

OUTDOOR CONNECTION

STORIES, ADVICE, AND INFORMATION FOR OUTDOOR LOVERS



Landscape photo of early stages of wetland restoration work facing NW. Sediment removal can be seen already holding water and some tile removal lines are also visible, as well as embankment construction restoring the natural shoreline.

Photo by Jake Chronister, Ducks Unlimited

A BIG PROJECT FOR CONSERVATIONISTS

Wetland restoration work at Howard K. Vincent WPA (Moore Slough WPA) nearing completion

By STEVE WEISMAN
OUTDOOR EDITOR

Back on Thursday, September 14, 2023, the formal dedication of the Howard K. Vincent Waterfowl Production Area Site (Moore Slough Waterfowl Production Area), a 195.5-acre parcel of farmland took place, which when completed would become both a much-needed wildlife area and an important buffer to help protect Big Spirit Lake waters.

This was an incredible collaborative effort across borders among conservationists in both

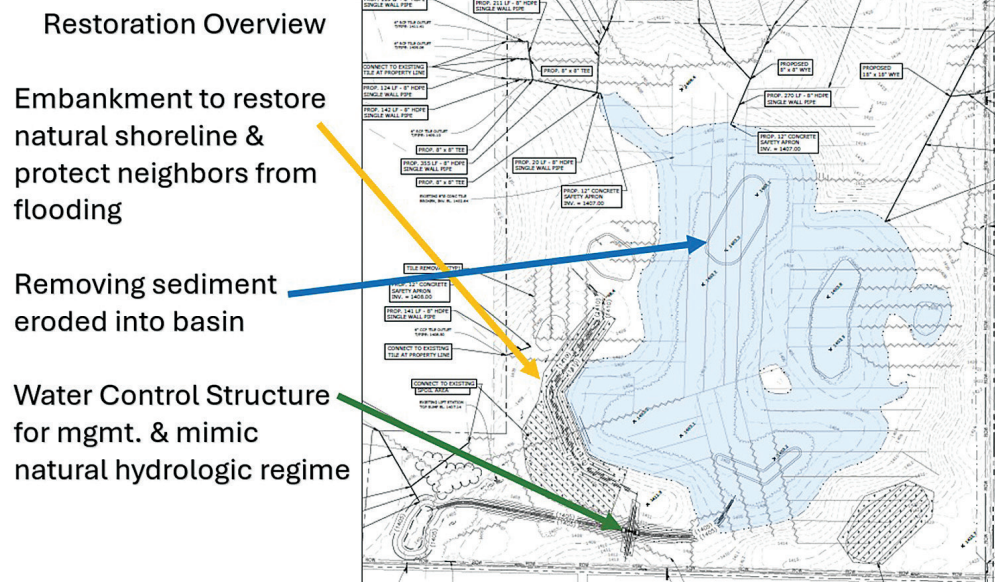
Minnesota and Iowa to make the purchase of this land a reality.

Since that time, much work has been going on behind the scenes to turn this property into a true waterfowl production area. However, before we look at the current work, let's take a look at how this all happened.

History of the Howard K. Vincent WPA (Moore Slough WPA)

Located northeast of the

Turn to **PROJECT**, Page 3C



Restoration overview blueprint.

Photo by Jake Chronister, Ducks Unlimited

Youth ice fishing set for Lost Island Lake

By STEVE WEISMAN
OUTDOOR EDITOR

Here is a great fishing opportunity for youth anglers, age 15 and under. How about a morning of ice fishing at Lost Island Lake? The date is set for Saturday, January 11 from 10 a.m. to noon.

The fishing outing is sponsored by the Palo Alto Conservation, Emmet County Conservation and the Iowa Great Lakes Fishing Club (IGLFC). That's not all: ice shacks, heaters, rods and reels and bait will all be provided for use during this outing. According to Kaitlin Steinle, Palo Alto County naturalist, "Bobber Down bait shop in Ruthven is donating all the bait for the morning."

Steinle continued, "Here in Palo Alto County, we are extremely fortunate to have Lost Island Lake. The goal of the morning is to get more youngsters (and adults) here in Palo Alto County and Emmet County interested in ice fishing. We hope to get as many people to come as possible."

