

Fall 2026

Conservation Connection

Johnson County Conservation Newsletter

1,000+ Bluebirds Fledged

Earlier this spring, our longtime bluebird trail monitor Ben Rowold reached an exciting avian milestone: he has now overseen 1,000+ Eastern bluebirds successfully fledged from the bluebird box system in Kent Park! This nesting season also broke the record for most bluebirds fledged in a year, with 145 officially fledged and likely 11 more to add to the count in coming weeks, for 156 total bluebirds flying off into the world.

Ben has monitored the nesting boxes on our bluebird trail in Kent Park for ten years now. Every week during the spring, summer, and early fall, Ben comes out to check on each nest box, collect data on the nests, eggs, and fledglings, cleans boxes between broods, deals with issues like wasps and mites, and spruces up the boxes between seasons. Committed monitoring of nest boxes is important for preventing predation and disease spread, and in fact, unmonitored

nest boxes can do more harm than good, negatively impacting native bird reproduction.



The bluebird box movement began in the 1960s as a conservation effort to boost populations of bluebirds, which had been declining since the early twentieth century. Bluebirds, like many other species of birds, rely on cavities in dead or dying trees to build their nests in, usually in old woodpecker-made cavities. With the removal of dead trees and large swaths of varied forests from the landscape, along with competition from non-native cavity dwellers like European Starlings, their population steadily dropped. Amazingly, over decades of devotion by conservationists, the bluebird box movement helped to bring their population back! Eastern bluebird populations have been growing since the 1960s, and today bluebirds have a healthy population throughout the country that is of low conservation concern.

If you've delighted in seeing the many bluebirds that live in Kent Park, you have these nest boxes and Ben's commitment to caring for them to thank. We're looking forward to 1,000 bluebirds more to come!



THE PEOPLE OF JCC

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Jon Green Chair
V Fixmer-Oraiz Vice Chair
Lisa Green- Douglass
Mandi Remington
Rod Sullivan

CONSERVATION BOARD

Carolyn Buckingham President
Zac Hall Vice President
William Waldie Secretary
Bonnie Winslow-Garvin
Connie Mutel

CONSERVATION STAFF

Director

Brad Freidhof

Office Manager

Dory Kjosa

Office Assistant

Ally Skidmore

Naturalists

Kristen Morrow

Michelle Wiegand

Rangers

Charlie Bray

Aaron Ohlsen

Natural Resource Manager

Jeremy Rieck

Natural Resource Mgmt. Specialists

Michael Alexander

Kevin Halemeyer

Blake Harris

Gage Hazen-Fabor

Natural Resource Mgmt. Technicians

Tim Kurt

Natalie Stowe

Isaac Chen

Operations Superintendent

Dave "Gus" Gustafson

Assistant Operations Superintendent

Ed Kringle

Utility Person

Brad Herrig

Mechanic

Josh DeWild

Maintenance Specialist

Paul Bouska

Field Workers

Alicia Claus-Bartels

Terry Kinney

Seth Somerville

Gabe Trimpe

Ben Woltz

Trails Field Worker II

Josh Gaffey

A Brief from Brad



Fall is a special time of year for anyone who enjoys the outdoors. The changing colors, crisp mornings and shorter days signal that another season of harvest is upon us. For me, fall brings two of my favorite activities together: harvesting the garden and hunting in the Iowa outdoors.

There is something rewarding about bringing food from the garden to the table after months of planting, weeding, watering and waiting. The same is true of hunting. Hours spent scouting, walking fields and timber, watching the weather and sitting quietly in the woods may ultimately lead to success—or they may not. But the reward is not always measured by what we bring home.

The real harvest is the experience itself. It is watching the seasons change, learning from the land and sharing time outdoors with family and friends. Hunting connects us to our natural resources in a way few other activities can. It reminds us that healthy wildlife populations, clean water, quality habitat and access to wild places are all essential parts of Iowa's outdoor heritage.

As we enjoy the bounty of fall, it is worth remembering that these opportunities do not happen by accident. They depend on healthy land, water and wildlife—and on our commitment to conserving them for the next generation.

Fall reminds us that a successful harvest begins long before the harvest itself. So does conservation.



Changing colors at the Bobwhite Shelter in F.W. Kent Park.

