

Conservation Connection

Johnson County Conservation Newsletter

Native Plant Series : Community Profiles

Michelle Wiegand - Naturalist

The Native Plant Series and Plant Sales returned for the third year on May 3rd. Each session features local expert presentations as well as a native plant sale. The goal of the series is to empower our community to utilize native plants in their home landscapes —planting native is one strategy we can all use to practice conservation at home. This article explores personal experiences of three native plant home gardeners. I hope you are inspired to join us for an upcoming Native Plant Series event!

My own journey into native landscaping began 10 years ago when we bought our first home near St. Louis. I had my first baby that year and much of the first year was spent enjoying the yard with her and observing what the prior owners left us. We quickly came to appreciate the numerous native plants already present—a lush hillside covered in yellow and green celandine poppy with thousands of Virginia bluebells. Purple redbud and white dogwood flowers framed the hillside in the spring. Late spring and early summer brought masses of spotted jewelweed—I loved to show my daughter the plant’s tiny seedpod that would erupt at the lightest touch.



My daughter, a lover of flowers, poses with the lanceleaf coreopsis we planted at our home in the St. Louis area. A bird bubbler we built is seen in the background.

We had our challenges—fighting back invasive bush honeysuckle and wintercreeper encroaching from neighboring properties. Our initial goal was to better support wildlife in our yard and as our daughter became more independent we were able to take action. We planted hundreds of native plants as a source of food and shelter for wildlife. We added water features for wildlife, removed invasive plants, and transitioned away from the many existing non-native hostas and boxwood.

Five years later we then moved back to Iowa City and started the process all over again. The process can be slow but we are rewarded each year by seeing spring ephemerals emerge, by sharing the sweet scent of woodland phlox with our daughters, and witnessing the abundant wildlife enjoying the plants and natural features in our yard.

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A Brief from Brad



In a world of constant notifications, overflowing inboxes, and never ending to do lists, it's easy to move through the day on autopilot. One of the simplest, most powerful ways to step out of that fog is to spend intentional time outdoors—and to use that time to practice being fully present.

You don't need a hiking trip or a weekend retreat to reconnect (those are great too). A short walk around the block, a quiet moment on your balcony, or ten minutes sitting on a park bench can be enough to reset your mind and body. In the age of information, our minds and emotions are manipulated and overwhelmed. This creates stress, stifles creativity, and negatively impacts our mental and physical health.

Here are a few gentle ways to use time outside to be more present in the moment:

Engage your senses, one by one

- *Sight:* Notice colors, shapes, and light—how the sky looks today, how the leaves move.
- *Sound:* Listen for layers—birds, wind, traffic, footsteps, distant voices.
- *Smell:* Fresh-cut grass, rain on pavement, flowers, or even city air after a storm.
- *Touch:* Feel the temperature on your skin, the texture of a tree trunk, the ground under your feet.

Let your attention rest on each sense for a few breaths. When your mind wanders, gently return to what you're seeing, hearing, or feeling.

Slow your pace

Instead of walking with a destination mindset, try walking with a curiosity mindset. Notice how your body feels with each step. Let yourself move just a little





Left page: Teens from a local student group participate in a mindfulness hike at Two Horse Farm.

Left: Outdoor Youth Corps teens observe monarch eggs at Cedar River Crossing. Slow observation can help you connect with the present moment. **Right:** Teens sit and enjoy a view a Bur Oak Land Trust's Belgum Grove site.

slower than usual. This physical slowing often creates mental space to breathe and reset.

Practice a simple “outdoor check in”

Ask yourself three questions:

- What’s happening around me?
- What’s happening in my body?
- What’s happening in my mind?

There’s nothing to fix; just notice. This small habit can shift you from reacting on autopilot to responding with awareness.

Take a “phone free” break

Try leaving your phone in your pocket or at home for a short outdoor break—even five minutes. At first, you may feel the urge to check it. That’s normal. See if you can treat that urge as just another thing to notice, like the clouds passing by.

Let nature set the pace of your thoughts

Nature has its own rhythm: clouds drifting, shadows moving, leaves swaying. When you sit or walk outside, imagine your thoughts moving at that slower pace. You don’t need to quiet your mind completely; just let your thoughts soften and spread out instead of racing.

