



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Tomahawk Marsh is returning to its prairie and wetland heritage



Work continues at Tomahawk Marsh Wildlife Area to return the area to a mix of prairie and wetlands. Here, a restored prairie in its fourth year provides critical habitat and food for grassland birds. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Tomahawk Marsh is undergoing a facelift of sorts. Parts of the 428-acre wildlife area just north of Lake View in central Sac County, has been reshaped to create small seasonal wetlands, and many of the trees have been removed to reclaim the prairie and to emphasize the grassland and wetland ecosystem.

“We’re working to turn the clock back 100 years, before the tree encroachment started, and expand the usable space for grassland bird species,” said Keith Ringler, wildlife technician with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources’ Black Hawk Unit. “It will look different this spring when the trees are gone.”

Ringler said the plan is to remove trees from the portions of the area that will be seeded to prairie and staff will increase the frequency of prescribed fire to maintain the prairie, if Mother Nature cooperates.

Given its location adjacent to the county road and its neighbors, fire can only be used when the wind direction is out of the southwest.

The prairie conversion is occurring on different sections at different intervals. One field is working its way through the first year as a prairie where an adjacent field is in its fourth. The four-year-old prairie is filled with bugs for hungry grassland birds. The southern portion has newer reconstructed prairie featuring up to 120 different plant species, including side oats gramma, little bluestem, ironweed, compass plant, cup plant, and rattlesnake master.

The existing 70 acres currently in agriculture will continue to shrink as the conversion process continues. Some of that cropland is being farmed as part of the process to eliminate the seed bank from the hay field as it transitions from old hay to prairie.

The DNR is working with a local partner as part of the beginning farmers program to do the mowing required for a new prairie, the planting and spraying of the sunflower fields, and planting the food plots.

The goal of the management plan is to keep the native shrubs - ninebark, dogwood and plums - and to maintain about 35 acres in ag fields as small food plots of corn, soybeans, sunflowers.

Tomahawk Marsh's main 167-acre wetland, ringed with cattails and bulrushes, is visible looking east off Perkins Avenue. It's a good place to kayak during years with normal rainfall and watch birds during the spring and fall migration.

Ringler said low spots hidden in the terrain were identified using new technology that allowed them to restore these smaller wetland pockets. These are often seasonally dry, but usually hold water in the spring. Tomahawk Marsh is in the Raccoon River watershed and the series of connected wetlands outlets to the southeast eventually entering the North Raccoon River.

The main marsh has hosted a pair of nesting trumpeter swans for the past 10-15 years, and had one breeding pair this year that produced five cygnets. It also has a history of Blandings turtles, snapping turtles and bullfrogs. There is remnant prairie along the marsh edge.

The Multiple Species Inventory and Monitoring team within the Wildlife Diversity Program visited Tomahawk Marsh in 2009 to survey the wildlife population and in addition to Blandings turtles and trumpeter swans, a number of species listed as in greatest conservation need were confirmed there, including northern prairie skink, northern leopard frog, American kestrel, chimney swift, common nighthawk, eyed brown (butterfly), and sedge sprite (damselfly).

Tomahawk Marsh also provides hunting for pheasants and waterfowl and recommended to callers who inquire about places to pheasant hunt in the vicinity of Sac County. Nontoxic shot is required on the area.

Looking at it from above, the area resembles a tomahawk, which is the source of its name.

Also visible from above is the old Chicago Northwestern railroad line that ran from Wall Lake to Sac City, from 1877-1972 as part of the line transporting coal from Wyoming to the Great Lakes. The railroad was the likely seed source for the trees the Black Hawk staff are currently removing. It's also a good place to take a hike.

Staff are also working to control smooth brome and reed canary grass through late spring or fall prescribed fire. Fire is also a key technique in the battle against sericea lespedeza. Ringler

said they've used fire for five years in a row on a 10-acre block of prairie, followed by spraying to expose the seed source and now, the once visible invasive is hard to find.

Media Contact: Keith Ringler, Wildlife Technician, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-330-5685.

Enjoy Iowa's natural landscapes fishing rivers and streams this fall

Fall is a great time to catch fish in Iowa's rivers. A unique angling challenge is hidden around every bend.