To kick the day off, the first 60 youngsters will receive a rod and reel ice fishing provided by the IGLFC. Terry Thomsen, president of the IGLFC, shared his thoughts on the morning. "It is great to see both Palo Alto Conservation and Emmet County Conservation working together to offer this ice fishing outing for area youngsters. As a club, that is our goal: to get more kids to become lifelong anglers on both open water and on the ice. We are more than happy to provide the volunteers and equipment to give

these kids the chance to experience what fun ice fishing is." Steinle noted that she and Sidney Krueger, the Emmet County Naturalist, are looking forward to the morning's event. "We have some equipment, but what the IGLFC is bringing will really help us out, along with their volunteer mentors, who can help give more hands-on guidance." Participants are to meet at the Lost Island Lake Boat Ramp in Lost Island - Huston Park (next to the marsh). Parents, adults are welcome

to observe and even help in the mentoring fun: the more the merrier! Those interested in attending should call the Palo Alto Conservation at (712) 837-4866 to pre-register so that the IGLFC will know how much equipment will be needed and how many fishing combinations to have. Steinle concluded, "Now we need Mother Nature to cooperate and give us good solid ice and a pleasant morning with little wind!" Not asking too much!



SYC hunter Chad Rutledge poses with a nice buck he harvested during the 2024 deer hunt. Chad's father is on the left and his guides were Greg Jones (Director) in the middle and Marshal Wernimont (Volunteer Guide) on the right.

Photo submitted

Special Youth Challenge Ministries offer outdoor hunting opportunities

By STEVE WEISMAN
OUTDOOR EDITOR

For the past 22 years, Special Youth Challenge (SYC) Ministries of Iowa, with its headquarters near Webb, IA, has been offering youth with special challenges a chance to participate in and enjoy shooting sports in God's great outdoors. SYC provides training and adaptive equipment to help the hunters achieve this goal through guided spring turkey and fall deer hunts at no cost to the hunters or their families.

A non-profit entity, SYC Iowa (SYC Iowa.org) is a faith-based organization geared towards youth with special challenges and life-threatening diseases, along with adult disabled Veterans to provide no-cost guided hunting and training experiences using adaptive equipment to accommodate all individuals with all abilities.

According to Gary Van Wattering, long-time volunteer and current president elect and Shawn Peterson, a volunteer since 2003 and current board member, everything is on a total volunteer basis with 26 members on the SYC board. Van Wattering says, "Since SYC hunters have a physical challenge, special need or have had a life-threatening disease or injury, it takes a lot of volunteers to help. The SYC

board members are truly motivated by the simple smile on a hunter's face and enjoy creating the best environment possible for the hunters and their families. We have approximately 300 volunteers to develop sportsmen's skills and enjoy God's great outdoors."

Peterson adds, "A lot of SYC's growth is by word of mouth. SYC is 100% volunteer run and is funded by the overwhelming generosity of local residents and businesses. The average cost of \$600 per hunter is totally taken care of by volunteer funding."

SYC growth

Growth of the organization has been steady over the past 22 years. "The first hunt in 2002 included four youth hunters. Since that first deer hunt, SYC has hosted 22 deer hunts and 21 turkey hunts, hosting approximately 160 different kids and 40 disabled veterans. This equates to approximately 400 turkey hunts and 440 deer hunts with about 6,000 volunteers in those 840 hunts over those 22 years. A high percentage of our kids return subsequent years. It's also interesting that a lot of them do not come from hunting parents. We have even had some who started

as participants and have graduated to be volunteers."

The average percentages of success include 30% for turkey hunts and 70% for deer hunts. Area landowners willingly open up their private land for the SYC hunts.

In addition to hunters from Iowa, hunters have come from the states of Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Events for the year

Three events are held each year: spring turkey hunt in April, fall deer hunt in late September and the annual SYC Fundraiser Banquet in November. Let's take a look at the two hunts:

Spring Turkey Hunt in April and Fall Deer Hunt in late September.

Both hunts are fully guided and offer the youth themselves the opportunity to hunt. Each hunter is assigned two guides. All blinds are accessible, and all firearms are

Turn to **HUNTER**, Page 2C

Doug Wagner
Financial Advisor
712-362-7744

Kristia F Pollock
Financial Advisor
712-362-7744

Edward Jones
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2025 hunting, fishing licenses now on sale

DES MOINES — As of Dec. 15, Iowans can buy 2025 resident hunting, fishing and other licenses. Licenses purchased in 2024 expire on Jan. 10.

