



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Busy Labor Day weekend expected on Iowa waters and at state parks

DES MOINES – The unofficial end to summer this weekend is expected to draw thousands of Iowans to their state parks and waterways.

The DNR reminds users to abide by all safety measures to ensure a safe and enjoyable Labor Day weekend.

Boating Safety

Boaters headed out to a lake, river, pond or any other waterway should follow these safety tips:

- Plan ahead and avoid peak hours and large crowds of boaters.
- Park your vehicles and trailers in designated parking spaces NOT in grass areas or they will be ticketed and towed.
- Alcohol and boating don't mix. Wind, sun glare and heat can enhance the effects of alcohol, hindering the operator's ability to make necessary decisions.
- The same limit of .08 for operating a vehicle under the influence applies to boating.
- Always have a designated operator that avoids consuming alcohol.
- Wear your life jacket, it floats, you don't! Any children under the age 13 must wear a lifejacket at all times on a vessel underway in Iowa.
- Every boat or vessel must have a wearable life jacket for everyone on board; a USCG approved throw-able flotation device is also required on vessels 16 feet or longer.
- Make sure there is a charged fire extinguisher on board, as well as a horn/whistle.
- Slow down and watch for other boaters or personal watercraft.
- Avoid dams and other hazards on waterways.

- Obey all posted warning signs and rules.
- Drain plugs and other water draining devices must be removed and/or remain open during transport to avoid the spread of invasive species.

Beach & Swimming Safety

Wherever you choose to swim this Labor Day weekend, whether it's a backyard pool, a pond or lake, or a public pool, please follow these safety tips:

- Keep young children at arm's reach at all times. Never, even for a moment, leave small children alone or in the care of another young child while swimming.
- Drowning is silent.
- Learn how to perform CPR.
- Avoid alcohol use while swimming.
- Alcohol is prohibited at some public beaches.
- Glass bottles are prohibited on beaches.
- Stay within the roped area of the lake.
- Swim with a buddy.
- Obey posted signs and flags.
- Wear a life jacket or some kind of personal flotation device.
- Use sunscreen and drink plenty of water as needed.
- Iowa's public beaches do not have lifeguards on duty.
- Check for bacteria levels at state park beaches at: <https://www.iowadnr.gov/things-to-do/beach-monitoring>

Because the beaches are busier this summer, staff are encouraging visitors to utilize the non-peak times and days. For the busier beaches/parks, the non-peak days usually include Sundays through Thursdays, and Fridays before 5:00 pm. If you plan to go to the beaches on Saturdays, the non-peak hours are usually before noon.

Parks staff may temporarily close parking lots when they become full and limit the number of visitors at that point. The DNR recommends visitors go to another nearby park or beach that is not as heavily populated. Visitors are reminded to only park in designated parking spaces. All violators will be cited by staff.

State Parks/Campgrounds Safety

This weekend will be another very busy one if you plan to visit a state park and campground, use these safety tips to ensure an enjoyable time:

- Pack snacks, food, water and personal hygiene products, including hand sanitizer, to bring along for hiking and utilizing the state parks.
- Stay hydrated with plenty of fluids.
- Don't hike alone and always have some way to communicate if you get lost and need help.
- Wear proper outdoor attire for hiking.
- Plan ahead for your visit to our parks and campgrounds. If a parking lot becomes full at a park or campground, staff may temporarily close the parking lots and limit the number of visitors at that point.

- If there is no parking available, do not park in the grass areas or any other area that is not a designated parking spot. All violators will be cited.
- Utilize the parks during non-peak times, which often include mornings and evenings.
- If a park is heavily populated, find another nearby state park that is less populated.
- Don't transport firewood, buy it locally.
- Be respectful of your neighbors camping around you.
- Slow down on park roadways and obey posted speed limit signs. Families and kids are often walking or biking on the roads.
- "Carry In, Carry Out"—please pick up any trash and carry out what you carry into the park. Be respectful and care for our natural resources.
- Campers should dispose of trash in receptacles, not burn it in the campfires.
- Check [the DNR website for all of the latest closures](#).
- If you plan to fish, be sure to have a current fishing license. You can purchase one by visiting www.iowadnr.gov/fishing, or by downloading the Go Outdoors Iowa app on your smartphone through the Google Play store or the App Store. You can also purchase your fishing license at some local retailers.

