



Spring 2026

Conservation Connection

Johnson County Conservation Newsletter

Prairies Marching On

The county gained 53 acres of newly seeded prairie at the end of 2025, with parcels planted at both Cedar River Crossing and Pechman Creek Delta.

At Cedar River Crossing, 40 acres of land that was acquired in 2024 was seeded. This parcel is on the north side of Sutliff Road, a formerly row-cropped piece of land that surrounds JCC's Sutliff Operation Center. Like most of the land that makes up Cedar River Crossing, this parcel is within the floodplain and can be submerged during intense floods. As prairie establishes on this site, the deep roots of prairie plants will help to hold the soil in place during these floods, and farm inputs won't leech into the watershed.

At Pechman Creek Delta, 13 acres of land was seeded in December 2025, just after the first big snowstorm of the year. The parcel seeded includes an 11.5 acre piece that runs from Sand Road to

the first drainage to the west, and a small piece just south of the shop and old farm buildings. As this prairie grows, it will be the first thing visitors see as they approach from the north or the south. Unlike Cedar River Crossing, where the entire site has had years of habitat reconstruction/restoration work, the planting at Pechman marks the first acres of prairie seed here as we work to return this land to a more natural state. The 380 acres of Pechman is made up of vast bottomland forest along the Iowa River and large fields that have been row-cropped for several decades. In years to come, the remaining fields will also be planted to prairies, with some wetland elements in this often-saturated floodplain.

Take a visit to these parks this summer to check out the progress as the first bold prairie plants start to sprout up. Each year to come, we'll get to see more and more species emerge as this land comes back to life.



Gray-headed coneflower and wild bergamot are often among the first plants to bloom in a new prairie, as shown here at a separate prairie planting at Cedar River Crossing, seeded in 2019. Forty more acres of prairie were planted on this site in 2025.

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A Brief from Brad



Another Symptom of Climate Change

Winter in Johnson County, Iowa, has long been defined by cold temperatures, snow, and the occasional ice storm. My youth was spent playing on massive snow drifts, building snow forts, and sledding on the hills in the pasture, but today's winters seem to have taken a great departure from those snow-filled winters of my youth.

This past winter, as well as the previous few winters, has felt different—marked by extreme weather swings. Cold, wet conditions were replaced by warm, dry ones, and this winter we witnessed the alarming emergence of wildfires. These events are not isolated curiosities; they are symptoms of a changing climate that is increasing the frequency and intensity of extremes, raising urgent questions about resilience, public safety, and land management.

The steady, predictable cold and snow of decades past is being replaced by patterns of dry and warmer conditions, intermixed with extreme winter storms. These conditions create an environment ripe for wildfires. Most of us hear the word "wildfire" and envision a western or Canadian scene, with a massive forest canopy fire pushing through rugged mountain terrain. This is what we see in the movies and on TV. I would venture a guess that most Iowans wouldn't consider wildfire as something that occurs in Iowa, but this winter, southern Iowa would disagree. There have been multiple, large-scale wildfires this winter in Iowa.

One of those occurred right here in Johnson County. On February 18, the Johnson County Emergency Communication Center (JECC) dispatch received a call for a fire near IWV Road. The National Weather Service had already issued a Red Flag Warning for the day. A Red Flag Warning is a high-level alert issued by the National Weather Service when temperatures are warm, relative humidity is low, and strong winds are forecast. There had been multiple smaller wildfires that day, and local fire departments were doing an amazing job of quickly extinguishing them, but this fire was different.

The Tiffin Fire Department was the first department on-scene and, following a rapid assessment, requested additional resources.

Even as those resources were arriving, the extremely low humidity and strong winds quickly spread the fire. Light fuels such as bean stubble and turf grass were carrying the fire. These fuels are typically light enough that the fire burns out or at least slows its rate of spread, but not this fire. The wind-driven fire raced across these fine fuels and jumped roadways. The plume of smoke was visible for miles; residents in surrounding communities took photos of the massive pillar of smoke as it rolled across the sky. The blaze was visible on satellite imagery and even showed up on weather radar. Winds at the Iowa City airport were gusting between 50 and 60 mph that day, according to Iowa's News Now meteorologist Cayson Frerichs—conditions that helped accelerate the fire's spread. Everyone involved did an amazing job working together to stop this wildfire. It was estimated to have covered 500 acres and spread 3.5 miles. There was structural damage and loss of power to the area, but no injuries or homes were lost in the incident.