Why this matters

Spending time outdoors while practicing presence isn’t just pleasant—it’s restorative. Studies consistently link time in nature with reduced stress, better mood, improved focus, and greater overall well-being. More importantly, it offers something many of us crave: a feeling of being grounded and truly “here” for our own lives. Growing up, I didn’t understand the restorative properties of being outdoors; I just knew I felt mentally and physically better after a day of working outside, fishing, or exploring in the woods.

An invitation for this week

Choose one small way to be more present outdoors in the coming days: a phone free walk, five minutes on a park bench, or a quiet moment by an open window. Treat it as a gift of attention you’re giving yourself—no pressure, no perfection, just presence.

Even a brief pause outside can be a reminder that life is happening now, in this moment, right where you are.

Get outdoors!

continued from cover



Left: My daughter helped us collect and process persimmons from our yard. **Right:** Celandine poppy and Virginia bluebells were a delight in spring in our St. Louis home.

Native Plant Series Participant Profiles:

Linda Nelson and Alex Carver have both been attending Native Plant Series events since the program started in 2024. Learn more about their experiences with the program and their respective native plant landscaping journeys.



Linda Nelson

Linda grew up on what she calls “chem lawns”—lawns weeded to perfection with manicured garden beds of showy annuals. When she moved into her current home ~30 years ago, she initially tried to maintain that type of “flawless” manicured lawn by digging up dandelions, fighting back plants spreading into her yard from a nearby ravine, and creating new garden beds full of hostas.

Linda soon realized this practice was unsustainable in part due to the high number of deer in her neighborhood and the shade provided by beautiful, massive bur oak, black

walnut, and white pine trees. She began to embrace many of the plants encroaching from a nearby ravine, including mayapple, ostrich fern, jack-in-the-pulpit, Virginia bluebells, and more.

Linda has always been an outdoor enthusiast and spent many summers hiking in Colorado. She and her husband love to camp. As she began to hike more and more at Kent Park, she drew inspiration from Iowa’s natural beauty and native landscapes. Linda shared that the Native Plant Series “came along at just the right time.” She has found guidance and support from speakers and she has developed a new prairie planting at home with plants purchased from Troutleaf Native Plants during the plant sales.



Left: Linda made the sign for her prairie planting at a recent Native Plant Series event. **Right:** Wild ginger borders a planting.

Linda tends to three main native plantings zones—a 10x10 prairie plot, a woodland corner of ferns, mayapples, and ephemerals, and an “evolving bee lawn”. She has implemented other practices discussed during the Native Plant Series, including leaving plant stems for overwintering insects and letting fallen leaves act as a green mulch. These approaches have made gardening less intensive and she has found pleasure in enjoying the increase in wildlife in her yard.



Linda shares a list of birds she recently spotted in her wildlife-friendly yard.



Alex Carver and Steve Bannantyne's yard is full of life and vibrant color in the summer while holding year-round interest.

Alex Carver

Alex and Steve Bannatyne have been working to transform their yard for five years. Having lived across the United States, Alex enjoys Iowa's growing season, and, unlike southern California, the opportunity to plant for all four seasons. During a tour of their yard, Alex pointed out her intention to plant for each season. She showed ephemerals for spring, summer and fall blooming plants, and, for winter visual interest and habitat for birds, with a towering yellow giant hyssop with its tall stalks and long dark brown seedheads.

Alex first became interested in landscaping with native plants around 2007 and has always been motivated to support more wildlife and reduce her resource consumption. Her yard has supported a diversity of wildlife including a family of barred owls, countless insect species, snakes, opossums, and, most recently, cecropia moths adopted through Johnson County Conservation. Both moths successfully eclosed around Mother's Day this year. Alex's relatively small yard not far from downtown is packed with a diversity of native plant species

including prairie, woodland, and even some moisture-loving marsh species like cardinal flower and blue lobelia. Alex's home is in a relatively high traffic pedestrian area. For privacy, she has planted tall growing prairie plants, including culver's root—a favorite of hers, along the back edge of her property near a cozy seating area.



