



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

# Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Oct. 10, 2023**

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## Birds and birders flock to the Boone Forks Bird Conservation Area for the fall migration



*The Des Moines River at Dolliver Memorial State Park is part of the Boone Forks Bird Conservation Area, a popular migration corridor in Hamilton and Webster counties. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.*

The confluence of the Boone and Des Moines rivers forms the heart of the Boone Forks Bird Conservation Area (BCA) – 80,000-acres of well managed public and private land in Webster and Hamilton counties, home to more than 130 nesting bird species and a stop-over site for another 115 migrating species.

“It’s a really important area, it supports a higher number of bird Species of Greatest Conservation Need than most other BCAs,” said Anna Buckardt Thomas, avian

ecologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

The mostly riverine and forested habitat supports forest birds and much of the public land is managed under a forest wildlife stewardship plan using practices that benefit the bird community. The towering oaks support lots of insects and caterpillars and produce acorns – all high-quality proteins used by birds.

On the private land side, participation in the BCA is voluntary and a good portion of private land is forested on the hilly river valleys.

“The area is so cool because a lot of the public land and private land has forest habitat,” she said.

And access is easy. Much of the BCA can be enjoyed by driving on gravel and county roads with river access boat ramp parking lots, and state and county parks as stopping points. Equipment is simple, just a pair of binoculars, your eyes and ears, she said.

Standing on the mostly dry Des Moines River bed in southeast Webster County on this sunny late September morning, Buckardt Thomas is scanning the trees through a pair of binoculars, listening for bird calls while a small flock of Canada geese noisily take flight.

“There’s a downy woodpecker, blue jay, red-bellied woodpecker,” she said upon hearing each bird’s call.

Dedicated in 2010, Boone Forks was Iowa’s 16<sup>th</sup> Bird Conservation Area. The emphasis of the bird conservation area program is to encourage habitat conservation at a larger landscape level – a level necessary to establish stable or growing bird populations.

Boone Forks BCA designation encompasses Brushy Creek State Recreation Area, Boone Forks Wildlife Area, Dolliver Memorial State Park, Briggs Woods county park, Bells Mill county park, Skillet Creek Indian Mounds, Gordon’s Marsh, and more. The public land within the BCA provides access and trails where birders can get out and hike, surrounded by the sight and sounds of the various birds.

Acadian flycatchers, wood thrushes, and ruby-throated hummingbirds, all nest here. As do eastern whip-poor-wills, which is a unique as not many areas in Central Iowa are suitable for whip-poor-wills. During the summer, spotted sandpipers have been seen along the river. Today, a yellow-rumped warbler – the most abundant warbler in North America - is in a tree hanging over the river. A downy woodpecker is tapping on a nearby limb.

Following the road through Dolliver Memorial State Park, Buckardt Thomas pulled in to a gravel parking lot at the boat ramp and hopped out, binoculars up, searching the trees.

“There’s a Nashville warbler,” she said. “There’s a Tennessee warbler. Sounds like there’s an eastern phoebe over here.”

On a previous trip, she saw a cerulean warbler at Dolliver’s picnic area.

The Boone Forks BCA is one of the better places in Central Iowa to see and hear breeding warblers, cerulean warblers, Louisiana waterthrush and the peak of the fall warbler migration to Central and South America is September.

The presence of broad-wing hawks confirms the fall hawk migration is underway, and soon, over-wintering bald eagles will arrive. The Des Moines River area is so attractive to bald eagles that it is included in the winter bald eagle survey.

Nearby Brushy Creek Lake is a popular place for migrating waterfowl and, if it has open water in the winter, trumpeter swans will gather there. A few years ago, a yellow-billed loon, native to the artic, showed up and hung out for a month – only the sixth time the species was ever seen in Iowa. There’s an opportunity to see belted kingfisher (crow-sized) along the river, in the winter, too.

Grassland birds are in the prairies. Marsh birds can be found in the wetland habitat, adding to the bird diversity.

“A catbird is calling,” she said. “And a robin.”

For anyone interested in experiencing Boone Forks BCA, all you need to do is just stop and listen. A list of Bird Conservation Areas is available on the DNR website at <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Conservation/Bird-Conservation-Areas>.

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## Oxbow Bottoms Wildlife Area won't remain a secret for long



*Looking west from the bank of the Iowa River, Oxbow Bottoms Wildlife Area is a 260-acre floodplain grassland-wetland complex in Tama County. Photo Courtesy of the Iowa DNR.*

Bordered by the Iowa River to the east and U.S. Hwy. 30 to the north is one of the newest public areas in Central Iowa - the 260-acre Oxbow Bottoms Wildlife Area – a floodplain grassland-wetland complex in Tama County.

