



## Preserving and Protecting Iowa's Wild Lands and Wildlife

Iowa does not have oceans and mountains, but Iowa does have tall grass prairies, woods, savannas, prairie pothole wetlands, lakes and streams. Iowa enjoys incredibly diverse species, among them 425 bird<sup>1</sup>, 61 mammal<sup>2</sup>, 148 fish<sup>3</sup>, 56 reptile<sup>4</sup> and 22 amphibian species.<sup>5</sup> Even more significant is Iowa's location – Iowa attracts some of the western-most species, some of the eastern-most species, and some of the northern-most species found in the country.

Iowa's parks and natural areas provide many benefits for our health and enjoyment. Iowa's prairies, forests, wetlands, rivers, and lakes:

- Supply habitat for wild plants and animals.
- Offer recreation opportunities for hiking, camping, canoeing, viewing wildlife, fishing
- Cleanse the air and water, retain and absorb water, sequester carbon
- Provide relaxation, stress relief and satisfy spiritual needs
- Offer beautiful scenery
- Support economic benefits to the neighboring communities when visitors spend money for things such as hotels, gas, restaurants
- Enable jobs and careers to people who work in parks and recreation, both in the public and private sector
- Preserve places where children can learn about nature, can play safely, and can enjoy being outdoors



*Whitewater Canyon, Jones and Dubuque Counties.  
Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor*

---

<sup>1</sup> Iowa Ornithologists' Union, [www.iowabirds.org/Checklists/](http://www.iowabirds.org/Checklists/)

<sup>2</sup> "Checklist of Iowa Mammals with Atlas Links", [www.gis.iastate.edu/gap/terra/atlas/mammals.htm](http://www.gis.iastate.edu/gap/terra/atlas/mammals.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Iowa Department of Natural Resources, [www.iowadnr.gov/Fishing/IowaFishSpecies.aspx](http://www.iowadnr.gov/Fishing/IowaFishSpecies.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> "Checklist of Iowa Herps with Atlas Links", [www.gis.iastate.edu/gap/terra/atlas/herps.htm](http://www.gis.iastate.edu/gap/terra/atlas/herps.htm)

<sup>5</sup> "Checklist of Iowa Herps with Atlas Links", [www.gis.iastate.edu/gap/terra/atlas/herps.htm](http://www.gis.iastate.edu/gap/terra/atlas/herps.htm)

## Challenges

Since the Europeans settled in Iowa, a significant amount of the state's natural area has vanished. The Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) law,<sup>6</sup> adopted in 1989, summarizes the loss:

"The general assembly finds that:

1. The citizens of Iowa have built and sustained their society on Iowa's air, soils, waters, and rich diversity of life. The well-being and future of Iowa depend on these natural resources.

2. Many human activities have endangered Iowa's natural resources. The state of Iowa has lost ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent of its prairies, ninety-eight percent of its wetlands, eighty percent of its woodlands, fifty percent of its topsoils, and more than one hundred species of wildlife since settlement in the early 1800's. There has been a significant deterioration in the quality of Iowa's surface waters and groundwaters.

3. The long-term effects of Iowa's natural resource losses are not completely known or understood, but detrimental effects are already apparent. Prevention of further loss is therefore imperative.

4. The air, waters, soils, and biota of Iowa are interdependent and form a complex ecosystem. Iowans have the right to inherit this ecosystem in a sustainable condition, without severe or irreparable damage caused by human activities."



*Goldfinch. Photo by Mike "Augie" Augspurger*

Wild lands and wildlife face numerous challenges.

- Significant weather pattern changes, including floods, droughts, late frosts and little snow cover, affect the ability of plants and animals to live and reproduce.
- Off-road vehicles operating through natural areas destroy plants, cause soil erosion, spread invasive species and destroy wildlife habitat.
- Silica sand mining threatens the scenic bluff lands of northeast Iowa while mining of loess soils threatens the Loess Hills of western Iowa.
- Destroying prairies, savannas and woodlands through poorly planned growth and development, as well as highway construction also results in fragmentation of natural areas and the loss of corridors for wildlife to travel and native plants to spread.
- Iowa's waters are under siege from pesticides, fertilizer, manure, sediment and other pollutants. Urban streams face thermal pollution from the onslaught of hot storm water running off pavement.
- Butterflies and ground nesting birds face challenges from current burn policies where the prairies are burned in a three-year rotation, which is not long enough for the species to recover between the burns.
- Air pollution from factories and concentrated animal feeding operations create unpleasant odors and release toxics into the air.

---

<sup>6</sup> Iowa Code, Section 455A.15 Legislative findings

- Inadequate financing to care for public lands and to acquire additional land.
- Public lands, including parks and recreation areas, face threats by decision makers to sell or donate the land to private entities for economic development activities and to harvest timber in order to shore up treasuries.
- Invasive species, both plant and animal, threaten the continued existence and habitat of native species.
- Lack of management plans for animals that are hunted and trapped results in the potential for over-harvest.