Wild hyacinth



Jack-in-the-Pulpit

While privacy is a goal in some areas, Alex's landscaping also invites curiosity and playfulness in more public-facing zones like the alleyway. Old powerline poles are cheerfully filled with succulents, native plantings are labeled for passersby, and "Bird & Pollinator" and "Wildlife Certified" yard signs share her intention to support wildlife with her neighbors. Beyond creating a welcoming, beautiful space with native plants, Alex is striving to inspire more



Alex adopted cecropia moth caterpillars. Two moths recently eclosed in her wildlife-friendly yard.

neighbors to plant native plants and to remove problematic invasive species. Alex recently co-founded the Longfellow Native Plant Group which hosted a social event and yard tour and assisted with a neighborhood park native planting. Doug Tallamy, entomologist and native plant advocate calls for a revolution of individuals developing "homegrown national parks" and that's exactly what Alex is working to do in her own yard while also supporting neighbors to do the same.

10 YEARS, 100 TEENS

IDAHO WILDERNESS TREK MILESTONES

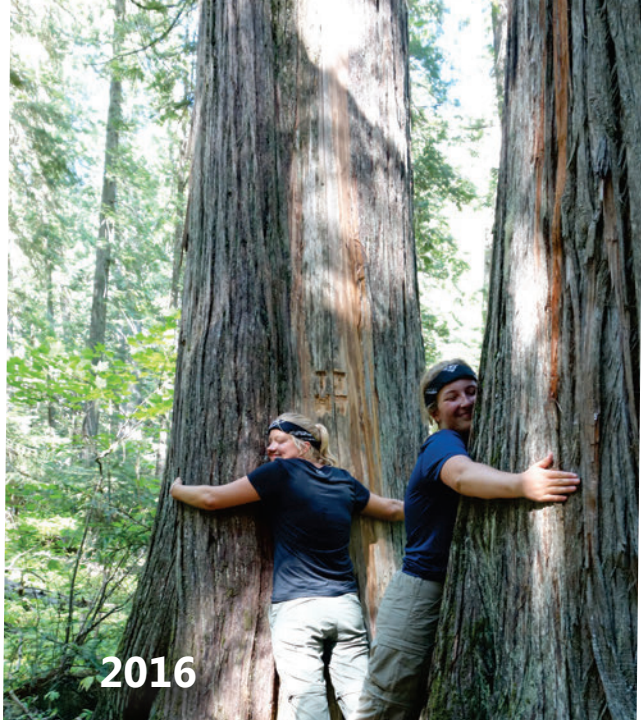
Kristen Morrow - Naturalist

This summer, the Idaho Wilderness Trek reaches two exciting milestones: we are celebrating the ten year anniversary of this trip, and with this year's cohort we'll have reached exactly 100 students with this life-changing experience. It's amazing to think back to all of the students we've met, and all of the incredible memories we've made with them. Each year of the trip has had its own identity, making it unique from any other year we've gone.

In 2017, many unique circumstances collided to make it a distinctly different trip from the others. A large wildfire was burning in the area that year, and this paired with a huge windstorm days before our arrival forced a last-minute route change. We ended up hiking into an even more wild and remote part of the Wilderness than we typically do (which is saying something, as we already rarely see another human). The trail we hiked in on was in rough shape and hadn't seen a conservation crew in many years. The Wilderness Ranger with us guided us through the saw work to clear this neglected trail, and we made a world of difference in making it accessible to people once again. But the wildness of the area provided the most remarkable gift. One night, all of the teens begged to sleep out under the stars, free of their tents. This is a tradition for us on the first night of the trip anyway, so we weren't opposed. As the teens were pulling out their sleeping bags and getting ready to call it a night, we heard a pack of wolves howling from a nearby ridge. Then, wolves howled back in response from the other side of our camp! We all listened in awe, sitting under the stars in this deep valley, listening to the two groups of wolves howl back and forth, getting closer to each other all the time. When the two groups reunited, the howls joined together from the same spot in a

louder cacophony of joyous howls and yips. The Wilderness Ranger with us said that she had never experienced anything like it in the many years she had been working in this remote wilderness, and here we were, a group of teens from Iowa on their first camping trip experiencing a peak wilderness moment. I am positive that night sticks with each of those teens (now adults) to this day as a deeply meaningful experience.

