

# Conservation Connection

## Johnson County Conservation Newsletter

### Pawpaws: Jungle Fruit Growing in Iowa

Frances Owen - Naturalist

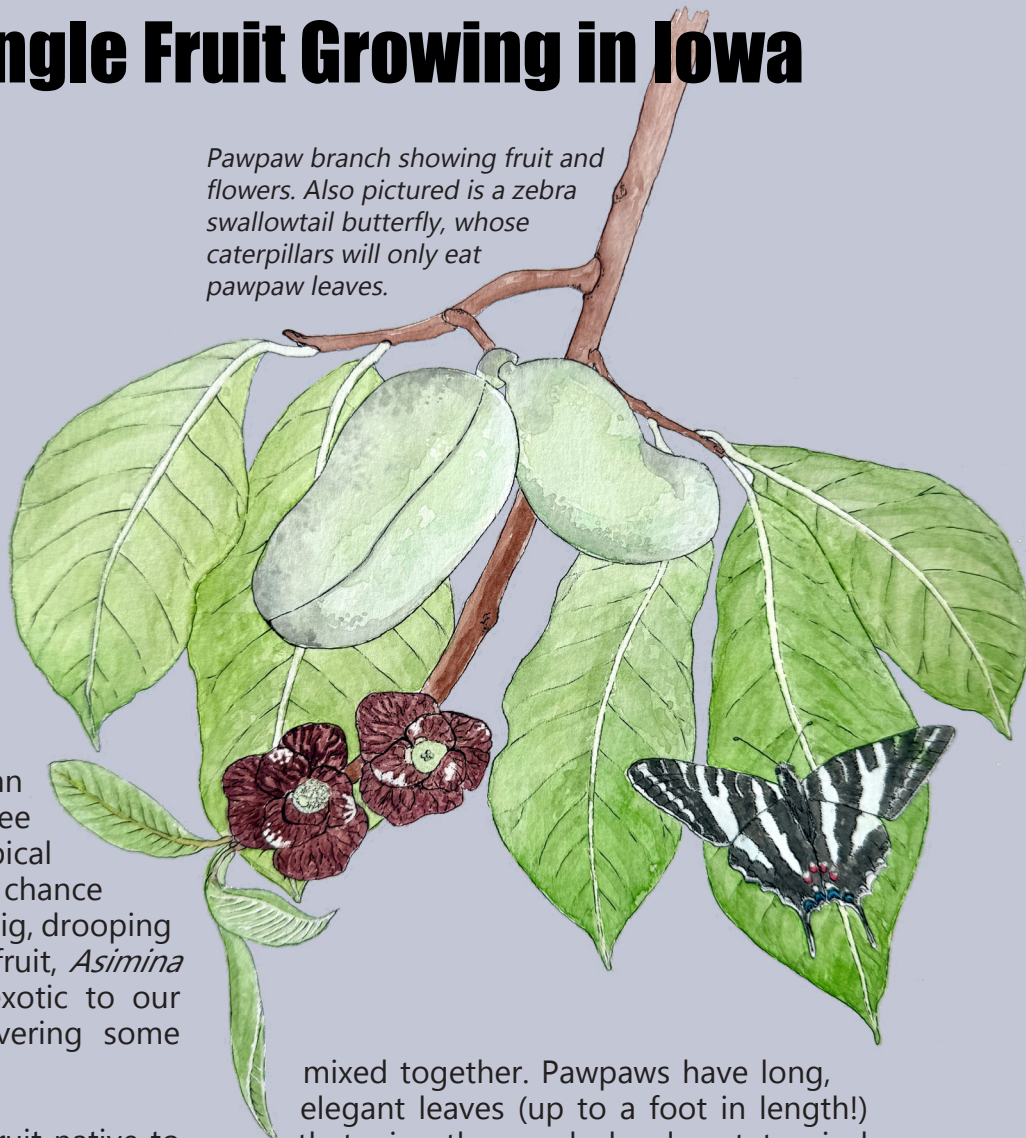
*"Now when you pick a paw-paw  
or a prickly pear  
And you prick a raw paw, well,  
next time beware  
Don't pick the prickly pear by the  
paw  
When you pick a pear try to use  
the claw  
But you don't need to use the  
claw  
When you pick a pear of the big  
paw-paw  
Have I given you a clue?"*