Guiding Your Next Adventure: Inside the Park's Signage Makeover

Aaron Ohlsen - Ranger

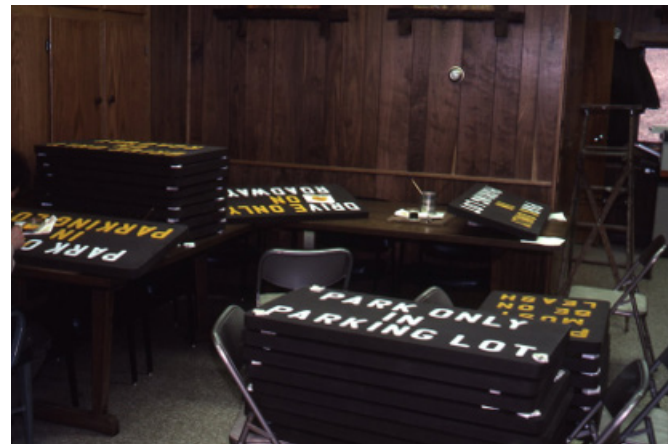
Wood you believe our parks are routing for a change?

For many years, wooden hand-routed and hand-painted signs have welcomed and pointed the way for visitors throughout our county parks and natural areas. They have a natural look that blends into the environment, and their handmade designs are unique to Johnson County Conservation Board areas.

Many of these signs have been standing in the elements since the '70s, getting taken down periodically throughout the years for repairs and repainting. These wooden signs that have been guiding you in your adventures are at the end of their life span. But there's no use pining

over the past - our new recycled high density polyethylene sign boards and posts are here to stay and won't ever rot.

For the past several years staff have been designing on a computer program called VCarve, routing on a CNC machine, and installing park signage that has the same overall shape and look as our original park signage. These signs use plastic that stays out of landfills, they don't rot, they don't need repainted yearly, and most importantly they match that classic Johnson County Conservation Area look while guiding you towards your next park adventure. Take it as a sign to come out and visit us, a day outdoors in nature will never lead you astray.



Top left and right: Former JCC Employee Gary "George" Pigeon painting signs at F.W. Kent Park circa 1970s.

Bottom left: Today, signs are created using a CNC machine. **Bottom middle and right:** Staff installing the finished products, beautifying the parks throughout the county.

Behind the Scenes at F.W. Kent Park Lake

*How science, stewardship, and water quality monitoring keep
F.W. Kent Park Lake healthy*

Jeremy Rieck - Natural Resource Manager

On a warm July afternoon, the beach at F.W. Kent Park is full of families. Children splash in the shallows while kayakers quietly paddle across the lake, and anglers wait patiently for the next bite. Hikers circle the shoreline, photographers capture the scenery, and countless visitors simply pause to enjoy one of Johnson County's most treasured parks.

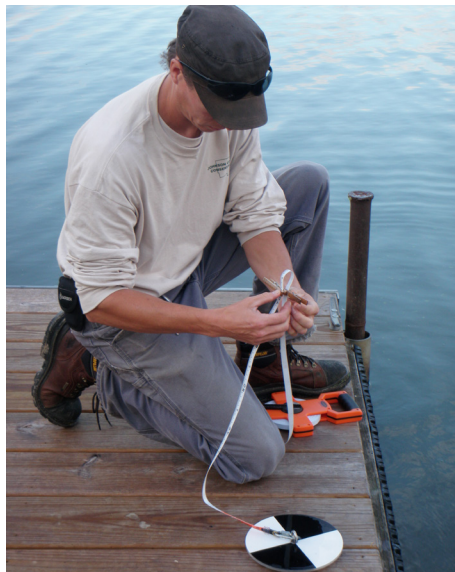
What most people don't see is the work happening behind the scenes to ensure the water they're enjoying is clean, healthy, and safe. Because many people assume F.W. Kent Park Lake has the same water quality challenges as many other Iowa lakes, they are often surprised to learn just how healthy the lake has become. That confidence isn't based on appearances, it's based on years of restoration, ongoing scientific monitoring, and a commitment to protecting one of Johnson County's most valuable resources.

Throughout the recreation season, Johnson

County Conservation's Natural Resource staff routinely monitors the health of Kent Park Lake. Their work provides the scientific data needed to understand the lake's condition, identify changes before they become problems, and ensure this important recreational resource remains healthy for both people and wildlife.

