

Iowa DNR News

CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

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Join a First Day Hike on New Year's Day

DES MOINES – What's the best way to spend New Year's Day? Take a First Day Hike in an Iowa state park or forest!

More than 40 parks are hosting either a guided group hike or suggesting a self-guided hike. Hikers can expect to be surrounded by the quiet beauty of nature in winter, and experience spectacular views, beautiful settings and the cultural treasures offered by Iowa's state parks.

"We are excited to host First Day Hikes again, helping visitors experience Iowa state parks and forests year-round," said Sherry Arntzen, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' State Parks, Forests and Preserves Bureau. "These hikes are a great way to get outside, exercise, enjoy nature and welcome the New Year with friends and family."

Staff and volunteers will lead free, guided First Day Hikes in 26 participating state parks. Some hikes will include wildlife viewing and hot beverages. Hikes will average one to two miles, or longer, depending on location.

Details about the hikes can be found at www.iowadnr.gov/firstdayhikes. To see a comprehensive national map of First Day Hikes, visit www.stateparks.org

Habitat planning for bad weather is key to supporting pheasant populations



The first snow of the season is a popular event with pheasant hunters because it often sends the birds to cover where hunters expect to find them. And while a little snow is good, too much snow can be bad, burying waste grains that are an important food source and collapsing marginal habitat.

This was the scenario Iowa experienced from 2007 to 2011 when winters were averaging 30-50 inches of snow, and the spring nesting season was averaging 7-12 inches of rain. The statewide pheasant population survey was knocked down from 27 birds per 30-mile route, to an all-time low of seven.

“It was a double whammy,” said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “It was unprecedented for us – going back to the 1960s we had never had five years in a row of bad winters followed by wet springs. The closest thing comparable was three years in a row in the early 1980s.”

The impact on Iowa’s pheasant population prompted the Iowa Legislature to convene a pheasant study group to looking into ways to support Iowa’s pheasant population. The group produced a habitat design recommendation, called Pheasant SAFE (State Acres For Enhancement), that was an amped up version of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) combining winter cover, with food plots and nesting coverall on one field.

“Pheasant SAFE put the bedroom, living room and kitchen all on one CRP property,” Bogenschutz said.

A piece of the Pheasant SAFE design that serves as a thermal escape during severe winters is a block planting of switchgrass or shelterbelts if landowners so choose.

Shelterbelts are multiple rows of trees or shrubs that offer travel corridors, food and escape cover for pheasants and other wildlife species. The woody vegetation component isn’t a requirement to enroll in Pheasant SAFE.

“Eight rows of shelterbelts provide awesome winter cover,” Bogenschutz said. “A block of switchgrass is required and we encourage a well-designed food plot. On

the nesting side, we're encouraging pollinator seeding that also benefits bees and monarchs – you want insects around for food. Switchgrass, or, if you're enrolling a wetland, cattails, are great winter habitat. The woody shelterbelts also provide overwinter habitat for bees and songbirds. There will also be some deer and cottontail use as well.”

Landowners interested in adding this pheasant friendly habitat can learn more by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey, and scrolling to the Helping Landowners with Wildlife Goals section. Links include information on technical assistance and local DNR and Pheasants Forever contacts.

“These SAFE sites are a great food source and minimizes bird movement when we have a bad winter,” Bogenschutz said. “When pheasants are exposed, that’s not good. SAFE keeps them in cover, allows them to walk in and out of the food plot and minimizes their exposure, which leads to better survival and better nesting.

“And they’re great places to hunt.”

Today, Iowa has about 1.6 million acres of CRP, of which, 494,000 acres are enrolled in a SAFE practice.

“Having quality habitat that includes food, nesting cover and thermal corridors allows for pheasants to survive harsh winters and wet springs, and to recover their populations in about half the time as areas with poor habitat,” Bogenschutz said.

Installing the different pieces of the Pheasant SAFE plan usually occurs in the spring, unless the area is being converted from existing CRP or other habitat types that require it to be sprayed in the fall. Native prairie plant seeds can be broadcast on frozen ground in February and March, or planted conventionally after the ground thaws.

“You’ve got options, depending upon your flexibility as a landowner, and that’s where we can help,” he said.

The Iowa DNR and Pheasants Forever are celebrating 100 years of pheasant hunting in the Hawkeye State. The first season was held Oct. 20-22, 1925, when 13 counties in north central Iowa were opened to pheasant hunting. Hunters were allowed a three-rooster limit, for a half-day of hunting. An estimated 75,000 hunters participated.

Hunters can commemorate the 100th anniversary by purchasing a hard card featuring Iowa Pheasants Forever Print of the Year. Residents can begin purchasing licenses for 2025 on Dec. 15.

Information on places to hunt, the August roadside survey results and more is available online by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey.

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

2025 hunting, fishing licenses on sale Dec. 15

Iowans can buy 2025 resident hunting, fishing and other licenses on Dec. 15. Licenses purchased for 2024 expire on Jan. 10.

The menu of license options includes the popular Outdoor Combo annual resident hunting/fishing/habitat combo license for \$55; the Angler's Special three-year fishing license for \$62; and the Hunter's Special three-year hunting license with habitat included for \$101.

Also available is the Bonus Line option for \$14 letting resident and nonresident anglers to fish with one more line in addition to the two lines allowed with the regular fishing license.