Is this a rare occurrence, an outlier to the norm? Potentially, but this could be part of a trend of extreme weather affecting Iowa. Extreme floods in 1993 and again in 2008. Currently, we are battling an extended period of drought that has persisted since 2020. This is the most severe drought cycle Iowa has had since the 1950s. These extremes are disruptive and unpredictable.

What does this signal about the climate crisis? These winter extremes align with broader climate trends scientists have observed in the Midwest: greater temperature variability, more intense precipitation events, and an amplified risk of both drought and flood conditions across different timescales. While no single fire proves climate change, the pattern—warmer winters, earlier thaws, and drier surface fuels—makes winter fires more plausible and more frequent. For Johnson County, this means that the seasonal calendar communities rely upon for farming, emergency response readiness, and ecosystem management is shifting.



Firefighters and emergency responders on scene battling the Johnson County wildfire in February.

This winter's extreme weather and the large 500-acre brush fire near the IWV Road are a warning: the seasonal rules officials and residents have relied on are changing. Preparing for a future in which extreme swings and off-season wildfire risk become more common will require coordinated action across local government, emergency services, conservation groups, and residents. The challenge is complex but actionable—by combining practical on-the-ground measures, improved planning, and continued attention to reducing emissions, Johnson County can reduce risk and protect its people, farms, and natural places from the next unpredictable season. Rest assured, Johnson County has some of the best Fire Departments, Law Enforcement, First Responders, Emergency Management, and other professionals in the State. We are also all proud Iowans, who pull together when faced with a crisis or disaster.

Please consider how you can play a role in addressing this climate crisis and building resiliency in our communities. Stay safe and get outdoors!



A row of 4th graders sits on a log, earnestly scribbling poetry in their notebooks. They're silent as they work, and the only sounds are the woodpeckers drumming and wind rustling in the fresh leaves above. Their silence is a change from the delighted exhalations from forest discoveries made just minutes ago, as the kids trekked through the understory peeking under logs and hunting for wildflowers and mushrooms.

This snapshot is a typical experience for 4th graders attending our Writing on the Environment (WOE) field trips. WOE is a nature-literary mash-up we've been running since 2022 in partnership with the Iowa City Community School District (ICCS) and the former Iowa Youth Writing Project. Through this program, 4th graders in select ICCSD schools learn about nature writing and journaling, starting with classroom visits before spending a day immersed in nature exploration with naturalists at Cangleska Wakan.

During the field trip, the kids are exposed to both wetland and forest ecosystems. At the wetlands, they use dip nets to search for some of our smallest critters: macroinvertebrates like dragonfly nymphs, diving beetles, snails, and even leeches! Sometimes they're lucky enough to scoop up hatchling turtles or spot baby water snakes gliding over the surface. After an hour of netting, they review the practice of nature journaling, a tool used by scientists and creatives alike, and a chance to really slow down and notice. They draw pictures of discoveries they made, and respond to the journaling prompts of "I notice... I wonder... It reminds me of..."

During the other half of the day, the kids follow a naturalist on a hike into a forest turned freshly green. Some classes wade into the creek to look for crawdad burrows and tadpole pods. Others spread out under the trees drawing wildflowers and checking out decomposition. The exact activities matter less than sharing a sense of awe and joy for exploration. One constant in each of these classes is the time to listen to nature poetry from the perch of a log before the kids passionately write out poems of their own, inspired by their day in the woods.

The program doesn't end when the kids load onto the bus. Back in their classrooms, the teachers guide students through more prompts in nature writing. The students craft more poems, essays, and sketches of the nature around them, and the students can submit their work for a chance to be printed in an anthology of 4th grade nature writing. And as a capstone, students published in the collection have the chance to read their work aloud in a celebratory gathering at Cangleska Wakan, their families proudly watching.