*The Bare Necessities from the  
1967 Movie "The Jungle Book"*

If you've ever wandered through an Iowa woodland and spotted a tree that looked just a little too tropical for the Midwest, there's a good chance you've met the pawpaw. With its big, drooping leaves and delicious banana like fruit, *Asimina triloba* brings a splash of the exotic to our Eastern Iowa forests while delivering some great ecological benefits.

Pawpaws are the largest edible fruit native to North America, and they grow well in Iowa's fertile, well-drained soils. The fruit itself looks a bit like a stubby green mango, and when ripe, the flesh has a sweet, creamy texture reminiscent of banana, mango, and vanilla all

Pawpaw branch showing fruit and flowers. Also pictured is a zebra swallowtail butterfly, whose caterpillars will only eat pawpaw leaves.



mixed together. Pawpaws have long, elegant leaves (up to a foot in length!) that give them a lush, almost tropical appearance. In early spring their dark purple-red flowers will bloom for a few weeks before being replaced by their green fruit. In fall, those big leaves turn a warm yellow.

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## A Brief from Brad

*Thankful for Iowa's Natural Treasures and the Services They Give Us*



As we move into a season of gratitude, it's worth pausing to appreciate the quiet, powerful ways Iowa's natural resources enrich our lives every day. From rolling prairies and winding rivers, to family farms and woodlands, these landscapes do more than look beautiful. They deliver vital environmental services that sustain our well-being, economy, and future. A cornucopia of natural resources that provide for the people who call this land home.



*Seed Harvest volunteers explore the wetlands at Cedar River Crossing while collecting seed for future habitat restoration projects.*

Healthy wetlands, riparian buffers, and well-managed soils act as nature's filtration and sponges. They reduce sediment and nutrient runoff, keep our rivers and drinking water cleaner, and slow floodwater during big storms. Those natural systems save communities money on water treatment, flood repair, and infrastructure by absorbing and filtering water where it falls. Iowa's rich soils are the foundation of some of the nation's most productive farms. Healthy soils store carbon, retain moisture during dry spells, and support diverse microbial life that helps crops thrive. Practices like cover cropping, reduced tillage, and crop rotation help maintain soil health, reducing erosion, and building resilience against extreme weather.

Prairies, forests, and restored habitats support pollinators and wildlife that are essential to both natural ecosystems and agricultural success. Bees, butterflies, birds, and beneficial insects pollinate crops, control pests, and maintain ecological balance. Protecting and restoring habitat corridors helps sustain these species and the services they provide.

Trees and perennial vegetation filter airborne pollutants, moderate local temperatures, and sequester carbon. Urban tree canopies cool neighborhoods in the summer, reduce energy use, and improve public health. On a larger scale, preserving and restoring natural areas contributes to climate mitigation and community resilience.

Iowa's parks, trails, rivers, and wildlife areas offer accessible outdoor recreation that strengthens communities and economies. Hunting, fishing, birdwatching, hiking, and paddling bring people together, support local businesses, and promote physical and mental wellness. These places are part of Iowa's cultural identity; spaces for family traditions, learning, and quiet reflection.



*Paddlers explore the slough at Pechman Creek Delta in kayaks during a public paddling program.*

The environmental services provided by natural resources translate into real economic benefits: lower infrastructure and health costs, stronger farm productivity, tourism revenue, and more resilient communities. Investing in conservation, from farmer incentives and landowner programs to urban green infrastructure, is an investment in Iowa's prosperity.

