

Earthtones

Autumn 2015

Myth-Staken

As the weather begins to turn chilly and the leaves change color, the woolly bear caterpillars begin to move. We discover them next to buildings and along sidewalks as they wander in search of the best place to winter. Next spring, they'll form a cocoon and become a tiger moth. But for now, they'll delight young children with their ticklish feet and grab attention from adults looking for a winter forecast.

The woolly bear has a brown stripe bordered by black at the tips. Folklore says the longer the brown stripe, the milder the winter. But, of course, folklore is not the same as science. It may be based upon good observations of the natural world, but it is also based upon memory. Therefore, if we have a mild winter and recall seeing a mostly brown caterpillar the fall before, this piece of folklore is reinforced. On the other hand, we may have forgotten about all the heavier black caterpillars we saw or all the years of snow after spotting caterpillars with long brown stripes.

While a stripe length seems rather arbitrary, some folklore can make logical sense. For example, the idea that feeding hummingbirds in the fall will prevent them from migrating. We place ourselves in the role of the hummingbird, and think, hmmm, easy food here. Why should I make the long, difficult journey to Central America when there is plenty of food here?

If you feed hummingbirds, you need not worry about stopping feeding. When it is time for the birds to migrate, they will go. Until then, your feeder provides much needed energy.

While not folklore, a common misconception about migration is they move to avoid the cold. In actuality, their motivation is food. The little chickadee, who eats seeds, remains in Iowa yearlong. Woodpeckers munch on bugs hiding in dead and dying trees throughout the entire winter. But swallows and swifts, which catch their dinner on wing, leave. We lack a winter population of flying insects. The same lack of food sources also drives other birds south: waterfowl, hummingbirds, etc.

Speaking of food, another false belief is that certain foods, like peanut butter and rice, will make birds sick. In winter, peanut butter actually provides lots of energy-filled protein to help birds survive the cold. As a note of caution, in the summer time, peanut butter set out in the hot sun too long can be as unhealthy for the birds as it is for us.

As for rice, a visit to any rice field will demonstrate that birds can eat rice just fine. Rice may swell up when cooked in hot water, but fortunately that is not the conditions in a bird's digestive tract. (On the other hand, feeding bread to birds fills them up without giving them any nutrition they need. It's the avian version of junk food).

Admittedly, it can be difficult to separate fact from widespread mistaken beliefs. Luckily, the Conservation Board is here to help you with your nature related questions and concerns. We'll make sure you know the bobcat hiding in your woods is not a danger to your children and suggest ways to avoid dealing with ticks and mosquitoes. We'll help you separate folklore from fact.

By Pamela Holz

Fern Cliff Notes

The more I learn about the history of each of the properties the Washington County Conservation Board manages, the more impressed I become! Over the past two months I have learned more about the history of Fern Cliff that I had in the 30 years prior.

My historic knowledge quest began in search of an area people were calling “pansy hill”. The pansies themselves were gone before I came to Washington County in 1984, but several local folks still talked about it. The biologist in me demanded to know what happened. Asking around certainly gave me a positive response- now I know there were several pansy hills in Washington County. Rumor has it that two issues caused them to disappear- the changing forest and plant thieves.

Another biologically significant item that I personally discovered at Fern Cliff are several wild shellbark hickory trees. Being from northwest Iowa, I had never seen such large hickory nuts. At first, I was harvesting them and eating them- and I will say they are both large and delicious. Eventually, I figured out they were not in any of our other publicly managed properties and I began growing them. Some of the

ones I have grown from seed are now bearing seeds. An interesting side note is that many of the original shellback hickory trees were cut down while still under private ownership because of anger at people stealing them.



Fern Cliff overlook

There are quite a number of biologically significant (even some rare and endangered) plants at Fern Cliff. Their identity and locations are protected to prevent more theft. However, a local plant historian is considering assisting us in efforts to do some minor managements to help them out. I hope we can accomplish this!

Our local NRCS Office assisted me in getting aerial photographs of this property at regular intervals since the 1930’s. What a story these pictures tell. Road changes and plant changes and property line changes! I have added them to our web site (under the Fern Cliff heading). Take a look at this web site, and then drive on over this fall for a visit to one of the most scenic overlooks in Washington County, Fern Cliff County Park.

By Steve Anderson

Minifacts on Fern Cliff

- ◆ Fern Cliff was one of the first parks considered for purchase when the Conservation Board was first created in 1963.
- ◆ The original property was first purchased in 1965 and always referred to as Fern Cliff.
- ◆ The area includes the junction of the north and south forks of Crooked Creek.
- ◆ The original shelter was built from old barn wood.



Trail at Fern Cliff

Annual Report Tidbits

Recently, our Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2014–2015 was approved by the Board and Supervisors. Here are some highlights of that report.

- * Our dedicated volunteer board of five met 13 times over the year, and each individual rarely missed a meeting.
- * Our staff of five has a total of 94 years of experience.
- * Our certified property tax level was 45.7 cents per thousand dollars of assessed valuation
- * Our campground revenues have increased dramatically for the fourth year in a row
- * 30 gallons of pecans were gathered from Marr Park trees for planting projects
- * The Edible Fruit Association via grant funding planted dwarf sour cherries, honey berries and paw paws at Marr Park as part of an experimental orchard
- * Funded by Trees Forever and assisted by two Eagle Scout projects, staff planted over 700 trees in several areas along the Marr Park–Ainsworth Trail
- * Several arches were installed along the trail with several more in the works. Sponsorship of the arches included Pheasants Forever, the Izaak Walton League, Turkey Federation, Master Gardeners, Leon “Mac” McNeil Memorial, and Neil Grimm Memorial.
- * The Marr Pond and proximity project was finalized with new sidewalk for the Lodge and sod around the new playground
- * Inside the Center, the walls and doors were repainted, track lighting added in the hallway, and a new security door added to the office.
- * Over 7,000 people visited the Conservation Center
- * The Center roof and the residence septic system were replaced
- * The educational program had contact with nearly 12,000 people. The naturalist, after training, implemented a STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) preschool program
- * A traveling snake exhibit—*Snakes, Rattles, and Holes*—was brought to the Center for the first half of the year
- * Work on upgrading our website with the rest of the county was begun
- * Plans were begun to replace the showerhouse to include a storm shelter and replace shelter 4 with an enclosed shelter

