

Iowa DNR News

CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

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Mix of habitats attract wildlife diversity at Big Marsh Wildlife Area, near Dumont



A water control structure was recently installed on south end of the Big Marsh Area, near Dumont, to help manage the water level and wetland habitat on the floodplain. The habitat changes as the elevation rises slightly to the west where the restored prairie is more successful. Butterflies, bees, dragonflies and more bounce from flower to flower, darting in and out of the prairie. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Dumont has a front row view of the 614-acre northern section of Big Marsh Wildlife Area and the pheasants, turkeys, ducks, geese, eagles and more wildlife that call the area home.

The recently added parcel southeast of town with a history of flooding, between the West Fork of the Cedar River and Hartgrave Creek, was sold to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) after attempts by multiple landowners to consistently farm it were unsuccessful.

Landowners had built a dike system to try to keep river and creek out. They had dug a trench through it to try to drain the land. But ultimately the floodplain and flash flood nature of the system were too much and it was added to the Big Marsh Wildlife Area.

The dike system remains, but now is used to keep water on the landscape. The NRCS designed and installed water control structure on south end to help manage the water level and wetland habitat. The floodplain is managed with a number of wetland basins with small grains and annual wetland plants for food for resident and migrating wildlife.

Winding south and west along the dike, a pair of sandhill cranes take flight from the drying wetland. A young bald eagle was soaring overhead.

"This is an awesome area, full of diverse wildlife," said Justin Clark, wildlife biologist for the Iowa DNR.

Management focuses on increasing the amount of forage available and battling the invasive Reed canary grass that thrives in wet soils. "You can't fight the floodplain," Clark said. "We turned to what worked decades ago – small grains. We chose what's out there versus trying force prairie in a place that will become canary grass."

Clark said it's a constant battle to try to contain the aggressive invader. The plan calls for a combination of haying and spraying the invader after Aug. 1, which avoids negatively impacting ground nesting animals.

"This encourages smartweed, bidons, milkweeds, giant ragweed and common ragweed while keeping the canary grass down," he said. "The weedy component attracts bugs that benefits pheasant chicks, turkey poults and, in the fall, seeds, that are good fuel for waterfowl."

The diverse habitat is what makes this section of Big Marsh so valuable to wildlife. Big Marsh is home to red shouldered hawks, sandhill cranes, Blandings turtles, all types of waterfowl, and is a stopover for migrating birds.

It is also valuable as an outdoor classroom, hosting students from Aplington-Parkersburg, Dike-New Hartford, Clarksville and troops of Scouts, and has provided summertime hands-on externships to teachers for more than a decade.

The habitat changes as the elevation rises slightly to the west where the restored prairie is more successful. Butterflies, bees, dragonflies and more bounce from flower to flower, darting in and out of the prairie. Here, the plan is to mow firebreaks in different locations to try to increase plant diversity. Fire is important management tool and the east half was burned in 2022, followed by the west half in 2024. The higher elevation is attractive to pheasants, turkeys and turtles.

The east side of the dike has oxbows and sloughs that is always wet. The 1-1/2 miles of mowed dikes and old railroad grade are a great place to hike and see wildlife and get fresh air and exercise.

The Big Marsh area resumes just to the west of Dumont and north of Hwy. 3, with Hargraves Creek flowing through its southern portion. Roughly 38 acres of this

parcel is within Dumont city limits so only archery hunting is allowed – no guns.

Hargraves Creek has a history of flooding this area, impacting the town. As a means of preventing flooding, the Iowa DOT has a project that will move a culvert under Hwy. 3 to allow more water through, and Butler County will raise the north-south gravel road on the west side of town to create a barrier to the floodwaters.

Media Contact: Justin Clark, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-330-2087.

Mine reclamation project to reshape Pella Wildlife Area



The Pella Wildlife Area is undergoing a \$4 million mine reclamation project that will see it transform from a former strip mine, to an area with a reconstructed prairie, oak hickory timber and wetlands that more naturally fits with the surrounding landscape. The project is expected to be completed by late 2025. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is in the early stages of a two-year project that will completely change the Pella Wildlife Area, thanks to \$4 million in funding from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) Mine Reclamation program.

The north half of the area was closed to all public use on Oct. 1. The south half will remain open until the reclamation work begins, likely around Nov. 1, when the entire wildlife area will be closed for public use. The area will be reopened to the public after the project is completed in late 2025.

The mine reclamation program is funded by mining royalties from western states with active coal mines and the national infrastructure investment after the covid pandemic. IDALS will oversee the project.

Located 1-1/2 miles south of Pella, the 277-acre Pella Wildlife Area is the site of a former strip coal mine active until the 1950s, when it was acquired by the Iowa

DNR. The project to remake the area includes removing all trees and vegetation, draining the ponds, and then rebuilding it to more naturally fit with the surrounding landscapes and replace the invasive plant species with native species.

Preparing for the reclamation project began in 2021, when the Iowa DNR surveyed trees (primarily cottonwoods) on site then solicited bids for contractors to utilize them as part of a salvage harvest. The winning bidder removed 2,300 trees, filling 185 semi-truck loads, totaling 700,000 board feet for use as pallets. A firewood contractor then cut and removed additional trees as part of the salvage harvest.

Funds received from salvage harvests are used to support forestry improvement projects throughout the state on DNR managed lands. The salvage harvest was completed in late winter.

In 2021, Vermeer partnered with DNR to field test some of its equipment on the site, clearing 10 acres of black locust, hedge and other invasive plant species in the middle of the area. This new open space had 10,000 trees planted in 2023, thanks to a grant from Alliant Energy. A contractor planted a mix of swamp white oak, pin oak, white oak, red oak, bur oak, along with shagbark hickory and pecan. The planting will remain through the reclamation project.