Water quality monitoring began in 2014 with daily temperature and turbidity readings at the boat dock and sampling at nine locations throughout the lake. By 2016, the program had expanded to 17 monitoring sites, including tributaries and upstream catch basins, providing a comprehensive picture of the entire watershed. Post restoration, the monitoring program has grown to 30 sampling locations.

The main parameters tested include phosphorus, nitrate, nitrite, ammonia, dissolved oxygen, turbidity, temperature, and e. coli.



Left: An employee measures turbidity at the outflow of Kent Park Lake using a water clarity tube. **Middle:** Another method to measure turbidity is using a secchi disk; the disk is lowered into the water and the depth where it is and isn't visible is measured. **Right:** An employee collects water at the beach to test for e. coli and other pollutants. **Opposite page:** Every week, JCC staff go out by boat to test water quality at numerous sites on Kent Park Lake.

Phosphorus is the most important nutrient we monitor. While it is essential for plant growth, excessive phosphorus fuels nuisance algae growth and harmful blue-green algae blooms that reduce water clarity, degrade fish habitat, and can produce toxins that pose risks to people, pets, and wildlife. Long-term monitoring identified excess phosphorus as the primary driver of F.W. Kent Park Lake's historic water quality problems.

Nitrate, nitrite, and ammonia are forms of nitrogen that enter lakes through fertilizer runoff, soil erosion, decaying vegetation, and animal waste. Elevated concentrations contribute to poor water quality and algae growth, while high ammonia levels can also become harmful to fish and other aquatic life.

Dissolved oxygen supports fish and aquatic insects, while pH helps ensure conditions remain suitable for aquatic life and recreation.

Turbidity, or water clarity, measures suspended sediment in the water and often indicates erosion somewhere within the watershed.

Temperature influences nearly every biological process in the lake, including fish activity, aquatic plant growth, and dissolved oxygen levels.

E. coli is monitored weekly at the beach throughout the recreation season to help protect public health. This is one of the reasons visitors can have confidence in the water quality at F.W. Kent Park Lake.

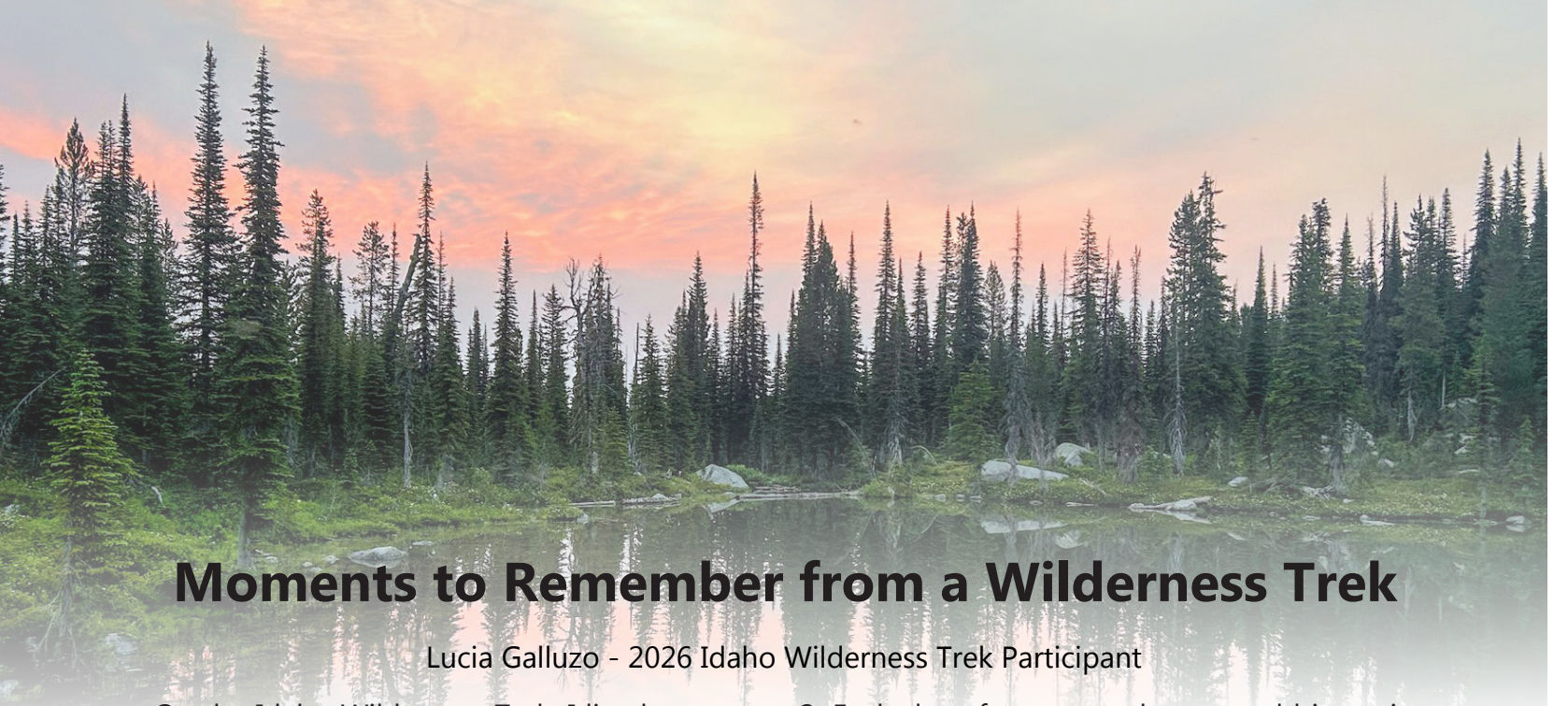
Monitoring does more than tell us the condition of the lake today, it guides the decisions we make for tomorrow. Before the lake restoration in 2016, the data collected by the Natural Resource staff identified excess phosphorus entering the lake from erosion and runoff as the primary driver of algae growth. That information became the foundation for an extensive restoration effort that included dredging the lake, improving and expanding upstream catch basins, installing



