been spent migrating between youth shelters, friend's homes and my mother's mobile home. But my father still reached out, often taking me on scenic fishing trips to northeast Iowa's trout streams. Though things around home were messy, the early memories shared fishing in Yellow River State Forest with my father opened my heart not only to the outdoors but also to spending time with my brother. At age 16, I finally went with my brother down to the Des Moines River to check his ditty poles for catfish.

Upon arriving at the river, I noticed the water was running high and muddy—so too was my anxiety of re-connecting with my brother. My fear of the past and also of the unknown future was clouding any type of peace I could find. Yet nerves were calmed the minute we jumped in his small flat-bottom boat and took off up river. We headed to a unique place called the "clown's mouth," which was an old abandoned streambed. Here, several large silver maple trees lay in the river, creating a large snag and a deep hole: the perfect habitat for catfish.

As my brother motored us closer to the ditty pole, my nerves once again jittered. Deeper and deeper they bounced in sync with the strong tugs of the bent ditty pole that lay in front of me; I instantly knew a gigantic fish was hooked on the other end. My brother instructed me to grab onto the bank to secure the boat, and as he has done time and time again, he reached his hand down into the muddy depths of the Des Moines River. A herculean battle ensued and after a few minutes of wrestling, my brother landed a massive olive-colored, big whiskered, flathead catfish.

Excitedly, we hurried back into town with the fish, stopping briefly at our grandpa's to weigh it and take pictures. The trophy weighed a whopping 53 pounds; nothing will ever replace the weight of having that moment be the last memory my brother and I shared together with my grandfather.

In 2002, my senior year of high school, I was involved in a serious car accident. After being struck by an oncoming vehicle, I was ejected from the back of a friend's pickup truck and sent skipping across highway 30. An air ambulance transported me down to Des Moines where I spent three days at Mercy Hospital. During my stay there, numerous friends and family visited. The words that linger most from those days were spoken by my brother. "It doesn't have to be like this," he said. For the next several years, I pondered his phrase, but it wasn't until 2011, while

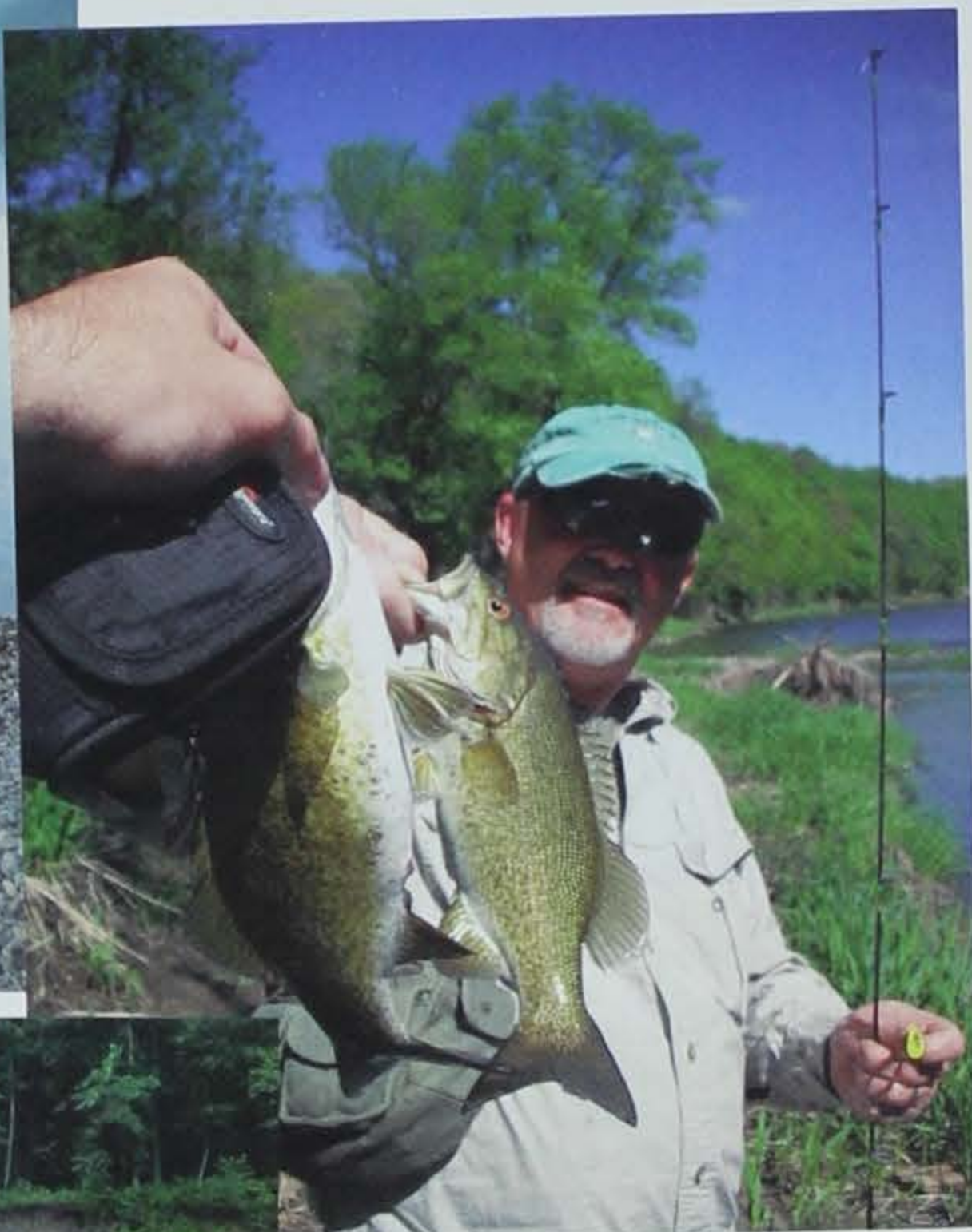
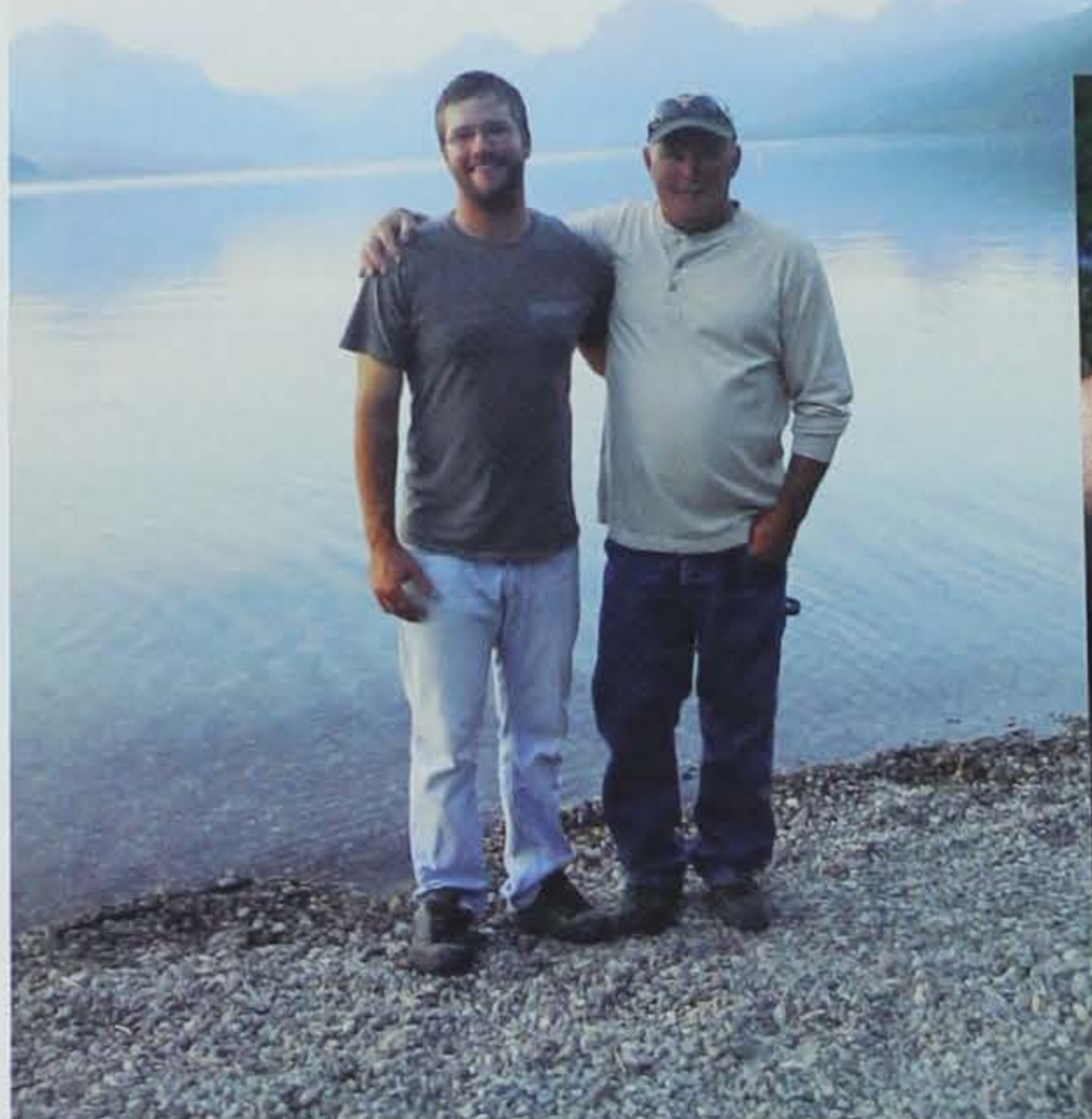
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CLOCKWISE: Brothers Brian and Tom Gibbs with a 53-pound flathead at their grandfather's house—the last time all three men would be together. Joe Gibbs, their father, paddles down the Turkey River. The magical Mississippi River at sunrise—a spiritual place for those who visit. Joe and Tom with a big brown trout on the Yellow River in Allamakee County. Below, author Brian Gibbs, a naturalist with the Clayton County Conservation Board, displays why he is hooked on the outdoors.