The menu of license options includes the popular Outdoor Combo annual resident hunting/fishing/habitat combo license for \$55; the Angler's Special three-year fishing license for \$62; and the Hunter's Special three-year hunting license with habitat included for \$101.

Also available is the Bonus Line option for \$14 letting resident and nonresident anglers to fish with one more line in addition to the two lines allowed with the regular fishing license.

Upgrade your paper license to a durable hard card with custom art from Iowa artists for only \$6.

Download the GoOutdoorsIowa mobile app for iPhone and Android devices to buy and access your license information, no matter where you are. Sync your hunting and fishing licenses on the app to show in the field. You may download multiple customer licenses to offer one secure digital license document location for families, groups, and more.

Licenses are available at 600 locations across the state, and on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.gov/GoOutdoorsIowa.

Hunting and fishing are often enjoyed with family and friends. A fishing or hunting license often a great stocking stuffer.

Stay safe on the ice this winter

DES MOINES — The recent blast of arctic air is growing ice on lakes and ponds across the northern two-thirds of Iowa. Outdoor ice enthusiasts are ready to get out ice fishing, snowmobiling, ice skating or fat-tire bike riding.

The DNR recommends a minimum of four inches of clear ice for fishing and at least five inches for snowmobiles and ATVs.

Ice forms at different rates on each body of water depending upon the size and water depth. Once frozen, conditions change constantly and ice thickness can vary across the lake. Rocks, trees, docks or other things that poke through the ice will conduct heat and make the ice around it less stable. Trust your instincts — if the ice does not look right, don't go out.

A blanket of snow on top of an ice covered lake insulates the ice, slowing the growth of ice and hiding potential hazards or weak spots. River ice is 15 percent weaker than lake ice. Ice with a bluish color is safer than clear ice. Avoid slushy or honey-combed and stay away from dark spots on the ice. Don't walk into areas where the snow cover looks discolored.

Safety tips on the ice

- No ice is 100 percent safe.
- New ice is usually stronger than old ice.
- Don't go out alone - if the worst should happen, someone will be there to call for help or to help rescue.
- Let someone know where you are going and when you will return.
- Check ice thickness as you go out - there could be pockets of thin ice or places where ice recently formed.
- Avoid off-colored snow or ice. It is usually a sign of weakness.
- The insulating effect of snow slows down the freezing process.
- Bring along these basic items to help keep you safe: hand warmers, ice cleats to help prevent falls, ice picks (wear around your neck) to help you crawl out of the water if you fall in, a life jacket, a floating safety rope, a whistle to call for help, a basic first aid kit and extra dry clothes including a pair of gloves.
- Use extreme caution when snowmobiling on ice. Snowmobiles can be difficult to steer and take a long time to stop with limited traction on ice. Slow down and avoid heavy braking.

Winter community trout stockings start Jan. 3

DES MOINES — The Iowa Department of Natural Resources will release rainbow trout in nine locations across Iowa this winter in areas that would not support them during warmer months.

Winter trout stockings are a great place to take kids to catch their first fish. A family-friendly event is paired with some stockings to help anglers have success and fun while fishing.

Bringing trout to cities and towns offers a "close to home" option for Iowans who might not travel to northeast Iowa to discover trout fishing. A family-friendly event is often paired with the stocking to help anglers have success and fun while fishing. Check the Iowa DNR Trout Fishing website to see which lakes are having events.

The popular program is supported by the sales of the trout fee.

Anglers need a valid fishing license and pay the trout fee to fish for or possess trout. The daily limit is five trout per licensed angler with a possession limit of 10.

Children age 15 or younger can fish for trout with a properly licensed adult, but together, they can only keep one daily limit. Children can pay the trout fee, allowing them to keep their own daily limit.

Winter trout stocking events are dependent on favorable weather and ice conditions. Check the DNR Trout Fishing website at www.iowadnr.gov for possible changes to the schedule.

Locally, Scharnberg Pond southeast of Evely is stocked on Saturday, Feb. 1 at noon. The next closest body of water is at Bacon Creek Lake in Sioux City, which will be stocked on Friday, Jan. 3 at 1 p.m.