### **Policy recommendations**



*Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor*

Although Iowa has lost significant wild lands, wild rivers and streams and wild life, some of the natural lands have been saved in parks and preserves. Expanding Iowa's parks and natural areas is good for all Iowans. Yet to protect additional natural areas in Iowa and to continue preserving the public lands already protected by the state, counties and cities, more work must be done. The Iowa Chapter supports policies that will continue to preserve and protect Iowa's natural areas.

### **Providing adequate funding to protect public natural areas and to acquire additional public land**

- Fully funding REAP at \$20 million every year as statutorily mandated, extending REAP beyond 2026, and retaining the current funding formulas. REAP funds are used to purchase natural areas for parks and open spaces as well as to provide conservation education.
- Increasing the sales tax by 3/8 of one cent to fund the Natural Resources & Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. The constitutional amendment providing the framework for the Trust Fund passed with 63 percent of the voters approving the amendment in November 2010. The overwhelming support for the constitutional amendment makes a clear statement that Iowans want to invest in parks, recreation and clean water.
- Adequately funding projects identified in the Watershed Management Plans.

### **Ensuring adequate staffing of public land departments so that they can be good stewards of the public lands**

- Adequate funding for staff must be appropriated to maintain the parks and natural areas, including removing invasive species from the properties.

- Funding studies to inventory the native species in state parks, state preserves, county parks and city parks.
- Funding a naturalist in every county to provide education of the public on natural areas and wildlife.
- Retaining free access to state and county parks for all who want to enjoy and recreate in them.

### **Preserving wild lands**

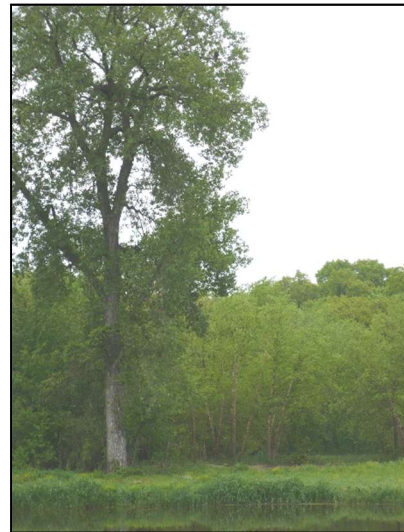
- Acquiring additional natural areas, both prairies and woodlands. A concerted effort should be made to connect the public lands so that a corridor is available for wildlife to travel. The corridors also facilitate plants to expand their populations.
- Keeping public lands in public hands. In some urban areas in Iowa, developers regularly request that public parks be privatized and adapted for commercial and industrial buildings or housing.
- Designating the Loess Hills as a National Reserve as recommended in the National Park report, "The Loess Hills of Western Iowa Special Resource Study and Environmental Assessment," issued in January 2002. The Reserve would be affiliated with the National Park Service.



*Loess Hills. Photo by Jim Redmond*

- Expanding Dunbar Slough in Greene County and including it in the Southern Prairie Pothole National Wildlife Refuge.
- Implementing effective measures to prevent pollution from entering water bodies and establishing enforceable criteria. Protecting public health requires the water in Iowa's rivers, streams and lakes be free of pollutants and meet water quality standards as approved by the Environmental Protection Agency. Polluted water reduces the number of fish in a water body and their ability to reproduce leading to a loss of recreation opportunities. Nobody wants to wade in, paddle on or swim in a stream or river that smells of sewage or manure. Water polluted with manure and sewage can lead to the growth of harmful bacteria, a public health threat. No one wants to plan a vacation to one of Iowa's lakes only to find that the beaches are closed due to high bacteria levels.
- Implementing measures to restore water quality in those streams and lakes that are currently degraded.
- Restoring wetlands and minimizing fill placed in floodplains.

- Restoring channelized streams with meanders and riffles that will provide habitat for fish and aquatic insects.
- Removing dams and restoring rivers to restore fish runs.
- Restoring the prairie pothole region to enhance habitat for ducks, geese and other water species.
- Imposing steep penalties to protect public lands from the damage caused by off-road vehicles and all-terrain vehicles, accompanied by strong enforcement actions, to ensure compliance with regulations regarding their use. Off-road vehicle trails should not be built in fragile areas highly prone to erosion nor should they be built in areas where rare plants and animals reside. Land managers need the authority to immediately close trails that face erosion from over-use, during weather conditions that would enable erosion and when users cut their own trails.
- Updating Iowa's list of endangered, threatened and special concern plants and animals.
- Concurrently updating the weed policy so that native plants, especially plants on the threatened, endangered and special concern lists are not erroneously labeled as weeds and destroyed.
- Restoring kestrel nesting boxes removed from DOT signs along interstates during 2013. The Department of Transportation (DOT) claimed there was too much traffic to allow maintenance of the boxes. The Iowa Chapter supports aggressive actions to establish kestrel nesting sites near where they were previously located.



