



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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- [High quality trout stream, timber make Big Mill Creek Wildlife Area popular year round](#)
- [Help prevent the spread of invasive aquatic plants around West Okoboji Lake](#)
- [Hawkeye Wildlife Area to host 12th Annual Pelican Festival](#)

High quality trout stream, timber make Big Mill Creek Wildlife Area popular year round



Big Mill Creek as it appeared in October 2022. Photo by Dan Kirby.

The parking lot at the northwest corner of the Big Mill Creek Wildlife Area provides a good spot to people watch, or more precisely, vehicle watch. Cars and trucks and

SUVs coming and going, up and down the access lane to Mill Creek, where drivers try their luck with the local trout population.

“The big draw for the area is the trout stream – it brings the most people here,” said Nick McClimon, wildlife technician for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Maquoketa Wildlife Unit at nearby Green Island.

Big Mill Creek Wildlife Area’s 700 acres in northeast Jackson County, five miles from Bellevue, are mostly timbered, with reconstructed prairie, wetlands and nearly a mile of trout stream.

The stream supports a wild population of naturally reproducing brown trout and is stocked from April through October with catchable sized rainbow trout. It has been the focus of a nearly decade long restoration project to fix the cut banks, connect the stream with its natural floodplain and restore prairie to the streambank all of which improves access for the angling community.

The project began in 2014, when around 1,000 feet of streambank was restored, then it resumed in 2019 when another 1,200 feet was restored. About 2,500 feet of floodplain restoration remain for Big Mill Creek on the WMA as funding becomes available over upcoming years. Meanwhile there is another 1,000 feet of stream restoration work planned in the WMA on South Fork Mill Creek – with that work likely to occur during 2024.

After the restoration is complete, McClimon said prescribed fire will be used occasionally to maintain the prairie and keep woody vegetation under control.

The project has improved access to the stream, which has had positive feedback from visitors.

“It’s a popular stream, partially because it’s the first stream encountered from the southeast so we see a lot of anglers from Illinois and the Quad Cities,” said Dan Kirby, fisheries biologist with the DNR’s Manchester trout hatchery. “It’s a high-quality stream popular with all types of fishing, from spinning reels and live bait to fly fishing.”

Kirby said the nearby South Fork of Mill Creek also has wild brown trout as well as Slimy Sculpin, another unique, cold water fish species, that is only found in the northeast part of Iowa in cold spring-fed streams.

Trout fishing is also available in nearby Little Mill Wildlife Area and in Mill Creek in section flowing through Felderman Park, in Bellevue.

“To me, that’s appealing – to have a number of trout streams nearby, to move around and check out other spots,” Kirby said.

Visitors wanting to explore Big Mill Creek Wildlife Area can hike along the access lane used by the trout stocking truck and along the fire breaks through the timber. Once the parking lot is out of sight, Big Mill becomes a hardwood forest with steep hills, cool, deep valleys and boulder outcroppings.

“This topography is unique to northeast Iowa. People may not realize we have terrain like this in Jackson County,” McClimon said. “You could spend a lot of time here and never have the same experience twice.”

The rolling hills are home to a quality deer and turkey population, and other species, like yellow and black billed cuckoos, five lined skink and prairie ring-neck snakes.

Big Mill is 75 percent timber, which is the focus of the habitat management.

Ash trees, victims of the emerald ash borer, stand leafless against the green canopy. A forest stewardship plan has identified 14 acres for a section harvest that will be replanted with oaks and other hardwoods as part the timber stand improvement.

“We are managing for what was historically here – hardwoods, mast producers,” McClimon said.

The southern portion will be managed as an oak savanna, removing non-target trees and using fire to expose the ground to sunlight.

Some of the flatter land found on the ridgetops is being converted from old ag fields into prairie to benefit pollinators and provide nesting cover. A neighbor that is part of the beginning farmer program is contracted to mow the prairie a few times a year to prevent the weeds from getting too tall until the prairie can take over.

“This will look completely different in two years,” he said.

Media Contact: Nick McClimon, Wildlife Technician, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 563-219-4148.

Help prevent the spread of invasive aquatic plants around West Okoboji Lake

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is asking for help to prevent the spread of Eurasian watermilfoil and brittle naiad around West Okoboji Lake.