## How you can give thanks in practical ways:

- Support local conservation efforts: join or donate to land trusts, watershed groups, or soil health initiatives.

- Advocate for smart policies: encourage funding and programs that support soil health, wetland restoration, and working lands conservation.

- Practice stewardship at home: plant native species, reduce lawn chemicals, and manage stormwater with rain gardens or permeable surfaces.

- Get outside and connect: volunteer for habitat restoration, attend local nature events, or simply explore a nearby park.

This season, let's recognize that gratitude can be action. By supporting and protecting Iowa's natural resources, we preserve the essential services they deliver — clean water and air, productive soils, abundant wildlife, and places that nourish our bodies and spirits. That's something worth giving thanks for.

I thank you all for your support and gratitude. Get outdoors and give back to the earth that gives us so much!



*Birdwatchers of all skill levels learn how to spot and identify some of the bird species in F.W. Kent Park.*



## JCC Staff Updates

### Josh Gaffey – Trails Field Worker

I grew up in Iowa City, Iowa, where I spent as much time outdoors as possible - hunting, fishing, and enjoying anything related to nature. My favorite pastime has always been pheasant hunting and training my two Labrador retrievers, Jake and Cash.

My passion for the outdoors led me to study Parks and Natural Resources at Kirkwood Community College. I graduated in May 2024 and began working full-time for Hardin County Conservation in January 2024.

During high school, I worked two summers for Johnson County Conservation and spent another summer as a water patrol officer for the Iowa DNR. I am excited to return to Johnson County Conservation. The trails here are beautiful and well maintained, and I am proud to be taking care of them.



## We Are Officially a “Bird Friendly Iowa” Community!

**Michelle Wiegand** - Naturalist

Johnson County was recently recognized as a “Bird Friendly Iowa” community. Bird Friendly Iowa is part of the global Bird City Network. American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and Environment for the Americas (EFTA) have joined forces with support from US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) to create The Bird City Network.

With our first application, Johnson County received “High Flyer” status, the highest status a community can achieve. Applications are evaluated based on a community’s engagement in habitat management, avian education, and reducing threats to birds. We celebrated this honor with a dedication ceremony on November 14 at Kent Park along with many of the partner organizations and volunteers who helped make this designation possible. Attendees enjoyed a Raptor Meet & Greet with our partners from Raptology, learned about raptor rehabilitation from The RARE Group, participated in a guided bird walk with the Iowa City Bird Club, and learned about ways to support birds at home with a presentation from Iowa’s Avian Ecologist, Anna Buckhardt Thomas.

For many, birds are a gateway into developing a love for the natural world. While birds are easily accessible, worldwide bird populations have

decreased around 30% since 1970 and nearly 3 billion birds are gone from our landscapes. Especially relevant in Iowa, grassland bird populations have seen the steepest decline (53% since 1970). This may be unsurprising when we consider that less than 1% of Iowa’s native prairie remains today. Johnson County and community partners are working to fight these trends through habitat restoration, education, and reducing threats to birds. When we improve our environment for birds, people benefit, as well.



*Johnson County community members and JCC staff show off the new Bird Friendly Iowa banners and signs.*

We look forward to continuing this work with you. Be sure to follow along for more upcoming events, programs, and volunteer opportunities that support birds.





**Left to Right:** JCC staff Sabrina Callahan and Brooke Batha plant seeds into pots; Ninety-seven pawpaw seedlings growing strong and kept safe until planting; JCC Natural Resource Management Technician Tim Kurt plants pawpaw seedlings at Clear Creek Conservation Area.

