

# Conservation Connection

## Johnson County Conservation Newsletter

### Patience – a Key Component of Trail Development

**Brad Freidhof** - Conservation Program Manager

The person who gave us the infamous expression, "patience is a virtue," must have known something about trail development, at the very least they knew how important a well-planned path can be on this journey we call life. Trail planning, design, engineering, and construction are all steps in getting to the long awaited opportunity to journey between two places. In Johnson County there are numerous trail plans in differing stages of development, but few are as anticipated as the completion of the Hoover Trail between Ely and Solon.

This segment of trail is a part of both the American Discovery Trail and the Great American Rail-Trail networks, which both have routes laid out across the United States. This trail segment also connects to the Cedar Valley Nature Trail, which provides trail users with numerous trail corridors and connection all the way to Waterloo, Iowa. Trail-users have been excitedly watching the progress of this segment since the project began several years ago and they had been dreaming about its development prior to that.

The wait is about to come to an end. This spring, construction crews completed the last sections of concrete along Highway 382. Signage is being installed at the trailhead and rest areas, and dirt work to provide the final grade adjacent to the trail is underway. The weather hasn't been as cooperative as we'd hoped this spring, but progress remains on track for the trail to be fully open this summer. The underpass along Ely Road will be the only remaining portion of the project to be completed. It is scheduled to be



**Above:** Bikers enjoying the newly completed trail segment that links the Hoover Trail and Cedar Valley Nature Trail. Construction of this trail segment was made possible through funds provided through the Conservation Bond.

constructed in conjunction with the upcoming Ely Road improvement project. A lot of users have been enjoying the completed phases of the trail and everyone is excited to see this project come to fruition.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all many things, but one aspect that really jumped out at me was the importance of parks, trails, and natural areas during these times of stress and uncertainty. People need places to recreate, exercise, and maintain their mental and emotional health. They need connections to their communities. This important connection between Ely and Solon, and Linn and Johnson counties is soon to be completed and we look forward to seeing you all out on the trails!

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# A Note from the Director

**Larry Gullett** - Executive Director



Every season, those of us who venture outdoors rediscover things we have forgotten. The rediscovery process is healing and often helps open our minds and broaden our perspectives, reminding us of the world beyond. We find reassurance and strength in knowing that the natural cycles continue on, and the infinite beauty of nature helps us make it through stressful times. For me, remembering the wild places I've been and wondering what they're like at any given moment brings me peace. It doesn't matter if the place is far away on a mountain top or just a few miles down the road in a hill prairie or along a river – all natural areas can be a space of solace and healing.

Many people have faced immense challenges throughout this pandemic - illness, the loss of a loved one, financial insecurity, loneliness, and the stress of balancing parenting with work, to name a few. I do not want to diminish those struggles, but I do appreciate a small silver lining: more people are reconnecting with the regenerative ability of time spent in nature. In every park system, including city, county, state, federal and private non-profit areas, visitation has doubled and in some cases tripled. It is tremendously fulfilling to people who work in the conservation and recreation field to see people using the parks and natural areas during this time, to see them remember the peace that time outdoors brings.

It is likely that we will be dealing with the impacts of this pandemic for a long time to come. Our JCC team is prepared to maintain the parks and trails for the safe use and enjoyment of everyone. To keep you safe, our team has intensified our regular sanitation efforts in high use areas. Our campground policies have been modified to ensure greater social distancing. Our education staff are working on modified programming to provide educational outdoor experiences in a safe and socially distant manner, and they have also created online content to share at-home nature activities for families to enjoy. To stay up-to-date on JCC's evolving policies, as well as our program offerings and park/trail updates, follow Johnson County Conservation on Facebook.

With time, we will get through this challenging era together. But until it passes, keep exploring and finding comfort in our parks and natural areas. Hopefully you too will discover something long forgotten.