LEFT: Father and son—Joe and Brian Gibbs—reunited at the waters of Glacier National Park, where Brian was a seasonal park ranger. A week earlier, Brian and brother Tom reconnected here as well, permanently putting 28 years of struggles aside. BELOW: Brian and Joe land two smallmouths simultaneously on the Turkey River.



LEFT: Paddles up, the brothers repeatedly race over this short rapids section on the Boone River. RIGHT: As a Christmas gift, father Joe gave his sons this humorous photo—the three men forged new bonds through nature and fishing.



walking the streets of Lansing, that I caught the meaning of my brother's words.

With a fishing pole in hand and a tackle box over my shoulder, I was a stranger aimlessly walking the streets. The Mississippi River in Lansing offered me no luck and my ride was delayed in arriving. I decided to call my father to discuss an upcoming fishing trip to northeast Iowa. While talking with Dad, a young child was wondering aimlessly in a vacant yard. The child had a brand new cherry red fishing pole clinched in his hand and was intent on walking next to me. Eventually, the child's curiosity called for my attention so I ended the phone call with my father prematurely and introduced myself to the boy.

Ben was his name, a young, forgotten child, who was in Lansing for respite care. I had never heard of respite care until Ben spoke: "It's when Mom needs a break from me." Ben said he lived in Wisconsin, and when asked if he liked to fish, he replied, "My mentor takes me fishing.

One time we caught a sheephead!" Having just spoken with my father, I asked Ben if he had a dad. "Yes, but he tried to harm me when I was in my mother's stomach." After a long, heartbroken gaze into Ben's eyes, I reached down into my tackle box full of lures and hooks. "What do you like to fish for?" I asked Ben. "I really enjoy fishing for walleyes and bass." I said, "You know what bass like to eat?" "Frogs!" Ben happily exclaimed. After this tender exchange, I filled his almost empty tackle box with lures, unstrung the line from his unused fishing pole and tied a jig to the end of the line.

Ben's first cast caught the stop sign behind him and hooked on the sleeve of his black sweatshirt. I tried to teach Ben how to cast but his wondering eyes were fixed on the tackle box of treasures that had been prepared for him. I looked down into the box, closed my eyes and knew there was no more help I could give. With a heavy heart, I told Ben goodbye and good luck fishing. I walked away in a slow fisherman's pace, one long tear streaming

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in front of the other. The next day fishing on the Turkey River, I caught the largest fish of my life—a 35-inch northern pike. I wished only that Ben or my father could have seen the fish in person.

Northeast Iowa is the spawning grounds for the most beautiful memories shared outdoors with my father. His 2011 autumn visit to see me completed an ancestral migration. One night shared fishing together on the Turkey River still haunts me. A tangerine sunset softly fruited in the evening sky; plump cherry clouds mingled with raspberry streaked stratus clouds. Cottonwood seeds drifted aimlessly alongside vows of blinking fireflies. The preacher of patience, a great blue heron, stalked his gilled prey. Bats were gracefully feasting on winged transients. Under a blanket of stars, my graphite fishing wand danced to the rising of a trophy smallmouth bass. The fish was caught and beauty is best when released, so I let the fish go. As I did, I saw a father's love amplified through a riverside telescope, while hues of

beauty riffled through my kaleidoscope heart. Yet during the walk home something felt missing. As we approached my front door, Dad stopped and said "I wish your brother could have been here. All I want is for you two to share a happy companionship again."

