



# THE PRAIRIE STAR



## A Mammoth-Sized Celebration at the Nature Playscape Grand Opening

by Laura DeCook, Environmental Ed Coordinator

Mahaska County Conservation hosted a community celebration on Saturday, November 8, 2025, to debut the new Nature Playscape and commemorate the conservation board's 50th anniversary. Nearly 150 community members attended the event, showing strong support for this exciting addition to Caldwell Park. Located just outside the ELC, the Nature Playscape offers a welcoming outdoor space designed to spark exploration and imaginative play. There are natural climbing features such as trees, logs, and stumps, along with a large woolly mammoth skeleton designed for kids to climb on. The area also includes swings, a musical instrument path, interpretive nature signs, and picnic spots for families to enjoy. Thousands of native plants surround the site, which will provide a vibrant natural backdrop this next spring and summer. In addition, an oak savannah, prairie restoration area, and oxbow wetland were added to enrich the landscape and provide opportunities for nature-based learning. Friends of Mahaska County Conservation provided refreshments for guests, adding to the celebratory atmosphere.

**Mahaska County  
Conservation Board  
Celebrates 50 years!  
1975-2025**



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Board Members, Staff

# MCCB UPDATES

## Rain or Rays, the Nature Playscape Invites Adventure

Even though the grand opening of the Nature Playscape on November 8 was a wet and rainy day, the weather didn't stop families from coming out to celebrate and enjoy the new space. Just a few days later, the sun came out and warmer temperatures brought even more visitors—families, kids, and bike trail enthusiasts—all eager to explore the playscape. Mahaska County Conservation is excited to provide this outdoor area for the community to enjoy. Future additions will include an outdoor restroom and a water fountain, so keep an eye out for more updates!



## Together We Built This: Thank You for Donating to the Playscape!

GEORGE DAILY TRUST  
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES  
MCWANE FOUNDATION CHARITABLE GIVING  
MCQUISTON TRUST  
UNITED WAY OF MAHASKA COUNTY  
MAHASKA COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION  
RURAL ENRICHMENT  
PELLA ROLSCREEN FOUNDATION  
GOLDEN GOOSE CLUB  
BROUWER FAMILY FOUNDATION  
VERMEER CHARITABLE FOUNDATION  
MAHASKA COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION  
OSKALOOSA OPTIMIST CLUB  
PRAIRIE MEADOWS  
MIDWESTONE FOUNDATION  
DAVIE & PORTIA FIGLAND  
CARGILL CHARITIES AID FOUNDATION  
CARGILL-EDDYVILLE EMPLOYEE/COMP. MATCH  
FRIENDS OF MAHASKA COUNTY CONSERVATION  
LIONS CLUB OF OSKALOOSA  
CENTRAL CHURCH  
WILLIE VAN WEELDEN MEMORIAL

CARGILL CHARITIES AID FOUNDATION  
HAROLD WESTRA MEMORIAL  
BLACKBAUD/PELLA CORPORATION  
MAHASKA COUNTY EXTENSION  
KOOL SEAMLESS GUTTER  
VIRGINIA WALKER  
STEVE & LINDA FOX  
AMERICAN FAMILY INSURANCE DREAMS  
FOUNDATON  
A.L & H.M. FOX  
DAVID & MARILYN PORTER  
WENDY POTHOVEN  
BETH BROSTROM  
GREEN IOWA AMERICORPS  
EDWARD & MELANIE HIRL  
VERONIA GRIM  
TIMOTHY & MARY FOSTER  
WILHELM & KAREN HARTL  
WESLEY & KENDRA ROQUET  
LEO SCHLUNZ  
NATHAN & JENNIFER PETERSON  
AND CASH DONATIONS BY THE PUBLIC

# NATURE NOTES

## Oak Savannas in Iowa

by Laura DeCook, Environmental Ed Coordinator

Oak savannas were once one of Iowa's most widespread ecosystems, covering millions of acres across the state. They formed a natural transition zone between open prairie and dense woodlands. Early settlers often described these areas as "park-like"—wide, grassy spaces dotted with large, spreading bur oaks, the signature tree of Iowa's savannas.

