

The Prairie Country Quarterly

Spring, 2026

A NEWSLETTER OF THE WINNEBAGO COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD



Spring is a Busy Time!

As the weather warms up and the days get longer, you're probably heading outdoors to get some yard work done or to get your garden planted. Well, we here at the Winnebago County Conservation Board get busy, too! There is a lot to do each spring to prepare our parks and wildlife areas for the coming year.



In fact, every spring, there is a whole checklist of items that we need to do. We always try to get started early, but spring weather often has the last word to say on that! For instance, before things green up too much, we try to conduct a few prairie burns. These burns help to reduce competition from woody vegetation in our prairies and also help to return nutrients back to the soil, helping to keep our prairies healthy. But, burns require just

the right weather conditions, a lot of planning beforehand, and equipment preparation that often begins during the cold days of winter!

We also need to get our campgrounds open for the season. We manage two campgrounds, one at Thorpe Park and one at Dahle Park. Before they can open back up in the spring, we need to clean them up, move the picnic tables and fire rings back into place, turn the water back on, and make sure the utilities are all working. And, if they're not working, we have to make sure that repairs get done before the campgrounds open.



We also have to reopen Thorpe Park's Lake Catherine Cabin, which closes down in the winter. We work every spring to get it cleaned up, turn the water back on, make sure that everything works in the cabin, and make sure that it's well-stocked. This year, we will also be opening up a new cabin at Thorpe Park! We are still working on getting that cabin up and running, so that's another project that will be ongoing throughout the spring and early summer.

In addition to all of these things, we have two shooting ranges that we manage. The Florence Park Shooting Range is a trap range, while the range at the Hogsback Wildlife Area is a traditional type of shooting range. Both of those need to be cleaned up and maintenance work needs to be done to make sure that they are also ready for the upcoming season.



And, of course, we have normal park maintenance that has to be done each spring, such as post-winter trail cleaning, installing fishing docks, putting picnic tables back out, and cleaning out our shelter houses. But, all this work pays off when we see people out in our parks, camping, fishing, hiking, or enjoying a stay in our cabins. We encourage you to come visit your county parks! We look forward to seeing you there!

Winnebago County Conservation Board

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Thank you!

Be Sure to Check Out These Upcoming Programs!

ARBOR DAY TREE GIVEAWAY

FRIDAY, APRIL 24TH
HANSON NATURE CENTER 8:30 AM-4:00 PM

We will once again be hosting our annual seedling giveaway, so stop by and pick up your free seedling! This year's species include Gray Dogwood, Hackberry, Norway Spruce, and Pin Oak. Quantities are limited, so please only one seedling per person.



SPRING OPEN HOUSE AND MOTUS TOWER DEDICATION

SATURDAY, APRIL 25TH
HANSON NATURE CENTER 1:30-3:30 PM
MOTUS TOWER DEDICATION 2:00 PM

Join us for a Spring Open House at the Hanson Nature Center! The Center will be open, you'll be able to walk the trails, we'll have crafts for the kids, and there will be a Motus Tower dedication at 2:00 PM. If you haven't visited our center yet, now is the time to check it out! And, if you have visited, come on back to see what's new! Light refreshments will be served.

FREE FISHING AT THORPE PARK

FRIDAY, JUNE 5TH
THORPE PARK BOAT RAMP 7:00-9:00 PM

The first weekend in June is always Free Fishing Days in Iowa! For three days, Iowa residents can fish in the state without needing to purchase a fishing license. So, if you've never fished and would like to try it, now is your chance! We will have fishing poles, as well as bait and tackle, available at the boat ramp to loan out to anyone wishing to fish at Lake Catherine this evening. We'll even have some instruction, if you need it, as well as handouts for the kids!



For more information on any of these programs, you can contact Naturalist Lisa Ralls at 641-567-3390.

WCCB News



Beehives Coming to the Hanson Nature Center

Over the last year or so, we've been selling honey to raise money for an observation beehive for the nature center. The honey was generously donated by one of our Conservation Board members, Tim Missal, who also happens to be a beekeeper. And, this spring, we also applied for, and received, a grant from the Iowa Association of Naturalists to cover the rest of the cost of the hive. So, we're happy to announce that we have raised enough money and will be getting a beehive this summer!