We see the impact of this program every spring. We've seen kids light up finding snails or screech "best day ever!!" as they splash in the creek. We've had teachers express awe at seeing students who struggle mightily in the classroom be in their academic element learning outdoors. We've had a boy tear up seeing his poetry in a book, saying "I've always wanted to be printed!" In a time with far too many hours fixed on screens and in many cases little to no opportunities for kids to explore in nature, programs like this matter a lot.



Help us keep this program going!

Funding cuts at the state and local level are making it harder for schools to participate in this program. Though our field trips services are free, bus transportation can be a barrier for schools. Our goal is to fundraise \$2000 this spring for our Bus Scholarship Fund. If you are able to help, you can scan the QR Code to donate to the Friends of Johnson County Conservation online. If you would like to donate by check, you can make it out to Friends of Johnson County Conservation, memo: Bus Scholarship; mail to F.W. Kent Park, Attn: FJCC, 2048 Hwy 6 NW, Oxford, IA 52322.





Historic Fall Burns

In the fall of 2025, JCC's Natural Resource Management crew conducted the organization's first multi-property fall prescribed fire season. The crew burned six sites across Kent Park, Cedar River Crossing, and Frytown Conservation Area, covering over 100 acres.

The burn at Frytown Conservation Area was especially noteworthy - it was the first fire on record since the land became a county park in 1973, and staff have no records of fire on this landscape in the decades preceding that when the property was used as pastureland by private landowners. The area that was burned is in the heart of the park, where extensive forest management had been conducted in the past few years. Clearing the understory of thick brush and invasive species through mechanical removal was the first step to bringing fire back to this landscape. More sunlight reaching the ground had already yielded a resurgence of spring ephemerals in this part of the property in recent years, but the fall prescribed burn should lead to an even more prolific display, as their growth is stimulated by fire.

The Natural Resource Management crew has historically conducted most prescribed burns in March and April, but the team is looking forward to a new chapter with more burns in November and December (also called "dormant season" burns). This season can be tricky for land managers to find

the right weather window. For example, in 2025, the crew expected a month of burning, but the early Thanksgiving snowstorms shrank that to just one week. Though challenging to time, there are many benefits to burning during the fall season. The main benefit for JCC is that fall season burns expands the window for fire management and makes it more possible to hit the target of 800 acres burned annually.

Fall burns also have lower intensity. This season typically has cooler temperatures and higher moisture both in the fuels and atmosphere (the average relative humidity (RH) in November and December is often around 40% versus an average RH in the 20s in March or April. These are important data points that land managers look at for conducting safe prescribed burns. There are wildlife benefits to fall burns as well. Reptiles are more consistently burrowed underground to overwinter, and thus out of harm's way. Fall burns can also stimulate earlier "green up", or growth of grasses and forbs, benefiting foraging herbivores.

JCC will continue to conduct most prescribed burns in the spring season in March and April, but adding fall burns gives us more tools to work with as we manage the land. Visitors to our parks can expect to see more fall burns in more county parks in years to come.



Meet Porkchop!

Isabel Harms - AmeriCorps Assistant Naturalist

Porkchop is a western hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus*) and he is Johnson County Conservation Education Center's newest education animal. He was born in 2024 at a herpetology lab at West Liberty University in West Virginia and came to live with us in November 2025. Porkchop is a laid-back and calm individual that loves to curl up and observe his surroundings.

About Western Hognose Snakes: As the days get warmer, many of our reptilian friends are starting to wake up and become more active. One of these reptiles, the western hognose snake, begins to become more active near the end of March into April when they "awake" from brumation (a hibernation-like state) and begin to reproduce. Western hognose snakes are truly some of the most dramatic and perhaps unique snakes of Iowa's sand prairies. They can be identified by their tan and light brown colors, dark belly, and distinct upturned nose. Looking much like a hog's nose, as their name suggests, their nose is shovel-like in nature and is used to burrow through sandy soils.