In the summer of 2012, I was blessed to have a seasonal park ranger job in Glacier National Park. One day while online, I saw my brother was making a surprise rafting trip out to the park with my cousin. Not only was he traveling to the mountains for the first time in his life, he was journeying 1,500 miles west to raft where I worked!

Panic ensued; I felt the same nerves I had that day on the Des Moines River.

Both of our emotions were amplified as it had been nine months since we shared any form of communication. Something deep down knew this was the opportunity I had been waiting for—how could we not reconnect in Glacier, my favorite park in the entire world. For two days, I walked in beauty with my brother, and together

we put the past 28 years of struggles aside. I will never forget the early morning moment when he departed. In the instant he reached to give me a handshake goodbye, I threw my arms around him and hugged him as tight as I ever had. One week later my father greeted me in Glacier with the same intense hug I had just given my brother.

On one of my father's last evenings in the park, we visited the Lake of Sacred Dancing Waters. We witnessed a beautiful sunset over the lake, and as the alpenglow turned the mountains pink, I pulled a white piece of paper from my blue jeans pocket. My favorite bird, the osprey, flew overhead as my father read the words my brother had just written me: "As I've had some time back home to myself, I realized that I didn't need time away from home to realize how much I've missed my little brother. All it took for me was just one embrace from you to realize that we've spent way too much time growing apart instead of closer. Leaving Glacier was a memory that will last a lifetime, for I know it will always be there, leaving me reminded that someday you or I will not."

On a sunny weekend in September 2012, my brother visited my home in Elkader. I was a fish out of water; ecstatic to share time angling on the Turkey River with him. I had made a point to scout out the best fishing holes where we could catch smallmouth bass and walleyes. After arriving at our first hole, I noticed a large, familiar bird sitting above us in a cottonwood tree. An avian messenger of the water world and keeper of all my secrets, the osprey watched us fish as tears of healing and smiles of gratitude filled my core. We landed dozens of fish that weekend, and for the first time in our adult lives, we caught a companionship back in Iowa.

Iowa's rivers have been the catalyst for bringing my family back together. The purchase of three kayaks this past year has enabled my father, brother and I to use the river as a conduit to heal and create beauty. I'll never forget the first time the three of us kayaked together on the Yellow River; the ethereal scene of us catching and releasing dozens of trout still haunts my dreams. Time and time again, I replay the comical memory of my brother goofing around and accidentally tipping his kayak into the cool April waters of a clear Volga River. In times of stress, I paddle back into the playfulness of a June day, where my father is photographing his two sons racing and kayaking the rapids of the Boone River. I have been blessed to make an ocean of memories in one river year and share this new found healing with others in many forms.

The Maquoketa River in Monticello holds a sacred place in my heart. While fishing down by this river, I came across an adolescent boy who was wearing a black and green Call of Duty video game t-shirt. He was alone and trying to catch fish with the 10 yards of fishing line he had found in the sand. He would throw out the line with his own two hands, then slowly reel it back in—a

difficult way to get hooked on fishing.

I was reminded of those newfound fishing adventures I had been sharing with my father and brother. Overcome with emotion, I decided to walk up to the car and grab the fishing pole my father had made for me. As I offered the young boy my fishing pole, he gave me a quiet glance and in a soft tone of voice said "sure." I proceeded to kayak across the river and watched the boy wade further into the shallow river. Having been in his steps years ago, I knew he was not only trying to seek out his own boundaries but was simultaneously reaching out to be fishing next to me. It was not until he entered waist deep water that I crossed back over to him. We fished together, and for the first time in my life, I felt like my father. After we finished fishing I asked him what his name was and he replied, "Jerrod."

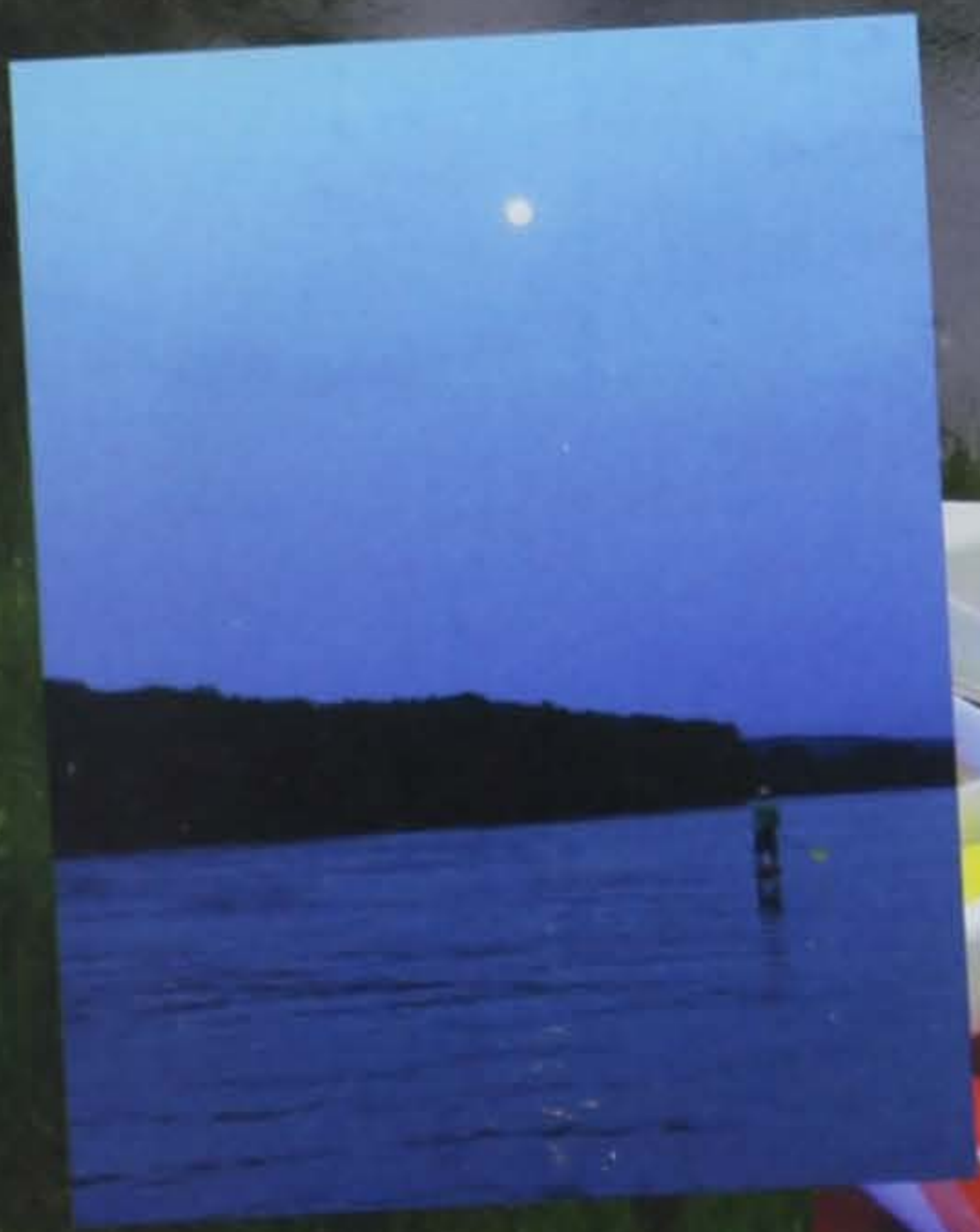
Jerrod was visiting his mother, but his father, who lived in a different town, had full time custody. When staying with his father, he often went catfishing on the Cedar River. Using the same techniques my brother and I did, Jerrod and his father would set ditty poles to catch massive catfish. I asked Jerrod what he was going to do after he left the Maquoketa River and he replied, "Go play video games." I urged him to keep fishing or play outside to which he said, "I don't have any friends here." Shortly after this conversation, he went wandering down by the river and came back with a handful of trash and a long blue/silver crankbait. "I thought it looked like a pen," Jerrod said. In the end, I sent Jerrod off with several fishing lures and a deer antler I had been keeping in my car. Though I may never see Jerrod again, I am a more grateful human being for having fished beside him and cast his memory into the waters of time.