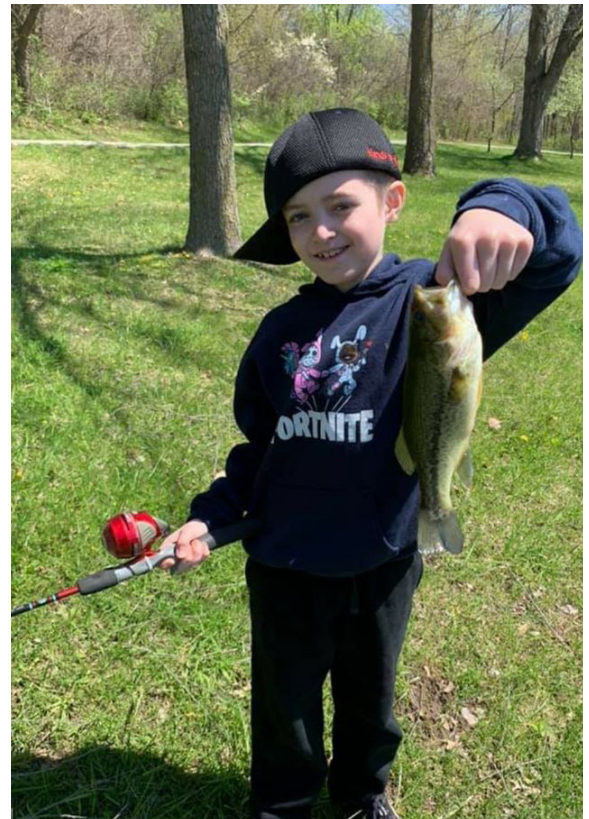
## Ranger Update: A Fine Time to Fish

Aaron Ohlsen - Park Ranger

In early May of this year, Iowa DNR Fisheries Biologist, Paul Sleeper came to F.W. Kent Park with a pickup truck full of Black Crappie. Johnson County Conservation staff assisted Paul in the stocking of 85 Black Crappie, averaging eight inches each, into Kent Park Lake. These fish will reproduce and be a great addition to the lake for anglers.

In addition, Bluegill, Largemouth Bass, and Channel Catfish were stocked into Kent Park Lake in June of 2019. These fish were fry size when they were stocked and in just under a year's time they have really grown! Currently, Bluegill are around palm-size and the Largemouth Bass and Channel Catfish range between seven and ten inches. These fish aren't quite "keeper size" yet but for a young angler or just someone looking to get outside, they're still fun to catch.

Good luck fishing this season and as always, get out to enjoy your county's parks and natural areas!



**Top Right:** This young angler made a great catch this spring at F.W. Kent Park. **Bottom Left:** This handful of Largemouth Bass fry were amid those stocked into the Kent Park Lake in the summer of 2019. **Bottom Right:** These Black Crappie were amid the 85 that were stocked into Kent Park Lake this May. The top is female and bottom is male.



## Stay Tuned for Sunny Days Ahead

Residents in all of Johnson County, including West Branch, will soon be able to learn about energy efficiency and solar energy as well as have an opportunity to get an affordable solar array for their home, farm or business through a solar group-buy this summer. The program is similar to one offered in 2018, in which 180 properties added solar for a collective 1.1 megawatts of clean solar energy! The program is based on an initial discounted base price and then additional discounts are provided to all participating households as certain thresholds are met.



Johnson County Conservation will help roll out the program, along with Johnson County, nine cities, and the Midwest Renewable Energy Association. The 2020 program launches Thursday 6/4 with a free online talk. Register and learn more at <http://solarizejohnsoncounty.org>





# Cedar River Crossing: A Place for the Wild

Kristen Morrow - Naturalist

*"Wilderness is not a luxury, but a necessity of the human spirit."* Those are the words of writer and environmental icon Edward Abbey. These words are also a cornerstone of my personal belief system. To visit wild places and be among wild things brings me the deepest sense of rejuvenation. Around here, when I yearn for wilderness, I head out to Cedar River Crossing, and I'm never disappointed.

On my last visit to this 560-acre JCC preserve, one wild thing after another crossed my path. In fact, not more than 50 feet into my hike, while walking along a slow backwater channel of the Cedar River, a playful swimming otter locked eyes with me before summersaulting into the mirky depths. As I hiked, she resurfaced from time to time in my wake, seeming curious in my journey. Farther down my path, a family of geese trotted frantically towards the wetland shore, their short legs doing double time to reach the safety of the water. Just beyond them, in the tree line, two Great Blue Herons alighted, the massive wings displacing air in slow motion as they took to the stormy skies. A wall of all-consuming noise hit me at this moment too - the clicking songs of thousands of Cricket Frogs, like two marbles tapping together, all set

off by the occasional '*splaaaaat*' of solo Gray Tree Frogs clinging to their branches. Not more than a half mile into this evening hike, this wild place was already doing its magic. My mind - given over entirely to the presence of wild things, their songs, their smells, their splashes, their visual beauty - quickly let go of all other stressors. I was fully, mindfully, all there.

