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Kick off summer in Iowa State Parks, June 9-11

DES MOINES – Several state parks and forests will be hosting family-friendly programming and activities as part of Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) new Summer Kick-Off event, June 9-11.

“Summer Kick-Off is our way of showing appreciation for our visitors with activities the entire family can enjoy,” said Sherry Arntzen, chief of Parks, Forests and Preserves Bureau for the Iowa DNR.

Planned events include hikes, nature programs, fireside chats, kayaking clinics and more. A list of parks and their programs, activity sheets and ideas for ways to explore parks is available online at www.iowadnr.gov/kickoffsummer.

Those wanting to camp during the Summer Kick-Off celebration are encouraged to make their reservation soon. Iowa has more than 4,400 state park campsites with most reservable in advance. Reservations can be made through the [reservation system](#).

“Iowa state parks are beloved overnight destinations for many people,” said Arntzen. “We offer campsites that appeal to a broad range of campers, from the more rustic hike-in sites to those with all the modern amenities.”

For visitors who prefer cabins over tents, the Iowa DNR has more than 90 cabins available to rent across 20 state parks and forests, Arntzen said.

In the off season from Labor Day to Memorial Day, cabins can be rented for a two-night minimum stay. During the peak of summer, most cabins require a seven-night minimum visit.

As of now, all state parks have water turned on, with shower and restroom buildings open for campers. A few parks do have renovations and closures, so check the park closure page at: www.iowadnr.gov/parkclosures when planning your

visit. Visit the [DNR's website](#) to sign up for electronic news updates and information about campsites, cabins, events and more.

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Midwest black bear population may start calling parts of Iowa home down the road

There's a pretty good chance that, in the next several weeks, Northeast Iowa will be visited by a few wandering black bears coming down from Minnesota and Wisconsin ahead of the breeding season. It's been an annual occurrence in this region each spring since 2014.

While much of Iowa does not have the habitat necessary to support a black bear population, certain locations do, primarily northeast, eastern and southern parts of the state. As black bear populations in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Missouri are stable to increasing, it is possible that a small population could set up residence in Iowa.

"Within the next three to five years, we may see cubs show up and a small breeding population become established. If that occurs, we should look to our neighbors in Wisconsin and Minnesota who have learned to live with bears," said Vince Evelsizer, furbearer and wetland wildlife research biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "It won't be perfect and there will be bumps along the way, but we need to start having conversations about the idea of bears coming back to Iowa, at least in certain places along the Mississippi River and Northeast Iowa where suitable habitat exists."

Wisconsin's black bear population is estimated to be 23,300, Minnesota's 12,000 - 15,000 and Missouri, which held its first bear hunt last fall, as many as 1,000. Missouri's population is growing at an estimated 9 percent annually.

"For example, in Wisconsin, with that many black bears, residents have learned to make a few adjustments to minimize bear conflicts, like putting away their bird seed in the spring, putting away their barbecue drip pans, and by keeping pet food and garbage in places bears can't access. There are still occasional problems, but these basic precautions result in much fewer negative encounters between bears and humans," Evelsizer said.

Bears are omnivores and their diet changes with the seasons. In the spring, bears emerge from their winter dens hungry. They'll feed heavily on newly emerging tender grasses and sedges. In summer, its berries, ants, various plants, and grubs. In the fall, its acorns and other tree nuts. They are also known to feed on

nontraditional sources, like row crops, orchard fruits, and honey – which is similar to striped skunks and raccoons.

“They’re like a big raccoon, motivated by hunger and willing to take advantage of whatever food is available, from fawns to eggs, bee hives, bird feeders – this is where making some changes can minimize nuisance bear interactions,” he said.

Black bears are native to Iowa. However, Iowa has been without a resident bear population for more than 100 years. In the Iowa code, black bears are not listed as a species of wildlife found in Iowa because they were not present in the state when these laws were created, nor have they been since. This means the Iowa DNR does not have the legal authority to manage black bear populations through actions such as designating protection status or adding a limited hunting season if the population eventually support it in the future. Iowa is the only state among its Midwest neighbors where the state’s wildlife agency does not have regulatory authority to manage bear populations, which typically includes handling nuisance conflicts and conducting research.

While the Iowa DNR does not regulate bears, it does have a bear response protocol.

“The objective with the response protocol is to provide guidance for our staff in dealing with any potential human-bear conflicts that arise. A proactive strategy will increase the odds for a better outcome for both the bears and for humans. For example, trap and transport of bears is a common scenario shown on TV shows, however in reality most states have moved away from this method because it often results in simply moving the problem to someone else’s backyard. It’s all about reducing conflicts where bears are instead,” Evelsizer said. “We want to keep Iowans informed about this interesting and emerging wildlife story and increase our collective knowledge about bears in order to live with them successfully and minimize conflicts.”

Since 2002, there have been 49 confirmed black bears in Iowa, and two to five per year since 2014. As bears have become more of a regular visitor, the chance to encounter a bear, although small, is a possibility.

“Black bears have some general tendencies and habits, but individual bears may go against the norm. Some are shy, others are not. They are typically secretive and want to be left alone – while others are bold and may be more daylight active,” he said.

Bears are typically nocturnal but get more active during late May to July breeding season, especially at dawn and dusk. Most of Iowa’s bear sightings start in late May continuing into early July.

“If you encounter a bear, avoid running away,” Evelsizer said. “Instead, back away slowly and cautiously while facing it. Make noise so they know you’re there.”

There are a number of resources available to help people minimize conflict with bears, Evelsizer said, including www.bearwise.org.

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