Paddling Safety

Whether it be tubing, paddleboarding, kayaking or canoeing, paddlers are enjoying the splash of the water, scenic views, and wildlife viewing from Iowa's rivers, rapids and streams. Stay safe each time you paddle with these simple safety tips:

- With very low water levels in central and western Iowa, due to drought conditions, some waterways are not suitable for paddling, often leaving paddlers stranded.
- Always know your river conditions before you go paddling. For the latest river conditions, contact Iowa DNR Customer Service at 515-725-8200 or your local county conservation board for updates.
- Let others know where you will be paddling, including what access to what access, and when you are expected to return.
- Always wear your life jacket. Kids under age 13 must wear a life jacket at all times. The vessel must have enough life jackets for all members on board.
- Avoid sandbar crowds and "rafting" up together. Tubers are reminded not to go in groups larger than 10 and don't tie tubes to one another.
- Check the Iowa DNR's interactive paddler's map at iowadnr.gov/Things-to-Do/Canoeing-Kayaking/Where-to-Paddle for updates on real-time hazards like downed trees and log jams, strainers and bridge construction. Pay attention to the dam warning signs and know where dams are located before you head out on the water.
- Find individual water trail maps, including access points at iowadnr.gov/Things-to-Do/Canoeing-Kayaking/Water-Trail-Maps-Brochures.

Media Contacts: Susan Stocker, Boating Law Administrator and Education Coordinator, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-313-6439 or Todd Robertson, Iowa DNR River Programs Outreach Coordinator, 515-205-6845.

Pheasant survey results highest in eight years



A quail sitting on a fencepost in western Iowa was counted during the recently completed August roadside survey, the Iowa DNR's annual population survey of pheasants, quail, partridge and cottontail rabbits. Photo courtesy of Iowa DNR wildlife biologist Doug Chafa.

The 2023 August pheasant population survey had the highest statewide counts since 2015, with the biggest increases coming from southwest, northwest and northeast regions. The statewide average was nearly 23 birds per route; a 15 percent increase over 2022.

“The bird counts were better than we thought in northwest and northeastern Iowa. The population in northeast is the highest that region has seen in 24 years,” said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife research biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Based on roadside counts, if hunters turn out like they have over the past few years, Bogenschutz said we can expect to see a harvest somewhere around 400,000 roosters.

“We haven’t had too many years since 2012 that areas were considered excellent, but there are some swaths of counties listed as excellent in northwest and north central Iowa – and over half of the state is considered fair to excellent,” he said.

Weather is a big factor influencing Iowa pheasant population and this uptick followed a normal winter and dry spring.

The annual survey also counts bobwhite quail, gray partridge and cottontail rabbits.

“The partridge population is up significantly with excellent counts coming from north central and northwest regions, and decent counts in parts of the east central region,” Bogenschutz said.

Surprisingly, he said the quail population didn't follow that upward trend with counts similar to last year across southern Iowa's quail belt.

"Quail hunting was pretty good last year and should be good this year as well in the southwest and south-central regions," he said.

Statewide, cottontail rabbit populations are good, with the better numbers coming from south central, west central and east central regions.

The full report is available at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey. The annual August roadside survey has been collecting data on Iowa's upland game populations since 1962. The statewide survey is conducted by Iowa DNR staff between Aug. 1-15, who drive 218, 30-mile routes on gravel roads at dawn on mornings with heavy dew. Hen pheasants will move their broods to the edge of the gravel road to dry off before they begin feeding, which makes them easier to count.