Pawpaws aren't just fun to eat; they're ecologically important. Their leaves contain natural compounds known as acetogenins, which make them unappealing to most herbivores, including deer. Because of those compounds, when the leaves are crushed, they give off a strong aroma described by many as a mix of bell peppers and diesel fuel. That doesn't stop the Zebra Swallowtail butterfly, listed as a species of special concern in Iowa, from using this tree as its host plant. Zebra Swallowtail caterpillars will only feed on pawpaw leaves, so planting pawpaws is an important part of helping this butterfly species survive and thrive. Pawpaws also create excellent forest understory habitat and will naturally spread to form small groves or thickets.

This fall has been particularly exciting for all fans of the pawpaw in Johnson County. Last spring, Art Bettis, a professor at the University of Iowa, delivered over 100 stratified pawpaw seeds ready for planting. Stratification is a process that replicates the environment native seeds experience during a winter spent outdoors and can be accomplished in many ways. It is a vital step in germinating many of our native seeds.

Our natural resource crew planted those seeds in 100 pots (some with two seeds each) and sheltered them inside a large dog kennel to protect them. Thanks to attentive watering and good seed luck, 97 pots sprouted seedlings, with some pots having 2!

During the last week of October, our natural resource crew planted 28 young trees at Clear Creek Conservation Area, six at Two Horse Farm, and six at Pechman Creek Delta. The rest of the pawpaw seedlings will be planted at Kent Park in two groves on the east side of the park.

Kent Park already boasts a 15-year-old grove south of the boat ramp road that produces fruit. The trees for that planting came from Lon Drake, who has been planting pawpaws for almost 20 years now. Pawpaws grown from seed usually take about seven years to produce fruit; depending on the environment it can happen a little sooner or later. With time, these new plantings will create additional pockets of habitat and, eventually, more pawpaw fruit for wildlife and humans alike.



Tree guards around the pawpaw seedlings will protect them while small.

# Volunteerism By the Numbers

As 2025 comes to a close, one of the positive things we can reflect on for the year is that we have never had more volunteers involved, nor as many hours of service provided. A total of **189 volunteers** participated as conservation volunteers over the year, logging an impressive **1503 hours** of service. Their impact has been huge, helping us achieve our mission to restore native habitats, provide educational and outdoor recreation activities, and maintain beautiful inviting public parks.

Here are some of the ways volunteers made an impact this year:

- One of our largest single-day volunteer efforts this year was the Iowa River Clean Up. This event drew **54 volunteers** who spent **250 hours** working together to remove 3.4 tons of trash from the river.
- Prairie seed harvests and seed cleaning sessions are the primary way people can be involved in our restoration efforts. In 2025, **69 volunteers** took part in this effort over **235 hours**, and provided many pounds of high-value prairie seed. All seed was either planted in new prairie reconstructions at Cedar River Crossing and Pechman Creek Delta this year, or shared with our friends at Pollinator Partnership to distribute to free seed and seedlings to the public to plant prairies of their own and expand native habitat in the region.
- The Wings and Wild Things Festival drew 4,288 attendees to celebrate the earth and learn about everything from mushrooms to reptiles, and raptors to Iowa wildflowers. **21 volunteers** helped to power this event, providing **142 hours** of service.
- As a novel project, **21** volunteers spent **111 hours** painting colorful educational murals on our picnic tables in front of the Conservation Education Center (CEC). These beautified tables are seen by tens of

thousands of park visitors annually.

- A small corps of CEC Hosts kept the CEC open on 17 days this year during weekend visitor hours, greeting folks and answering questions. This small group of **6 volunteers** served a total of **104 hours**.
- A hard working crew of **24 volunteers** helped sort and organize mountains of clothes over **88.5 hours** during two separate Clothing Swap events in 2025. These events diverted a total of 2,325 pounds of clothes from the landfill, encouraging their reuse instead, and limiting new consumption.
- Two volunteers dedicated their whole summer to helping with special projects at Cangleska Wakan, serving a whopping **308 hours** total. They made a huge impact and helped with trail clearing, garden revitalization, resource inventory and organization, event preparation, and more.