Opportunities to get hands-on fisheries career experience

DES MOINES — Summer seasonal positions for 2025 at Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fisheries offices are open for applications until January 10.

Learn about fisheries careers and gain valuable experience while working alongside biologists and technicians. Positions are available in research, management, culture and aquatic invasive species. Six-month positions usually start at the beginning of April and three-month positions start the middle of May. There is an opportunity to get a glimpse into a seasonal fisheries position with the DNR YouTube video. Learn how to apply online at www.governmentjobs.com/careers/iowa/jobs/4737143/fisheries-seasonal-worker-internship. Application deadline is January 10, 2025.

For more information about these positions, contact Ben Wallace at 712-657-2638 or ben.wallace@dnr.iowa.gov.

Habitat planning for bad weather is key to supporting pheasants

DES MOINES — The first snow of the season is a popular event with pheasant hunters because it often sends the birds to cover where hunters expect to find them. And while a little snow is good, too much snow can be bad, burying waste grains that are an important food source and collapsing marginal habitat.

This was the scenario Iowa experienced from 2007 to 2011 when winters were averaging 30-50 inches of snow, and the spring nesting season was averaging 7-12 inches of rain. The statewide pheasant population survey was knocked down from 27 birds per 30-mile route, to an all-time low of seven.

"It was a double whammy," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "It was unprecedented for us — going back to the 1960s we had never had five years in a row of bad winters followed by wet springs. The closest thing comparable was three years in a row in the early 1980s."

The impact on Iowa's pheasant pop-

ulation prompted the Iowa Legislature to convene a pheasant study group to looking into ways to support Iowa's pheasant population. The group produced a habitat design recommendation, called Pheasant SAFE (State Acres For Enhancement), that was an amped up version of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) combining winter cover, with food plots and nesting coverall on one field.

"Pheasant SAFE put the bedroom, living room and kitchen all on one CRP property," Bogenschutz said. A piece of the Pheasant SAFE design that serves as a thermal escape during severe winters is a block planting of switchgrass or shelterbelts if landowners so choose.

Shelterbelts are multiple rows of trees or shrubs that offer travel corridors, food and escape cover for pheasants and other wildlife species. The woody vegetation component isn't a requirement to enroll in Pheasant SAFE.

"Eight rows of shelterbelts provide awesome winter cover," Bogenschutz said. "A block of switchgrass is re-

Online
Information on places to hunt, the August roadside survey results and more is available online by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at www.iowadnr.gov/

quired and we encourage a well-designed food plot. On the nesting side, we're encouraging pollinator seeding that also benefits bees and monarchs — you want insects around for food. Switchgrass, or, if you're enrolling a wetland, cattails, are great winter habitat. The woody shelterbelts also provide overwinter habitat for bees and songbirds. There will also be some deer and cottontail use as well.

Landowners interested in adding this pheasant friendly habitat can learn more by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey, and scrolling to the Helping Landowners with Wildlife Goals section. Links include information on technical as-

sistance and local DNR and Pheasants Forever contacts.

"These SAFE sites are a great food source and minimizes bird movement when we have a bad winter," Bogenschutz said. "When pheasants are exposed, that's not good. SAFE keeps them in cover, allows them to walk in and out of the food plot and minimizes their exposure, which leads to better survival and better nesting. And they're great places to hunt."

Today, Iowa has about 1.6 million acres of CRP, of which, 494,000 acres are enrolled in a SAFE practice.

"Having quality habitat that includes food, nesting cover and thermal corridors allows for pheasants to survive harsh winters and wet springs, and to recover their populations in about half the time as areas with poor habitat," Bogenschutz said.

Installing the different pieces of the Pheasant SAFE plan usually occurs in the spring, unless the area is being converted from existing CRP or other habitat types that require it to be sprayed in the fall. Native prairie plant seeds can be broadcast on fro-

zen ground in February and March, or planted conventionally after the ground thaws.

"You've got options, depending upon your flexibility as a landowner, and that's where we can help," he said.

The Iowa DNR and Pheasants Forever are celebrating 100 years of pheasant hunting in the Hawkeye State. The first season was held Oct. 20-22, 1925, when 13 counties in north central Iowa were opened to pheasant hunting. Hunters were allowed a three-rooster limit, for a half-day of hunting. An estimated 75,000 hunters participated.