The hive will be a glass-enclosed, observation hive located in the lower level classroom at the nature center. It will allow people to see the inner workings of the normally secretive world of a bee colony. It will also be combined with educational information about bees and other pollinators. In addition, Tim has agreed to place one of his working hives outdoors at the center to compliment the indoor hive.

We are excited about this new display that we will soon be able to offer to the public!

New Lake Catherine Cabin Rates

The WCCB decided over the winter to raise the rates at the [Lake Catherine Cabin at Thorpe Park](#). Beginning this year, the new rates will be \$80/night during the week, and \$100/night on Friday and Saturday nights. There will also now be a two-night minimum and the \$20 pet fee will be a nightly fee, covering up to two pets. We will also be adding back the cooking utensils and supplies that were removed during Covid, although people will still need to supply their own bedding and towels.

We apologize for any inconvenience that this rate increase may cause, but the board felt that it was necessary in order to keep up with the increasing maintenance costs associated with the cabin.



Motus Tower Up at the Hanson Nature Center

Our Motus Tower is up at the Hanson Nature Center! It was erected on March 24th and is [now online and searching for birds!](#) Researchers throughout the world tag birds with special tags and Motus Towers can detect those tags from up to 10 miles away. When a bird is pinged on a Motus Tower, that time and location are documented. So, as tagged birds migrate, their migration can be followed through a series of Motus Towers, providing researchers with valuable information about those birds, their migration routes, and the habitats they're utilizing.

Our tower is called Mae's Way because the money for the MOTUS Tower has been very generously donated to us by the Helgeson family of Lake Mills in memory of their daughter, Mae. Mae was an avid birder and photographer who tragically passed away in an accident in 2024, at only 11 years old.

We will be holding a dedication ceremony to honor Mae and her family at our Spring Open House on April 25th. At that time, we will also offer a short program to let people know about how the tower works and what we hope it will offer to the local community, as well as to the birding world.

Join Us For Critter Camp 2026!

Critter Camp is back! For the fourth year in a row, we are partnering with NIACC to bring our weeklong day camp to 1st through 5th-graders from throughout north Iowa. Meet fascinating reptiles and amphibians face-to-face, catch and study bugs, go on nature hikes, and learn how to fish--for real fish! And, of course no Critter Camp would be complete without catching some pond critters! The week is all about exploring, learning, and a little less screen time. Critter Camp themes this year will include:

- Monday, June 8th**--Birds at the Hanson Nature Center
- Tuesday, June 9th**--Bugs at Thorpe Park
- Wednesday, June 10th**--Fishing at Thorpe Park
- Thursday, June 11th**--Reptiles and Amphibians at the Hanson Nature Center
- Friday, June 12th**--Pond Critters at Pilot Knob State Park.



Times each day will run from 9:00-11:00 AM. The fee for the whole week is \$9/child, with registration through NIACC at niacc.augusoft.net. Contact WCCB Naturalist Lisa Ralls at 641-567-3390 for more information.

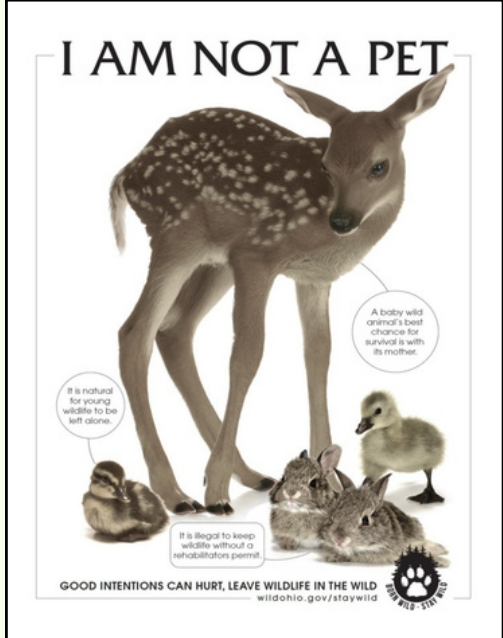


THIS SUMMER, THE HANSON NATURE CENTER WILL BE OPEN FROM 1:00-4:00 PM ON SEVERAL WEEKEND DAYS. WE HOPE YOU CAN VISIT US ON ONE OF THESE DAYS!