Volunteers helped with so many efforts that we cannot fit all of them here. Dozens of hours were dedicated to monitoring bird nesting boxes, conducting the IMMP (monarch-focused citizen science), tagging monarchs, cataloging books, sewing and repairing education resources, filling bird feeders, feeding education animals, clearing trails, providing raptor presentations, and more. Here at JCC, we feel immense gratitude to be part of a community that is passionate to take an active role in the efforts of conservation.

We're looking forward to continuing and expanding volunteer opportunities in 2026. In addition to a diversity of ways to be involved, we will also be hosting new social events for volunteers such as coffee hours, hikes, and more. Subscribe to the Volunteer Newsletter to stay up-to-date about all opportunities! *Click or scan the code to subscribe.*







CEC Hosts and Event Tabling



Wings and Wild Things Festival



Iowa River Clean Up



I.M.M.P



Picnic Table Mural Project



Clothing Swap



Raptor Meet & Greets



Prairie Seed Harvests



Prairie Seed Cleaning





# JOHNSON COUNTY AVIAN ADVENTURE

FEBRUARY 4- MARCH 22

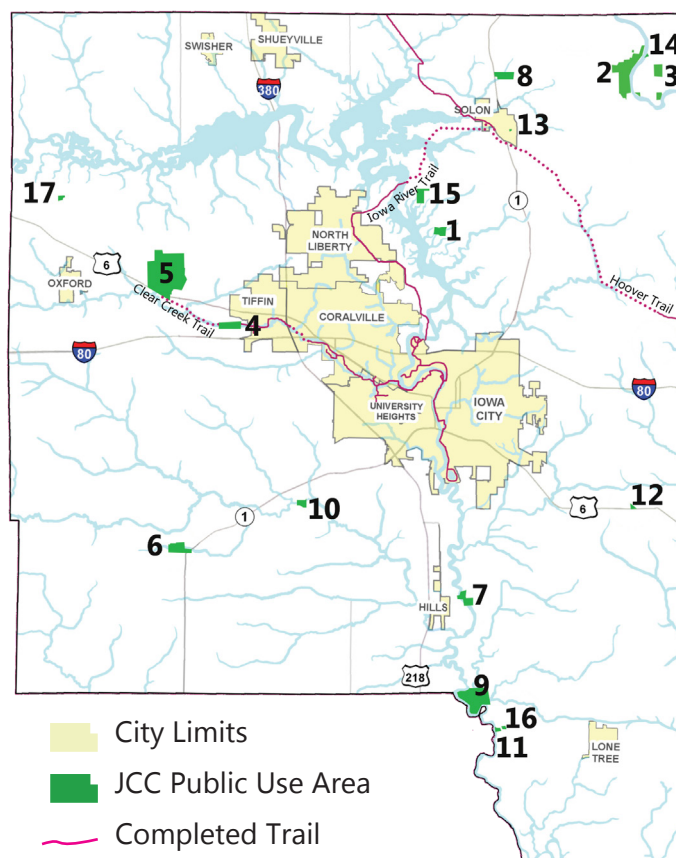
**SEARCH, ADVENTURE, DISCOVER, & WIN!**

JOHNSONCOUNTYIOWA.GOV/CONSERVATION/EVENTS



## JCC Public Use Areas

1. Cangleska Wakan	132 acres
2. Cedar River Crossing	610 acres
3. Ciha Fen Preserve	81 acres
4. Clear Creek Conservation Area	87 acres
5. F.W. Kent Park	1,062 acres
6. Frytown Conservation Area	94 acres
7. Hills Access	40 acres
8. Malinda Reif Reilly Fen & Prairie	100 acres
9. Pechman Creek Delta	380 acres
10. Phebe Timber	27 acre
11. River Junction Access	12 acres
12. Scott Church Park	5 acres
13. Solon Prairie	3 acres
14. Sutliff Bridge & Access	1/2 acre
15. Two Horse Farm	83 acres
16. Walker Park	3 acres
17. Williams Prairie Preserve	21 acres