- Youth pheasant season is Oct. 21-22
- Pheasant season is Oct. 28-Jan. 10, 2024
- Quail season is Oct. 28-Jan. 31, 2024
- Rabbit season is Sept. 2-Feb. 28, 2024
- Partridge season is Oct. 14-Jan. 31, 2024

Media Contact: Todd Bogenschutz, Upland Wildlife Research Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources,

Iowa's dove season begins Sept. 1

Iowa's sunflower and wheat fields will be popular places on Sept. 1, when thousands of hunters slip into the standing flowers and field edges in the early morning darkness for the opening day of dove hunting season.

Fast paced and fun, dove hunting can be done by nearly everyone regardless of skill level or mobility. It doesn't require expensive equipment to participate, only clothes that blend in to the background, a bucket and plenty of shells. There's a lot of action with a steady stream of doves coming in.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) includes a list of wildlife areas at www.iowadnr.gov/doves where dove plots were planted and identifies the access point nearest the plot. Hunters are encouraged to do some preseason scouting to see if the sunflower planting was successful or if it was stunted or damaged from the summer heat wave or hail storms.

"It really comes down to getting out there and looking at the area to check the condition of the dove field, then scout it a day or two ahead of the season to see if and how the doves are using it," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife research biologist with the Iowa DNR. "A fair number of doves moved thru Iowa last week with our 50-degree nights. Success will depend on how many remain on opening day and that depends on how many cold nights we have between now and the opener."

Hunters looking for Plan B may want to focus on private land silage or hay fields, or where farmers harvested small grain fields, grazed pastures or feedlots.

Dove plots are getting increasingly busy on opening day and hunters are encouraged to be courteous to one another, to pick up their spent shell casings and other trash and leave the field in good condition. Dove hunting is a good opportunity to introduce someone new to the sport because there is often a lot of action.

Dove season is Sept. 1-Nov. 29. Shooting hours are one half hour before sunrise to sunset. Daily bag limit is 15 (mourning or Eurasian collared) with a possession limit of 30.

Hunters are reminded that their gun must be plugged to hold no more than three shells. If hunting public areas north of I-80, hunters should check to see if nontoxic shot is required. The Iowa online Hunting Atlas at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/Places-to-Hunt-Shoot> identifies all county, state and federal land open to hunting, zone information and nontoxic shot requirements.

All dove hunters are required to register with the migratory Harvest Information Program (HIP). It's free, fast and the information is used to help determine participation and harvest. Go to www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/Migratory-Game-Birds to register.

Media Contact: Todd Bogenschutz, Upland Wildlife Research Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-979-0828.

Brook trout thrive at South Pine Creek wildlife area



Wild bergamot, goldenrod, vervain, common boneset and mountain mint are flowering in the prairie surrounding South Pine Creek. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

The brook trout in South Pine Creek might be the most well-known of the trout species in the Hawkeye State. And for good reason. This strain has been confirmed through two genetic assessments as unique to Iowa.

South Pine Creek is a small, cold, high-quality stream flowing through a prairie-lined valley on the South Pine Wildlife Area in northeast Winneshiek County. The consistently cold stream temperatures, heavily influenced by groundwater, has allowed brook trout to survive.

“People come here to fish because it’s a pretty special spot,” said Troy Anderson, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Upper Iowa Unit.

The small, winding stream is a mile-long hike down an access lane from the one-and-only parking lot on the north end of the wildlife area.

South Pine Creek relies on natural reproduction of brook trout, and of brown trout, to sustain its population. Since these two species grow up wild, they are more difficult to catch than the hatchery raised and widely released rainbow trout. Nearly 1.2 miles of the stream flows through the South Pine area.

“It’s a unique area with special fishing regulations which requires more technical skills of the angler,” said Michael Siepker, fisheries biologist with the Iowa DNR’s Decorah trout hatchery. “People hike in here for the experience of catching a wild Iowa brook trout.”