Because of its high visibility, it will likely become one of the more popular places to hunt. But it's not there yet.

“It’s so new, I haven’t been getting many calls about it,” said Steve Woodruff, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Iowa River Unit.

The Iowa DNR took possession of Oxbow Bottoms in 2021, after it was first acquired by Pheasants Forever. Deer, pheasants and doves are here. Turkeys too, along the river. And given its size, it can accommodate multiple groups.

“The local Pheasants Forever chapters were very instrumental in this acquisition, and they did some important initial work on it including re-establishing old wetland basins,” Woodruff said. “This area fills a need for public hunting land in this part of the state.”

The groups partnering to create Oxbow Bottoms were the Marshall/Tama Counties chapter, the Iowa County chapter, Jasper County chapter, and Northern Polk County chapter of Pheasants Forever, the Iowa Build a Wildlife Area donors and supporters, OnX Hunt, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Iowa DNR.

The area is heavily influenced by the Iowa River and the previous landowner enrolled it in the Wetland Reserve Program. Floodplains come with management

issues and at Oxbow Bottoms, the issues are keeping cottonwoods and willows at bay while encouraging the grassland-prairie and wetlands on the developing area. As part of the management plan, a combination of prescribed fire and aerial spraying is used to manage the trees.

“That’s showing good results so far,” Woodruff said. “We’re trying to remove the seed source so other species get a chance to come in.”

The habitat and plant community vary slightly depending on elevation – the higher and less frequently flooded areas have more native diversity, like big bluestem, Indian grass, switchgrass, partridge pea, compass plant, rattlesnake master, and purple prairie clover. The lower elevation has whorl milkweed, Canada anemone, gray headed coneflower, cup plant, compass plant and partridge pea.

“Flooding really set the grasses back and this area does get flooded,” Woodruff said.

As a floodplain, the fairly level terrain makes walking easier and the fire lanes provide good places to hike. A neighboring farmer maintains the fire lanes.

A bald eagle soars over the trickle that is the Iowa River, its nest sits high on a cottonwood on the east bank. Killdeer, with their familiar call, are running around on the river’s exposed sandbars.

Although the drought continues its grip on Iowa, Oxbow Bottoms’ basins are ready to catch and hold water once the rains return.

Around the basins, the dry year has encouraged more foxtail, marestail and button weed than millet. The Iowa River Unit staff sprayed the existing perennial vegetation in the dry basins in August to encourage annual vegetation growth, which produces more seeds than perennials. Those seeds are an important food source for migrating waterfowl.

Woodruff said the management plan also includes clearing certain areas where sorghum and green browse can be planted as food plots for deer and pheasants.

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## Check docks and equipment for invasive species before storing for the winter

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reminds lake property owners to check their boat and trailers, and docks and lifts, for aquatic invasive species before storing them for the winter.

Aquatic invasive species, everything from zebra mussels to Eurasian watermilfoil, move from one waterbody to another by hitchhiking on boats, in bait buckets and on other equipment used in the water. They can create serious problems for Iowa waters and negatively impact the quality of outdoor recreation experiences.

“Fall is a great time for lake property owners to check their boats, docks and lifts for new infestations of aquatic invasive species like zebra mussels,” said Kim Bogenschutz, aquatic invasive species coordinator for the Iowa DNR. “As you bring each item out of the water, visually inspect areas that have been submerged for months. Touch smooth surfaces to check for juvenile zebra mussels that feel like sandpaper when you run your hand over a surface they’ve attached themselves to and are often invisible to the human eye.”

Aquatic invasive species often grow quickly and spread fast when brought to a new lake or stream due to lack of natural controls.

### **How to Prevent the Spread of Invasive Species**

- CLEAN any plants, animals, or mud from your boat and equipment before you leave a waterbody.
- DRAIN water from all equipment (motor, live well, bilge, transom well, bait bucket) before you leave a waterbody.
- 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 or 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 waterbody and always empty unwanted bait in the trash.

It is illegal to possess or transport prohibited aquatic invasive species or to transport any aquatic plants on water-related equipment in Iowa. Signs posted at public accesses remind boaters to stop aquatic hitchhikers and identify infested waters.

Iowa law also requires boaters to drain all water from boats and equipment before they leave a water access and to keep drain plugs removed or opened during transport. It is also illegal to introduce any live fish, except for hooked bait, into public waters.

Learn more about aquatic invasive species, including a list of infested waters in the current *Iowa Fishing Regulations* or at [www.iowadnr.gov/ais](http://www.iowadnr.gov/ais).

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