In 2022, the trip provided a whole new level of challenge to both us leaders and the teens. On the first day of the trek, we backpacked out to our standard first night camp. We had a long hard day of both hiking and doing grueling trailwork along the way. There were so many blown-down trees that year that we were climbing over and through jungle gyms of fallen pines every ten feet, while also climbing a steep miles-long staircase of a trail. As we got to the edge of camp, the sun low in the sky, we felt the air cool significantly, and suddenly fields of white started to surround us. To our dismay, we discovered that for the first time, deep snow remained in our camp. We were forced to scout for dry patches of ground to set up tents, but with so few places available, nearly all of us ended up camping on top of hardy scrubby bushes. We set up camp in the dark and ate a late dinner under the stars and surrounded by snow. That year forced all of us to grow. We were stymied from hiking much further up the trail - the snowfields around us grew from 1-2 feet to a wall of several feet. We did manage to hike up to Friday Pass, however, hiking through snow the whole way up, and teaching the teens how to safely cross slick snowfields. At the top, we took in the panoramic view of mountains in every direction. On the way down, we had memorable snowball fights and sledding sessions on the hot afternoon, giving each of



2016



2018



2019



2017



2022



2025

these Iowa kids a unique 'winter in July' memory.

In 2024, we hiked up to Friday Pass and discovered that the whole backside of the mountain leading down to the Wind Lakes was charred black from a wildfire the previous fall. We hiked down the mountain over a trail that seemed to be obliterated from the fire. We camped in a forest next to the lake that had escaped the blaze, but all around us were the signs of nature's harsh cycles. Forests that were once cool and deeply shaded were filled instead with spires of crispy charcoal trunks. The ground, once covered in lush explosions of wildflowers, was dark black and hot. We did trailwork in this burned area, spending a day sawing in the heat through the blackened trunks of fallen trees. At the end of the day, each of us was covered with charcoal and smelled like smoke, a lingering memory of the fire long past. Working in this kind of environment can feel sad and brutal at times, especially when the fires burn so hot. But they can also provide opportunities for the teens to better understand fire ecology, and also receive lessons in how our forest management and climate change have exacerbated fire intensity throughout the country. We saw glimmers of hope along the way too - in a couple spots, vibrant magenta fireweed (a post-fire pioneer species) was already starting to take over, and the teens could envision summers ahead when the black slopes would be carpeted in green and pink.

Leading this trip has been one of the greatest honors of my career, and I can say with certainty that it is the most impactful work I've gotten to do as a naturalist. The trek has changed many lives, from helping to guide career paths to deepening relationships with nature, to helping people gain confidence in themselves. I reached out to all past "graduates" of the trip for examples of how this trip influenced them.

Many people found passions for conservation through the Idaho Wilderness Trek. Liam, a participant back in 2017 wasn't sure what he wanted to do after high school, and he didn't

feel like a traditional college path was a good fit for him. A wildfire was burning in the area during his trip, and the crew got to see wildland firefighters at work, and even saw helicopters landing to resupply at the Forest Service base where we were spending our last night. That experience really stuck with him, and within a year, he was back in Montana working for the Montana Conservation Corps on a saw crew. That job then led to a couple years working as a wildland firefighter. Today, Liam lives in Montana and works in restoration. He says that the trip "really changed my trajectory in life."

Joanna did the trip in 2023 as an upcoming junior. She said that at the time, she found the trailwork very challenging but also rewarding. Since the trip, she's sought out similar experiences, spending a whole month camping and doing conservation work in Oregon last summer. This year, she's moving on to a local conservation job through the Bur Oak Land Trust AmeriCorps program.

In 2018, Thomas participated in the trek. He was facing some internal struggles at that time in his life, but being outdoors in such an immersive wilderness "opened his eyes." He discovered that he could work in this field, and since 2019, he has worked in natural resource management managing bison herds all around the country, primarily focusing on tribal food sovereignty and cultural land management practices.

Kate, a 2019 participant, has taken her experience full circle. She graduated with a degree in Environmental Science and has worked for the Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, and back in Idaho and Montana leading trail work and environmental education with the Great Burn Conservation Alliance. She was able to join our trip for a few days in 2025 and share with the teens her real life example of an Iowan finding a foothold in the competitive conservation field.