MAY 23RD
JULY 5TH
AUGUST 8TH
SEPTEMBER 5TH



I AM NOT A PET



A baby wild animal's best chance for survival is with its mother.

It is natural for young wildlife to be left alone.

It is illegal to keep wildlife without a rehabilitator's permit.

GOOD INTENTIONS CAN HURT. LEAVE WILDLIFE IN THE WILD wildohio.gov/staywild

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

--Wendell Barry, American Author and Poet



Meet North America's Smallest Falcon-- The American Kestrel

You've probably seen these striking, colorful little birds sitting on a telephone pole or on a power line in a rural area. Or, you may have actually missed them altogether, because of their diminutive size. But American Kestrels are iconic birds of open, grassy areas; and, as such, can be found throughout Iowa.

Despite their appearance, kestrels are not actually hawks. Some people even call them "sparrow hawks" because they are so small, only about the size of a blue jay. But, kestrels are actually falcons, and are smaller relatives of Peregrine Falcons. Since they are so small, their diet mostly consists of small prey animals, such as large insects, mice, voles, or small frogs and snakes .

Kestrels are cavity-nesting birds, so they do need some trees in their otherwise open habitat. But, they cannot excavate their own cavity, so they rely on woodpecker holes or natural tree cavities to raise their young. They also readily take to nesting boxes and, in fact, you can often see kestrel nesting boxes on rural telephone poles or on the back of interstate signs.

Unfortunately, because of habitat loss and the decline of their food sources, the kestrel population has decreased by 50% over the last 60 years. If the decline continues, the population may decrease by another 50% by 2075. If you'd like to help out these little falcons, there are several things that you can do. If you have old, dead trees on your property, leave them standing, if you can, because they probably have nesting cavities in them. Or, you can build nesting boxes for the kestrels to use. Finally, you can also use pesticides wisely and make sure that any rodent poison you use does not kill any small prey animals that kestrels may feed upon. Otherwise, the kestrels could also be poisoned.

These tiny falcons are beautiful birds, but they are also a very important part of the ecosystem. Be sure to watch for them this spring!



We want to extend a heartfelt thank you to the following people for their donations over the past few months! We are very appreciative of their support. All cash donations go towards developing and enhancing our nature center exhibits.

In Memory of Bruce Burdick
Steve and Kathy Iverson

In Memory of Neil Boyd
Dan and Kim Langfald

In Memory of Mark Fjone, “A fan of Mae and all she stood for, and her love of birds and nature”
Sue Fjone

Belinda Friis

Lynn and Julie Hagenon

Thank You!



We also want to extend a big thank you to the Thompson Lions Club for donating \$500 towards a flag pole for the Hanson Nature Center. We truly appreciate their support!

Pictured in this photo of the new flag pole are (left to right) Lions Club member Larry Hill, Conservation Board Director Chris Barber, Friends Foundation members Ron Ambrosion and Tim Missal, Lions Club member Mike Holstad, Friends Foundation Chair Brad Huntington, Lions Club member Chris Haugebak, and Friends Foundation member Genna Thompson.

Finally, we'd also like to thank Jeff Schmidt for donating the electrical work to install the light for the flag.

GIVE  
SUPPORT

Although our nature center will be two years old this year, we still have a lot of work to do! We've been able to put together some nice displays, but we will be enhancing and adding to those as time goes on. For that, we will continue to need funding. And, by becoming a member of our **Friends of Winnebago County Conservation Foundation**, you can help us out! Annual dues all go towards WCCB projects, many of which are now Hanson Nature Center projects. And, in the future, we also plan to have member-only perks and benefits.

Even if you're not a member, you can still contribute to our foundation. And, since it is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, your contributions are all tax-deductible and will be recognized in this newsletter. For more information about becoming a Friends member, you can go to the [Foundation page](#) of our web site. If you would just like more information about how you can donate to the center, please check out the [Hanson Nature Center page](#) or use this qr code to donate. Thank you, in advance, for your support! It is truly appreciated!

