

Earthtones

Spring 2018

It's a Hard-Shell Life

The most distinguishing feature of a turtle is its shell. This protection has enabled turtles to survive for over 200 million years. A turtle has very few predators once it reaches adulthood. Thus, given no other limiting factor, many turtles can grow rather old, more than 100 years in some species.

Instead, their vulnerability is highest prior to adulthood.

Like other reptiles, turtles lay eggs. In Iowa, this usually occurs in early summer. In most cases, turtles bury their eggs in sand or loose soil, sometimes miles from where they live. Once laid, the mother heads back home, never to acknowledge her offspring again.

Before they even hatch, turtles already face huge hurdles. Nesting sites have become fewer and harder to access. This, in turn, can mean nesting in a less than ideal location. Predators may spot a clutch quicker. Summer construction or other land disturbances can crush a nest. All in all, less than 10% of eggs live to hatching. In certain species, the odds are even lower.

In early fall, the turtles, with a temporary egg tooth, hatch out. They must choose to immediately head to safety or remain in the nest through the winter and hibernate there. The remains of the yolk, attached to their plastron (or underside), continue to nourish them during this transition.

Either way, as soon as the hatchling leaves the nest, it must immediately head to shelter. Being roughly the size of a quarter, their shell offers them little protection at this phase of life. They face the dangers of even more predators, including skunks, raccoons, herons, minks, and more. Like earlier, most will never make it to safety.

While our other reptiles mature in a year or two, our turtles take several years. A painted turtle matures youngest, at about three years of age. On the other hand, a snapper may need to be seven. Naturally, the longer it takes to reach reproductive age, the more threats they face before being able to replace themselves in a population. In the case of the snapping turtle, they are also harvestable before maturation.

Thus, turtles have many natural restrictions on their ability for their populations to grow. The changes we made in the landscape has only increased their risks. As a result, many turtle populations in Iowa and elsewhere are dropping. That great shell of theirs is not protecting them well against current threats.



Snapper laying eggs at Marr Park

Fortunately, in Iowa, we are doing what we can. Last year, the state initiated turtle trapping restrictions for the first time. More and more people are becoming aware of the situation. And like the tortoise in the race with the hare, we make slow and steady progress.

By Pamela Holz, Naturalist

Kewash Trail Progress

On May 15, we hope to open bids for a major improvement project at the Washington end of the Kewash Nature Trail. We will be paving a 10-foot wide strip from Highway 1/92 to approximately a half mile west. In addition, a trail spur will be created and paved from the Kewash, across the Willow Pond dam to the eastern edge of the County Farm to Lexington Avenue. Across the road is the Kirkwood Regional Educational Center. This spur will add approximately 1,500 feet.

To make this project possible, the Washington County Conservation Board applied for and received a TAP (Transportation Alternative Program) grant in the amount of \$342,000. We fortunately also received a Washington County Riverboat grant for \$120,000 and are expending \$60,000 of our own funds. The City of Washington is participating with us, bringing with them a Resource Enhancement And Protection (REAP) grant in the amount of \$100,000 and matching our commitment of \$60,000. With all of that, the math says we have \$682,000 to accomplish this.

Over the year or more since this process started, the Washington County Conservation Board has been working steadily, utilizing a combination of our own staff as well as area professionals and volunteers, to do as much of the site preparation as possible.

Part of this site preparation has included the pruning and removal of trees and bushes which would interfere with the grading and construction. Accomplishing this prior to the bid letting represents a significant cost savings and also prevents restrictions associated with Indiana bats from becoming a factor.

While we regret the inconvenience, it is clear that the segments of the Kewash Nature Trail involved will have to be closed during the actual construction period. This is necessary both for the safety of the construction people and the public. Exactly when that will happen will be up to the contractor that receives the bid. However, our best guess is that this could start as early as July. It is absolutely our goal that the project will be completed in the 2018 calendar year.

Once completed, the Kewash Nature Trail will be much more conducive for skaters, roller-bladers, street bicycles, and persons with limited mobility. The vision for this trail is that it becomes a loop in one or more of several options, making it even more popular with the public, and we are here to serve.

By Steve Anderson, Director

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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.

New Faces

Brandie Bray has recently joined our team as Center Coordinator, replacing Kathy Dolan who transferred to the County Engineer's office.