Remy and Lucy both did the trip twice, each serving in a "Student Leader" role. Remy is now



studying Environmental Science and said that he hadn't considered that a career in conservation or environmental education was something he could do. He says that the Idaho Wilderness Trek "is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. It not only gave me a deeper appreciation for the outdoors but also helped me see myself and gave me a new confidence." Lucy now studies Forestry at Iowa State University and hopes to return to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness with her new forestry perspective in hand. She said that she found this trip "incredibly empowering and life-changing." When facing challenges today, she reminds herself, "if I can climb mountains, then I can get through whatever hard thing is happening now."

For others, their paths remained on different career trajectories but they discovered other things about themselves through the trip. Adam, a trekker in 2023 shared that nature is now part of his mental health practice, saying that "when I'm knocked off balance by stress, either from school or something going on in my personal life, I turn to nature to recuperate." Logan, from the 2019 trip, shared that the trek "changed me drastically over the years." It influenced his interest in both service and travel, helped him build social confidence to engage with strangers, and helped push him to serve the country. He has been in the U.S. Army for four years now while also studying engineering.

For Yaffa, a 2024 trekker, the trip has made an outsized impact on her life, and her reflection encompasses the full breadth of our goals of the

trip - from helping students find their life paths, to building a positive and loving community, to helping teens gain confidence in themselves:

"The Johnson County Idaho trip was one of the most fulfilling and life altering experiences I have ever had. Going into the trip I was scared and unsure of my own abilities. Throughout the trip, I grew more confident in my outdoor skills as well as in myself as a person. The trip introduced me to life long friends and showed me what it felt like to be backed by a compassionate strong community. Prior to going on the trek I had no idea what I wanted to do beyond highschool. After going on the trek I saw a world of possibilities open that previously seemed unattainable. I am now a student at the University of Minnesota majoring in environmental science. Without this trip I would have never believed in myself enough to go to college. The trip found me in a very difficult part of my life and pushed me out of it and into a direction of certainty in myself and my abilities. It's hard to explain what the trip continues to mean to me. Although only ten days I truly believe it changed the entire trajectory of my life."

I'm excited to meet another eleven teens this summer, and help them discover new things about themselves, whether that is helping them to become strong conservationists and defenders of public lands, find passion for the outdoors and the healing powers of nature, or something more basic and universal - that each of them is so strong and capable of doing hard things. Here's to many more nights under the stars to come.

JCC Staff Updates

Isaac Chen - Natural Resource Management Technician

I grew up in Iowa City and graduated from Cornell College with a BA in environmental studies with a Biology concentration. After graduation, I spent five months as a Biology Intern at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, working on insect, plant and bird surveys, and assisting with bison management. After that, I did a term of service in the Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa, working with the Linn County Conservation Board, and going on natural disaster response deployments in Minnesota and Missouri. In 2023 I started working as a seasonal at Johnson County Conservation, working on the natural resources crew at Kent Park, Cedar River Crossing and Two Horse Farm. I am honored to have a permanent position now as a Natural Resource Technician.

I live in Iowa City, where outside of work I enjoy hiking, fishing, reading, and working in my garden. I'm a bit of an entomology nerd, so if you see an interesting insect, point me towards it!



Mission Partner Award

This spring, JCC Naturalist Kristen Morrow was honored by the Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County (NCJC) with a Good Neighbor Award as the Mission Partner of 2026. The Good Neighbor Awards honor individuals and organizations whose efforts embody the mission of the NCJC - celebrating diversity, strengthening families, and creating safe spaces for community.

In 2022, Kristen worked with NCJC to launch a preschool program called Nature Buds with NCJC, in order to ensure that JCC's high quality nature programs could be more inclusive in the community. Since then, naturalists visit the two current NCJC centers to provide monthly nature programs, teaching the three and four year olds about everything from spiders and worms to beavers and birds. The kiddos see the same naturalist every month of the school year for two years, building relationships and core nature understandings that stick with them as they graduate into kindergarten and beyond.