Iowa's oak savannas supported a rich mix of prairie grasses and wildflowers. It provided food, nesting sites, and shelter for many wildlife species such as red-headed woodpeckers, wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, and various pollinators.

These habitats were historically maintained by periodic fires, which kept brush and shade-loving trees from overcrowding the landscape. Today, less than 0.1% of Iowa's original oak savannas remain due to land conversion, fire suppression, and the spread of dense woodlands. Because of this steep decline, oak savannas are considered one of Iowa's rarest and most threatened ecosystems.

Across the state, conservation groups and land managers are working to restore these habitats through selective thinning to reopen the canopy, prescribed burning to maintain grassland plants, and planting bur oak trees in areas where savanna structure has been lost.

As part of this statewide effort, bur oak trees have been planted next to the nature playscape at Caldwell Park to help recreate an oak savanna. As these oaks grow, they will provide natural shade for park visitors, improved wildlife habitat, and a restored piece of Iowa's native landscape. This project helps bring back a beautiful, historic ecosystem while enhancing the park for future generations.



## Online Rentals

MYCOUNTY PARKS.COM

**You can now rent cabins, shelter houses, and the ELC community room online!**

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Mahaska>



### **Eveland Access Cabins (Apple & Birch)**

Address: 1681 – 290th St., Oskaloosa, Iowa 52577

To view pictures of the cabins and to find rental information, visit our website [www.mahaskaconservation.com](http://www.mahaskaconservation.com).



### **Park Shelter Houses**

- **Eveland Access Campground** (electric)
- **Nicholson Park** (non-electric)
- **Russell Wildlife Area** (non-electric)
- **White Oak Conservation Area** (2 non-electric)



### **Community Room at Environmental Learning Center**

Address: 2342 Hwy. 92, Oskaloosa, Iowa 52577

To view pictures of the community room and to find rental information, visit our website [www.mahaskaconservation.com](http://www.mahaskaconservation.com).

# PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGES



## December

### 18 Christmas Ornament Workshop

6:00-7:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Get into the seasonal spirit with this fun, nature-inspired craft program! Participants of all ages are invited to create festive ornaments using pinecones, wood cookies, and other natural materials. This free, hands-on activity is a wonderful way to celebrate the season and take home a handmade decoration to enjoy or give as a gift. Join us for a cozy crafting experience that's perfect for the whole family! **Save your seat by signing up with the QR code on this page.**



### 22 Reindeer Facts & Fun!

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Join us for a fun Reindeer program! Participants will learn all about these amazing animals—what they eat, where they live, and how they survive in the cold. We'll explore fun reindeer facts and get into the winter spirit together. Perfect for young and old nature lovers! **Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page.**

### 22 Ice Age Mammoths

1:00-2:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Step back in time and discover the amazing world of Ice Age mammoths! In this fun, hands-on program, kids will learn how woolly mammoths survived the freezing Ice Age—from their giant curved tusks to their thick fur coats. We'll explore real mammoth bones dug up right here in Mahaska County and find out what they can teach us about these incredible animals. To finish our adventure, we'll listen to exciting mammoth stories and imagine what life was like when these giants roamed our land. Perfect for young and old explorers who love fossils, animals, and big discoveries! **Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page.**

### 23 Animal Tracks & Scat Discovery

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Join us for an exciting exploration of local wildlife! Participants will learn how to identify different animal tracks and scat and discover the clues they reveal about the animals living around us. After our indoor introduction, we'll head out on a guided hike to put these new skills into action and see what signs of wildlife we can find. This free, all-ages program is perfect for curious nature lovers and outdoor adventurers alike! **Please sign up with the QR code on this page.**



### 23 Nature Documentary "Chimpanzee"

1:00-2:30 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

"Chimpanzee" is a heartwarming documentary that follows Oscar, a young chimp, as he grows and explores life in the African rainforest. Viewers will enjoy watching his playful curiosity, his bond with family, and the challenges he faces while learning to survive in the wild. This film offers a close, inspiring look at the world of chimpanzees and the importance of family. Feel free to bring a drink and snack to this program. We will meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab. **Save your seat by signing up with the QR code on this page.**