sediment control structures, converting mowed hillsides to native prairie, restoring native vegetation, removing an overabundance of grass carp, reestablishing aquatic plants, and improving fish habitat.

Those efforts addressed the source of the problem rather than simply treating the symptoms. After meeting Iowa Department of Natural Resources water quality standards through two consecutive assessment cycles (four years), F.W. Kent Park Lake was officially removed from Iowa's Impaired Waters List in 2024 after being listed since 2004 for chlorophyll-a impairment. Today, visitors see a clean, inviting lake where families swim, anglers fish, paddlers explore, and wildlife thrives.

What they may not see are the water samples collected each week, the data reviewed throughout the year, and the continued stewardship that protects this resource long after the restoration project was completed. Every sample collected and every management decision informed by science helps preserve a lake where families can swim, anglers can fish, paddlers can explore, and wildlife can thrive. Behind the clear water is more than a lake. It represents years of restoration, science, and dedicated stewardship by Johnson County Conservation staff, ensuring one of Johnson County's most treasured outdoor destinations remains healthy for generations to come.



Moments to Remember from a Wilderness Trek

Lucia Galluzo - 2026 Idaho Wilderness Trek Participant

On the Idaho Wilderness Trek, I lived moment by moment in a way I never have before. For background, Johnson County Conservation naturalists have been taking high schoolers to Idaho's Selway Bitterroot Wilderness the previous ten summers. This year I was lucky enough to go on the ten-day trip! Because our days in the wilderness consisted of hiking, trail work, swimming, camp chores, and talking around the fire, all of which required my mind to be on the present task, I was able to collect moments, smooth like Lochsa River stones that I will remember forever. Here are my top six sun-warmed-river-rock moments:

1. To begin our trek, we gathered at the trailhead loaded down with backpacks and tools. Once we hiked around the first bend, we could see the mountains that would be our trek home. They were majestic, but also intimidating because I knew we would have to climb them. Further down the trail we were stopped by a tree across the path. It was our job to clear it and any others on the trail. We were taught how to use a crosscut saw and all the way to our campsite, we cleared the trail of the many trees that had fallen during a forest fire last year. The trail we cleared was the trail we hiked back on the last day. Seeing how much better condition the trail was in and knowing how much work we did was a great feeling of accomplishment.