This past year on an early fall day, I took my father and brother into the center of my universe: Brush Creek Canyon State Preserve. The goldfinches had begun to lose their yellow and the ospreys were migrating south. The sumac was beginning to lose its chlorophyll and the orange carotenoids had begun to show through. Fish bones from river otters were scattered on rock bars. The stream flowed clear and in a single cast, my brother merged into the timeless beauty that overcomes all earthly fear.

Watching my big brother battle a trophy fish revealed the kinship I had been casting my whole life for. The grace of his smile matched the vitality of the airborne trout. Beads of water were flung from the fish's colorful scales. Concentric circles rippled in the deep turquoise pool. My brother flexed his brawn and brought the fish close to shore. Using two time-weathered hands, my father reached into the crystal stream and freed the fish from the lure. With a proud smile, he handed the brown to my brother. Everything was a paradise and in this beautiful instant, my brother and father will stay eternally radiant.

We are bordered by rivers. 🏠

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF IOWA DNR. PHOTO OF TRAILER AT FISHING BOAT RAMP BY STUDIO 2



BUILD A PROTHONOTARY WARBLER NEST BOX

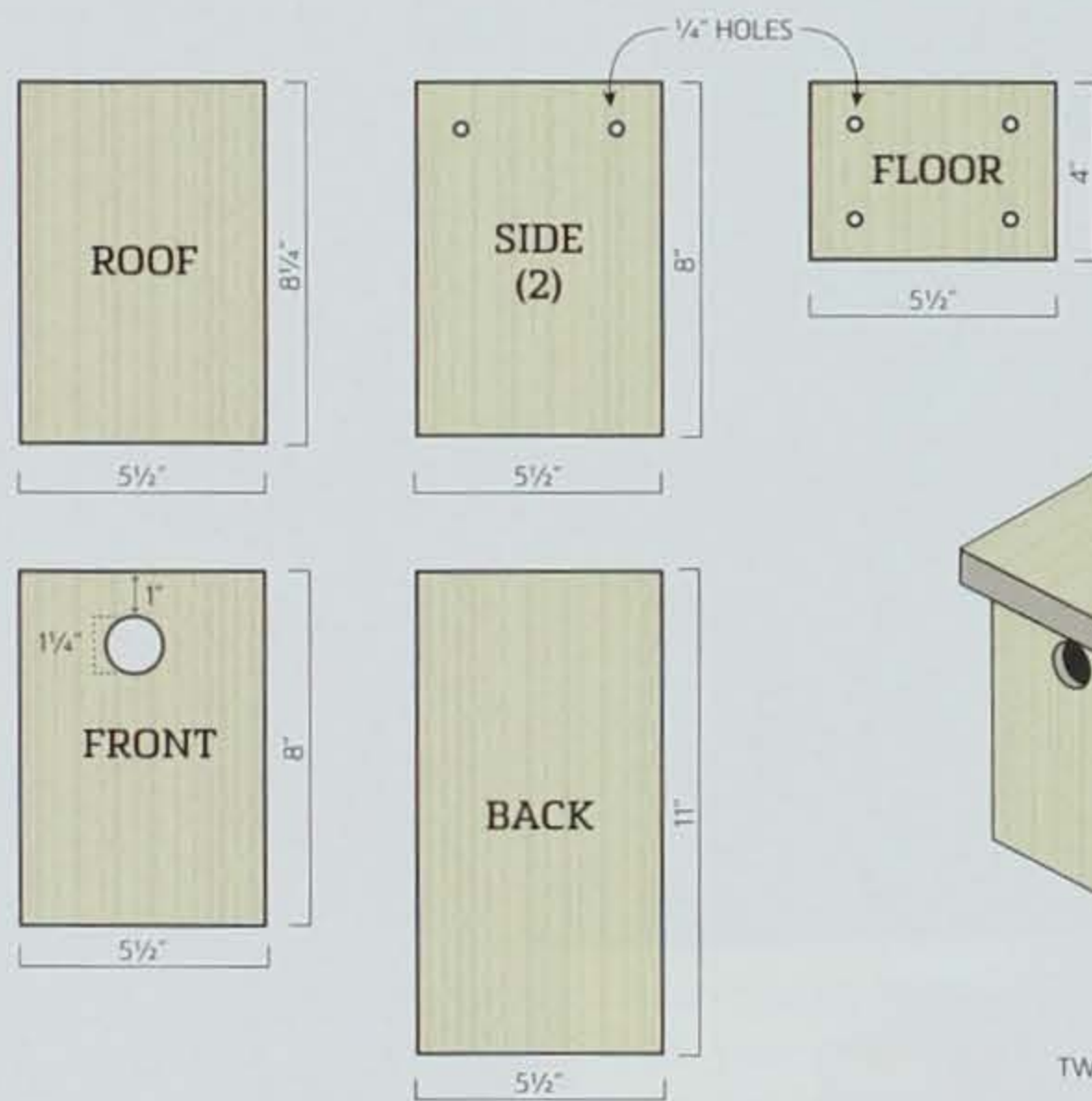
Create Needed Habitat for a Species in Decline and Reap Viewing Benefits

The stunning prothonotary warbler could use some help. The population has declined 42 percent in the last 20 years due to loss of nesting habitat and other factors. It nests in tree cavities near or over wet areas such as marshes, swamps, ponds, flooded timber and tree-lined streams. Fortunately, as a cavity nester, they are receptive to using a nest box. By building and placing nest boxes in the right locations, you can create a haven (and your own secret viewing locations) for this dazzling denizen of the soggy soils.