Washington County Conservation Board

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Kathy Dolan, Center Coordinator
Mark Even, Park Ranger

Washington County Conservation Board meetings are held the second Thursday of each month at 4:30 p.m. at the Conservation Education Center. Visitors are welcome.

The WCCB is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

**If you would like a copy of
this newsletter in larger
print, please contact our
office.**

This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.

Autumn Calendar

The Washington County Conservation Board meets the second Thursday of each month. Meetings are held at the Conservation Education Center in Marr Park at 4:30 p.m. The Conservation Center will be closed the following holidays: November 11, November 26–27, December 24–25, and January 1.

Sat., Oct. 3 7:00 p.m. Marr Park

Annual Halloween Hike: Shoo Fly!

Compare flies with insects that are called flies but are not true flies in a evening hike of adventure around the mini-lake. Start at the Lodge to learn about flies, then head around the luminary-lit mini-lake to face challenges with dragonflies, fireflies, and butterflies. Craft and refreshments will be available at the Center afterward.

Sat., Nov. 21 10:00 a.m. Conservation Center

Beautiful Basket Weaving

Join Kathy Dolan as she leads you in making a decorative reed basket. You'll make a lovely basket for your own use or for a gift. Material fee is \$10. Bring a towel and a lunch. Plan on 3-4 hours to make the basket. Ages 10 and up. Contact us to learn the exact type and size of the basket.

Sat., Jan. 30 1:00 p.m. Marr Park

Ice Fishing Clinic

This fun family event will feature a relatively warm shelter and pre-drilled holes. You will have the chance to catch fish from a five-inch hole in the ice and learn some tips and tricks. Also, see the fish in action with an underwater camera. Hot cocoa will be served in the Center. Families welcome.



New roof on Center



Pecans picked for planting

Thanks to...

Notify Me

Dap camp volunteers

- Kathleen Schnoebelen
- Samantha and Anna Holz
- Addie and Olivia Pacha
- Emma Crossett
- Nicole Nickelson
- Brennan Horak
- Maggie Morgan
- Susan Davis
- Christina Grier
- Carmen Knipfer
- Tim Wilbanks



Can't wait for the next newsletter? Misplaced your calendar? Want a reminder of what is happening? Just like to keep abreast of the Board activities and decisions? Thanks to an overhaul of the Washington County website, you now have an opportunity for easy access of information.

You can access our department's pages from the main site of <http://co.washington.ia.us>. As before, the site contains park information, our calendar, past newsletters, and other information. We now also include our Board agendas and approved meeting minutes. We have plans to eventually add our annual report and other documents to help keep you better informed.

Also to the following:

- * Faith Baptist Youth program for Marr Park clean up
- * Doug Moothhart for work at Brinton Timber
- * Wilkinson Precast for concrete donation
- * Joe Yeggy for the day camp donation
- * Jim Blakeney for wood splitting
- * Tomas Salazar for work around the shop
- * And thanks to all our visitors who inform us when there is a need on one of our areas that requires our attention

For those of you that like to keep on top of the action, the site also contains a convenient feature called "Notify Me." Through its own button on the home page, you can pick and chose to receive via e-mail Conservation Board (and also other county agencies) announcements.

For example, if you wish to receive notices of any of our events, you can subscribe to the Calendar, sub-heading Conservation, events. Whenever we post on the web an upcoming event, you will automatically receive an e-mail giving you basic information and a link to click for more details.

Through the Agenda Center, you can receive notification when we post our meeting agendas and our approved meeting minutes. News Flash will be for any other press releases and/or articles submitted to area media.

Stay informed while staying at home.



E-mail Addresses Wanted

We are still collecting e-mail addresses for *Earthtones*. You can sign up via the website link or send it to wccbnaturalist@iowatelecom.net. Your address will not be shared or distributed.

WASHINGTON COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD
2943 HIGHWAY 92
AINSWORTH, IA 52201

Return Service Requested

Winter Center Hours

Tues.—Sat.
8:00 a.m. — 4:30 p.m.

Sun.—Mon.
Closed

Marr Park Road Work

Progress at Marr Park has certainly picked up over the last few years. This fall is no different. We are pleased to announce that we will be paving the rest of the road to the Conservation Center, beginning in mid-October. This project will benefit all patrons of the park.

Having a paved road at Marr Park has been an idea of the Board for a long time. We were pleasantly surprised to be able to pave the first half when the Marr Park-Ainsworth Trail was built and the paving company offered us an excellent deal.

Now we are finishing that project. By working in late October, we hope to still have decent concrete weather yet be late enough to miss impacting the majority of the warm weather park users.

The paved road will be easier to maintain. We'll be able to plow it without losing important rock.

During the spring thaw, we won't have puddles and soft spots while we wait for the frost to leave. And, importantly for the public, less dust means less harm to lungs and vehicles.

As a side note to the project, we also upgraded the parking lot at the lodge. We have enlarged it and added more rock. Lodge users should now find plenty of parking room for their gatherings.

All in all, we hope you will be as pleased as we are with our progress.