New AmeriCorps VISTA Program

Increasing Access to Conservation Education & Building Organizational Capacity

Three AmeriCorps VISTA members are joining the Johnson County Conservation education team in 2026 thanks to a partnership with Volunteer Iowa and the federal VISTA program. Volunteer Iowa is a statewide network committed to improving lives, strengthening communities, and fostering civic engagement through service and volunteering.

VISTA is an acronym that stands for "Volunteers In Service To America." President John F. Kennedy began to envision the program as a kind of domestic Peace Corps in 1962. The idea was to develop a program to improve the lives of Americans affected by poverty. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson officially created the VISTA program. VISTA joined with the AmeriCorps program, which was founded by President Bill Clinton, in 1994.

Four core principles guide the mission of all AmeriCorps VISTA members: ending poverty, empowering communities, building capacity, and creating sustainable solutions. The VISTA members who are joining the county will be focusing on providing environmental education to underserved communities, as well as supporting and enhancing Johnson County Conservation Board's ability to serve the public with increased opportunities for no-cost

educational programming, recreational events, and volunteer service opportunities.

In April, Chelsea Cozad, who previously served with JCC as an AmeriCorps State member, returned to our team as full-time Education & Stewardship VISTA Member. Chelsea hit the ground running by assisting with the compilation of our Writing on the Environment student anthology, organizing volunteer projects and social events, and building partnerships with area organizations.



In June, we will welcome two Summer VISTA members for 10-week positions. These folks will assist with summer public events, outreach to area nonprofit organizations, wildlife monitoring, summer camps, and more. We are eager for them to join our team, and we are grateful to

increase our capacity with the support of these members.

These VISTA positions are made possible through a grant from the Johnson County Community Foundation. We are grateful for our community's support and we look forward to giving back through these new positions.

Photo: AmeriCorps VISTA Member Chelsea Cozad, greets an ornate box turtle at Kent Park.

Join us for a Summer Program Series!

Summer Bioblitz Series: Enjoy Johnson County's outdoors and contribute to citizen science at the same time! See dates and times on page 13.

Wednesday's Wildlife & Wanders: Wednesdays, June 17 - August 5, varying locations, an exciting new theme each week!

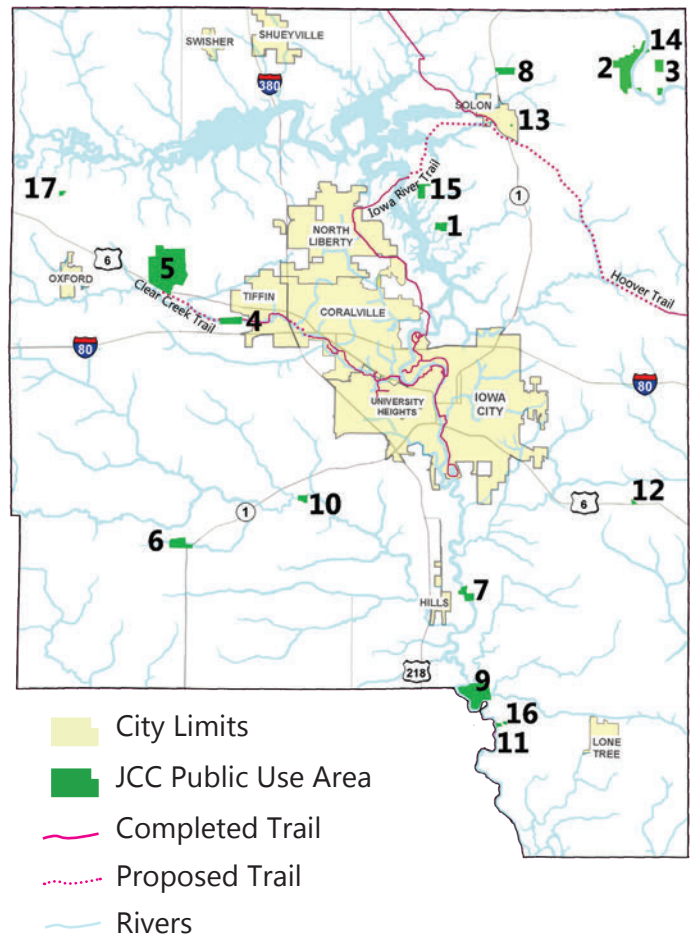
Raptor Program with Raptology: Saturdays, June 20, July 18, & August 8, 10:30 a.m. - 11:15 a.m., Kent Park's Conservation Education Center

Wildflower Hikes: Tuesdays, June 16 - August 11, 9:00 a.m., varying locations

Reptile Meet & Greets: Fridays, June 12 - August 14, 2:00 - 3:00 p.m., Kent Park's Conservation Education Center (excluding holidays on July 3 and June 19)

JCC Public Use Areas

1. Cangleska Wakan	132 acres
2. Cedar River Crossing	560 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

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**.