To be a wilderness lover and an Iowan can be a challenging combination. Iowa bears the unfortunate title of "most ecologically altered state in the nation," as well as one of the states with the least amount of public land. Those facts make places like Cedar River Crossing even more important. Not only do these 560 acres of wilderness offer a lifeline for our native species, whether flower, animal, fungus, or otherwise, they create a vital network. In Iowa, just about the only contiguous habitat corridors occur in the narrow strips of natural land along our rivers and streams. The protected land of this preserve follows the banks of the Cedar River for two miles. Places like this ensure that wild things can migrate. They help to maintain more diverse gene pools in a given population, and they provide a path of refuge as the climate changes. Places like this are a major priority for



conservation and protection throughout the state.

Cedar River Crossing is not real wilderness, at least, not in the definition of The Wilderness Act of 1964. Through that act, we define Wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." The landscape of Cedar River Crossing is far from untrammelled. Much of the preserve has a long history of use for crop production. Additionally, over the past few years, JCC has undertaken the massive task of restoring healthy habitats here. Heavy earthmovers criss-crossed the land digging wetlands. Chainsaws hummed removing invasive trees. Tractors plodded spreading the seeds of prairie plants. However, as the next chapter of this land unfolds, and as the fruits of the restoration labor are realized, the marks of man will be harder to detect. Someday, a hiker wandering this landscape will

hardly notice that this land is not wilderness. The animals have already made the case.

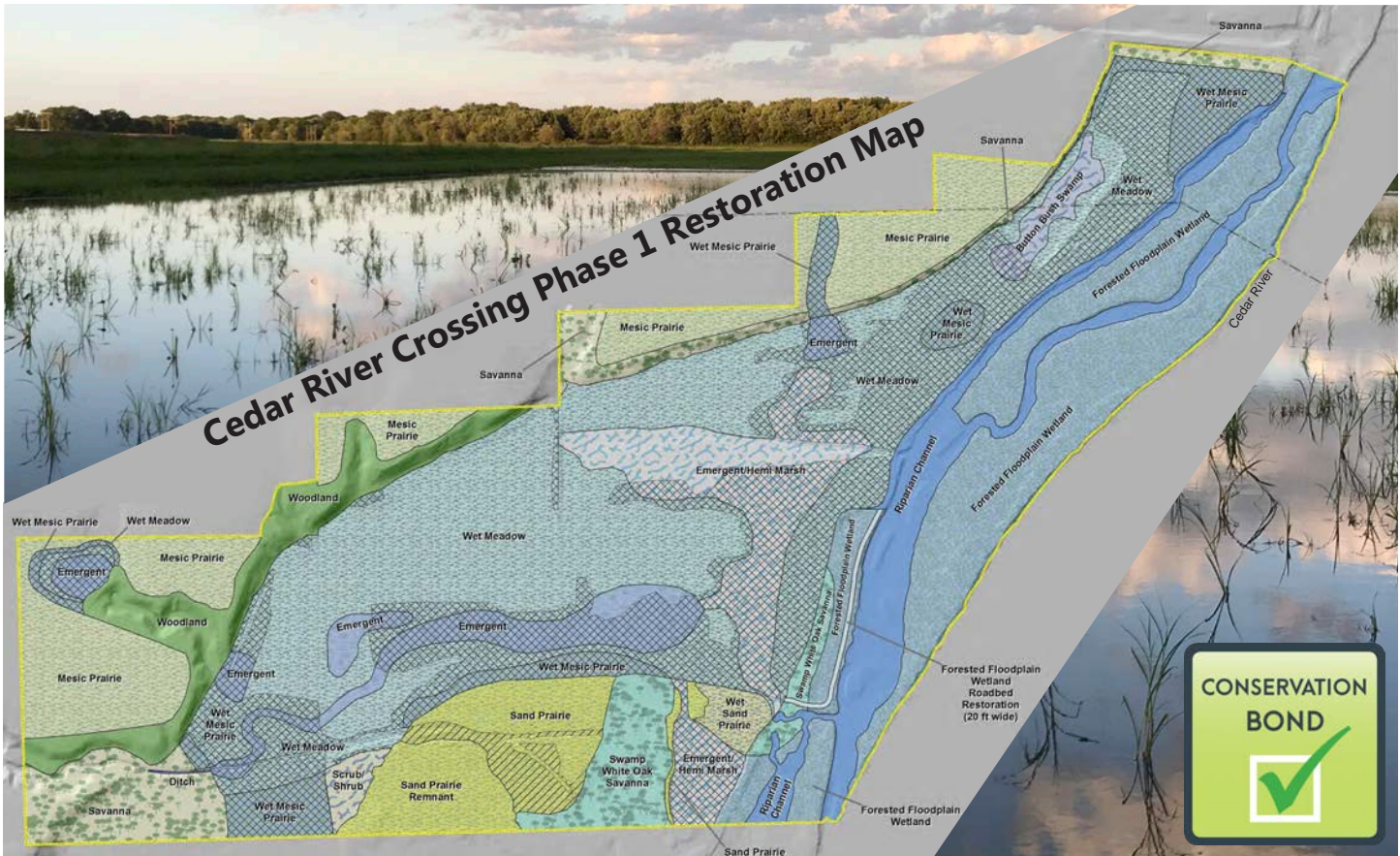
On every hike I take into Cedar River Crossing, I find a similar cascade of wild discoveries. Fittingly, to visit Cedar River Crossing one has to embrace their own wild nature. Throughout much of the preserve, there are no defined trails. As the prairie steadily grows, a hiker can be sure of trekking through ever taller grasses. And if you enter from the south, better bring some tall boots, or maybe even a canoe! The spirit of wilderness and adventure you'll find here make it all worth it.