2. Each day after our work, we would jump in the lake near camp. By the time I got back to camp the people who hiked at the front of the group would already be in the water. The cold, fresh alpine lake felt refreshing after a day of work and bug bites. My favorite swimming experience was when we hiked to Lower Wind Lake. We sat on a rock in the middle of the lake where there were no bugs and talked, losing track of time. When we were finally called back, no one wanted to leave that rock.

3. One afternoon, we had solo time. At first, I was not looking forward to the four hours I would spend by myself, but once I climbed the rock where I chose to spend the afternoon, I knew solo time would end too quickly. From my perch I heard a shrill screeching noise. At first, I was confused but then I noticed the small cliff above me had a marmot standing on its hind legs looking down at me. My friend the marmot continued to sit and stare for the next three hours. As my solo time was coming to a close I was laying down with my eyes closed and I heard something above me. I opened my eyes and noticed a hummingbird flying back and forth directly above my head. It was so close I could hear the hum of its wings. This peaceful experience of observing life is one I will always remember.

4. We ended every day around the campfire

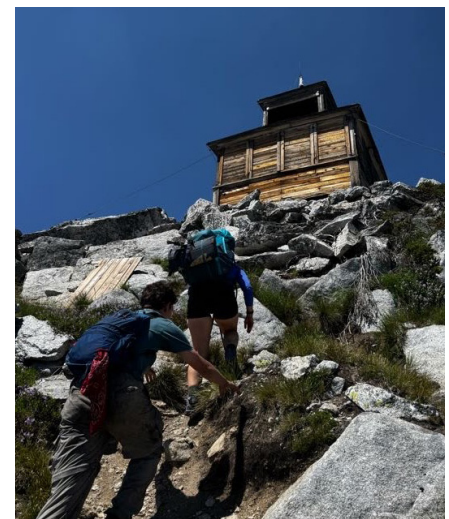


eating dinner, discussing our roses, buds, and thorns, drinking hot chocolate, and occasionally roasting marshmallows. This dusk time was full of laughter, jokes, friendship, and genuine connection.

5. On our last full day in the wilderness, we hiked to Grave Peak. It was a challenging trail with steep rocky sections and snow fields. Once we made it to the fire watch tower at the peak, everyone pulled out their cameras to photograph the mountains and lakes surrounding us. Looking at the mountains made me feel small in such a big world; it was a feeling I don't experience often.

6. The morning we hiked out, we woke before dawn, put on our bug nets, and sat on a big rock over the lake to see the sunrise above the mountain. We were all tired but eager to not miss our last moments in the wilderness. We were rewarded with a colorful sunrise with a perfect reflection in the lake's still water.

This trek gave me these treasured memories and new friends. It taught me to get out of my comfort zone whether it be with the people I talk to, the places I go, or the things I do in my life. When I graduate high school in two years and begin the next chapter of my life, I know that this trip and the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness will have contributed to the person I am. I will always carry my Idaho moments with me like a smooth stone in my pocket.



Opposite page: The teens woke up for a 4:30 AM sunrise over Swamp Lake. **Top left:** Experience-maxxers, this crew made a point to watch as many sunsets as they could. **Top Right:** A capstone tradition of the trek is to visit the ancient cedar trees in Devoto Grove. **Middle left:** A teen works on clearing a fallen tree from the trail. **Middle right:** The final ascent to the Fire Tower atop Grave Peak is especially steep. **Bottom:** A cluster of paintbrush flowers flourished in a wildfire-burned forest.