Brandie grew up in the Chicago suburbs. She moved to the Kalona area three years ago. She recently graduated from Kirkwood after studying Parks and Natural Resources.

In regards to her new position, she responds, "I've always had a passion for the outdoors and our natural areas. Any chance I get, no matter the weather, I'm outside with my husband and daughter doing just about anything. We like hiking, kayaking, backpacking, and camping. I'm really excited to be working in conservation and I look forward to doing my part to serve the community in Washington County."

In addition to Brandie, two more new faces have joined the Conservation Board. Supervisor Stan Stoops has upgraded his status from supervisor liaison to full board member. Zach Rozmus has transferred from the county's sheriff department and is now our second ranger-technician. See upcoming newsletter issues for more information on these new members of our team.



We warmly greet all three new personnel and look forward to serving the public with them.

New Board Member Stan Stoops

Turtle Trivia

- * Turtles have existed for over 200 million years; since the Age of Dinosaurs
- * The largest turtle (Archelon) lived right before the dinosaur extinction and was 12 feet long
- * The shell is composed of over 50 bones and includes fused vertebrae
- * Turtle shells have three layers: bone, skin, and scales
- * Shells have blood supply and nerves
- * Unlike most vertebrates, turtles have shoulders and hip bones inside their rib cage
- * While the shell protects turtles, it also limits movement (less agility of legs) and lung function
- * Some turtles supplement their lung intake through "throat breathing"
- * In throat breathing, turtles swallow water, capillaries in their neck take in the oxygen, and they then eliminate the water through their nostrils
- * Tortoises walk at speeds of 0.2 miles per hour
- * Turtles can see in color
- * Turtles have a great sense of smell
- * Turtles can get gout and ear infections



Safe in the Shell

Visitor to the turtle exhibit

Summer Day Camps

These nature camps are designed around the natural world at Marr Park and will be fun as well as educational. Activities will include hikes, games, crafts, fishing, and exploration. Students will also create their own camp t-shirt. Light refreshments will be served each morning.

Each camp is limited to 12 students. Camp runs from 9:00 a.m. till noon, Monday through Friday. Camp fee is \$30 per student. (Exception is Tadpole Camp: see below right).

Pre-registration is required for all camps.

Dragonfly Camp: Campers will explore nature through stories. Activities will be designed around nature-related stories read at the beginning of each session.

For students entering 1st–2nd grade

Dates: June 11–15 or

July 9–13



Tadpole Camp: This camp is for 4-5 year olds who have yet to start kindergarten. We will focus on exploring the natural world with our senses. Relatives over 18 are welcome as well.

Dates: M–W: June 4–6

W–F: July 18–20

Times: 9:00 – 10:30 a.m.

Limit: 8

Cost: \$20



Kestrel Camp: Activities will focus on the various natural cycles in the park.

For students entering 3rd–4th grade

Dates: June 25–29 or

July 30–Aug. 3

Scholarships Available

The Washington Noon Kiwanis is offering scholarships for those with financial need.

Mink Camp: Theme this year is Travels through Time. We will explore Iowa's past, present, and the future we want. Includes regular camp activities such as canoeing, survival, and two-way radio exploration.

For students entering 5th–7th grade

Dates: July 23–27



For more information on these camps or to receive a registration form, please call the Naturalist at 319/657-2400 or e-mail wccbnaturalist@gmail.com.



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Spring Center Hours
(Beginning May 1)

Thurs.—Sat., Mon.
10:30—6:30

Sun.
1:00—5:00

Closed Tuesday-Wednesday

New Displays Coming to Conservation Center

For the last several months, we have been working steadily to upgrade and expand on the displays in the Conservation Education Center. We have partnered with McCullough Creative of Dubuque to design and fabricate these educational, interactive, imaginative exhibits.

Revolving around the theme “I live here,” the proposal includes a two-level tree (see right), a crawl through ant nest, and interchangeable-top activity tables. All activities are designed to engage the visitor through successive visits and encourage further outdoor adventure. We will be keeping the computer kiosk and moving a scaled-down pizzeria into the Lab; the rest of the displays will be brand new.

In addition, we hope to add a reading nook and display cases in the Library to encourage more usage there.

Feel free to contact us if you would like more information on these plans, are interested in a program for your group, or would like to donate to help bring these exciting, hands-on explorations to the Center.