*For more details about Cedar River Crossing, including location, tips on hiking here, and a downloadable map, visit [How To Explore Cedar River Crossing on JCC's blog, JCC Nature Notes.](#)*



**Clockwise from top left:** Among the wild things that call Cedar River Crossing home are 398 plant species, including Venus' Looking Glass; JCC Director Larry Gullett came across this female Blanding's Turtle (a threatened species) laying eggs in the sand prairie at Cedar River Crossing; Prairie Larkspur (a threatened species) is found onsite; Rose Mallow is one of the largest wildflowers in Iowa, with blossoms 6 inches across! Rose Mallow grows thickly around the established wetlands on site; JCC Volunteer Aaron Basten caught this Solitary Sandpiper enjoying a meal. Numerous other species of water birds have become common in the wetlands and backwater channels of the preserve.





# The Restoration of Cedar River Crossing - Phase 1

The first phase of the Cedar River Crossing mesic restoration project focused on the north half of the property. During this phase alone, JCC's Natural Resources and Operations staff members put in thousands of hours of work to restore healthy ecosystems. The map above details the mosaic of habitats that staff have worked to recreate; the photos below provide a small glimpse of the restoration efforts while in progress; and the stats on the opposite page summarize the habitat improvements made so far. In addition to the work conducted by JCC, seed harvest volunteers helped gather some of the seed used for prairie plantings. This project was made possible through funds provided through the Conservation Bond.



Planting 12,000 wetland plugs



Seeding the prairie



Removing invasive trees



# 144 acres of wetland reconstructed

The wetlands will help to absorb and slow floodwater that often inundates this floodplain. The wetlands were seeded and 12,000 native plugs were hand-planted along the shores. Already, this restored habitat has drawn thousands of water-loving birds, including numerous species of ducks, geese, swans, cranes, plovers and more!



# 79 acres of prairie seeded

The newly planted prairies areas add to the relic sand prairie already onsite. The deep-rooted prairie plants will help to absorb and filter floodwater and runoff. The sand prairies here are home to rare plants including Green Flowered Milkweed, Prairie Larkspur, Blue Toadflax, and Fringed Puccoon. Rare animals, like the Blandings Turtle and Hognose Snake have also been spotted in this habitat!



# 71 acres of savanna restored

JCC's natural resource team has steadily worked to remove invasive trees and open up the oak savannas on the property. These areas are the best places onsite to spot spring ephemerals like Virginia Bluebell (right), Dutchman's Breeches, Trout Lily, Sweet William, Wild Geranium, and Columbine.