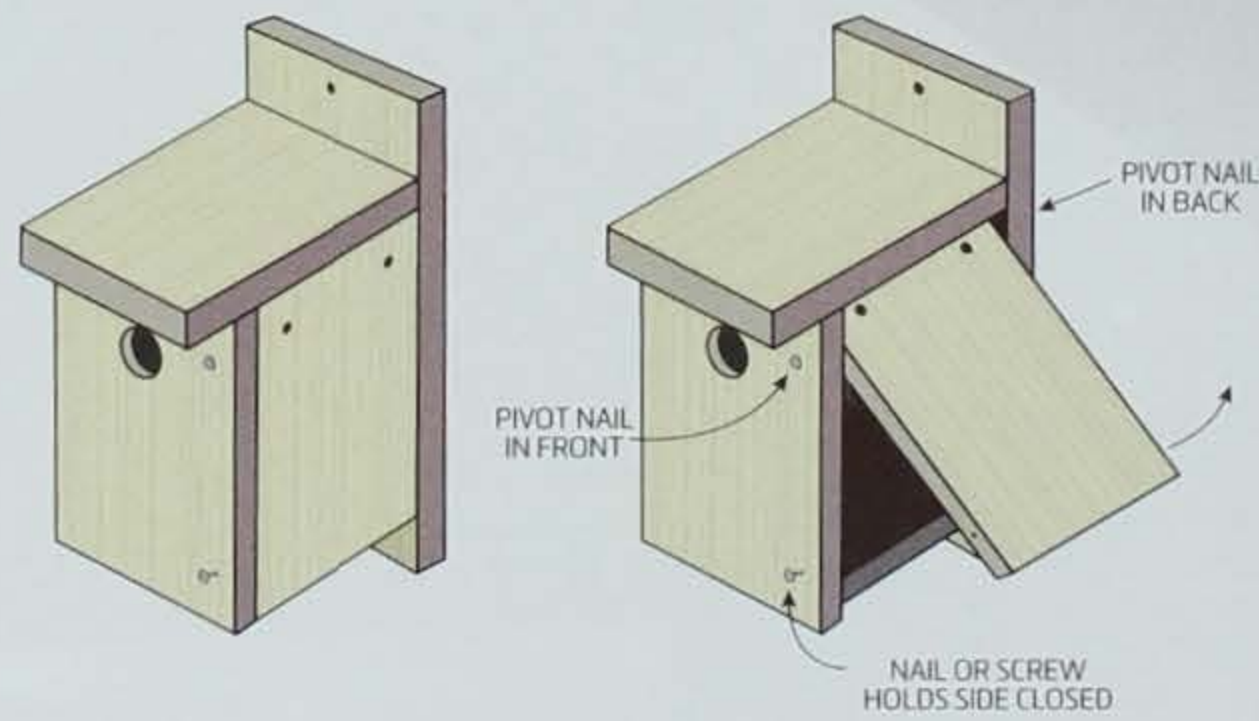
ITEMS NEEDED:

- One 1"x6"x4' rough cut red cedar board per house
- One 10' length of 3/4-inch conduit pipe per house
- Saw, drill, 1/4-inch drill bit, 1 1/4-inch spade bit, woodscrews

Cut wood using pattern, pre-drill holes and assemble with wood screws. Find suitable locale and pound pipe into ground 4 feet deep, with 6 feet remaining above ground to keep box dry during floods. Mount house to pole. See story page 26 for more tips.



NEST BOX FOR:
HOUSE WREN • CAROLINA CHICKADEE
WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH
PROTHONOTARY WARBLER



TWO "PIVOT" NAILS ALLOW SIDE TO SWING OUT FOR CLEANING. USE ONE NAIL AT BOTTOM TO CLOSE SIDE.

LUMBER: ONE 1" x 6" x 4'



Catfish Boil

Ice is out, spring is here and catfish are cruising the shallows looking for an easy meal and a place to spawn in the coming month. Limits of Iowa's most sought-after fish await those with a fishing pole, a jar of cut bait and a little patience. Sure, a plate of fried catfish filets and crispy home fries would sure kick the fishing season off right. But why not take a page from our friends to the South, invite a few friends over and serve up an old-fashioned fish boil. Swap out crawfish or shellfish for catfish, and enjoy Iowa's version of a southern favorite.


CATFISH BOIL

Catfish filets, 5 to 10 pounds
depending on number of guests
4 to 5 pounds smoked sausage,
Andouille or kielbasa, sliced
1 tablespoon dried mustard
1 tablespoon black pepper
1 tablespoon ground coriander
2 tablespoons ground allspice
2 tablespoons thyme
5 gallons water
2 cups kosher salt
4 tablespoons cayenne pepper
1 tablespoon dried oregano
1 tablespoon dried dill weed
6 lemons, halved
5-7 bay leaves
3 to 4 pounds red potatoes
12 ears corn, halved

2 pounds carrots, halved
6 onions, quartered
Hot sauce, lemon slices, melted
butter, cocktail sauce for dipping

Fill a 40-quart pot with 5 gallons water. Add spices, onions and lemons. Bring to boil. Place potatoes, sausage and carrots in a basket and boil 7-8 minutes. Add corn to basket, cook for 5 minutes. Turn off heat. Gently add filets to basket. Poach until white and flaky, about 8-10 minutes. Empty basket contents onto plates and discard water. Serve with condiments.

Tempt the Tongue With Taco Tuesdays At Bata's



Nearly every city and town in Iowa has its own culinary treasures, whether it's a mom-and-pop greasy spoon, a bustling bar and grill or a cozy sit-down fine dining restaurant. The bigger the community, the more hidden gems.