When faced with a predator a western hognose will first stay still in hopes the danger will pass. If that doesn't work, they will flatten their head and hiss to look like larger, more venomous snakes. Sometimes they will strike, but usually with their mouths closed in a "bluff strike." If the predator is not scared away, the hognose will proceed to play dead. Rarely will they bite

a predator despite being a venomous snake. The western hognose snake has rear-fanged venom. This means that they carry venom in a pair of fangs near the back of their mouths. The positioning of these fangs means that most rear-fanged venomous snakes need to chew on prey in order to inject venom. Western hognose snakes carry such a mild venom that, combined with the rear-fangs, they are considered generally harmless to humans. Even people who have been bitten by a hognose snake (mostly owners of captive hognose snakes) tend to just experience some minor swelling and digestive upset. Severe reactions are rare and only happen when a hognose snake is allowed to chew on a person for several minutes.

The venom of a western hognose snake allows them to eat toads. Most species don't like to eat toads because of the toxins they produce and their balloon-like defenses that make them hard to eat. The venom that hognose snakes carry cause toads to relax which deflates the toad and makes it easier to eat. Western hognose snakes in captivity will even refuse to eat prey other than toads after having a toad meal because they love eating them so much!

Western hognose snakes are endangered and a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Iowa mainly due to habitat loss and separation. Western hognose snakes are highly specialized to live in sand prairies near wetlands. Sand prairies in Iowa face threats from climate change and invasive species in addition to land development. This destruction of the western hognose snake's special environment forces them to adapt to a new environment or die. Most commonly, adaptation is not possible and a western hognose forced out of a sand prairie will die. To help the western hognose snake please notify the Iowa DNR if you encounter one. This will help the Iowa DNR keep track of populations and the locations of this endangered animal.

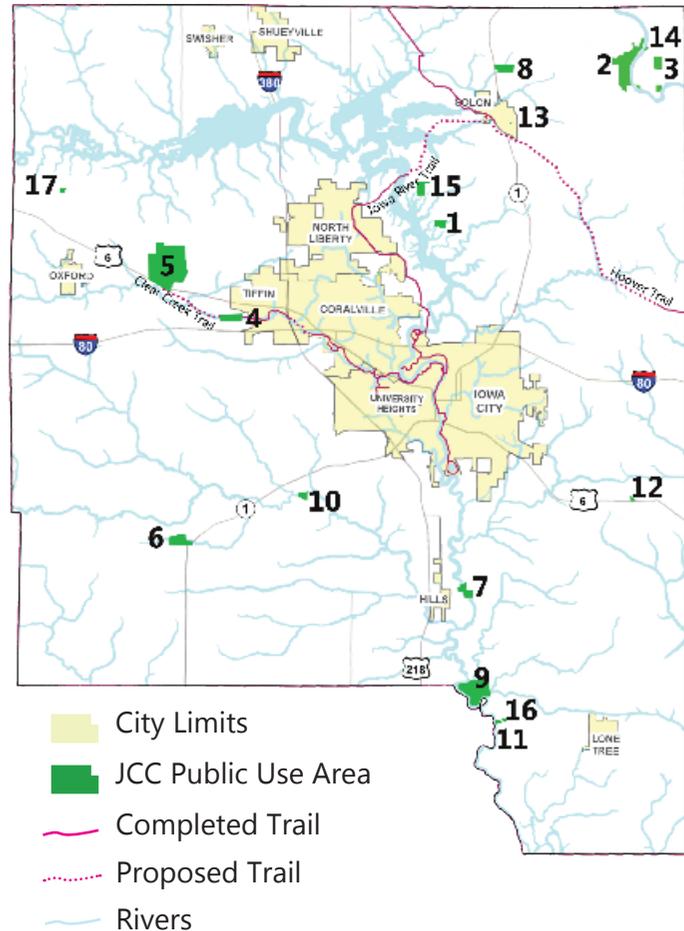
OUTDOOR YOUTH CORPS

The Outdoor Youth Corps (OYC) returns in 2026! The OYC summer job program allows teens to explore careers in conservation, outdoor recreation, parks and natural resources, wildlife rehabilitation, and more. Teens facilitate environmental education programs, assist with land stewardship and wildlife monitoring, and network with professionals. OYC is made possible through a partnership between Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County, the City of Iowa City, and Johnson County Conservation with support from Heritage Trees of Johnson County. Email MWiegand@JohnsonCountyIowa.gov for more information.