Wings & Wild Things Festival

A Celebration of Iowa's Natural World

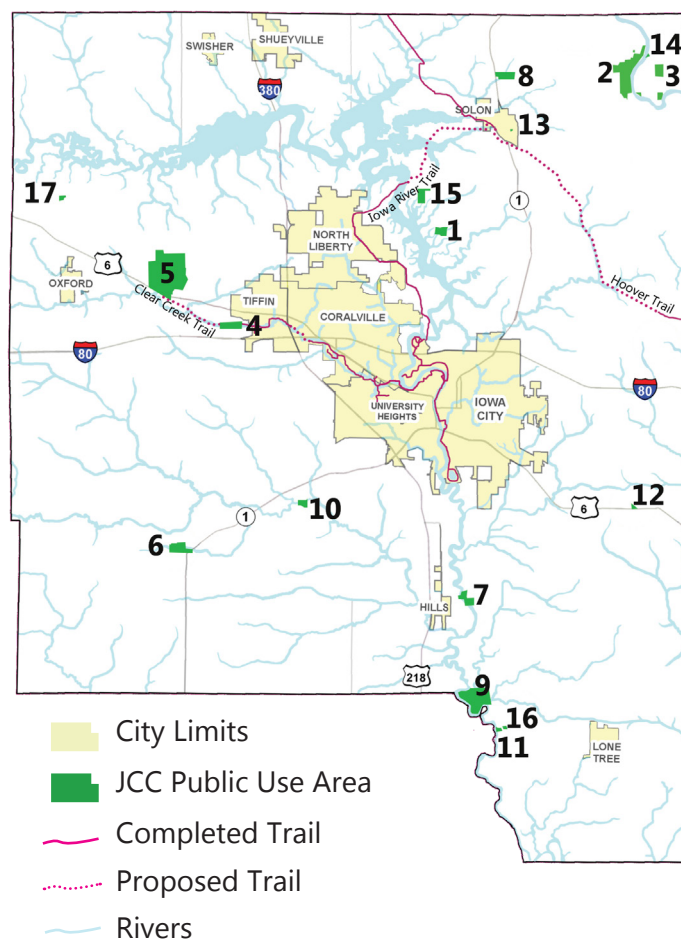
NATIVE PLANT SALE
LIVE REPTILES FISHING
RAPTOR MEET & GREET
ECO ARTS BIRD HIKES
FUNGI FORAYS FUN
NATURAL FIRE CRAFTING
POLLINATOR ACTIVITIES
LIVE MUSIC LOCAL FOOD
+ MORE

October 4
10 am-2 pm
Kent Park



JCC 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. To sign up, **click or scan** 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**.



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

CEC Open Houses, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m. Every Second Saturday of the month, September - December.

Free open hours will include themed activities along with exploration of the CEC.

September

Native Plant Speaker Series & Plant Sale

Sunday, Sept. 13, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m./1:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Embrace conservation at home by landscaping with native plants! Each event showcases a regional native plant expert and hosts a native plant sale by Troutleaf Native Plants. The plant sale will go until 1:00 p.m., and no registration is required for the sale. Registration is required for the Speaker Series).

Naturalist Hike

Tuesday, September 15, 4:30 - 6:00 p.m.
Two Horse Farm

Take in fields of goldenrod on this 1.5-2 mile hike.

Afternoon Paddle

Tuesday, September 15, 2:00 - 3:30 p.m.
Kent Park Lake

Paddle Kent Park lake with a naturalist. This is a beginner-friendly adult class, and JCC provides kayaks, paddles, and life jackets.

Iowa River Clean Up

Saturday Sept. 19, 8:00 a.m. - 2:00/4:00 p.m.
(Times variable by conditions and volunteer task)
Iowa River, Iowa City to Hills Access (9.5 miles)

The Iowa River Clean Up is an annual event where volunteers haul out trash large and small by canoe. This year is the 10th clean-up, and since the first event, volunteers have removed over 64 tons of trash! Canoes and life jackets provided on a first served basis. Additional volunteers are needed to help unload trash from canoes.

Nature Buds - Butterflies

Wednesday, September 30, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.

Nature Buds is a monthly nature program for kids ages three to five years old. Each month features a seasonal theme with story time, a craft/STEM activity, and often outdoor exploration.

October

Wings & Wild Things Festival

Sunday, October 4, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
F.W. Kent Park

Celebrate Iowa's natural world! Event features live raptor meet & greets, a native plant sale, education stations, guided bird walks, fishing, eco arts activities, reptile demonstrations, and more. Grab food from local food trucks, and enjoy a day spent exploring Johnson County's Kent Park.

Fall Fungi Foray

Thursday, October 8, 4:00 - 5:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

What do oysters, puffballs, and bird's nests all have in common? They are all different types of fungi! Fungi are an integral part of the ecosystem, playing an important role in decomposition and nutrient cycling. Join us to learn all about Iowan fungi from the Prairie States Mushroom Club as we search for them in F.W. Kent Park.