The DNR continues to work with partners to develop a management plan and move through the permitting process. Boaters and other lake users must be extra

vigilant when cleaning their boats and equipment to prevent the spread of these invasive aquatic plants into the main part of West Okoboji Lake or other lakes.

Eurasian watermilfoil was recently discovered in canals near Miller's Bay and The Harbor canals on West Okoboji Lake, and brittle naiad was found in the Triboji lagoon. No Eurasian watermilfoil or brittle naiad was found in the main lake of West Okoboji or the other lakes in the Iowa Great Lakes chain.

"It is critical for boaters and anglers to clean all vegetation from boats and equipment before moving out of the canals and lagoon into the main lake to prevent the spread of Eurasian watermilfoil and brittle naiad into West Okoboji Lake," said Kim Bogenschutz, the DNR's aquatic invasive species program coordinator. "The same is true for boaters leaving the boat ramp at Triboji to prevent the spread to other lakes."

The Iowa DNR Aquatic Plant Management team monitors the vegetation in the Iowa Great Lakes each year. The monitoring has been especially important this summer. East Okoboji, Upper Gar, Minnewashta, and Lower Gar Lakes were aggressively treated with an approved herbicide to eradicate Eurasian watermilfoil discovered in those lakes late last summer. The DNR worked closely with lake associations, cities, Dickinson County, and other organizations to develop and fund that treatment plan. Surveys conducted the past couple weeks found no Eurasian watermilfoil growing in East Okoboji or the three lower chain lakes.

Eurasian watermilfoil and brittle naiad are invasive rooted aquatic plants native to parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. They can spread quickly and outcompete beneficial native plants. Eurasian watermilfoil reproduces by fragmentation, which means small pieces of it grow into new plants. Brittle naiad reproduces by seeds which float with pieces of the plant when it breaks apart.

"Boaters and anglers can unintentionally spread Eurasian watermilfoil, brittle naiad, and other aquatic invasive species if they do not take the proper precautions," said Jason Euchner, Iowa DNR aquatic vegetation management biologist. "We always ask boaters and anglers to clean their equipment before leaving a waterbody. Now, we need them to remove vegetation before leaving the canals and lagoon and minimize their trips into and out of the canals and lagoon."

Compliance with these requests is voluntary when moving within connected waters, but is required when leaving a water access point. It is illegal to possess or transport prohibited aquatic invasive species, such as Eurasian watermilfoil and brittle naiad, in Iowa. Boaters must also drain all water from boats and equipment before leaving a water access and must keep drain plugs removed or opened during transport.

“It’s easy to comply with the law when you follow the steps to Clean, Drain, Dry,” said Bogenschutz

- CLEAN any plants, animals or mud from the boat and equipment before you leave a water body. With the current infestations in the canals and lagoon, you must also check boat props and other parts of the boat where vegetation fragments could get caught before entering the main lake.
- DRAIN water from all equipment (motor, live well, bilge, transom well, bait bucket) before you leave a water body.
- DRY anything that comes into contact with water (boats, trailers, equipment, boots, clothing, dogs). Before you move to another waterbody either: Spray your boat and trailer with hot, high-pressure water; or Dry your boat and equipment for at least five Days.
- Never release plants, fish or animals into a water body unless they came out of that water body and empty unwanted bait in the trash.

Find more information about aquatic invasive species and a list of infested waters in the 2023 Iowa Fishing Regulations booklet or on the DNR’s website at www.iowadnr.gov/ais.

Media Contacts: Mike Hawkins, Spirit Lake Fish Management Biologist at 712-336-1840 or Jason Euchner, Aquatic Vegetation Management Biologist at 515-432-2823.

Attendees Note: The Amana Road currently has “Road Closed” signs, but it will remain open to the Pelican Festival location.

Hawkeye Wildlife Area to host 12th Annual Pelican Festival

SWISHER, Iowa - The public is invited to the 12th Annual Pelican Festival, Aug. 27, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., at the Hawkeye Wildlife Area, near Swisher.

Programs begin at 12:30 p.m., and run every 30 minutes. Attendees can see a live peregrine falcon, learn about bats and bees and, of course, the American white pelican. Exhibitors from various outdoors associations, societies and clubs will be on hand with displays attendees can experience.

Pelican viewing for visitors will be assisted by birding volunteers with binoculars and spotting scopes.

The event is hosted by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa Audubon, Iowa City Bird Club, Cedar Rapids Audubon Society and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For more information, call or text 319-430-0315.