Cedar Rapids is no different, where mainstay iconic restaurants have been dishing up award-winning plates for years, and upstarts are giving them a run for their money. Bata's Restaurant is one of those upstarts, fueling a resurgence in this eastern Iowa city devastated by floods in 2008. Roughly 11 feet of water swamped the more than century-old converted jewelry business, nearly reaching the ceiling.

Like so many other family-owned restaurants, Bata's focuses on locally

grown produce and meats whenever possible. Trips to the local farmers market are frequent. But the Bata family isn't afraid to search far and wide for the freshest ingredients. Take their seafood, whether it is the giant shrimp that comes five to a pound flown in from Hawaii, or the cedar plank salmon, you know it is fresh.

"If it wasn't swimming a couple days ago, you don't want it," says manager Nick Bata. "Our seafood is flown in within a day" of being caught.

If you go, make sure to try the caramelized sweet potato strips—a house specialty. The angel pork rib wings also get rave reviews. Nick's famous flatbread rounds out any meal. And when it is offered, don't pass up the duck tongue appetizer.

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Bata's restaurant is the quintessential family restaurant, where dad Tony mans the kitchen and son Nick runs the rest. Mom Shirley is there, too, somewhere behind the scenes. Tuesday nights are always Mexican night, homemade tacos and enchiladas are served as they were when the elder Bata's family came to this country 90-some years ago. Hours are 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Reservations recommended during dinner service. 1006 3rd St. SE, Cedar Rapids. **319.261.2355**; batarestaurant.com.

While you could substitute store-bought tortillas, these homemade shells are well worth the effort.

VENISON OR PHEASANT TACOS

1 1/2 to 2 pounds ground or shredded venison or pheasant
1 1/2 tablespoons chili powder
1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
1/4 teaspoon onion powder
1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
1/4 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon paprika
1 1/2 teaspoons ground cumin
salt and pepper to taste

In a small bowl, mix seasonings. Brown meat in small amount of oil. Drain. Add meat to seasonings in bowl and mix.

TACO OR TORTILLA DOUGH

4 cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 tablespoons lard or vegetable oil
1 1/2 cups water
additional seasonings to taste, if desired
toppings of choice

Whisk flour, salt, baking powder and optional seasonings in a bowl. Mix in lard or oil until flour resembles corn meal. Add water and mix into dough. Place on lightly floured surface and knead until smooth and elastic. Divide into 24 pieces and roll each into a ball. Roll dough out into 6- to 7-inch discs and place two to three tablespoons meat in center. Fold in half and pinch ends together with a fork so it doesn't come apart while cooking. Heat 1.5 inches oil in deep skillet. Add two tacos and cook until browned, about two minutes per side. Add desired toppings and serve immediately.



Warden's Diary

BY ERIKA BILLERBECK



Aliens, Bears and Yetis

After working my territory for a few years, nothing could happen at the 14,000-acre Hawkeye Wildlife Area that would surprise me. If funds were sufficient, the wildlife area alone could staff its own full-time game warden, and that person would never be bored. If my phone rang right now to inform me an unidentified flying object had landed in a field at Hawkeye and there were little blue beings jumping into the river from the Greencastle Bridge, I would merely sigh and be on my way. So this call was far from a shock.

We had just returned home from an entertaining evening of watching our kindergartner perform in her first school concert. She was all hopped up on sugar from the bake sale cookie she had devoured in the car along the way, and her little brother was equally wide awake. The challenge of putting the kids to bed in such an excited state was not something I was looking forward to. So, lucky for me, a call came in about possible human remains found at the Hawkeye Wildlife Area.

The call came from a sheriff's deputy who was at the wildlife area and looking at what appeared to be "human-like" hands and other miscellaneous tissues that seemed to have been dumped like any other garbage in one of the parking