*Do you require any specific accessibility measures in order to comfortably participate in these programs? Reach out to us at 319-645-1011 for special accommodations.

Conservation Education Center Summer Hours:

Saturdays, 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Themed activities second Saturdays monthly.

June

Summer BioBlitz Series

Enjoy the best of Johnson County's natural spaces and contribute to citizen science at the same time! A BioBlitz is a group effort to identify what kinds of wildlife are thriving in a given area.

Friday, June 5, 10 a.m. - 12:00 p.m., F.W. Kent Park

Wednesday, July 8, 5:00 - 6:00 p.m., F.W. Kent Park

Saturday, July 18, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m., Pechman Creek Delta

Tuesday, August 4, 5:00 - 6:00 p.m., Ciha Fen

The Truth About Bats

Friday, June 12th, 7:30 - 9:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan

Designed for all ages, this program will sort out the facts from the myths about bats. Learn the truth about bats, the species we have in Iowa, and try to spot some bats as the sun sets.

Migrating Against The Wind

Thursday, June 11, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

This program for 4th-6th graders, will focus on why migration matters as well as exploring data on migratory birds that travel through Iowa. The engaging workshop will allow students to understand the challenges a migratory bird faces within an ever-changing climate. It will include watching for birds at the bird blind and a ¼ mile walk.

Native Plant Sale

Sunday, June 14, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Support wildlife and reduce your ecological footprint by adding native plants to your landscape! In May, we will host Troutleaf Native Plants based out of Johnson County, IA.

Native Plant Speaker Series

Sunday, June 14, 9:00-12:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

The Native Plant Series is back! Learn to incorporate native plants at home to support wildlife and provide other ecological benefits. Each event showcases regional native plant experts and hosts a native plant sale.

Wednesday's Wildlife & Wanders

Wednesdays, June 17- August 5
10:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.
Varying locations

Looking for an excuse to explore the outdoors this summer? Join us every Wednesday from June 17 through August 5 as we explore a

new wildlife theme or hiking trail each week. Location details for each week will be available on the registration page.

Firefly Night Hike

Friday, June 26, 8:30 - 10:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Experience the wonder of a prairie filled with flashing fireflies! This night hike will cover over 2.5 miles over mostly flat terrain. We recommend people bring flashlights/headlamps, but reserve them for emergencies to enjoy the dark night naturally. We'll have some jars kids can use to catch (and release) fireflies along the way.

Wildflower Hike

Saturday, June 27, 9:00 - 10:30 a.m.
Valley View, F.W. Kent Park

Join a naturalist on a hike to learn about some of the wildflowers of summer including history and uses. This hike will cover two miles over hilly terrain.

SUP Homies

Monday, June 29, 3:00 - 5:00 p.m.
Kent Park Lake, Boat Ramp

Try out stand-up paddleboards (SUP) on Kent Park Lake with a peaceful paddle. This is a beginner-focused class, and JCC provides SUPs, paddles, and life jackets. This program is open to participants ages 12 and up.

Archery for Beginners

Tuesday, June 30, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Youth Group Lodge, Kent Park

Learn archery basics and spend the evening doing target practice under the trees. JCC provides beginner bows suitable for both youth and adults. All ages 4th grade and up are welcome; youth must attend with a parent/guardian.

July

Night Hike

Friday, July 10, 8:30 - 9:30 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Experience the wonder of a forest and prairie at night! This night hike will cover one mile over slightly hilly terrain. We recommend people bring flashlights/headlamps, but reserve them for emergencies to enjoy the dark night naturally.