## Paved Trail Segments Managed by JCC

Clear Creek Trail	1.3 miles
Hoover Trail	6 miles
Iowa River Trail	3.5 miles

More information about JCC public use areas can be found through our website:  
[www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/conservation](http://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/conservation)



# Program/Event Guide

## How to Sign Up:

Programs are free unless a fee is listed. Sign up for all programs is online at the link below, unless stated otherwise. To sign up, **click or scan** the QR code to the right or go to: <https://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/conservation/events>. For questions or sign-up help, call **319-645-1011**.



## Accessibility

JCC is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. We welcome and encourage people with disabilities to attend programs and events. Accommodations may be requested by contacting naturalist staff at 319-645-1011 or [jccnaturalists@gmail.com](mailto:jccnaturalists@gmail.com).

## January

### First Day Naturalist Hike

Wednesday, January 1, 2:00 - 3:30 p.m.  
Cangleska Wakan

Start your year off right with an active afternoon in fresh air. This 2.5-mile hike will cover trails at Cangleska Wakan and Big Grove Preserve.

### CEC Open House - Winter Wonderland

Saturday, January 10, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

This winter, explore the Conservation Education Center during the second weekend of the month. Each month features a theme with hands-on activities in the CEC classroom. This month, learn about what makes winter so wonderful: snowflakes, evergreen trees, animal tracks and more! No registration needed; please check social media for updates/park road closures for inclement weather.

### Upcycled Shirts: Finger Knitting Coasters/Bags

Wednesday, January 14, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Using leftover t-shirts from our Clothing Swap,

participants will learn how to create their own yarn to turn into coasters and bags. This program is suited for middle-school and up.

### Winter Foraging Hike

Saturday, January 17, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m.  
Cangleska Wakan

Take a walk with a JCC naturalist and learn about some of the foods and medicines that can be foraged in winter! This program will take place outdoors and features a two-mile walk over uneven terrain.

### Nature Buds - Animal Tracks

Wednesday, January 21, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Nature Buds is a free program for 3-5 year-old kids. The program features story time, a craft or STEM activity, and often outdoor exploration.

### Naturalist Hike

Thursday, January 22, 4:00 - 5:30 p.m.  
Cedar River Crossing

Join a naturalist for this guided 3-mile hike. The majority of the hike is over level terrain, with a couple short hills. We will finish our hike just after the sun sets and get to watch the first stars make their appearance.

## February

### Maple Syrup Class

Saturday, February 7, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.  
Sutliff Operations Center and Cedar River Crossing

Learn about making your own maple syrup during this hands-on program. Walk into Cedar River Crossing with us to identify appropriate trees and set them up for collecting sap. Interested participants can rent equipment for the season (\$5) to tap their own tree!

### Upcycled T-Shirt: Braided Rugs

Wednesday, February 11, 1:00 - 3:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park  
See January 14 event for more information.

### Accessible Great Backyard Bird Count

Saturday, February 14, 10:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Join Birdability and JCC for a cozy winter birding program inside the CEC. We will provide training on the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), do some group counts, and enjoy community. This event centers folks with access needs but all are welcome and encouraged to attend.

### CEC Open House - Love Birds

Saturday, February 14; Tuesday, February 17 (no school ICCSD); Thursday, February 26 (no school CCA), 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park  
See January 10 event for more information.

### Naturalist Hike

Thursday, February 19, 4:00 - 5:30 p.m.  
Ciha Fen

Join a naturalist guided 1.5-mile hike through old-growth oaks and prairie as the sun sets. The trail has a wide grassy surface with some gradual hills, but is otherwise mostly flat.

### Nature Buds - Reptiles

Wednesday, February 25, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

### Winter Tree ID

Friday, February 27 or Saturday, February 28, 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center F.W. Kent Park

Participants will learn advanced tree ID skills such as bud, twig, and bark ID, as well as natural history snippets about many of Iowa's trees. This program will primarily be outdoors, hiking both on and off trail. This class is designed for adults.