# Denitification basin collects: 100 miles of agricultural tile drainage

This newly built basin is the first collection point for the agricultural drainage off of 800 acres of surrounding cropland. In this basin, natural microbial processes will help to filter out nutrient pollutants like nitrate, before the water drains into the wetlands, and ultimately, into the Cedar River. Next to the basin, hikers can check out the unique astronomical clock built into the landscape.







VIRGINIA CREEPER  
SPHINX MOTH

# NATIONAL MOTH WEEK

## July 18th through 26th

There are around 2,100 documented species of moths in Iowa! To add some perspective, Iowa hosts a meager 127 species of butterflies. Many people think moths are dull compared to their typically daytime counterparts, but there is a fascinating world of moth diversity waiting for you to discover! Intricate patterns, hidden colors, and graceful shapes, moths are undeniably beautiful. Since last summer, Johnson County Conservation has been participating in National Moth Week, a worldwide effort to document moth diversity – and you can help!

1

Download the free  iNaturalist App for your phone or tablet and set up your account. This is an amazingly powerful tool to identify and document the diversity of life around us. Simply take a photo of any living thing, and the app will help you identify it!

2

Look for moths around outdoor lights at night. You can even stretch a white sheet across a bright light to try attracting more moths. Take photos of everything you see, either on your phone (click observe in the iNaturalist app) or use another high quality camera.

3

Submit your observations. If you take your photos within iNaturalist, click on “What did you see?” to view suggestions from the app. Identify it to the best of your ability (some may only be identifiable to the family level). Don't worry if you can't identify them. Make sure your observations upload through the app and other iNaturalist members will help identify them.

HARNESSED  
TIGER MOTH



LUNA MOTH

For more information about Moth Week, visit <http://nationalmothweek.org>. Check out the event map to see all of the moth week events around the world and register a private mothing event to join the community of citizen scientists! Follow JCC on Facebook and Instagram for additional moth activities that week. Also, check out the guided Caterpillar Hikes on July 21 & 23! (See page 11.)



# Self-guided Hikes to Enjoy this Summer

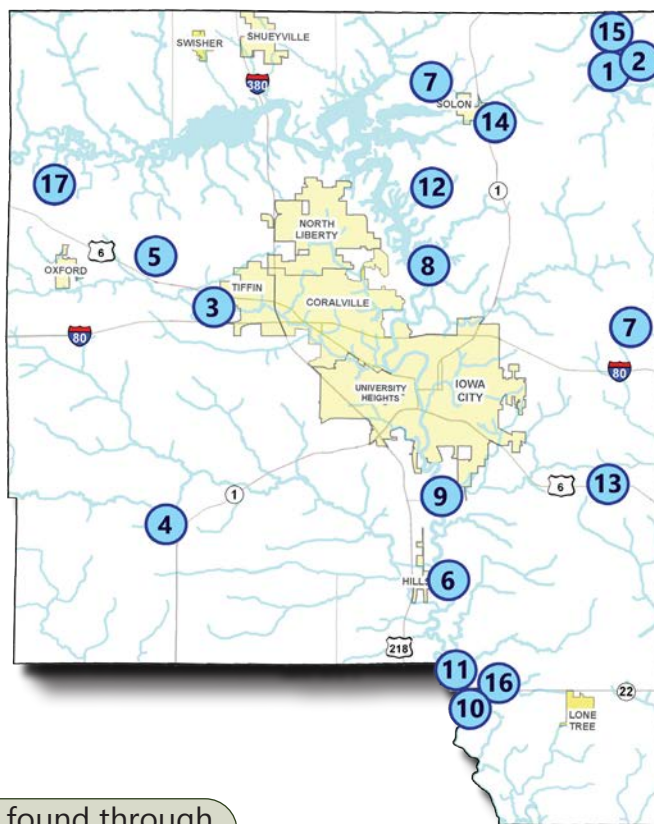
With the Conservation Education Center closed this summer, JCC's education team has been scrambling to put together great alternative activities that park visitors can enjoy on their own. This summer, hikers with an interest in plant ID can take a self-guided Kent Park Prairie Phenology tour, while hikers with little ones in tow can check out the rotating Storybook Trail! Both hikes take place on the half-mile trail loop around the Conservation Education Center. Read on for more details.