Native Tree ID

Tuesday July 14, 5:00 - 6:30 p.m.
Sunday, July 26, 2:00 - 3:30 p.m.
Youth Group Camp, F.W. Kent Park

Examine the native trees found around Iowa. Learn ID tips, history, and the ecological roles of trees you have in your own backyard. This hike will be less than a mile on grass with uneven terrain.

Momentary Art

Thursday, July 16, 5:00 - 6:30 p.m.
Two Horse Farm

Learn about Iowa's flora and fauna while creating temporary art. This art is made from what is found on the ground, nothing will be removed. Everything will be used in the present and then released back into nature. This allows you to be in the moment while everything else is changing. Want a day to relax and let things go, try some momentary art. This includes a hike that is about a mile, including hills and uneven terrain.

Minecraft meets the Outdoors

Sunday, July 19, 2:00 - 3:00 p.m. (K - 3rd grade)
Friday, July 31, 5:00 - 6:00 p.m. (4th-6th grade)
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

It's Back! Explore Iowa prairie and woodlands, learning to identify species that correlate to the world of Minecraft. This walk will be about a mile, on gravel and grass with some hills. Adults must be present. Two sessions are available - one for youth in upper elementary and another for lower elementary.

Written In Stone

Thursday July 23, 5:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan

Have you ever wondered what is under your feet? Or wonder why Iowa has great soil? On this hike we will explore the topography of Iowa. From the bedrock to the shaping of the land from glaciation. This hike will be 1-2 miles on dirt trails with uneven terrain and hills.

Wildflower Hike

Saturday, July 25, 9:00 - 10:30 a.m.
Valley View, F.W. Kent Park

Join a naturalist on a hike to learn about some of the wildflowers of summer including history and uses. This hike will cover two miles over hilly terrain.

All About Raptors

Monday, July 27, 1:00 - 3:00 pm
Conservation Education Center, F.W. Kent Park

Meet rehabilitated raptors and enjoy youth-led education stations. This program will be held in partnership with The RARE Group. Teens from JCC's teen job program will assist in facilitation.

Creek Stomp Cooldown

Tuesday, July 28, 4:00 p.m.- 5:00 p.m.
Cangleska Wakan

Need to beat the summer heat? Look no farther! Join us for creek stomp at Cangleska Wakan. We'll wade through a shallow stream and investigate the inhabitants of our watery walkway. When you head home, you'll be a little bit messier and lot more refreshed!

Morning Kayaking

Wednesday, July 29, 9:30 -11:00 a.m.
Kent Park Lake, Boat Ramp

Paddle Kent Park lake with a naturalist. This is a beginner-friendly class, and JCC provides kayaks, paddles, and life jackets. This program is open to participants ages 10 and up.

August

Rose Mallow Pilgrimage

Thursday, July 30, 8:30 - 11:00 a.m.
Cedar River Crossing

Hike through the wild side of Cedar River Crossing, trekking through prairie and wetlands alike to reach the peak rose mallow bloom, thousands of large pink hibiscus-like flowers blooming around a pond. This hike will be 2 miles over both dry and wet trail and some untrailed prairie areas.

SUP Homies

Friday, July 31, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Kent Park Lake, Boat Ramp
See June 29 event for details.

Amphibian Meet and Greet

Thursday, August 6, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, Kent Park

Visit the CEC to explore the amazing world of amphibians! Our friends at Toadally Awesome Pets will have numerous amphibians to observe up close, including frogs, toads, axolotls, and more! Visitors will also learn about important role amphibians play in our ecosystems, and some ways we can help them to thrive.

Fairy Prairie Hike

Saturday, August 8, 2:00 -3:30 p.m.
Knight Prairie Pavilion, F.W. Kent Park

Dress like a fairy and frolic in the prairie! Learn about the importance of prairies along with identification of native flora and fauna. This hike will be up to two miles with options to turn around and leave early. It is on uneven terrain with hills.

Experiential Education Educator Workshop

Wednesday, August 12, 8 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Conservation Education Center, Kent Park

This full-day workshop aimed at formal and informal educators will feature interactive and inspiring workshop sessions, a catered lunch, and opportunities for networking and learning from peers.



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Spotted horsemint in bloom at Ciha Fen in August of 2025. Visit this site to view abundant spotted horsemint and whorled milkweed in late summer.