### Kent Park After Dark: Family Night Hike

Saturday, February 28, 5:30 - 7:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center F.W. Kent Park

This family program will cover nocturnal animal adaptations and a guided hike in the near full moonlight. The hike will be approximately one-mile long on uneven terrain. We will finish our hike with cocoa available back at the Conservation Education Center and the CEC will be open for exploration until 8:00 p.m.

## March

### Full Moon Naturalist Hike

Monday, March 2, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.  
Cedar River Crossing

Join a naturalist for a guided 3-mile hike at Cedar River Crossing. We will be walking on a mowed grass trail. The majority of the hike is over level terrain, with a couple short hills. We will begin walking just as the sun sets, the rest of our way lit up by moonlight.

### No School Day: Upcycled T-shirt Streamers & Decor

Wednesday, March 4, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park



Using leftover t-shirts from our Clothing Swap, participants will learn to make t-shirt yarn, tassels, and several simple crafts that are fun to add to a play room or outdoor play space. This class is appropriate for elementary students and up. A parent/guardian is asked to stay and assist youth participants.

### **Map Reading Challenge Course**

Saturday, March 7, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.  
Cangleska Wakan

Practice map-reading skills to find hidden points scattered both on and off-trail at Cangleska Wakan. Mark progress along the way with special markers at each point. This challenge is entirely self-guided, and participants be comfortable navigating with only a map. Completion time will vary, up to the 3:00 p.m. cut-off. Celebrate with hot drinks and a fire after.

### **Upcycled T-Shirt Series: Woven Wall Hanging**

Wednesday, March 11, 6:00-9:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park  
Fee: \$10

Using leftover t-shirts from our Clothing Swap, yarn, and other upcycled fabrics, participants will learn to make t-shirt yarn and a simple woven wall hanging using an upcycled loom. Participants will receive a tapestry needle and upcycled frame loom to keep, along with the work they create in class.

### **CEC Open House - Fungi**

Saturday, March 14, 12:00 - 3:00 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park  
See January 10 event for more information.

### **No School Day - CEC Open House**

Tuesday, March 17, 12:00 - 3:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park  
See February 17 event for more information.

### **Reptile Meet & Greet**

Tuesday, March 17, 2:00 - 3:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Meet and learn about a few of JCC's reptile ambassadors in this indoor program. Participants will have the chance to touch and possibly hold some of the animals as well.

### **Family Hike at Cangleska Wakan**

Wednesday, March 18, 1:00 - 3:30 p.m.  
Cangleska Wakan

Wander through the Cangleska woods with a naturalist guide on this 2-mile hike. All ages welcome, with or without kids.

### **Forts and Fires**

Thursday, March 19, 12:30 - 3:30 p.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

This Spring Break, take an afternoon to live on the wild side, building a fort in the woods from sticks and leaves, and starting fires with primitive tools. This program is designed for families to work together wildcrafting with elementary through middle school aged kids.

### **Nature Buds - Worms**

Wednesday, March 25, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.  
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Nature Buds is a free program for 3-5 year-old kids. The program features story time, a craft or STEM activity, and often outdoor exploration.

### **Naturalist Hike**

Thursday, March 26, 4:00 - 5:30 p.m.  
Malinda Reif Reilly Fen and Prairie

Join a naturalist guided 2.5-mile hike through mostly flat terrain. The hike will be a mixture of mowed grassy trail and natural trail-less land.



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Pictured are "Lake Stars" on one of the fishing ponds at F.W. Kent Park. Lake Stars are formed when snow falls on thin ice. The weight of the snow causes a hole to form in the ice. Water seeps through the hole, and spreads under the snow to create melted branch-like channels, then re-freezes. This phenomenon is typically seen in early winter.