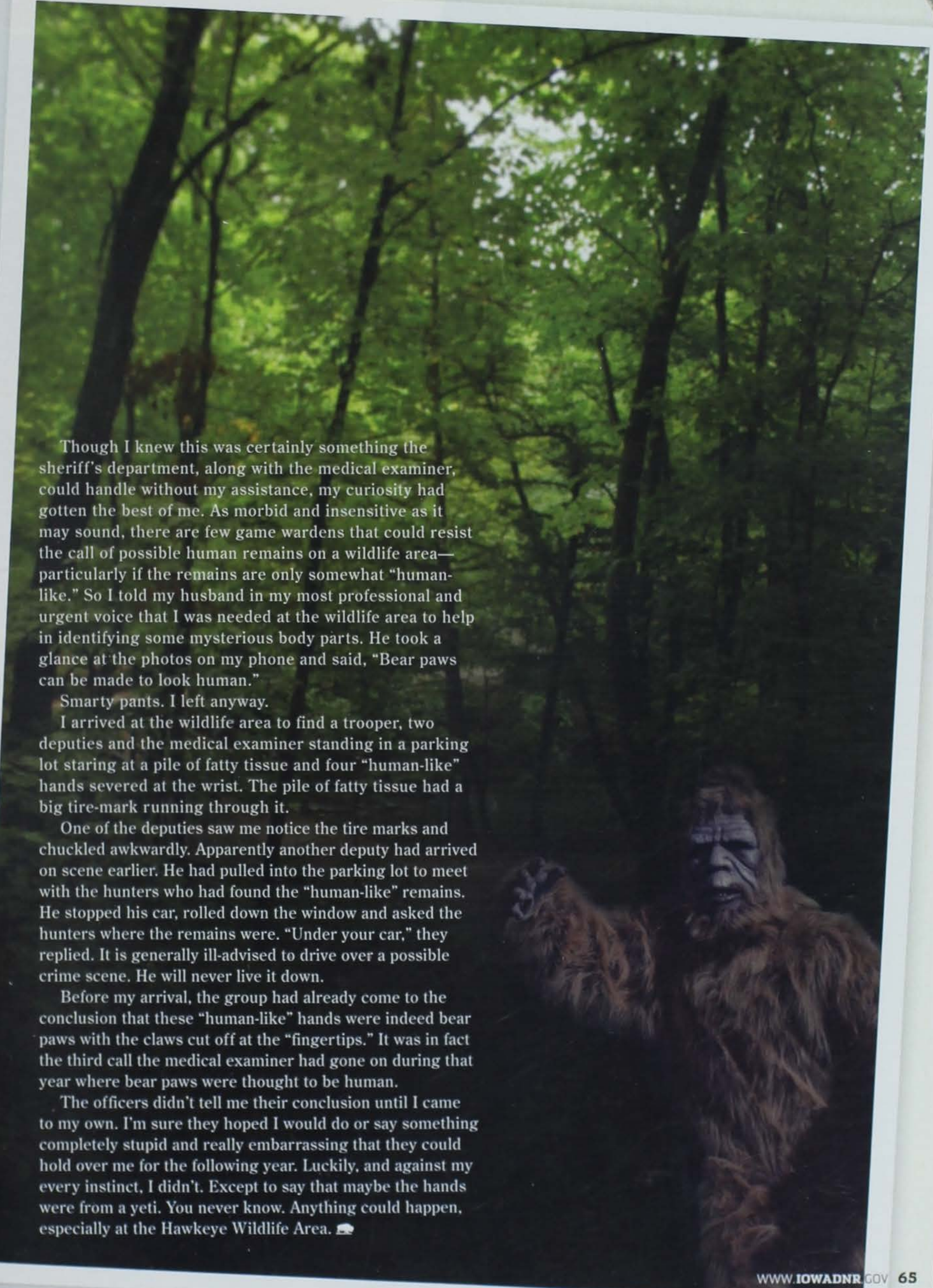


lots. The deputy told me that he was pretty sure they weren't human, but wasn't completely sure... and obviously this is one of those things you want to be completely sure about. The deputy mentioned that it had crossed his mind that maybe the "hands" were bear paws, but they lacked fur, and obviously he didn't want to go tossing out someone's hands if in fact he was wrong. He said the medical

examiner was on his way to the scene. The deputy agreed to send a photo of the remains to my phone.

When I hung up, I could hear the chaos through the baby monitor in my son's room. It sounded as though the kids were possibly climbing the walls of their bedrooms, swinging from the curtains and falling to the floor, while my poor husband pleaded...and then begged...and then yelled at them to get into their pajamas and brush their teeth. It sounded like he had everything under control.

I threw on my coat and was heading down the steps to break the news that I would be of no help in accomplishing the impossible task of wrestling the kids into their beds when my phone beeped. I had received the pictures. I opened them up and looked. And squinted. And rubbed my eyes. And looked again. Could it be? Maybe? Human? Bear?...or yeti?



Though I knew this was certainly something the sheriff's department, along with the medical examiner, could handle without my assistance, my curiosity had gotten the best of me. As morbid and insensitive as it may sound, there are few game wardens that could resist the call of possible human remains on a wildlife area—particularly if the remains are only somewhat “human-like.” So I told my husband in my most professional and urgent voice that I was needed at the wildlife area to help in identifying some mysterious body parts. He took a glance at the photos on my phone and said, “Bear paws can be made to look human.”

Smarty pants. I left anyway.

I arrived at the wildlife area to find a trooper, two deputies and the medical examiner standing in a parking lot staring at a pile of fatty tissue and four “human-like” hands severed at the wrist. The pile of fatty tissue had a big tire-mark running through it.

One of the deputies saw me notice the tire marks and chuckled awkwardly. Apparently another deputy had arrived on scene earlier. He had pulled into the parking lot to meet with the hunters who had found the “human-like” remains. He stopped his car, rolled down the window and asked the hunters where the remains were. “Under your car,” they replied. It is generally ill-advised to drive over a possible crime scene. He will never live it down.

Before my arrival, the group had already come to the conclusion that these “human-like” hands were indeed bear paws with the claws cut off at the “fingertips.” It was in fact the third call the medical examiner had gone on during that year where bear paws were thought to be human.

The officers didn't tell me their conclusion until I came to my own. I'm sure they hoped I would do or say something completely stupid and really embarrassing that they could hold over me for the following year. Luckily, and against my every instinct, I didn't. Except to say that maybe the hands were from a yeti. You never know. Anything could happen, especially at the Hawkeye Wildlife Area. 🐾

Admiration & Legacy

BY JESSIE ROLPH BROWN

PREPARING A PARK

CAL AND FRANKIE PARROTT, COUNCIL BLUFFS
Couple restores land that will become a county park

It began as a place to indulge in a retirement hobby—wildlife photography—but it became an all-out ecosystem restoration and soon, it will become a park. In 1998, Cal and Frankie Parrott bought land near Carson. Cal's background in agricultural science and years on the Pottawattamie County Conservation Board led him to consider restoring the site to its pre-settlement condition. A reconstructed prairie on 35 acres of former rowcrop land boasts 10 to 15 kinds of grass and more than 200 forbs, or flowers. After leasing the pasture for a few years, the Parrotts restored the land to its original oak savanna. They thinned invasive species from 65 acres of woodland to allow native oaks to grow. The couple reseeded land in the Conservation Reserve Program and Cal took fire training and established a regular burning program. "The more you learn, the more you want to do," Cal says. "One really begins to learn the meaning of land stewardship and passing it along better than we found it." The county noted that the site was one of the most diverse in the area.

"Cal and Frankie were very interested in finding the right thing for that land to be healthy. That is not common," says Chad Graeve with Pottawattamie County Conservation. "They just had a selfless commitment to managing that property." Ultimately, the Parrotts wanted to share that land with others and used a bargain sale to sell the property, which will eventually be owned by the county. "As you begin to age, you know that you can't do all you want. We saw the opportunity to leave the ground and pass it on so the county can do more restoration," Cal says. "We saw this as an opportunity to leave it intact and for others to enjoy, long-term, in western Iowa."



WITINOK PHOTO BY NCIH STAFF; PARROTT PHOTO BY JESSICA RILLING



ROCK SOLID TEACHER

PAT WITINOK, NORTH LIBERTY
Teacher leads kids to service at Devonian Fossil Gorge

Not every science class is fortunate enough to have a treasure trove of fossils in its backyard, and one North Liberty teacher makes sure her students don't miss the chance to explore and discover. Since 2008, Pat Witinok has taken her eighth grade science students from North Central Junior High to the Devonian Fossil Gorge at Coralville Lake, once in the fall and again in May. There, they explore the fossils unearthed by the 1993 and 2008 floods. "My students realize that the gorge took 350 million years to form and appreciate the opportunity," Witinok says. "It helps the students learn to be stewards of the land. When we go out, they really get it." Part of that stewardship is community service projects, where they pick up trash, pull pounds and pounds of invasive garlic mustard, repair nature trails and more. They've planted hundreds of trees and helped replace plants wiped out by the 2008 floods. They've also helped with maintenance on the disc golf course and trimmed up locusts. "We're just so excited that we were able to do so much for our own county," says Witinok. "For me, it's been my passion to take them into their own backyard and show them the wonders that are out there." Many of the projects the students help with would otherwise go undone, according to Mary Sue Bowers with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "They've done a phenomenal job and Pat is just a dynamo," she says. "Pat genuinely cares about the kids and that they get a good education and have a genuine concern for the environment."