## January

### 16 Owl Prowl at Eveland Access

7:00-8:00 pm

#### Eveland Access Campground Parking Lot

Join us for a guided nighttime walk as we search for owls in their natural habitat. Learn about local owl species, their calls, and nighttime behaviors while enjoying a peaceful outdoor adventure. Perfect for all ages—dress warm, bring a flashlight and your sense of curiosity! **Pre-registration is needed. Sign up with the QR code on this page.**

# PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGES



## January cont.

### 20 Nature Documentary “Oceans”

1:00-2:300 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Join Sir David Attenborough as he explores the wonders of the ocean and the threats it faces, like destructive fishing practices. With stunning underwater footage, this documentary highlights the ocean's role in life on Earth and its fight against climate change. It also shows how marine ecosystems can recover if we take action now. Feel free to bring a drink and snack. **Pre-registration is needed to reserve a seat. Save your seat by signing up with the QR code on this page.**

## February

### 13 Storybook Players Return!

11:00 am - 12:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Oskaloosa High School's popular Storybook Players will bring their talents to the Environmental Learning Center this year with a fun and engaging lineup of performances. Audiences will enjoy *The Golden Goose*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Scrunch's Magical Pinecone*, and *Scooby-Don't*, each presented with the troupe's signature creativity and energy. The event will feature interactive performances and student-led theatre, offering a lively and immersive experience for children and adults alike. **Seats fill quickly! Registration is not needed, just arrive early to get a seat!**



### 17 Nature Documentary “African Lion”

1:00-2:30 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

This visually stunning wildlife feature offers an up-close look at life within an African lion pride. Follow their daily challenges, family bonds, and survival struggles on the savanna, all captured through immersive, cinematic storytelling. Both engaging and educational, it highlights the strength, beauty, and social complexity of these iconic big cats. Feel free to bring a drink and snacks. **Save your seat by signing up with the QR code on this page.**

## March

### 17 Shamrock Trail Trek

10:00-11:00 am

#### White Oak Conservation Area

Celebrate St. Patrick's Day with a fun spring hike at the White Oak Conservation Area! We will explore the trails, search for the first signs of spring, and enjoy the fresh air as nature begins to wake up for the season. We may even find some leprechaun tracks along the way! Wear something green, bring your curiosity, and join us for a lucky adventure outdoors! **Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page.**



### 19 Macrame Plant Hanger & Wall Art Workshop

6:00-7:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Join us for a fun and creative macramé workshop! Participants of all ages can choose to make either a macramé plant hanger or a unique piece of wall art crafted on natural sticks. No experience is needed—just bring your creativity and enjoy a relaxing evening of hands-on crafting! **Save your seat by signing up with the QR code on this page.**

# PROGRAMS FOR KIDS



## December

### 22 Reindeer Facts & Fun!

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

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Join us for an exciting exploration of local wildlife! Participants will learn how to identify different animal tracks and scat and discover the clues they reveal about the animals living around us. After our indoor introduction, we'll head out on a guided hike to put these new skills into action and see what signs of wildlife we can find. This free, all-ages program is perfect for curious nature lovers and outdoor adventurers alike! *Please sign up with the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*



### 30 Slime Making S.T.E.M. Lab

2:00-3:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Join us for a fun and gooey S.T.E.M. adventure! Kids will learn simple science concepts while making their very own slime to take home. This free, hands-on lab is the perfect mix of creativity and curiosity—get ready to stretch, squish, and explore! *Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*

## January

### 7 Knee-High Naturalists “Nature Clues”

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

This is a free program for kids ages 5 and younger. This month, the kids will learn how animals make tracks with their feet. We will also take off our shoes and make a few tracks of our own! An adult needs to accompany the participating child. *Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*

# PROGRAMS FOR KIDS



## January cont.

### 14 Homeschool Science Lab “Draw My Picture”

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

This free program is open to homeschool and online students of all ages. This month, kids will explore animal drawing through a fun, interactive format. Students will receive playful clues to help them guess which animal they'll sketch next, making the session both creative and engaging. Join us for an imaginative art experience designed to spark curiosity and artistic expression! *Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*