**Kent Park Prairie Phenology tour:** This tour utilizes the GeoTourist app to help hikers learn about the flowers blooming around the Conservation Education Center prairie. As you hike the loop, your phone will activate at various points, playing an audio description of a blooming flower nearby, while on the screen, a written description and photos will appear. Throughout the summer, the tour will change with the changing prairie, so come back and take the tour multiple times to learn about a myriad of species present here! **Instructions:** Download **GeoTourist** in the App Store or Google Play. Once you've opened the app, click on "Around me" to see a list of local tours. In addition, you can take a Geotourist tour around the lake trail titled, "A Walking Tour Around Kent Park Lake" as well!

**Storybook Trail:** To help provide novel forms of engagement that pair literacy with environmental education, a rotating storybook trail will be set up around the CEC trail loop. Every one to two weeks, a new nature-focused story will be featured. Pages of the book will be attached to signs and spaced out along the trail loop. Virtual activity guides will also be provided at the start of the trail to help extend the learning. The trail is designed especially for pre-K through upper elementary age children, but can be enjoyed by all! Prairie Lights helped make this trail possible by providing a discount on the featured books. Please help us thank this great community partner with your support!

## JCCB Public Use Areas

|                               |                     |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Cedar River Crossing       | 514 acres           |
| 2. Ciha Fen                   | 81 acres            |
| 3. Clear Creek Area & Trail   | 87 acres, 1.3 miles |
| 4. Frytown Conservation Area  | 94 acres            |
| 5. F.W. Kent Park             | 1,052 acres         |
| 6. Hills Access               | 40 acres            |
| 7. Hoover Trail               | 6 miles             |
| 8. Iowa River Trail           | 3.5 miles           |
| 9. Iowa River Water Trail     | 22 miles            |
| 10. River Junction Access     | 12 acres            |
| 11. Pechman Creek Delta       | 380 acres           |
| 12. Schwab-Burford Property   | 132 acres           |
| 13. Scott Church Park         | 5 acres             |
| 14. Solon Prairie             | 3 acres             |
| 15. Sutliff Bridge & Access   | 1/2 acre            |
| 16. Walker Park               | 3 acres             |
| 17. Williams Prairie Preserve | 21 acres            |



More information about JCC public use areas can be found through our website: [www.johnson-county.com/conservation](http://www.johnson-county.com/conservation)



# Program Guide

Due to Covid-19, JCC will be hosting highly-modified public programs. To help families enjoy enriching and educational outdoor experiences, JCC education staff will host learning activities limited to one family unit per available time slot, with multiple time slots per program. All programs will be entirely outdoors; JCC staff will wear masks, and program participants are highly encouraged to wear masks as well.

**Programs may be cancelled based on current public health conditions or weather conditions.**

## Weekly Kayak Programs:

**Details:** Individual hour-long time-slots are available between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. The first four time-slots (between 9:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.) are designated for single family units; participants must be 10 years or older. A time slot from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. is set aside for adults and will not be limited to household units. All sessions will be limited to eight participants. This program is free and all equipment is provided; paddles will be sanitized in between time slots. PFDs will only be used once per day and will be set aside for cleaning following use. Participants are encouraged to bring personal PFDs if available.

**To reserve a time slot for all kayak program offerings, go to:**



Trouble with the QR code? Sign up at: <https://tinyurl.com/jccKayakProgramsSummer2020> or call 319-645-1011 for help.

### **Paddle Mondays at Pechman Creek Delta**

Mondays starting June 15 to August 3  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.  
Pechman Creek Delta (5875 Sand Rd SE, Lone Tree)

### **Paddle Fridays at Kent Park**

Most Fridays starting June 19 to August 7  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.  
F.W. Kent Park Lake; Boat Ramp

## Family Programs:

**Details:** Individual hour-long time-slots are available between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. for single family units. Each program is designed especially for families with children pre-K through upper elementary ages. All sessions will be limited to eight participants. All programs are free and all equipment is provided; any equipment used (dip nets, bug nets, etc) will be used by only one group per day when possible, and sanitized following use.

**To reserve a time slot for all family program offerings, go to:**



Trouble with the QR code? Sign up at: <https://tinyurl.com/jccFamilyProgramsSummer2020> or call 319-645-1011 for help.