The special regulations restrict fishing to artificial lures only and all brook trout must be released alive. A recent regulation change allows anglers to keep brown trout (five per day, possession limit of 10), as a means of supporting the brook trout population.

“Our priority is to protect the brook trout and that unique Iowa ancestry,” Siepker said.

That ancestry is being shared with other high-quality streams in northeast Iowa, through a brook trout fingerling stocking effort.

The South Pine brookies are collected around the first of November, spawned streamside then released back into stream. The fertilized eggs are taken to the Manchester trout hatchery where they are raised to fingerling sized before being released to grow up wild.

On this early August morning, the prairie surrounding the stream is just beginning to flower. It’s a strong year for the raggedy, purple, wild bergamot with goldenrod, vervain, common boneset and mountain mint also prominent.

While the stream and trout are the primary focus, South Pine Wildlife Area supports good turkey, rabbit and squirrel hunting, but is mostly known for deer.

“It’s pretty secluded and there’s only one access so you’ll know if anyone is there,” Anderson said.

Forest makes up around 75 percent of South Pine with white oaks prominent among the tree species, but a small pocket of aspens sites on the northwest part of the area. Given South Pine’s location in the state and the existence of aspens, it was a prime candidate for a project to attract and support ruffed grouse by cutting aspens for its regrowth.

Ruffed grouse rely on aspens during its life and the population in the Upper Midwest, including Iowa, has been in decline from some time.

“The aspen cut is about eight years old and it responded really well, but we don’t know if it has attracted any grouse or not,” Anderson said as a woodcock flushed from the aspens.

Media Contact: Troy Anderson, Wildlife Biologist, Upper Iowa Unit, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 563-379-5725.

Landowner adds trees and shrubs to enhance, diversify Allamakee County century farm



Sandy Koehring converted a portion of her 120-acre century farm into a mix of trees and shrubs through the Conservation Reserve Program. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Sandy Koehring was cautious when making changes to the family farm. After all, the Postville-native was born and raised here and it’s been in the family for more than 110 years. So, when she decided to convert part of her land into trees, she started small.

“I didn’t want to dive right in,” she said. “I wanted to take baby steps.”

Her goal was to prevent soil erosion and protect the groundwater, while saving the best ground for row crops.

She met with Dave Asche, district forester with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Elkader office, to walk the property and discuss her options.

The first baby step was in 2008 when she enrolled 8.6 acres into the Conservation Reserve Program, by converting a small portion of pasture to trees. The following year she took another baby step, enrolling 7.8 acres, and then another 7 acres in the third year. By year four, Koehring was ready to dive in – she enrolled another 31 acres into CRP.

In the beginning, she tried different mixes of trees and shrubs, then focused on practices and species she liked. Her property now includes Norway spruce, white

pine, eastern red cedars, nannyberry, dogwood, high bush cranberry, white oak, red oak, chinkapin oak, hazelnut, walnut, chokecherry, and more all from the State Forest Nursery.

Today, nearly half of Koehring's 120-acre farm is enrolled in CRP. "I took the worst of my ground – wet soils, poor pasture, hills and sink holes – and put it into tree plantings and grass and it's the best thing I have done," she said.

The success of her tree planting didn't happen by accident – it took research, planning and working with an experienced private forester for it to all come together.

Asche researched the soil types, which guided his decisions on which tree or shrub would grow best in each situation when writing the tree plan. He included tree and shrub diversity as a protection in case disease comes through. Once the plan was finished, Koehring contacted a local private forester to manage the planting.

"It's important to plant the trees at the right depth and distance with the contours on the property, and private foresters are available to provide that service," Asche said.

Getting the planting off on the right foot was important.

The young trees had tubes placed around them for protection as they grew. The private forester also provided the initial follow up spraying to reduce competition.