Arts & Ice Cream Bike Ride: Dubuque St. Trail

Thursday, October 15, 12:00 - ~5:00 p.m.
Dubuque St. Trail

Enjoy an easy-paced bike ride on the Dubuque Street Trail. This ~16 mile ride will go from Waterworks Prairie to North Liberty and back. We will stop in North Liberty for ice cream from Heyn's and get an artist-guided tour of a studio.

Nature Buds - Leaves

Wednesday, October 28, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.

November

Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
Wild Rumpus

Thursday, November 5, 3:30 - 4:30 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Bring your wild child out to Kent Park, and embark on a journey to where the wild things are! We will read the classic book together and use it to help us learn about the wild creatures that live nearby. Then, we'll head out for a wild rumpus of our own! The CEC will be open to explore before the program.

Intro to Print Making

Friday, November 13, 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
Fee: \$25 with tool; \$10 no tool

This intro course is for beginner linocut print makers who want the basics: tools, techniques, printing process, etc. Participants will draw, carve, and print a design during the class..

No School Day - Nature Arts Camp

Wednesday, November 18, 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
Fee: \$25

Spend an ICCSD no-school day with JCC Naturalists! We will explore nature-based arts activities, play games, and spend time exploring outdoors. This camp is drop-off style for kids K- 5th.

Nature Buds - Spiders

Wednesday, November 25, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.

December

Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
Foraged Winter Wreaths

Wednesday, December 9, 6:00-7:30 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Create a winter wreath using natural materials collected from Johnson County Conservation sites.

Rain Barrel Workshop

Thursday, December 10, 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, Kent Park
Fee: \$40

Construct your own upcycled 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 paint their barrel using provided acrylic paints.

Nature Buds - Beavers

Wednesday, December 16, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Winter Camp

Mon & Tues, Dec. 21-22, 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park
Fee: \$50

In this two-day camp, campers will explore Kent Park with activities possibly including shelter/fire building, animal tracking, birding, campfire cooking, meeting reptiles, and more (activities will vary by conditions.) This camp is open to kids K- 5th.

Volunteer Events

Monarch Tagging Event

We need volunteers to help us catch wild monarch butterflies for tagging! This is a great way to support monarch butterfly research. Events are dependent on weather conditions and location may be changed depending on monarch activity. Locations include Cedar River Crossing (best for older kids or adults with good mobility) or Kent Park (all ages).

Thursday, September 3, 3:30 - 5:30 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, Kent Park

Saturday, September 5, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.,
Kent Park

Thursday, September 10, 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Cedar River Crossing

Prairie Seed Harvests

Help us hand harvest wildflower seeds for future prairie restoration projects! Training will be provided at the start of the program. Most harvests require hiking up to 1.5 miles, except the "Accessible Harvests," which will focus on harvesting from wildflower patches close to parking areas.

Wednesday, Sept 16, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center

Wednesday, Sept 23, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Williams Prairie Preserve

Wednesday, September 30, 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Two Horse Farm

Wednesday, Oct 7, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Valley View Prairie

Wednesday, Oct 14, 10:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
Cedar River Crossing

Wednesday, Oct 21, 4:30 - 6:30 p.m.
Cedar River Crossing

Friday, Oct 23, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Dam Parking Area, Kent Park

Accessible harvest, no hiking required

Wednesday, Oct 28, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Red Haw Shelter Area, Kent Park

Accessible harvest, no hiking required

Wednesday, Oct 28, 2:00 - 4:00

Malinda Reif Reilly Fen and Prairie

Wednesday, Nov 4, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Knight Prairie Pavilion, Kent Park

Accessible harvest, no hiking required

Wednesday, Nov 4, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Conservation Education Center

Wednesday, Nov 11, 10:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Ciha Fen Preserve

Prairie Seed Processing

Harvested prairie seed must be broken down for fall planting, including plucking, crushing, sifting, and sorting. This volunteer task is a sit-down, indoor job.

Wednesday, Nov 4, 2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

Coralville Public Library

Tuesday, Nov 17, 3:30-5:30 p.m.

Conservation Education Center

Tuesday, Nov 24, 1:00-3:00 p.m.

Conservation Education Center

Tuesday, Dec 1, 9:30-11:30 a.m.

Conservation Education Center

Tuesday, Dec 8, 9:30-11:30 a.m.