## February

### 4 Knee-High Naturalists “Songbird Sweets Craft”

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

This free program is designed for children ages 5 and younger. This month, our little learners will explore what birds eat, discover how different foods help them stay healthy in winter, and make a special bird treat to take home. Join us for hands-on fun, simple science, and a chance to help our feathered friends! *Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*

### 11 Homeschool Science Lab “Gravity Games”

10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Get ready to drop, launch, roll, and explore! In this program, homeschool students will dive into Newton's laws of motion and discover how gravity shapes the way things move. We'll investigate both the challenges and the surprising benefits of gravity, then put our learning into action with hands-on experiments and fun gravity challenges. A perfect blend of science, creativity, and active learning! *Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*



### 13 Storybook Players Return!

11:00 am - 12:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Oskaloosa High School's popular Storybook Players will bring their talents to the Environmental Learning Center this year with a fun and engaging lineup of performances. Audiences will enjoy *The Golden Goose*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Scrunch's Magical Pinecone*, and *Scooby-Don't*, each presented with the troupe's signature creativity and energy. The event will feature interactive performances and student-led theatre, offering a lively and immersive experience for children and adults alike. *Seats fill quickly! Registration is not needed, just arrive early to get a seat!*

## March

### 11 Knee-High Naturalists “Animal Tea Party”

10:00 - 11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

You're invited to a special Animal Tea Party! Children ages 5 and younger are encouraged to bring their favorite stuffed animal as their very own tea party guest. We'll enjoy snacks along with lemonade and hot chocolate, play fun games, and make new friends together. Dress-up is welcome—feel free to wear your fanciest, funniest, or favorite outfit for the celebration! *Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.*





## March cont.

### 10 Homeschool Science Lab “Inventions from Nature” 10:00-11:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Discover how nature inspires human creativity! Homeschool students will explore real examples of inventions in medicine, clothing, food, and more that were created by observing plants, animals, and natural systems. From Velcro to bullet-proof vests, nature has shaped countless ideas. After exploring these fascinating examples, kids will have the chance to design and build their own nature-inspired invention. A hands-on, creative adventure in biomimicry! **Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.**

### 17 Shamrock Trail Trek 10:00-11:00 am

#### White Oak Conservation Area

Celebrate St. Patrick’s Day with a fun spring hike at the White Oak Conservation Area! Kids will explore the trails, search for the first signs of spring, and enjoy the fresh air as nature begins to wake up for the season. We may even find some leprechaun tracks along the way! Wear something green, bring your curiosity, and join us for a lucky adventure outdoors! **Pre-registration is needed, and you can sign up using the QR code on this page. A minimum of 5 kids is needed to hold the program.**



# Volunteer Training

January 19, 2026

Environmental Learning Center

ALL AGES ARE ENCOURAGED TO VOLUNTEER!

Sign up for a time using the QR Code:

1-2 pm or 5-6 pm



For questions and help with registration,  
call (641)673-9327.



# PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS



## December

*Check out the list of programs for all ages on pages 4-5!*

### 5 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteer opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a cup or mug decorated for Christmas to take part in a door prize.** Registration is not needed, and we meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

### 12 O.W.L.S. “Christmas Cookie Decorating”

11:00 am-12:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Adults of all ages are welcome to join the O.W.L.S. (Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls) program for a festive afternoon of holiday cookie decorating. Bring a friend and enjoy a cozy, creative time decorating homemade sugar cookies. We'll have coffee, hot chocolate, plenty of cookies to sample, and lots of holiday cheer! *Pre-registration is needed to reserve a seat. Please call (641) 673-9327, email [decook@mahaskacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahaskacountyia.gov), or register online using the QR code at the top of this page.*



## January

### 9 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteer opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug that has a winter theme on it to take part in a door prize.** Registration is not needed, and we meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

### 23 O.W.L.S. “Backyard Bird Treats”

1:00 - 2:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

In this hands-on program, participants will make easy-to-follow bird food cakes to take home and hang outdoors. These treats are perfect for attracting winter birds and adding a little extra nourishment during the colder months. Come enjoy a relaxed crafting session and leave with something your feathered friends will love! **Pre-registration is needed. You can sign up using the QR code on this page, by calling (641)673-9327, or emailing [decook@mahakacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahakacountyia.gov).**