Koehring played an active role in helping the tree planting succeed. When the rain didn't come, she would hook on to her 500-gallon water buffalo and applied 1,500 gallons of water weekly to the conifer seedlings. She also mowed around the trees to keep the weeds down.

Walking along the initial planting to a back corner of her property is a cabin she built in 2009. A young buck bounded away, spooked by the unwanted visitors. The once visible cabin is now hidden from view.

Here she enjoys watching fawns and seeing and hearing turkeys and pheasants, as well as other wildlife and song birds. There are dozens of antlers hanging off the front porch, evidence of successful shed antler hunts.

"You got to get it started or you won't see it," she said of the tree planting. "The more I see wildlife, the more reassured I am that I'm protecting the soil. I'm improving this farm by planting trees."

Another one of her goals was to help bring back bees and butterflies and the flowering prairie plants, flowering shrubs and milkweed is accomplishing just that.

There's a 'Tree Famer' sign hanging on her fence at the gravel road. As her CRP contracts expire, she plans to re-enroll the sections to keep trees on the land. "What am I going to do, bulldoze those trees? No, I'm going to re-enroll for another 15 years," she said. "Hopefully, that sign helps neighbors want to do this, too."

Her vision in 2008 of leaving her century farm in better shape has become reality.

Media Contact: Dave Asche, District Forester, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 563-880-0507.

Iowa's teal-only hunting season opens Sept. 1

Iowa's 16-day teal only hunting season begins statewide Sept. 1, offering hunters an opportunity to enjoy Iowa's wetlands and shallow lakes during the mild late summer weather.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes the September teal season available when the teal population is above certain levels. It offers hunters 16 bonus hunting days and does not take any days away from the regular duck hunting seasons.

"The teal season is a good opportunity to introduce young or novice hunters to duck hunting because these birds will fly all day and decoy fairly well," said Orrin Jones, state waterfowl biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Continental populations of blue-winged teal declined in 2023, but remain above the long-term average. However, wetland conditions in North and South Dakota were favorable for good duck production. Teal will be moving in to Iowa in mid to late August and bird numbers can improve overnight with the change in weather up north. The Iowa DNR posts updates to the waterfowl migration each Friday during the duck and goose season at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/Migratory-Game-Birds/Waterfowl-Migration-Survey>.

Teal favor mudflats and shallow water and recent rains across North Iowa have improved wetland conditions in that region, but conditions vary statewide and Jones advised hunters to scout the areas before opening day. The Iowa DNR includes a wetland conditions report on its website at www.iowadnr.gov/hunting in the right sidebar.

"Get out, assess the water levels and vegetation. Check out the wetlands before you go, especially for the first hunt of the season," he said. "There are places that have water and places that don't and it's not universal – they can be as close as within 15 or 20 miles of each other."

Since this season is only open for teal, it is important that hunters properly identify their target to avoid shooting other species. "Hunters need to take that into account when planning their hunt," Jones said. "Keep the sun at your back – it's much more difficult to identify ducks when looking into the sun."

Legal shooting hours begin at sunrise, which is different from the regular duck season. Hunters are required to have the state migratory game bird fee and federal duck stamp.

Media Contact: Orrin Jones, State Waterfowl Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-231-1957.

Iowa's rabbit, squirrel season opens Sept. 2

The good news for Iowa's cottontail rabbit hunters is that Iowa has an abundant rabbit population, with the south-central part of the state seeing the best overall numbers. The better news for hunters is Iowa's cottontail rabbit season begins Sept. 2 statewide.

“Cottontail numbers were unchanged from last year so it should be another good year for rabbit hunting not only for experienced hunters, but for young or novice hunters who can learn necessary skills with little competition,” said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife research biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

The most popular way to hunt is with a shotgun walking brushy areas with grass next to crop fields in the morning or evening. It can be done individually or with a group of friends.