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The Carnivorous Common Sundew

The sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*, is one of five carnivorous plants native to Iowa—of which only three species still survive here. The common name comes from secreted, shimmering dew-like drops prominent when the sun is overhead. The word *drosera* is Greek origin for dewy or watery, and *rotundifolia* is Latin for round leaf. Endangered, it is found in only one location in northern Iowa. It is more common in other states and Canada, north Europe and Asia.

MOIST BOG HABITAT

Sundew grow up to 10 inches and prefer peaty areas such as bogs, fens, edges of ponds and rivers and wet sand. Seeds float in water to aid distribution.

FIRE AND RESEEDING

Sundew may have been more common in Iowa before settlement, when fire occurred more frequently. Sundews recolonize when small fires remove tall biomass and create sunlit openings. While not fire resistant, patchy fires in wet areas make openings for the quick-growing plant.

HABITAT LOSS, NITROGEN IMPACTS

Ninety-five percent of carnivorous-plant wetland habitat has been destroyed in the United States for agriculture or building projects. Sites that still exist are suffering from agricultural run-off, which enriches the soil with extra nitrogen and phosphorus and allows competitor plants to thrive.

POOR SOIL NUTRIENT BOOSTER

To overcome poor or acidic soils typical of bogs, the plant evolved to obtain extra nutrients from insects. When dissolving insects, the plant extracts ammonia, a form of nitrogen, from the insect to bolster its nitrogen uptake. Plants found in poor soil areas use carnivorous behavior the most, and those plants that feast on the most insects have more and larger leaves.

DEW OF DEATH

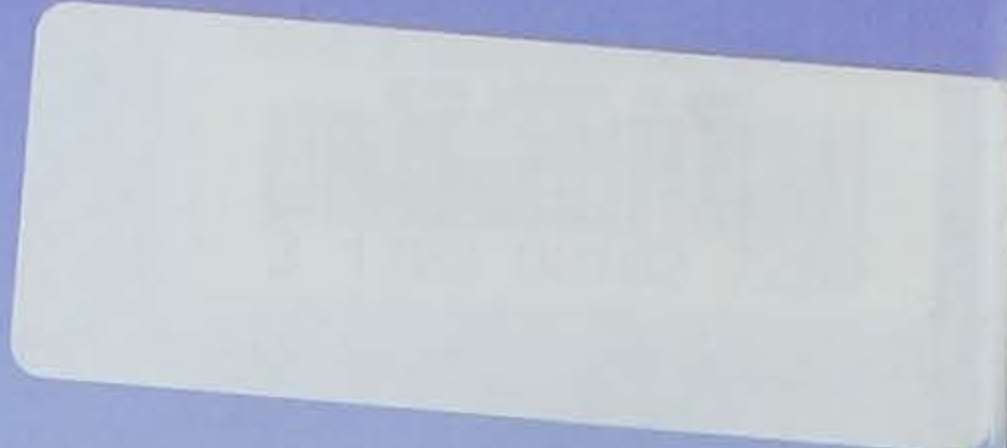
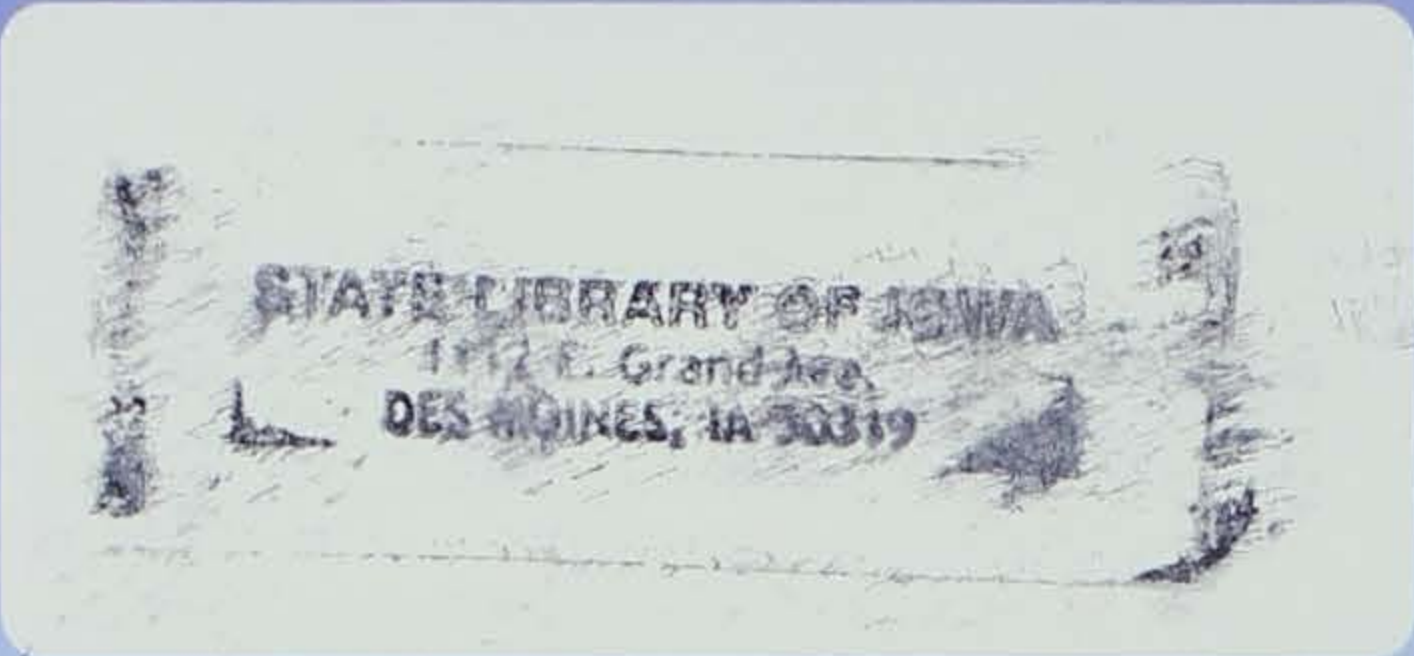
The plant is covered in red hairs topped with glands that secrete a sweet fluid, adhesives and digestive enzymes. Insects, attracted to the nectar, become trapped. Leaves fold in to hold prey, and enzymes aid digestion.

ANT BUFFET

Some research shows sundews may be an important food source for bog ants, which raid the plants to steal captured insects. Ants may scavenge up to two-thirds of captured insects.

WATERLOO PHOTO BY NICH STAFF; PARROTT PHOTO BY JESSICA RILLING

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