Conservation Education Center

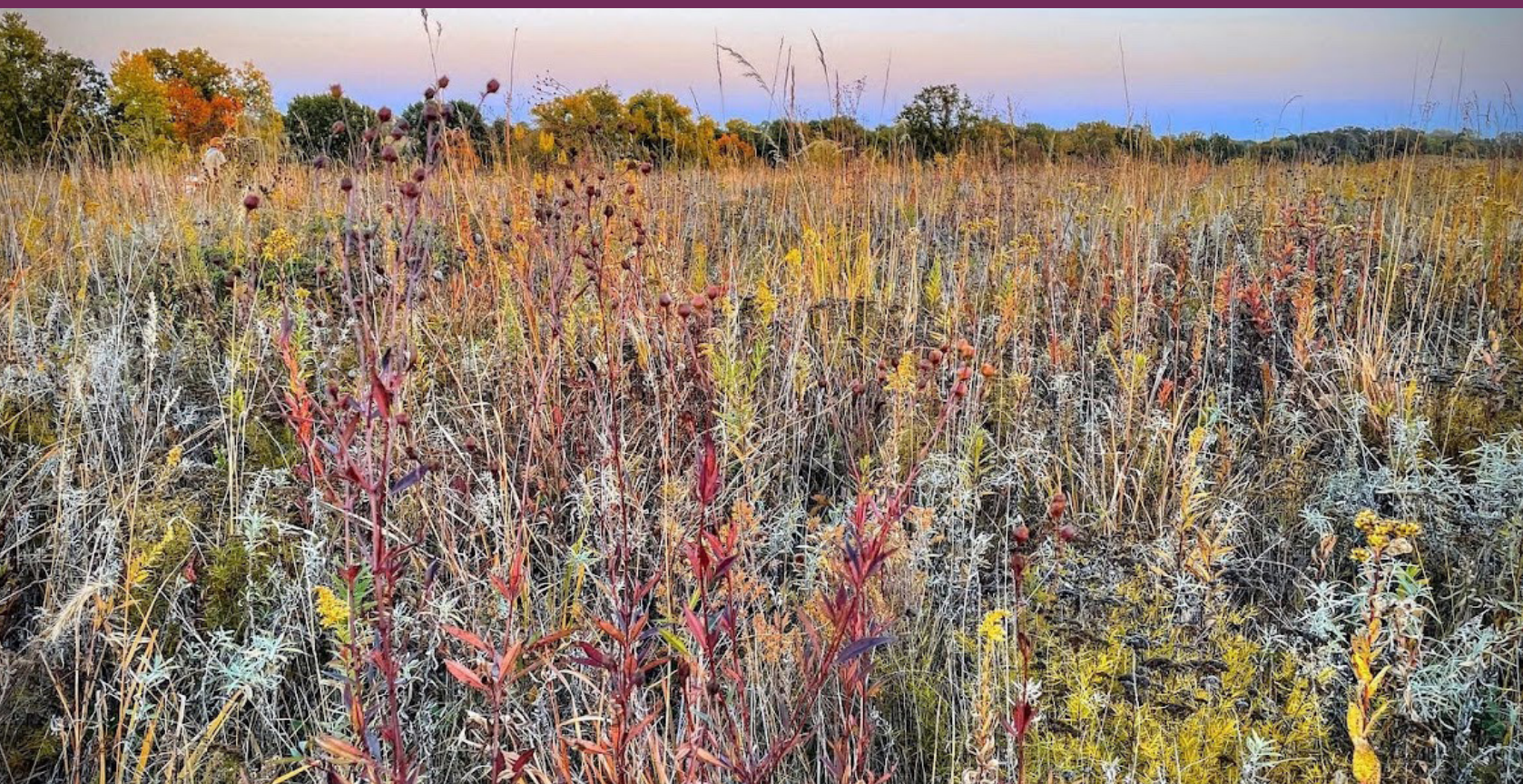


Johnson County Conservation
2048 HWY 6 NW
Oxford, IA 52322

Scan or click the QR
code to subscribe to
our newsletter.



PRINTED ON
RECYCLED PAPER



The forests aren't the only colorful part of fall - prairies bring vibrant hues of their own, like the red coreopsis, yellow goldenrod, and silver sage shown here.