## February

### 6 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteer opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug that has something about love on it to take part in a door prize. If you don't have one, feel free to decorate one!** Registration is not needed, and we meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

# PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS



## February cont.

*Check out the list of programs for all ages on pages 4-5!*

### 13 Storybook Players Return!

11:00 am - 12:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Oskaloosa High School's popular Storybook Players will bring their talents to the Environmental Learning Center this year with a fun and engaging lineup of performances. Audiences will enjoy *The Golden Goose*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Scrunch's Magical Pinecone*, and *Scooby-Don't*, each presented with the troupe's signature creativity and energy. The event will feature interactive performances and student-led theatre, offering a lively and immersive experience for children and adults alike. **Seats fill quickly! Registration is not needed, just arrive early to get a seat!**

### 20 O.W.L.S. "Pine Needle Sachet Craft"

1:00-2:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Adults of all ages are invited to join our O.W.L.S. (Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls) program! Bring a friend and enjoy a relaxing, hands-on session as we make fragrant pine needle sachets. These natural sachets are simple to create and perfect to take home and use in drawers, closets, or as a calming winter scent. Come for the craft, stay for the conversation! **Pre-registration is needed to reserve supplies. Pre-registration is needed. You can sign up using the QR code on this page, by calling (641)673-9327, or emailing [decook@mahakacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahakacountyia.gov).**



## March

### 13 Coffee Club

9:00-10:00 am

#### Environmental Learning Center

Drop in and join us for fresh coffee and tasty treats on a Coffee Club day. We talk about upcoming programs, volunteer opportunities with Mahaska County Conservation, and about everything in nature. **This month, bring a coffee cup or mug that the color green on it to take part in a door prize.** Registration is not needed, and we meet upstairs in the Discovery Lab.

### 27 O.W.L.S. "Prescribed Prairie Burns - Why Fire Helps Nature"

1:00-2:00 pm

#### Environmental Learning Center

Adults of all ages are invited to join our O.W.L.S. (Older, Wiser, Livelier Souls) program! Join us to discover how prescribed burns help native plants thrive, improve wildlife habitat, and keep our prairies healthy and vibrant. Guest speaker Ella Paulson, Green Iowa AmeriCorps member, will explain why land managers intentionally set controlled fires, how they do it safely, and what happens to the land afterward. Whether you're new to the idea or just curious, you'll discover why controlled fire is such an important conservation tool. **Pre-registration is needed. You can sign up using the QR code on this page, by calling (641)673-9327, or emailing [decook@mahakacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahakacountyia.gov).**



# B.A.R.K. RANGERS

## Tail-Wagging Fun at the Halloween Dog Costume Parade

Dogs and their owners came to the Halloween Bash for the dog costume parade at the Eveland Access Halloween Bash. The dogs were given treats by some campers and played bob for the hotdogs. It was a fun time! Each participating dog received a special event certificate stamped with their paw print!



### How Does My Dog Become A B.A.R.K. Ranger?

Select a Mahaska County park and complete a fun and easy activity checklist to earn your *FREE* B.A.R.K. Ranger certificate! Find the checklist on our website at [www.mahaskaconservation.com](http://www.mahaskaconservation.com) under the "Links" tab (see image below). After your visit, stop by the ELC during our open hours to get your certificate stamped with your dog's paw print. You can also buy a B.A.R.K. Ranger dog tag for \$10.00. *Cash or check to FMCC.*



## ANIMAL WINTER SAFETY TIPS

### PROVIDE SHELTER



AT 32°F OR LESS, NO OWNED DOGS OR CATS SHOULD BE LEFT OUTDOORS UNLESS THEY HAVE ACCESS TO A WELL-INSULATED STRUCTURE THAT :

- IS LARGE ENOUGH TO CURL UP IN AND HAS A WIND BLOCK AT THE DOOR
- HAS AN ELEVATED FLOOR
- WARM DRY BLANKETS OR DRY STRAWS
- INCLUDES A HEATED WATER BOWL