Upgrade your paper license to a durable hard card with custom art from Iowa artists for only \$6.

Download the GoOutdoorsIowa mobile app for iPhone and Android devices to buy and access your license information, no matter where you are. Sync your hunting and fishing licenses on the app to show in the field. You may download multiple customer licenses to offer one secure digital license document location for families, groups, and more.

Licenses are available at 600 locations across the state, and on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.gov/GoOutdoorsIowa.

Hunting and fishing are often enjoyed with family and friends. A fishing or hunting license makes a great stocking stuffer.

Stay safe on the ice this winter

The recent blast of arctic air is growing ice on lakes and ponds across the northern two-thirds of Iowa. Outdoor ice enthusiasts are ready to get out ice fishing, snowmobiling, ice skating or fat-tire bike riding.

The DNR recommends a minimum of four inches of clear ice for fishing and at least five inches for snowmobiles and ATVs.

Ice forms at different rates on each body of water depending upon the size and water depth. Once frozen, conditions change constantly and ice thickness can vary across the lake. Rocks, trees, docks or other things that poke through the ice will conduct heat and make the ice around it less stable. Trust your instincts – if the ice does not look right, don't go out.

A blanket of snow on top of an ice covered lake insulates the ice, slowing the growth of ice and hiding potential hazards or weak spots. River ice is 15 percent weaker than lake ice. Ice with a bluish color is safer than clear ice. Avoid slushy or honey-combed and stay away from dark spots on the ice. Don't walk into areas where the snow cover looks discolored.

Safety Tips on the Ice

- No ice is 100 percent safe.
- New ice is usually stronger than old ice.
- Don't go out alone - if the worst should happen, someone will be there to call for help or to help rescue.
- Let someone know where you are going and when you will return.
- Check ice thickness as you go out - there could be pockets of thin ice or places where ice recently formed.
- Avoid off-colored snow or ice. It is usually a sign of weakness.
- The insulating effect of snow slows down the freezing process.
- Bring along these basic items to help keep you safe: hand warmers, ice cleats to help prevent falls, ice picks (wear around your neck) to help you crawl out of the water if you fall in, a life jacket, a floating safety rope, a whistle to call for help, a basic first aid kit and extra dry clothes including a pair of gloves.
- Use extreme caution when snowmobiling on ice. Snowmobiles can be difficult to steer and take a long time to stop with limited traction on ice. Slow down and avoid heavy braking.

Funds available for spring 2025 tree plantings in communities impacted by the 2020 derecho

The Iowa Legislature appropriated state infrastructure funds to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for a community-based tree planting program for derecho recovery tree planting.

The Community Forestry Grant Program provides reimbursable grants to purchase and plant trees suitable to Iowa in counties included in the 2020 Governor's disaster proclamation. Approximately \$250,000 in funds are available to state and local governments, schools and volunteer organizations, and service organizations in the 27 impacted counties.

Award recipients will be reimbursed \$500 to \$10,000 and are not required to provide a dollar-for-dollar cash match to purchase trees and planting materials. Qualifying public planting lands include, but are not limited to, street rights-of-way, parks, school grounds, courthouse lawns, public buildings, fairgrounds, cemeteries, libraries, and trails (DNR lands are not eligible).

The spring application and rules are available online at www.iowadnr.gov/urbanforestry. Applications are due by 4:30 p.m. on Monday, March 3, 2025.

Media Contact: Ellie Jones, Community Disaster Recovery Coordinator, Iowa Department of Natural Resources and Trees Forever, 319-826-0814 or ellie.jones@dnr.iowa.gov.

Ledges “State of the Park” Address to be held in Boone.

BOONE – Tens of thousands of campers, creek stompers, and other park patrons celebrated the centennial anniversary of Ledges State Park throughout 2024. To wrap up the year, staff from the park will host their annual open house at 6 p.m., Dec. 19 at Boone City Hall Auditorium, 923 Eighth Street, in Boone. A short presentation will begin at 6:30 p.m.

The event is free and open to the public.

The event will be highlighted by an overview of the draft Ledges State Park Forest Stewardship Plan. Public comments on the plan are encouraged as park staff seek to incorporate public opinion into it.

“This plan was drafted by our district forester from years of forest data collection. It was reviewed by professionals within the DNR and is now ready for public review. As custodians of the park, we want to be the best stewards of the forest resource and this plan allows us to do just that,” said Andy Bartlett, park manager for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources at Ledges State Park.

Information and displays on events, projects, and changes coming to Ledges in 2025 will also be displayed. Friends of the Ledges members will be present to

provide information on membership and ways to get involved with their group and the park.

Any person with special requirements such as those related to mobility or hearing impairments who wishes to participate in the public meeting should promptly contact the DNR or ADA Coordinator at 515-725-8200, Relay Iowa TTY Service 800-735-7942, or Webmaster@dnr.iowa.gov to advise of specific needs.

If you need assistance in a language other than English, contact DNR at Ledges@dnr.iowa.gov or civilrights@dnr.iowa.gov; or by telephone at 515-432-1852 at least seven days before the event.

Si necesita ayuda en un idioma que no sea inglés, comuníquese con el DNR al Ledges@dnr.iowa.gov o civilrights@dnr.iowa.gov; o por teléfono a 515-432-1852 al menos siete días antes del evento.

Media Contact: Andy Bartlett, Park Manager, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-432-1852 or andy.bartlett@dnr.iowa.gov