



THE PRAIRIE STAR



Nature Playscape

A nature playscape will be constructed outdoors on the west side of the Environmental Learning Center this spring. This will be a great place to enjoy the outdoors and provide kids a fun place to play .



venmo

We need help meeting our fundraising goal. Scan this QR code and help us build the nature playscape!

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Woolly Mammoth Tooth

Did you know that Woolly mammoths had only four teeth in their mouths? The amount of teeth may be a small number, but the size of each tooth is huge! Some teeth are ten inches long and five inches wide. Come learn more about the fascinating Woolly mammoths at the Environmental Learning Center! *(Right) A tooth of a Woolly mammoth that is now on display.*



MCCB UPDATES

Mahaska County Conservation Welcomes a New Administrative Assistant



Mahaska County Conservation is happy to introduce our new Administrative Assistant, Molly Hicks. Molly grew up in Northwest Iowa, where her lifelong passion for nature led to her deep involvement with county conservation—first as a participant, then as a volunteer, and eventually as an employee. Most recently, she spent a year in Maquoketa, serving Jackson County Conservation, where she expanded her knowledge and experience in the field.

Now, as the Administrative Assistant for Mahaska County Conservation, Molly is thrilled to be part of a team that shares her commitment to preserving the outdoors. Her role blends a variety of tasks that suit her well—from office management to hands-on fieldwork and engaging in educational programs.

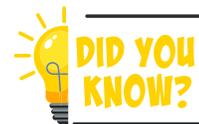
Outside of work, Molly is happiest in nature. Whether she's camping, fishing, hiking, or pushing her limits as an ultra-marathon trail runner, the outdoors is where she thrives. She's excited to get to know Mahaska County better and is grateful for the warm welcome she's received. Molly looks forward to building strong connections with the community while contributing to the conservation and enjoyment of the county's natural spaces.

Enjoy Your Visit to Cedar Bluffs State Preserve with New Park Benches

New park benches are now found along the trails at Cedar Bluffs State Preserve. The benches provide an area for visitors to rest, relax and enjoy the nature in Cedar Bluffs. Earlier this fall, Mahaska County Conservation Park Rangers Tommy VanRenterghem and Steve Nugteren installed the benches on concrete pads.

Cedar Bluffs is a very unique 225 acre area that contains a wide variety of deciduous trees, wildflowers, ferns and other plant life; made accessible by a carefully laid out loop trail. Lookout points along the 2 mile trail allow hikers an excellent view of the Des Moines River Valley. Towering sandstone bluffs can be found along Cedar Creek; which forms the north boundary of the property. An extensive stairway makes the descent to Cedar Creek easy and safe. Cedar Bluffs is located at 1235 - 280th , Oskaloosa, IA 52577. A parking lot is located in the southwest corner of the property, but other development is minimal; our primary goal is to preserve the natural splendor that has attracted generations of visitors to this extraordinary area.

Here is a link to a map to guide you to Cedar Bluffs State Preserve.
<https://maps.app.goo.gl/FyDd1rg8einTNe9z6>



John F. Lacey served as a U.S. Representative for Iowa's Sixth District for 16 years (1889-1891, 1893-1907). He secured legislation to protect birds and other wildlife and also national forests, parks and monuments. For this, Lacey was given the title "Father of Federal Conservation Legislation". He also lived near Cedar Bluffs State Preserve! Perhaps this is where he developed his inspirations.

NATURE NOTES

Winter Sun Dogs

by Laura DeCook, Naturalist

Sun dogs, or mock suns, appear in the sky as a bright burst of light when sunlight passes through ice crystals at the proper angle. They are technically called solar perihelia (perihelia meaning “with the sun”). Usually cirrus clouds or ice fog in front of the sun create them.



Ice crystals in the atmosphere are hexagonally shaped rods (like pencils) or thin, hexagonal plate patterns. The crystals that help form sun dogs are flat, so you can think of their shape resembling microscopic dinner plates floating in the air. As the flat, hexagonal crystals fall to the earth, they move like a maple leaf drifting down from a tree. Sun dogs emerge when sunlight passes through the plate’s thin side faces and is refracted.