### CONSIDER WALKING YOUR DOG



- CONSIDER SHORTENING THE WALK IF THE TEMPERATURE IS TOO FRIGID
- CHECK WITH YOUR VET WHETHER YOUR PET MAY WANT ADDITIONAL CLOTHING

### WARNINGS

- SIGNS THAT YOUR PET MAY BE GETTING TOO COLD:
- TREMBLING
  - SLOWED BREATHING
  - MOBILITY ISSUES
  - NUMBNESS
  - ILLNESS

Mahaska County Conservation Board

Search

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**Related Links**

Helpful links to connect you to volunteering, the B.A.R.K. Ranger Program, park surveys, and related organizations.

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**B.A.R.K. Ranger Program**

What is the B.A.R.K. Ranger Program?

- [B.A.R.K. Ranger Principles](#)
- For park directions go to this website's "Parks" tab.

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**Park activities with your dog:**

- [Caldwell Park Activity Checklist](#)
- [Cedar Bluffs State Preserve Activity Checklist](#)
- [Eddyville Dunes Sand Prairie Activity Checklist](#)
- [Quercus Wilderness Area Activity Checklist](#)
- [White Oak Conservation Area Activity Checklist](#)

# VOLUNTEER NEWS



## Make Plans to Attend the Annual Volunteer & Partnership Appreciation Dinner

by Laura DeCook, Environmental Ed Coordinator

Our volunteers make everything we do possible, and we are grateful for the time, energy, and passion you give throughout the year. To celebrate all you've done, we invite you to join us for a special evening of thanks and recognition.

Please join us for a soup supper and fun on Monday, January 19, 2026, from 6:00-8:00 pm at the Environmental Learning Center. Soup, drinks and table service will be provided, and we ask volunteers to bring a finger food to share. During the event, we will present two special honors: Commitment to Conservation and Partnership of the Year, recognizing individuals and organizations who have gone above and beyond in their service this last year.

We hope you'll join us as we celebrate your hard work, dedication, and the incredible impact you make in our community. Thank you for all that you do!

Please let us know you plan on attending by signing up using the QR code below or call (641)673-9327. You can also email [decook@mahaskacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahaskacountyia.gov).

**Volunteer & Partnership Appreciation Dinner**

**February 2, 2026**  
**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 Jan. 30, 2025 by using the QR code, calling the office (641)673-9327, or emailing [decook@mahaskacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahaskacountyia.gov).

## Volunteer Training Date

If you would like to join our volunteer team or renew your volunteer status, come to our one-hour training on **January 19, 2026** at the Environmental Learning Center. **Please sign up for one of two sessions by scanning the QR code below, contacting our office at (641)673-9327, or emailing [decook@mahaskacountyia.gov](mailto:decook@mahaskacountyia.gov).** Volunteers are asked to attend a training once every three years.

**Afternoon session 1:00-2:00 pm**  
**Evening session 5:00-6:00 pm**



Looking for a way to give back and enjoy the great outdoors? Mahaska County Conservation is seeking volunteers to assist with a variety of projects and events this winter. Whether you have an hour or a whole day to give, your help makes a difference!

Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Serve as a Host at the Environmental Learning Center—welcome visitors and share your enthusiasm for nature.
- Become a Park Steward—“adopt” a park to help with trash cleanup, report maintenance needs, and support special projects.

# CONSERVATION CORNER

## Caldwell Park Oxbow Restoration Completed - A Wetland Brought Back to Life

by **Laura DeCook, Environmental Ed Coordinator**

Mahaska County Conservation is excited to announce that the Caldwell Park oxbow wetland restoration is now complete, marking a major milestone for habitat improvement and water quality in our community.

This project has been months in the making, and we are incredibly grateful for everyone who contributed their expertise, time, and effort.

The restoration was made possible through a strong partnership with the Iowa Soybean Association, with the project overseen by both the Iowa Soybean Association and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Their teams provided the vision, design work, and technical guidance, handled required permitting, and ensured construction was completed with environmental precision.