JCCB Public Use Areas

1. Cangleska Wakan	132 acres
2. Cedar River Crossing	610 acres
3. Ciha Fen Preserve	81 acres
4. Clear Creek Conservation Area	87 acres
5. F.W. Kent Park	1,062 acres
6. Frytown Conservation Area	94 acres
7. Hills Access	40 acres
8. Malinda Reif Reilly Fen & Prairie	100 acres
9. Pechman Creek Delta	380 acres
10. Phebe Timber	27 acre
11. River Junction Access	12 acres
12. Scott Church Park	5 acres
13. Solon Prairie	3 acres
14. Sutliff Bridge & Access	1/2 acre
15. Two Horse Farm	83 acres
16. Walker Park	3 acres
17. Williams Prairie Preserve	21 acres



Paved Trail Segments Managed by JCC

Clear Creek Trail	1.3 miles
Hoover Trail	6 miles
Iowa River Trail	3.5 miles

More information about JCC public use areas can be found through our website:

www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/conservation

Program/Event Guide

How to Sign Up:

Programs are free unless a fee is listed. Sign up for all programs is online at the link below, unless stated otherwise. Sign up by scanning the QR code to the right or go to <https://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/conservation/events>. For questions or sign-up help, call **319-645-1011**.



Program/Event Accessibility

Do you require any specific accessibility measures in order to comfortably participate in these programs? Reach out to us at 319-645-1011 for assistance.

March

Nature Buds: Worms

Wednesday, March 25, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Nature Buds is a free program designed for kids ages three to five with an accompanying adult. The program includes themed story time, group activity, a follow-up craft or STEM activity, and often, outdoor exploration.

Avian Adventure Trivia Night

Tuesday, March 24, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Big Grove Brewery, Iowa City

This nature-themed trivia night will have a focus on birds and Johnson County's natural resources. The event is open to all but is especially geared toward those who participate in the Avian Adventure program – a county-wide, bird-themed scavenger hunt taking place from February 5 through March 22.

April

CEC Open House - Frogs

Saturday, April 11, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

This month, learn about frogs with self-guided hands-on activities and crafts. Nets and guides will be available for free check-out to explore for tadpoles at the nearby wetlands.

Nature Buds: Birding 101

Wednesday, April 15, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
See March 25th event for details.

Bountiful Harvest Farm Greenhouse & Seed Starting Tour

Thursday, April 16, 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan/Bountiful Harvest Farm

The owners and operators of Bountiful Harvest Farm CSA are inviting the public for a peek into their greenhouse and a tour of what is growing this time of year on the farm. Participants will learn about seed starting and even plant some seeds!

Spring Ephemeral Hike

Saturday, April 18, 10:00-11:30 a.m.
Cangleska Wakan

Join a naturalist on a hike to learn about some of the first wildflowers of spring. This hike is almost 1.5 miles on a hilly trail that transitions between grass and dirt.

Spring Foraging

Wednesday, April 22, 6:00 - 7:30 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Take a walk to learn about some of the wild foods that can be found in spring!

No School Day: Nature Journal-Making & Hike

Friday, April 24, 1:00-3:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan

Spend this ICCSD getting creative and recording your nature observations. We will create nature journals from recycled materials and then take a hike to record our observations using our new journals.

Spring Ephemeral Hike

Saturday, April 25, 10:00-11:30 a.m.
Frytown Conservation Area

Join a naturalist on a hike to learn about some of the first wildflowers of spring. This hike is almost 2 miles on a hilly trail that transitions between grass and dirt.

Seasonal Social Series: Experiential Education Collaborative

Wednesday, April 29 5:00 - 6:30 p.m.
Big Grove Brewery, Iowa City

Excited about hands-on learning? Looking to learn from others while building connections with like-minded folks in formal and informal education fields? The Experiential Education Collaborative's Seasonal Social Series features local experts, networking opportunities, and hands-on learning.