*Pinicon Ridge Park, Central City, Iowa.  
Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor*

### **Protecting wildlife**

- Planting prairie plants in all road ditches provides habitat for wildlife as well as corridors for wildlife to travel. The other benefits of prairie in the ditches include reduced mowing costs, reduced herbicide usage and the ability to hold and absorb more storm water.
- Prohibiting the use of CRP land for grazing to allow ground-nesting birds to thrive.
- Restoring habitat for the jackrabbit.
- Undertaking studies to determine the cause of the population crash of the gray fox and to restore its habitat to encourage restoration of the population.
- Extending the time between controlled burns in prairie management plans beyond three years so that butterflies and ground-nesting birds can recover their populations.
- Placing new transmission lines several thousand feet away from natural areas to protect birds from injuries incurred when they slam into the lines and towers. Transmission lines built near natural areas need extra precautions to protect birds, including longer spans between towers, deflection devices placed on the wires and a monopole structure as opposed to the lattice-type of tower structure.

- Mandatory monitoring of pre-construction echolocation for bats before wind turbines are constructed, with turbines moved away from prime bat habitat and bat migration areas.
- Determining during pre-construction studies if a wind turbine will be sited on migratory pathways used by birds or if rare species of birds reside near the turbine site. Areas used by rare bird species and migrating birds should be avoided.
- Reducing night-time lighting

### **Ensuring sustainable hunting, fishing and trapping**

- Hunting, trapping and fishing quotas and seasons set by Department of Natural Resources staff must be based on monitoring populations and scientific studies. Particular investigations need to be undertaken for the bobcat and otter to determine if the populations are not over-harvested. Both the bobcat and otter were extirpated from the state and are now allowed to be trapped. The otter was reintroduced and the bobcat returned to the state from surrounding states. The bobcat populations should be allowed to continue spreading throughout Iowa, with particular emphasis on its expansion into northeast Iowa. Although duck and goose populations have been extensively studied, most of the other animals that are hunted have not been studied. Each hunted, fished and trapped species needs a management plan detailing the populations, expected population changes, contemplated habitat restoration needs for the population to sustain itself and identification of how Iowa's climate changes are affecting and will affect populations and hunting seasons.
- Ongoing studies of turtles, with a special review of the sustainability of the commercial trapping limits. The Chapter also supports a closed trapping season from January through the end of July. A closed season will protect the turtles during their spring and summer reproductive cycle (breeding, developing eggs and nesting) to ensure that turtles are not extirpated from the waters in Iowa. Considering that commercial trappers are harvesting large numbers of turtles for export and that the numbers of softshell and painted turtles are significantly declining, limits should be placed on those species of turtle to ensure sustainability after a harvest.
- Double-fencing private game farms to ensure that the captive game animals are not released into the wild and to help prevent the spread of chronic wasting disease through the wild population of deer.
- The black bear and cougar need to be placed on the furbearer list, with a closed season. Both the black bear and cougar were extirpated from the state. Both species periodically make appearances in Iowa, often resulting in the animals being hunted.
- Banning lead shot and lead fishing tackle. Animals can ingest lost fishing weights and pieces of lead shot, mistaking them for food or grit. Small quantities of lead poison



*Palisades-Kepler State Park.  
Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor*

birds. Eagles regularly face a slow, painful death after ingesting lead obtained from deer carcasses. Dove hunting is particularly dangerous as hunters spray large quantities of small shot with poor success rates in hitting a dove. Additionally, the Chapter supports monitoring for lead contamination in publicly-owned food plots used for dove hunting as well as developing decontamination plans for the soil.

- Increasing the monitoring of fish and turtle populations for toxic levels of pollutants, including mercury and PCBs, in order to protect public health.

#### **Improving recreation opportunities**

- Increasing public access to water trails.
- Removing low head dams. If they must stay, signage needs improvement and maintenance.
- Improving water quality so that people who recreate in or near Iowa's lakes, rivers and streams are not put at health risk due to high levels of bacteria and other microbes, toxic pollution and poor water quality



*Low head dam on the Cedar River at Palisades Kepler State Park. Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor*

#### **Supporting Iowa's wildlife, natural areas, parks and recreation areas by individuals**

- Purchasing REAP license plates.
- Contributing to the Chickadee Checkoff on state income taxes.
- Creating habitat friendly lawns by planting native prairie plants, native shrubs and native trees. Organic lawns are attainable by avoiding the use of herbicides, pesticides and artificial fertilizers. If necessary, apply non-phosphorus fertilizer. Testing soil before applying fertilizer will determine how much fertilizer to apply.
- Introducing a child to the natural world. Children who are introduced to the natural world will develop an appreciation for the wildlands and wildlife and will seek outdoor recreation opportunities throughout their lives.

#### **Conclusion**

We all have a responsibility to protect wildlife and wild places and leave a better world for future generations. The natural legacy we leave our children and grandchildren depends on the steps we take today as stewards of Iowa's and America's wild places and wild life.