Hunters can commemorate the 100th anniversary by purchasing a hard card featuring Iowa Pheasants Forever Print of the Year. Residents can begin purchasing licenses for 2025 on Dec. 15.

Information on places to hunt, the August roadside survey results and more is available online by clicking the 100 Years of Pheasant Hunting graphic at www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey.



SYC hunters and the guides during the deer hunt in September of 2024.

Photo submitted

HUNTER, Continued from Page 1C

tailored to the special needs of the youth, including a separate screen for scope use and a double trigger system for the guide and the hunter.

The equipment is custom developed to provide a safe experience. The target is displayed on an easy-to-see camera screen, the gun rests and swivels on a four-leg stand which helps to absorb the recoil. The Hunt Guide must have their trigger pressed before the Hunter presses their trigger for the gun to fire, which provides an increased level of safety.

Each hunt weekend takes place on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Each hunt starts with gathering on a Friday to sight guns in and become familiar with the equipment.

Following is a full banquet welcome dinner where hunters are recognized, and new hunters are given a camo bible, camo clothing and a handmade SYC quilt. The Guest Speaker will present to end opening night.

Saturday is a full day of hunting with midday rest break and lots of food morning and evening. Sunday morning is the last opportunity to hunt with church service midmorning and recognition of hunters, guides, and volunteers to end the amazing weekend.

Lots of positives

So, what do the participants, guides and parents think about the SYC? Megan, a SYC hunter gives her top 11 reasons to love SYC with a chance to be with people like yourself, a family, hunting and a time to be with God as her top four.

Another hunter notes, "SYC has helped me realize that just because I am in a wheelchair

I can do things that I thought I couldn't.

SYC has helped me think of myself differently because I used to think that I couldn't do many things, but SYC showed me I can. I think all kids should think about what they think, they think they can't do and try to do it. I will always remember SYC for how they helped change my life."



An example of equipment that has been Engineered by one of the SYC board members.

Photo submitted

One of the hunter's moms shares the joy of the entire weekend. "We had such a wonderful time. So much love and caring went into making the weekend so special. Mitchell has a memory he will cherish for a lifetime, and so do we. We look forward to coming back. Thank you for the fellowship and the time together."

A volunteer mentor/guide reflects, "These hunters and volunteers for Special Youth Challenge Ministries are amazing and I am so glad I got the opportunity and hope there are many more to come."

Becoming a part

According to both Van Wattering and Peterson, there are many ways people can help the SYC meet its purpose and mission. Van Wattering notes, "We are a Christian ministry, and people can simply pray for us. We can always use volunteer mentors or people on a SYC committee. Since we are a volunteer organization, we can always use people's financial contributions."

Here is an example of an area organization stepping up. According to board member Mary Jo Rapp of the Iowa Great Lakes Pheasants Forever (IGLPF) chapter, "Gary

came to us in June and told us about their mission and organization. We believed that what SYC is doing fits in with our mission of promoting outdoor recreation and fostering youth engagement. After the meeting, we unanimously voted to contribute \$5,000 to the SYC."

Van Wattering says, "We have organizations like this, businesses and individuals who see the SYC as something important. They are all greatly appreciated!"

To learn more about SYC, go to SYClowa.org or call 866-792-4692.

Resurgence of avian influenza in wild birds

DES MOINES — (Iowa DNR) The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and its federal partners have been monitoring for the presence of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in Iowa's wild birds since early 2022. After nearly a year without detections in sick or dead birds, Iowa has seen a sharp jump in affected waterfowl across the state mostly, north of Interstate 80 since early December, spurred on by the stress of migration and the severe cold.

Avian influenza is a highly transmissible, naturally occurring virus found in certain waterfowl and shorebirds. There are various subtypes and strains, most of which cause limited harm to domestic poultry (low pathogenic) but some of which are lethal (highly pathogenic).

The H5N1 strain that has been circulating since 2022 is the first time HPAI has affected wild birds in North America at such a large scale.

"We've learned a lot about how this virus behaves in the intervening years. Dabbling ducks are a great indicator species, and we started seeing the number of HPAI detections in apparently healthy hunter harvests ramp up in mid-November. Just a couple weeks later we started responding to sick and dead geese," said Dr. Rachel Ruden, state wildlife veterinarian with the Iowa DNR.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has an online database tracking HPAI detections in wild birds and other species by state at <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections>.