### **Froggin' Fun**

Tuesday, June 16 and Thursday, June 18  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Explore the wetlands with a naturalist as your guide! We'll catch tadpoles and other wetland creatures, and learn how to identify the many different tadpoles that live in the pond. Participants should wear water shoes/rubber boots and clothes that can get muddy! Do not apply bug spray onto hands or arms as we will be handling amphibians.

### **Berry Picking Hike**

Tuesday, June 23 and Thursday, June 25  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Ciha Fen Preserve (5656 145th St NE, Lisbon, IA)

Explore this quiet JCC property with a short hike around the prairie-savanna. The hike will finish in a large raspberry patch where we'll spend time picking berries for families to take home. Participants should wear long pants and closed-toe shoes and have a long sleeve shirt option for poison ivy protection. Bring a container to take berries home after.



### **Creek Exploration**

Tuesday, June 30 and Thursday, July 1  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Schwab-Burford (4045 245th St NE, Solon, IA)

Happy International Mud Day (June 29)! To celebrate, wander through the woods with a shallow creek as your path! We'll also learn about stream creatures and the patterns that streams make as they meander. Participants should wear sturdy footwear safe for wet rocky streambeds and clothes that can get muddy.

### **Nature Journaling**

Tuesday, July 11 and Thursday, July 13  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Bring a sketchbook, nature journal, or simple notebook, and learn the basics of creating and keeping a nature journal. We'll hike a short 1/2 mile loop, journaling about the flowers in bloom, insects buzzing, caterpillars crawling, birds singing, and any other details we experience along the way.

### **Bullfrog Mania at Schwab-Burford Pond**

Tuesday, July 14 and Thursday, July 16  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Schwab-Burford (4045 245th St NE, Solon, IA)

Thousands of big fat bullfrog tadpoles live in the Schwab-Burford pond, just waiting to be caught and admired! Participants should wear water shoes/ rubber boots and clothes that can get muddy! Do not apply bug spray onto hands or arms as we will be handling amphibians.

### **Caterpillar Hike and Moth/Butterfly Catching**

Tuesday, July 21 and Thursday, July 23  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Happy Moth Week! To celebrate, observe and learn about the caterpillars of giant silk moth and butterflies that are being raised outside of the Conservation Education Center. Then, use bug nets to try to catch and observe your own! At the end of the program, participants may be able to adopt monarch caterpillars to take home and raise.

### **Forest Bathing Hike**

Tuesday, July 28 and Thursday, July 30  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Schwab-Burford (4045 245th St NE, Solon, IA)

Escape the heat with a hike in the deep shade of an oak woodland. Along the way, we'll practice basic

kid-friendly sensory activities to experience the forest in new ways.

### **Foraging for Families and Beginners**

Tuesday, August 4 and Thursday, August 6  
Time slots from 9:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Learn the rules for safe foraging, then head out on a naturalist-guided hike, enjoying basic wild edibles along the way.

## **Adult Programs:**

**Details:** In addition to the weekly adult-only kayak programs, JCC will host several nature programs for adults. These programs are open to adults from different households, but group numbers will be limited to eight participants. As with all programs, physical distancing will be practiced, and masks are encouraged. For descriptions and guidance on each program, see the description for each corresponding offering in the "Family Programs."

**To sign up for all adult programming (non-kayaking programs), go to:**



Trouble with the QR code? Sign up at:  
<https://tinyurl.com/jccAdultProgramsSummer2020>  
or call 319-645-1011 for help.

### **Berry Picking Hike**

Tuesday, June 23 and Thursday, June 25  
Adult time slot 3:00-4:00 p.m.  
Ciha Fen Preserve (5656 145th St NE, Lisbon, IA)

### **Nature Journaling**

Tuesday, July 11 and Thursday, July 13  
Adult time slot 3:00-4:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

### **Forest Bathing Hike**

Tuesday, July 28 and Thursday, July 30  
Adult time slot 3:00-4:00 p.m.  
Schwab-Burford (4045 245th St NE, Solon, IA)

### **Summer Foraging Hike**

Tuesday, August 4 and Thursday, August 6  
Adult time slot 3:00-4:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park





Johnson County Conservation  
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The wetlands at Cedar River Crossing provide valuable habitat for animals as well as wetland plants, like the flowering sedge shown here.