



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Discover Hidden Gems with the 2023 State Park Passport

The Iowa State Park Passport is back in 2023 and better than ever.

From June 1 – Oct. 31, Iowa State Park Passport holders can earn points by checking into more than 60 state parks and forests using the online app. Each park has a different point value (either 100, 200 or 300 points), with “hidden gems” earning higher points. Redeem points for various prizes.

Sign up and download the State Park Passport onto a mobile device at <https://iowadnr.gov/parkspassport>. Previous passholders need to sign up for the 2023 pass. In its fourth year, the Passport has been a popular way to explore new parks and track participants outdoor adventures.

NEW! Hidden gems within each state park

Along with checking into parks through the passport, park visitors can then discover “Hidden Gems” as they explore.

Each park on the passport includes a description of a “Hidden Gem” to find within the park, such as historical markers, scenic overlooks, special trails and more. Post a selfie at the hidden gem with #IowaStateParks on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter and the Iowa DNR will randomly select one photo to win an outdoor cooking package.

To learn more and to sign up, go to www.iowadnr.gov/stateparks. Previous passholders will need to re-subscribe to take part in the 2023 Passport program.

Prizes for the 2023 State Park Passport include:

- 500 points – any passholder redeeming at this level gets \$5 off an overnight camping stay

- 1,000 points – first 500 passholders to redeem at this level get a weather-proof sticker
- 2,500 points – first 300 passholders to redeem at this level get a ceramic coffee mug!

Once points are redeemed, the passholder's points reset to zero. Passholders may start earning points again until Oct. 31. So, cash-in early, or bank points for higher level prizes.

- For every 300 points earned, passholders are automatically entered into a drawing to win a paddling package (kayak, paddle, life jacket and dry bag) or a three-night stay at a cabin at Lake Darling State Park. There is no limit to the number of entries!

Prizes were donated by sponsorship partners Bass Pro Shops and the Iowa Hunter Education Association.

Different habitats on the Upper Wapsi Wildlife Area attracts and supports diverse wildlife



A pair of nesting trumpeter swans successfully hatched two young on the edge of a two-acre wetland on the Upper Wapsi Wildlife Area. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

The Upper Wapsi Wildlife Area is returning to a mix of wetlands, timber, and prairie that traditionally would make up this area, hosting various wildlife from sandhill cranes, Canada geese, red-shouldered hawks, bobolinks, pheasants, to wild turkeys, blanding's turtles, smooth green snakes and white-tailed deer.

The easy-to-find public area, bordered by Iowa Hwy. 346 to the north, and two miles west of U.S. Hwy. 63 in south central Chickasaw County, attracts birdwatchers, and waterfowl, deer and pheasant hunters to its 560 acres.

"It's easy to get to, but you have to be willing to walk to see everything that is available here," said Jason Auel, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Cedar-Wapsi Wildlife Unit, while heading to the south side of the property.

His destination was a 15-acre restored wetland built as a part of a series of four basins on the GC Farms tract during the winter of 2011, just before the parcel was acquired by the Iowa DNR in 2012. On the way, a wild turkey, dusting and bugging in recently planted food plot, hurried to the safety of the timber.

This large wetland has held water year-round since construction. It's not visible from the road and is roughly a half mile hike from the parking lot. Dozens of Canada geese, lazily paddling around the wetland, became nervous at the presence of the uninvited guests.

Near the wetlands, are a series of rolling mounds that were created when the basins were installed. These mounds have slightly more elevation and plant diversity than the low laying areas because it doesn't get flooded as often.

These mounds were part of a 60-acre section that received prescribed fire early this spring and rattlesnake master, blazing star, various milkweeds, and gray headed coneflower can already be seen. Fire is necessary to keep trees and the moist-soils-and-floodplain-loving Reed canary grass, an invasive species, from encroaching on the prairie.

The Wapsipinicon River flows through the center of the area and is the source for the fairly regular flooding. Heavy rains in the watershed can send the river out of its banks, like it did a few weeks ago, when parts of Mitchell County received six inches of rain.

"Fire top-killed a bunch of trees," Auel said while looking at the burn area. "We'll see if we need any follow up treatment in a few weeks."

The river offers the opportunity to catch northern pike, smallmouth bass and walleye. Paddling this river stretch is possible, but challenging given the debris.

The Upper Wapsi area was created in 1998 with the purchase of a parcel in the Wapsipinicon River floodplain west of the river, and south of Hwy 346. Initially seeded to prairie, the frequent flooding changed the area to canary grass and

trees. Auel said they are working to reestablish the prairie – it was sprayed last winter, then planted with wild rye, Indian grass, big bluestem and switchgrass.

On this picture-perfect, blue-sky day, a bald eagle was perched on the top branch of a dead tree along the river. On the west side, a pair of trumpeter swans were nesting on the edge of a two-acre wetland – their two recently hatched cygnats visible through a spotting scope or binoculars.

“It’s a nice example of a floodplain, oxbow wetland area that would traditionally be here,” Auel said. “It has good pheasant and deer hunting and bird watching for grassland birds, and pileated woodpeckers and red-shouldered hawks in the timber.”

Etcetera

- The Upper Wapsi can have good mushroom hunting during the non-flooding years
- If planning to visit this summer, be prepared to battle black flies. The bugs are swarming as soon as you step out of the vehicle. Auel said the best option is for a breeze to keep them off of you. He hasn’t found a bug repellent that works them
- The timber is a mix of soft maples, ash, and river birch. Areas slightly higher elevation have some oaks.
- There are 15 acres spread over three food plots on the area, primarily sorghum and corn, with sunflowers, turnips occasionally added to the rotation.

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