“It looks messy right now but the annuals produce a lot of seeds for wildlife and provide protection to the oaks to get a head start,” said Todd Gosselink, wildlife biologist with the Iowa DNR. “The whole area will look absolutely different once this project is completed.”

The new look Pella Wildlife Area will have a 70-acre timber, 20 acres of wetlands located to filter water coming off the area, with the remainder in restored prairie with plants that are adapted for acidic soils in the mine reclamation areas. Once completed, it will support woodland species, wetland species, prairie species and edge species.

“We’re going to manage this to have something for everyone,” he said. “There will be more usable space for wildlife and for people.”

Media Contact: Todd Gosselink, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-238-6936.

DNR to host public meeting on hazardous tree removal at Lewis and Clark State Park

ONAWA, IA – The Iowa DNR is hosting an open house at the Lewis and Clark State Park Visitor Center on Tuesday, Oct. 23 from 4 to 6 p.m. regarding tree removal and a timber sale at the park. The tree removal plan addresses several hazardous cottonwood trees near the campground. The open house will take place in a come-and-go format with DNR forestry staff on hand to answer questions.

For more information contact: DNR Park, Forest and Preserves Supervisor Michelle Reinig at Michelle.Reinig@dnr.iowa.gov

Stay safe this harvest season

AMES - As fall harvest starts across Iowa, the risk of wildfires in crop fields increases. Iowa is seeing dry conditions for this fall with relative humidity dropping down to dangerous levels for wildfires and ignition sources in the fields. Higher afternoon temperatures are also expected with the National Weather Service issuing both Red Flag Warnings and Fire Weather Watches across Iowa.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) encourages farmers to get reacquainted with fire prevention practices to keep your farm 'firewise.' The following simple steps for a safer harvest can save time and money.

- **Properly prepare machinery** to reduce the chance of a field fire from an overheated bearing (check the manufacturer's recommendations). A spark from an improperly lubricated combine can instantaneously ignite dry plants and field debris.

Check that all fire extinguishers carried on the machinery are fully charged with loose powder inside. If the powder is not loose, remove the extinguisher from its bracket then thump the canister with a rubber hammer until the powder moves when shaken.

Make sure the size of the extinguisher is appropriate for the size of the machinery. You may need larger and/or additional extinguishers. Also make sure you have the correct extinguisher for the type of fire to be extinguished. There are two types of extinguishers, the powder extinguisher for electrical and petroleum-based fires and the water extinguisher for vegetative fires. You may need to carry both kinds of extinguishers.

- **Keep equipment clean.** Check and remove combustible harvest debris from motors, exhausts, ledges and brackets several times a day. A portable gas-powered leaf blower is great for blowing debris from the various surfaces of the combine.
- **Service grain storage and drying equipment.** Storage facilities are like your bank vault. Protect their contents by properly servicing all bearings, belts, motors and drags. Dryers frequently cause fires; have a qualified service technician perform the necessary maintenance before drying grain. Keep weeds mowed around the facilities to discourage a fire from spreading. All extinguishers should be handy, fully charged, and the proper size and type for the area.
- **Turn off interior lighting in overfilled bins.** A grain fire will start if the grain surrounds the bulb. Turn off the light's breaker to avoid accidentally turning the light on. This also applies to hay storage facilities.
- **Handle hay properly.** Improper hay storage commonly causes or complicates farm fires. Preventative measures greatly reduce this risk.

Planning proper hay storage is crucial. Store hay away from combustibles such as gasoline, fertilizers and pesticides, as well as open burning areas like burn barrels, brush piles and vegetative burning. Arrange round bales in groups of 10 or fewer and place at least 100 feet away from structures. Leave 30 feet of mowed grass, bare ground or rock between the bale groups, creating a solid fire break.

Many hay fires occur by spontaneous combustion of moist hay, usually within six weeks after baling. Plan to bale hay at its driest stage and do not bale in the morning dew or too soon after a rain.

Check stored hay frequently for hot hay or an internal hay fire. Be aware of a caramel or strong burning odor, a visible vapor or smoke, a strong musty smell, and/or hay that is hot when touched. If any of these occur, call the fire department immediately and do not move the hay. Moving it exposes overheated or smoldering hay to oxygen, speeding the fire.

- **When tilling in the fall, till a 30 foot break** around building sites, remote bin sites and outside storage facilities to minimize fire spread, and around fields if there is excess fine fuels in the area. Remove weeds and other combustibles around structures and stored equipment.
- **If a fire occurs, remain calm, call 911 immediately.** Provide clear, concise directions to your location. Many field and bin sites do not have 911 addresses, so be prepared to identify an intersection or landmark to direct responders.

To help control field fires until firefighters arrive, remain calm and act swiftly. Quickly disk a fire break approximately 15 feet wide around the fire. Be cautious when doing this as smoke will starve and stall a motor and will make hazards and bystanders difficult to see. To assist with a structural fire, make sure there are no flammable objects nearby and if the circuit panel is safely accessible, turn off the building's electricity. If time allows, evacuate any livestock to a distant pasture. If possible, spray high-pressure water on any surrounding vegetation or structures, discouraging spreading embers. Do not take risks.

After using any equipment to fight a fire, check air filters, ledges, nooks and crannies for burning debris. For more detailed information, visit www.iowadnr.gov/fire.

Remember, **in a fire emergency, call 911 immediately.** Do not wait until all your means of fighting the fire are exhausted. Every minute impacts your losses.

For more information, contact Ryan Schlater at 515-233-8067 or visit www.iowadnr.gov/fire.

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.

Media Contact: Kim Bogenschutz, Fisheries Bureau's Aquatic Invasive Species Program Coordinator, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-290-0540.