Sun dogs are usually bright white, but may show a spectrum of color with reds on the edge nearest the sun and blues farther away. The degree to which colors are visible depends upon the amount of “wobble” the ice crystal has when it falls. The more wobble, the more color.

Sun dogs typically appear when the sun is low on the horizon, usually just after sunrise or just before sunset. Winter is a great time to see his natural phenomena!

Eveland Access CABINS

1681 – 290th St., Oskaloosa, Iowa 52577



Apple and Birch Cabins are available for rent year-round. To view pictures of the cabins and to find rental information, visit the MCCB website:

www.mahaskaconservation.com

or call MCCB at (641)673-9327.

PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGES

December

21 Bird Food Giveaway

9:00 am - 12:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center, South Parking Lot

Families can get up to 10 gallons of free cracked corn for bird feeding this winter. Please bring your own containers and they will be filled and loaded into your vehicle. Donations are greatly appreciated! This is made possible by the generous corn donation from Cargill and the volunteers and staff of the Mahaska County Conservation Board.

Holiday Hours at the Environmental Learning Center

December 23 12:30-4:00 pm

December 24 CLOSED

December 25 CLOSED

December 26 12:30-4:00pm

December 27 12:30-7:00 pm

December 28 10:00 am - 2:00 pm

December 30 12:30-4:30 pm

December 31 12:30-4:30

January 1 CLOSED

January 2 12:30-7:00 pm

January 3 12:30-7:00 pm

January 4 10:00 am - 2:00 pm



January

13 Volunteer Training

1:00-2:00 pm or 6:00-7:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

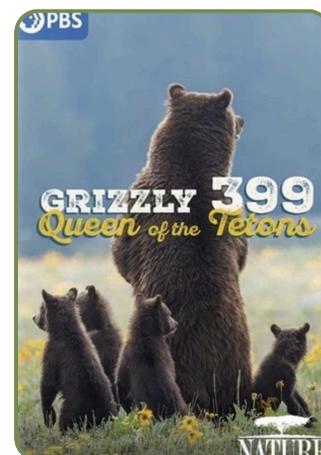
We love our volunteers! Mahaska County Conservation volunteers help with so many programs and activities. If you are interested in helping in our parks as a Park Attendant, greeting visitors in the Environmental Learning Center as an ELC Host, or help with programs and events, then join us for this training. At the training, participants will take part in an informative volunteer game and enjoy refreshments. We welcome all ages to become volunteers and training is needed once every three years. **Please sign up at decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or by calling (641)673-9327.**

14 Grizzly 399: Queen of the Tetons

1:00-2:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Grizzly 399, the most famous bear in Grand Teton National Park, has a litter of four cubs to raise. Every day, the family must contend with threats to their survival involving nature and human encroachment in bear country. Some western states seek to remove grizzlies from the endangered species list—which would make it legal to hunt them. This is a riveting story full of twists and turns, hope and heartbreak. Grizzly 399 stands as a symbol of the clash between humans and the wild. Feel free to bring snacks. Some refreshments will be provided. **Save your seat by signing up at decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or by calling (641)673-9327.**



PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGES

January cont.

24 Oskaloosa High School Storybook Players

11:00 am-12:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Come and enjoy a free performance of Oskaloosa High School's traveling theatre group called the Storybook Players. High school students will perform short skits about well-known children's stories such as Princess and the Pea, the Frog Prince, and Peter Pan. **Pre-registration is needed to reserve a seat. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up.**