"You are never far from one of Iowa's many rivers," said Greg Gelwicks, Iowa DNR interior rivers research biologist. "Fall is a great time to give them a try."

Fish become more active and hungry when the stream temperature drops. "Look for actively feeding fish where riffles enter pools or rocky areas," Gelwicks said. "They sit there out of the current and wait for food to come by."

Many fish in Iowa's rivers search out deep pools with very little current to spend the winter. Fish start to move to overwintering areas in October, and most fish will arrive by November.

Fish may move to deep water earlier than normal this fall with low water levels in many of Iowa rivers. "Anglers willing to brave chilly temperatures can be rewarded if they also seek out these areas," Gelwicks said.

Channel catfish will move to the deepest holes they can find in larger streams, often with depths greater than 15 feet, if available. Walleyes can be found in these same pools, but will also use slightly shallower areas with little current. Look for smallmouth bass in deep holes with boulders or woody structure.

When fish first move to wintering holes, deep running crankbaits and jigs with plastics work well. As water temperatures drop, switch to a jig and minnow fished slowly for best results. Try the upper Wapsipinicon River (Buchanan and Linn counties) or upper Cedar River (Black Hawk and Bremer counties) for smallmouth bass. The Shell Rock River (Butler and Bremer counties) or upper Cedar River (Black Hawk or Bremer counties) are a great choice for walleye.

An extensive list of Iowa's rivers, with information on access points and native species, is available on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.gov/Fishing/Where-to-Fish/Interior-Rivers.

Media Contact: Greg Gelwicks, Interior Rivers Research Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 563-927-3276.

Fall is a great time to plant shade trees

It's not too late to plant some varieties of shade trees before winter sets in. Fall is an ideal time to plant new trees with mild temperatures and adequate ground moisture.

"Properly planted trees will have a better opportunity for a long healthy life," said Iowa DNR district forester Mark Vitosh. "Improperly planted trees can become stressed more easily or

may look otherwise healthy, but then suddenly die in the first 10 to 20 years after planting.”

Properly planted trees should have a long, healthy life. The keys to a successful shade tree planting include selecting a species that matches your site’s growing conditions (i.e. soil type, soil drainage, available growing space, full sun or shade, etc.), proper planting, and quality tree care and maintenance throughout the tree’s life. Always call Iowa One Call-811 before you start digging to locate any underground utilities.

A five-minute video produced by the Iowa DNR provides tips on how to properly plant a tree from a container and avoid very common mistakes. Go to www.iowadnr.gov/Conservation/Forestry/Urban-Forestry to view the video.

Key tips from the video include:

- Before digging the planting hole, pull any additional soil away from the top of the root ball to identify the first main lateral root.
- Measure the distance just above the first lateral root to the bottom of the root ball; that is the depth that you should dig the planting hole. Proper planting depth is key to long-term tree survival. If the hole is dug too deep the tree can settle over time which can cause long-term health issues.
- Once you remove the root ball from the container, look for roots that seem to be growing around the root ball. Remove these roots to improve the long-term health of the tree. Use a hand saw to sever those encircling roots a half inch to an inch deep into the root ball. Shave off the encircling roots on all sides of the root ball. Also remove any encircling roots on the bottom of the root ball.
- Attempt to dig the planting hole at least twice the width of the root ball. If the sides of the planting hole are smooth, use the sharp end of the shovel to add texture to the sides of the hole to allow the new tree roots to penetrate the soil profile.
- Avoid any kind of soil amendments in the planting hole; instead use the soil from the original hole to refill around the roots of the tree. The final soil level should cover the first main lateral root. As you refill the hole gently pack the soil around the root ball with your hands.
- Once the tree is planted, slowly water the planting hole (focus water in the location of the root ball) to settle the soil. As the tree grows be sure to water the expanding root system further away from the initial root ball.

In the first year or two after planting, timely watering, mulching, and in some cases staking can be critical for success. Once a tree is well established, structural pruning can help maintain a quality tree into the future. Learn more about proper tree care after planting at <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/product/5096>

Media Contact: Emma Hanigan, Urban Forestry Coordinator, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-249-1732.