May

Spring Ephemeral Hike

Friday, May 1, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.
Ciha Fen Preserve

Join a naturalist for a 1.5 mile hike through

this unique sand prairie savanna to see what flowers are blooming and listen to the frogs and the birds.

Native Plant Speaker Series & Plant Sale

Sunday, May 3, 9:00-12:00 p.m./1:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Learn to incorporate native plants at home to support wildlife and provide other ecological benefits. Each event showcases a regional native plant expert and hands-on activities, and hosts a native plant sale between 9:00 - 1:00 (no registration needed to attend the plant sale). Troutleaf Native Plants based out of Johnson County, IA is the plant vendor.

Intro to Print Making

Wednesday, May 6, 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
Fee: \$25

Learn the basics of print making regarding tools, print mediums, paper, and techniques. Participants will draw and carve their own nature-focused print to take home. Included in the fee is a set of beginner carving tools and a Speedy Carve block to work on that can both be taken home at the end.

CEC Open House - Nature Journaling

Saturday, May 9, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Explore inside the CEC and check out some of the self-guided activity stations centered on nature journaling and nature writing.

Paper Making with Garlic Mustard

Saturday, May 16, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan

Help us pull garlic mustard, then learn how to make paper from plants! Participants will learn a little about garlic mustard and why we work to remove it. We will spend part of the

program pulling these invasive plants from the landscape, then transition into making paper!

Evening Paddle

Wednesday, May 27, 4:00 - 5:30 p.m.
Kent Park Lake

Kick off the paddle season with a gentle kayak session around Kent Park Lake. No experience necessary, and kayaks and life jackets will be provided. This event is open to adults.

Rain Barrel Workshop

Thursday, May 28, 4:00 - 6:00 PM
Conservation Education Center, Kent Park
Material Fee: \$40

Construct your own up-cycled rain barrel, using food-grade steel drums provided by Big Grove Brewery. We'll provide all parts to assemble the barrel/eaves hook ups as part of the program. Participants can choose to paint their barrel using provided acrylic paints as well.

June

Free Fishing Weekend

Saturday, June 6, 7:00 - 11:00 a.m.
Kent Park Angler's Parking Lot/Boat Ramp

Come enjoy a weekend of free fishing with a JCC Ranger. No fishing license is needed this weekend only, and all fishing poles and bait will be provided. No registration is required for this event - check JCC's social media pages for any weather updates.

Paper Coneflower Workshop

Thursday, June 11, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan
Fee: \$30

Learn how to make coneflowers out of paper! Participants will learn about the materials used in creating paper flower art and will be guided through the creation of their very own beautiful flower to take home. These are crafted from specialty crepe paper and are intended to be a realistic (and enduring) copy of our native wildflowers.

Native Plant Sale

Sunday, June 14, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Support wildlife and reduce your ecological footprint by adding native plants to your landscape!

Native Plant Speaker Series & Plant Sale

Sunday, June 14, 9:00-12:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Learn to incorporate native plants at home to support wildlife and provide other ecological benefits. Each event showcases a regional native plant expert, hands-on activities, and hosts a native plant sale.

Teen Adventure Camp

Week 1: 16-19
Week 2: June 23-26
Youth Group Lodge, Kent Park
Fee: \$100

Our Adventure Camps are for kids going into 6th-8th grades. We'll guide kids through a full day of adventure programming, from kayaking and archery to paddleboarding and hiking. We'll also delve into some nature inspired arts/crafts. Scholarships are available. Students are limited to one week. More details available on the registration page.

Raptor Meet-n-Greet

Saturday, June 20, 10:30-11:15 a.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Come meet and learn about two different birds of prey with Raptology. This program is an informal "meet-n-greet" style and no registration is required.

CEC Summer Open Hours

Saturdays, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM
June 6 - August 8

Come explore the Discovery Room, visit the education animals, hike the Storybook Trail, and check out the bird blind!



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Wild geranium blooms in incredible abundance along a hillside in Kent Park. The wild geranium was not seeded on this site, and erupted on its own last spring following years of prescribed fires and forest management to clear the understory of invasive and shrubby plants.