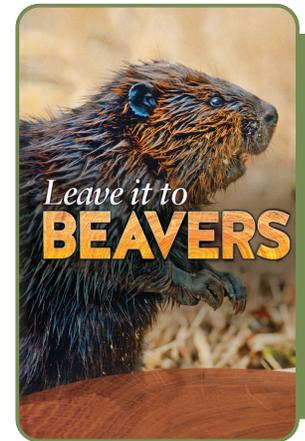
February

18 Leave it to Beavers

1:00-1:45 pm

Environmental Learning Center

This documentary is a fascinating story of beavers in North America - their history, near extinction, and current comeback, as a growing number of scientists, conservationists and grass-roots environmentalists have come to regard beavers as overlooked tools when it comes to reversing the disastrous effects of global warming and world-wide water shortages. Feel free to bring snacks. Some refreshments will be provided. **Save your seat by signing up at decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or by calling (641)673-9327.**



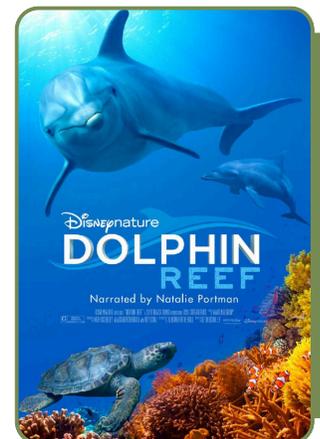
March

11 Dolphin Reef

1:00-2:30 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Dolphin Reef is a film about a young bottlenose dolphin named Echo and his adventures in the coral reefs of French Polynesia. Echo learns to survive with the help of his mother Kumu and his pod. You will discover the dangers and wonders of the ocean in this film. Feel free to bring snacks. Some refreshments will be provided. **Save your seat by signing up at decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or by calling (641)673-9327.**



PROGRAMS FOR KIDS

December

11 Knee-High Naturalists “Animals in Winter”

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for kids ages 5 and younger. This month, the kids will learn about the special ways that animals survive the winter. We will have a story and activity. **Pre-registration is needed to participate. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**



18 Homeschool Science Lab “How Animals Survive the Winter”

10:00-11:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for all ages of homeschool and online students. Join us this month to explore how a variety of animals survive winter. Do you know which animals hibernate in Iowa? How else can animals survive the cold and snow if they do not hibernate? Come and learn all about the answers to these questions and more! **Pre-registration is needed to participate. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

23 Reindeer Food and Life in the Arctic Circle

1:00-2:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Come and learn about the life in the Arctic Circle and make some reindeer food! Mahaska County’s Green Iowa AmeriCorps member, Ella Paulson, will talk about her experience living in northern Lapland which is in the Arctic Circle, and also help you make a tasty treat for Santa’s reindeer. **Save your seat by signing up at decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or by calling (641)673-9327. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

January

8 Knee-High Naturalists “Snowman Science Experiments”

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for kids ages 5 and younger. This month, we will have fun with snowman experiments and making snowy crafts. **Pre-registration is needed to participate. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program. Contact us by emailing decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up.**



PROGRAMS FOR KIDS

January cont.

15 Homeschool Science Lab “Endangered Species”

10:00-11:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for all ages of homeschool and online students. Kids will learn about a variety of endangered plant and animal species in Iowa and around the world. **Please pre-register by contacting decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

February



5 Knee-High Naturalists “Eat Like a Bird!”

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for kids ages 5 and younger. Kids will learn how birds eat, listen to a story, and try to eat like a bird during our own fun experiment. **Pre-registration is needed to participate. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

12 Homeschool Science Lab “Push-Pull Rockets”

10:00-11:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for all ages of homeschool and online students. Kids will become scientists as they explore push and pull forces with balloon rockets! **Pre-registration is needed to participate. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

March

12 Knee-High Naturalists “Reptiles”

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for kids ages 5 and younger. Kids will learn what makes an animal a reptile and meet the ELC’s reptile ambassador animals! **Pre-registration is needed to participate. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

19 Homeschool Science Lab “Trading Post”

10:00-11:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for all ages of homeschool and online students. Kids will learn how and why people in our past used trading posts and then participate in a trading post inside the ELC. **Pre-registration is needed to participate. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up. A minimum of 5 kids are needed to hold the program.**

PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS

December

6 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee, hot chocolate and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteering opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug that has Christmas or winter decorations on it to take part in a door prize.** We meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.