Rabbit hunting does not require a significant investment or high tech equipment, just a shotgun and some shells. Rabbit is a lean, low fat meat and popular table fare considered a delicacy in many culinary circles.

Cottontail rabbit season is Sept. 2 to Feb. 28, 2024. The daily limit is 10 rabbits with a possession limit of 20. Jackrabbit season is closed. While wearing blaze orange clothing is not required to hunt rabbits, it is recommended. Shooting hours for rabbits is sunrise to sunset.

Iowa’s cottontail rabbit population estimates are included in the recently completed August roadside survey of upland wildlife species at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey.

Local squirrel populations are variable depending upon acorn production and it appears to be a good nut year in many areas. In areas of lower annual acorn production look for patches of hickory trees as an excellent alternative.

Squirrel hunting is an inexpensive and exciting way to get introduced into hunting. Those new to hunting can gain valuable woodsmanship skills as squirrels will twist and turn hunters through the woodlands.

“One beauty of squirrel hunting is if you mess up and spook a squirrel there is usually another one just down the ridge, this provides lots of opportunities for success,” said Jim Coffey, forest wildlife biologist for the Iowa DNR. “Experienced hunters often say that they haven’t hunted squirrels since they were a kid. Well, this is the year to be a kid again. Get yourself outside chasing squirrels and bring someone new to hunting along. Squirrels are definitely an underutilized resource.”

Be prepared during early squirrel season for mosquitoes and other flying pests, Coffey said, and try and hunt in the early cool mornings as squirrels will be very active before the heat of the day.

Hunters will generally find plenty of squirrels and little competition. This would also be a good opportunity to do some scouting for a spring turkey hunt or to look for whitetail deer rubs before bow season.

“These honed skills will make you an overall better hunter. Many of the skills needed for squirrel hunting are also used for spring turkey hunting,” Coffey said.

Squirrel season is Sept. 2 to Jan. 31, 2024, with a daily bag limit of six total or combination of red fox squirrels or eastern grey squirrels and a possession limit of 12. Fox squirrels are generally found in more open pasture timber and woodlots whereas grey squirrels tend to be in more mature timber. There is no restriction on shooting hours.

Hunters looking for places to go rabbit or squirrel hunting should use Iowa's online hunting atlas at www.iowadnr.gov/hunting, with more than 600,000 acres of public land that allows hunting.

Hunters have the opportunity to hunt these species on additional acres of private land enrolled into the popular Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP).

Enrollment in the program is at an all-time high of nearly 33,000 acres. The IHAP allows hunters access to the portion of the property covered by the agreement, from Sept. 1 to May 31. Conservation officers will provide assistance and enforcement, if needed.

Media Contacts: Rabbits - Todd Bogenschutz, Upland Wildlife Research Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-979-0828. Squirrels – Jim Coffey, Forest Wildlife Research Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-774-2958.

Water level to drop at Three Mile Lake ahead of restoration

CRESTON – Lake water levels at Three Mile Lake, in Union County, will be lowered this week as a part of a lake restoration project.

Managers will maintain the lake at approximately eight feet below normal lake levels until the fall of 2024, when the water will be lowered up to 11 feet to expose areas of shoreline and lake bed for construction. Water being released through the lake's outlet structure will be released slowly to avoid downstream impacts.

Construction activities will begin this fall and be completed in the spring of 2025, when managers will allow the lake to refill. The lake will remain open for boating and recreation throughout the project with boat access maintained at the main boat ramp. Boaters should use caution with the lower water levels as tree stumps, cedar tree brush piles, and underwater reefs may be at or near the water's surface.

The restoration project will improve and protect water quality in Three Mile Lake and provide new recreational opportunities for this popular destination. Planned activities include stabilizing the shoreline, improving the jetties, installing fish habitat and modifying the existing in-lake silt basin.

For more information, please contact George Antoniou at George.antoniou@dnr.iowa.gov or 515.201.6775.