



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Elk Lake Wildlife Area renovation is already paying dividends



The Iowa DNR removed non-target tree species and kept the oaks and other mast producers, like hackberries, that opened the shoreline for fishing access and visitor use. Goats are being used to keep the understory in check to allow the grasses and sedges to come in, which will help to prevent erosion and restore the natural transition of the area. Restoration projects were also completed on the upland and wetland sections of the area. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Ruthven, Iowa – Rolling in to the parking lot on this early July morning, Elk Lake is barely recognizable from the brown, open water shallow lake that it was just two short years ago.

The 260-acre lake three miles south of Ruthven suffered from poor water quality caused by the excessive nutrients in the lake as well as a fish community dominated by common carp, and little to no aquatic vegetation.

“Other lakes with poor water quality will have good water quality at times, but not here,” said Rob Patterson, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Prairie Lakes Wildlife Unit. “You could come here any time during the year and see poor water quality and very few people using the lake.”

But a recent water level management project combined with a well-timed drought has reset the shallow lake.

The project began in fall of 2020 when the DNR installed a small in-lake channel to help with water level management actions that were planned for 2021.

In the spring of 2021 the DNR lowered water levels in the lake 3.5 feet using a portable pump, with the goal of improving the water quality by establishing emergent aquatic plants and renovating the fishery. During the summer of 2021 aquatic plants began to recolonize the near shore areas and by the winter the fishery was reset.

This summer the lake has been allowed to refill and restocking of fish has begun. The lake is in a healthy clear water condition and many wildlife species have started using the lake once again. Fish stocking will continue as water levels rise and will include a diversity of fish species that will likely include northern pike, yellow perch, largemouth bass and bluegills.

The lake has not yet reached crest but will be allowed to refill with any rain fall in the area.

While the in-lake renovation plan has recently been completed, improvements on the surrounding land been underway for a few years.

“The nicest part of Elk Lake is that most of the lakeshore is public,” said Lucas Straw, wildlife technician for the Iowa DNR.

Shoreline management has been mostly completed. The Iowa DNR removed ash trees and other non-target tree species and kept the oaks and other mast producers, like hackberries, that opened the shoreline for fishing access and visitor use.

On the east shore, goats are being used to keep the understory in check to allow the grasses and sedges to come in, which will help to prevent erosion and restore the natural transition of the area. Restoration projects were also completed on the upland and wetland sections of the area.

A 35-acre prairie was restored, a recent acquisition was transitioned from an alfalfa field to prairie. Straw said they have been working on a 15-acre hillside remnant prairie and are seeing native plants, like big bluestem, return, especially after prescribed fire was used.

The 40-acre Wapiti Marsh on the northeast side of the Elk Lake is a potential candidate for restoration, which would only improve its ability to filter nutrients and sediment.

Now that the renovation work is complete and the lake is nearly full, Elk Lake is attracting attention.

“We’ve heard from a lot people who are excited to recreate on Elk Lake once the lake is completely refilled,” Patterson said.

Given its location on the migration route, it will likely be a popular stop over for waterfowl and shorebirds in the spring and fall.

“The whole suite of water birds, all of the ducks and shorebirds come through here,” Straw said. “Hopefully the sandhill cranes find Elk Lake. The same goes for trumpeter swans.”

Use by ducks and marsh birds has increased. There’s a bald eagle nest on the northeast side of the lake. Painted turtles are here plus a diverse amphibian community. Blandings turtles are two miles away and could take up residence after the restoration.

Etcetera...

- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation provided grants for seed, which supplemented the prairie seed to increase seed diversity and volume.
- Elk Lake Wildlife Area covers about 530 acres of upland and wetland habitats.
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is partnering on wetland restorations in the area.

Media Contact: Rob Patterson, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-330-2563.

Catfish are biting across Iowa

Fishing for catfish is a fun summer tradition for many Iowa families. Invite someone new to come along this year to share the fun and memories.

“Catfish will bite most of the time, no matter what the water temperature,” explains Daniel Vogeler, Iowa DNR fisheries technician. “They are biting in most lakes, ponds, rivers and streams across Iowa.”

Bring along two coolers with ice, one to keep your bait firm and fresh and another to keep your catch cold and preserve that great taste.

Catfish have a great sense of smell and taste. Try prepared dip baits, chicken livers, minnows or chubs, green sunfish, bluegill, crawdads, frogs, nightcrawlers or dead, but fresh, goldeye or gizzard shad.

Lakes stratify, or form layers, this time of year, with cool, oxygen-deprived waters sinking to the bottom. Don’t fish in water deeper than 8 to 10 feet on most lakes.

Look for areas with vegetation, brush piles or rock. Use the DNR interactive fishing atlas to help you quickly find these spots. Fish the upper ends of the larger reservoirs where the water is shallower and baitfish like gizzard shad gather. Use baits fished on the bottom or suspended off the bottom with a bobber and let current or breeze move the bait to find active catfish.

Iowa rivers are loaded with catfish. Look for fish around downed trees and brush piles, but don’t overlook rock piles or other objects that deflect water and form a current seam. Position your bait just upstream of brush piles so the scent of the bait is carried

downstream into the structure to draw the catfish out. Anchor the bait with a heavy weight so it doesn't drift into snags. If fishing the big rivers, try upstream and on the tips of wing dykes and wing dams on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

Find more tips for catching, cleaning and cooking catfish on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.gov/Fishing/Fishing-Tips-How-Tos/How-to-Fish-For-/Channel-Catfish-Fishing.

Media Contact: Daniel Vogeler, Fisheries Bureau, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-336-1840.

Celebrate a child's first fish

Preserve the memory of your child or grandchild hooking their first fish this summer with a special certificate. Print the certificate yourself from an electronic file posted online or request a printed certificate.

Apply for a first fish certificate online at www.iowadnr.gov/firstfish. It's easy and free to participate. There are no size, species or age requirements – only that it is the very first fish the angler has successfully landed.

Family and friends can join in on the celebration by viewing the first catch photos of their kids and other budding anglers on the [First Fish webpage](#) once the entry is approved.

Give your kids a lifetime of BIG memories this summer. Follow the simple tips for taking kids fishing on the Iowa DNR website at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/idnr/Fishing/Fishing-Tips-How-Tos/Taking-Kids-Fishing>.

Media Contact: Holly Luft, Fisheries Bureau, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-769-2587.

Iowa DNR sending firefighters to Alaska, Texas and Colorado

AMES – As wildfires continue to rage in parts of the west, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Fire Program has started to dispatch wildland firefighters to Alaska, Texas and Colorado.

The fire program recently sent six Iowa wildland firefighters to Alaska for three weeks and two firefighters to Colorado for two weeks. Three wildland firefighters along with the DNR type 6 fire engine are in Texas fighting the Dempsey Fire.

“We just sent three firefighters to replace the first crew,” said Ryan Schlater, fire specialist, with the Iowa DNR's Fire Program. “They are patrolling for new fire starts. Conditions are very hot and dry.”

Iowa DNR fire staff watch the daily fire behavior and new fire starts, such as the new one threatening Yosemite's Mariposa Sequoia grove of trees.

“We have more firefighters available and ready to go once resource orders come in,” explains Schlater.

The fire program has been sending wildland firefighters to national incidents since 2006. A crew and fire engine helped fight the Rim Fire in Yosemite in 2013.

For more information, contact Ryan Schlater at 515-233-8067 or visit the Iowa DNR Fire Program webpage at www.iowadnr.gov/Conservation/Forestry/Fire-Management.