January

3 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee, hot chocolate, and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteering opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug that has a special story with it to take part in a door prize.** We meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

24 O.W.L.S. "Oskaloosa High School Storybook Players"

11:00 am-12:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Adults of any age are invited to join the O.W.L.S. (Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls) program. Come and enjoy a free performance of Oskaloosa High School's traveling theatre group called the Storybook Players. High school students will perform short skits about well-known children's stories such as Princess and the Pea, the Frog Prince, and Peter Pan. **Pre-registration is needed to reserve a seat. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up.**

February

7 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee, hot chocolate, and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteering opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug with red on it to take part in a door prize.** We meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS

February cont.

21 O.W.L.S. “Life in the Arctic Circle”

11:00 am-12:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Adults of any age are invited to join the O.W.L.S. (Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls) program. This month, our guest speaker, Ella Paulson, will talk about her experiences traveling abroad and spending time in Lapland. She has amazing stories about her studies and experiences in the arctic wild! Ella is a current Green Iowa AmeriCorps member serving Mahaska County Conservation. **Pre-registration is needed to reserve a seat. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up.**

March

14 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

Environmental Learning Center

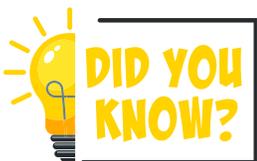
Drop in and join us for fresh coffee, hot chocolate, and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteering opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug that has green colors on it to take part in a door prize.** We meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

21 O.W.L.S. “The Prairie Tool: American Bison”

11:00 am-12:00 pm

Environmental Learning Center

Adults of any age are invited to join the O.W.L.S. (Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls) program. Come and listen to our guest speaker, Lilly Morin, as she shares her wealth of knowledge of how bison have historically shaped America’s prairies. She will also explain how our land today can benefit from modern grazers working the land as herds of bison once did. Lilly is a current Green Iowa AmeriCorps member serving Mahaska County Conservation. Pre-registration is needed to reserve a seat. Contact decook@mahaskacountyia.gov or call (641)673-9327 to sign up.



A baby bison is also called a “red dog”. Bison calves tend to be born from late March through May and are orange-red in color, earning them this nickname. After a few months, their hair starts to change to dark brown and their characteristic shoulder hump and horns begin to grow.



VOLUNTEER NEWS

What Can Volunteers Do?

Host and greet visitors at the Environmental Learning Center

Help with public events

Help feed animals at the Environmental Learning Center

Help create new programs and activities for the community



Help with educational programs

Help keep our parks clean or help with park projects as a Park Steward

Help with native garden care at our county parks

Help with light duties at the Environmental Learning Center

New Volunteer Training

If you would like to join our volunteer team, come to our one-hour training on **Monday, January 13** at the Environmental Learning Center. Please sign up for one of two sessions. **Call us at (641)673-9327 or email decook@mahaskacountyia.gov to reserve a seat.**

Afternoon session 1:00-2:00 pm
Evening session 6:00-7:00 pm

Volunteer & Partnership Appreciation Dinner

February 10, 2025
6:00-8:00 pm

at the Mahaska County
Environmental Learning Center
(lower level)

SCHEDULE:

6:00 pm Doors Open
6:30 pm Soup Supper
Soup, drinks & table service provided.
Please bring finger food to share.
7:15 pm Presentations

Please RSVP by Feb. 7, 2024 by calling (641)673-9327 or email decook@mahaskacountyia.gov.

CONSERVATION CORNER

Invest in Iowa's Future: Fund the Natural Resources Trust Fund



by Chris Clingan, MCCB Director

Clean water, thriving wildlife, and accessible outdoor spaces aren't just ideals—they're investments in Iowa's future. The Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, created through the Iowa Water and Land Legacy (IWILL) amendment, offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform our environment and economy without burdening taxpayers. By allocating three-eighths of a cent from a future sales tax increase, this initiative will generate \$180 million annually to improve water quality, protect soil, and enhance outdoor recreation across the state. Funding IWILL isn't a cost—it's a strategic investment in the health, prosperity, and well-being of our communities.