A special thank-you goes to Carl Drost, who operated the heavy equipment and played a key role in shaping the oxbow. His skill and attention to detail helped bring the wetland back to life. With Carl on the machine and the Iowa Soybean Association and USFWS overseeing the process, the restoration was truly in expert hands from start to finish.

After the earthwork was completed, the Iowa Soybean Association supplied a diverse native seed mix—featuring grasses, sedges, and wildflowers—to help establish a thriving natural habitat. These plants will support birds, amphibians, pollinators, and other wildlife while improving water quality by slowing runoff and filtering pollutants.

Wetlands like this serve as nature's water filters and natural flood managers. Thanks to this successful restoration, Caldwell Park now has a healthy, functioning wetland, working quietly and beautifully to benefit both wildlife and the community.

We extend our sincere appreciation to everyone involved in completing this meaningful conservation project. Your dedication has helped restore an important piece of Iowa's natural heritage.

## New Trumpeter Swan Mount on Display at the Environmental Learning Center

by **Laura DeCook, Environmental Ed Coordinator**

Stop by the Environmental Learning Center to see our newest display—a beautiful trumpeter swan mount! A big thank-you to the Friends of Mahaska County Conservation for purchasing the taxidermy for this impressive specimen and bringing it to the ELC.

Trumpeter swans are the largest native waterfowl in North America, with wingspans reaching up to 8 feet. Once nearly extinct, their populations have made an inspiring recovery.



Photo courtesy of Ann Seda, Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship.



# ACTIVITY PAGE

## Explore Outdoors - Mahaska County

M N F A U K N U K S H T U O S S L A F B S D Y  
A V G A R D E N I N G X Q G N I K A Y A K Z E  
P G Y Y H P A R G O T O H P F H M D D O F S L  
L N E H X A H B I R D W A T C H I N G I V D C  
E I L A K N U K S H T R O N X L C V O X U N B  
S Z B O W F I S H I N G S D N A L D O O W O H  
Y A D U L O O A K S A V A N N A H F W H B P P  
R G C A N O E I N G I F O S S I L S S D I S W  
U R L B I G N I I K S Y R T N U O C S S O R C  
P A M Y K M D K C E D A R C R E E K E D Z Y M  
I T R I V E R B O T T O M S V F I S H I N G T  
N S A W S N O W S H O E I N G G N I P M A C C  
G D T R A P P I N G W Y Y G N I R O L P X E U  
W S E I R I A R P Z P I C N I C S I G G V U E  
E N H U N T I N G W E T L A N D S N B D A W X  
D E S M O I N E S R I V E R X P H I K I N G Y

Find the following words in the puzzle.

Words are hidden ↑ ↓ → ← and ↘ .

BIRDWATCHING

BOWFISHING

CAMPING

CANOEING

CEDAR CREEK

CROSS COUNTRY

SKIING

DES MOINES RIVER

ELC

EXPLORING

FISHING

FOSSILS

GARDENING

HIKING

HUNTING

KAYAKING

MAPLE SYRUPING

NORTH SKUNK

OAK SAVANNAH

PHOTOGRAPHY

PICNICS

PONDS

PRAIRIES

RIVER BOTTOMS

SNOWSHOEING

SOUTH SKUNK

STARGAZING

TRAPPING

WETLANDS

WOODLANDS





## Mahaska County Conservation Board & Meeting Dates

Chairperson            Curt Jager, Eddyville  
Vice-Chairperson    Linda Fox, Rose Hill  
Secretary              Jennifer Peterson, Oskaloosa  
Member                 Chuck Webb, Oskaloosa  
Member                 Steve Dixon, 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 15, 2025  
January 19, 2026  
February 16, 2026  
March 16, 2026

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

## Mahaska County Conservation Staff

Executive Director	Chris Clingan
Environmental Ed Coordinator	Laura DeCook
Park Ranger	Tommy VanRenterghem
Park Ranger	Steve Nugteren
Admin. Assistant/Naturalist	Molly Hicks
Green Iowa AmeriCorps & ELC Attendant	Ella Paulson
ELC Attendant	Kylee Eastwood

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.

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