For Mahaska County, this investment could mean clean streams and lakes, healthier soils, and revitalized parks and trails that benefit families, farmers, and outdoor enthusiasts alike. Local economies would see a surge in tourism and job creation, with outdoor recreation already contributing billions to Iowa's economy each year. Clean waterways and green spaces don't just attract visitors—they improve public health, boost property values, and create opportunities for future generations. Every dollar spent through IWILL will yield returns in the form of vibrant rural communities, resilient ecosystems, and a competitive edge for Iowa in retaining its workforce.

This is our chance to make a lasting impact. Funding IWILL ensures we leave Iowa better for the next generation—safer, cleaner, and more prosperous. Contact your local legislators in Mahaska County and urge them to support this critical investment. Together, we can turn IWILL into a legacy that benefits everyone. Visit iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org to learn more and make your voice heard.

Green Iowa AmeriCorps Serves Mahaska County Conservation



I'm **Lilly Morin**, a new Green Iowa AmeriCorps member for the '24-'25 service term. I'm looking forward to what I can do for Mahaska County Conservation and I am enthusiastic to experience Iowa for the first time!

I grew up in the small town of Hondo, Texas where I studied and earned an associate degree from Southwest Texas Junior College. After great mentorship, I found my passion in natural resources. I then pursued that fascination at Texas A&M University-Kingsville and graduated with a bachelor's degree in Range and Wildlife Management. My studies continued at Sul Ross State University where I earned a master's degree in Range and Wildlife Management.



I'm **Ella Paulson**, a new Green Iowa AmeriCorps member for the '24-'25 service term. I'll be working with Mahaska County Conservation on environmental projects in the area. You will find

me outdoors helping with prescribed burns, invasive species removal, and planting native trees and plants.

I earned my BS and BA degrees from the University of Vermont in May for Environmental Studies and Music Performance. In school, I researched palsa collapse in Northern Lapland and completed my undergraduate thesis on how music can relieve climate anxiety. When I'm not working, I love birding, traveling, and reading. I look forward to meeting people in the community and doing what I can to better the natural landscapes here!

MAHASKA COUNTY CONSERVATION BOARD

Mahaska County Conservation Board & Meeting Dates

Chairperson	Steve Dixon, Oskaloosa
Vice-Chairperson	Curt Jager, Eddyville
Secretary	Linda Fox, Rose Hill
Member	Jennifer Peterson, Oskaloosa
Member	Chuck Webb, Oskaloosa

MCCB's monthly board meetings begin at 6:00 pm on the third Monday of each month. Public is welcome to attend. Meetings are held in the lower level of the Environmental Learning Center, 2342 Hwy. 92, Oskaloosa, IA 52577.

December 16, 2024

January 13, 2025

February 17, 2025

March 17, 2025

Dates and times are subject to change. Call MCCB at (641)673-9327 for more information.

Mahaska County Conservation Staff

Director	Chris Clingan
Naturalist	Laura DeCook
Park Ranger	Tommy VanRenterghem
Park Ranger	Steve Nugteren
Administrative Assist.	Molly Hicks
AmeriCorps	Lilly Morin
AmeriCorps	Ella Paulson



Discover Nature in Iowa!



MAHASKA COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING CENTER
2342 Hwy. 92, Oskaloosa, IA 52577
Ph: (641)673-9327

OPEN HOURS

Monday - Wednesday	12:30-4:30 pm
Thursday & Friday	12:30-7:00 pm
Saturday	10 am - 2 pm
Sunday	CLOSED

The Prairie Star is the newsletter of the Mahaska County Conservation Board and is emailed to those persons on our mailing list. There is no charge for the newsletter. Please help us by keeping us informed of any change of email address or if you no longer wish to receive our newsletter.

Mahaska County's programs and facilities are consistent with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, and handicap. If anyone believes he or she has been subjected to discrimination, he or she may file a complaint alleging discrimination with either the Mahaska County Conservation Board or the office for Equal Opportunity, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington D.C. 29240.