HPAI can also affect animals that consume infected carcasses, including other birds like eagles, and mammals, like red fox. Ruden said those who find five or more sick or dead flocking birds within a week should report their findings to their local wildlife biologist or state conservation officer. They are also interested in reports of solitary birds or mammals. Contact information is available online at www.iowadnr.gov under the About DNR tab on the homepage. (https://www.iowadnr.gov/Portals/idnr/uploads/contacts/wildlife_management.pdf) (<https://www.iowadnr.gov/Portals/idnr/uploads/Law%20Enforcement/dnrlemap.pdf>).

The virus can remain viable in a deceased bird for several weeks, depending upon environmental conditions.

"We are encouraging the public to stay away from sick birds, especially waterfowl. We have seen some shift in their clinical presentation — some are still developing the 'classical' signs like twisting their heads and necks or swimming in tight circles. However, some are just quiet and seem unable or unaware to fly away when approached," said Dr. Ruden.

She also cautioned against bringing these birds to licensed wildlife rehabilitators to limit further spread.

At this point, she said, backyard birdfeeders are not of concern unless actively attended by waterfowl. Impact on upland birds, like wild turkeys, has also been rare given their behaviors and preferred habitats, which make them less likely to encounter the disease in the wild.

Waterfowl hunters can use these simple precautions to limit their exposure while field dressing and consuming wild game: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fsc_hpai_hunters.pdf. Cooking meat to an internal temperature of 165° F can kill the virus, if present.

While there is some inherent risk to hunting dogs given the nature of their interaction with carcasses, sick birds often become poor, uncoordinated flyers and so are less likely to be harvested. Hunters should prevent dogs from interacting with unknown carcasses, and avoid feeding them raw meat from harvested birds. More information is available online at <https://www.ducks.org/conservation/waterfowl-research-science/waterfowl-hunters-and-the-avian-flu-what-you-need-to-know>.

If poultry producers or those with backyard flocks suspect signs of H5N1 HPAI, they should contact their veterinarian immediately. Possible cases must also be reported to the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship at (515) 281-5305.

OUTDOOR CONNECTION



This above all: Never forget that fishing is supposed to be fun.

Photo by Bob Jensen



Photo by Mike Fredricks

With regular gun seasons over, deer hunting shifts to late season mode

DES MOINES — With the two regular gun seasons now in the books, Iowa's deer hunting shifts to a more solitary endeavor with the opening of the late muzzleloader season and the reopening of the archery season.

Jace Elliott, state deer biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, said roughly 15-20,000 hunters will participate in the late muzzleloader season and likely harvest about 10,000 deer.

"The season is popular with hunters looking to avoid the crowds. It's the season with the highest percentage of does harvested and is a good opportunity for herd management or to put meat in the freezer," Elliott said. "This time of year, hunters would be wise to target existing food sources as these resources can be limited."

While the archery season also re-opens, fewer deer are harvested during this time than during the early portion of the season.

The late muzzleloader and late split archery season are Dec. 23 to Jan. 10, 2025.

The Population Management January Antlerless Season is available only in Allamakee, Appanoose, Decatur, Lucas, Monroe, Wayne and Winneshiek counties if there are more than 100 antlerless tags available in that county on Dec. 23. Since all seven counties met that requirement, all seven will be open. Hunters participating in the population management January antlerless season may use bows, muzzleloaders, handguns, shotguns, crossbows, or rifles .223 caliber and larger, as a method of take.

The Excess Tag January Antlerless Season is available in all counties with unsold county antlerless tags on Jan. 11. Due to the compressed timeline, license sales will only be available over the counter, not online, until the quota is filled. Hunters participating in the excess tag January antlerless season may only use rifles from .223 caliber to .500 caliber as a method of take. The season runs Jan. 11-19, 2025.

"We began running both seasons concurrently in 2023, and this past January we had just shy of 3,000 hunters participating who harvested about 1,500 deer statewide," he said. "We will likely have similar counties participating as last year — primarily in northeast Iowa and southern Iowa — that will not fill their antlerless quota by Jan 10."

Hunters can monitor the quotas in real time at iowadnr.gov/Hunting then click on the Antlerless Deer Tag Quotas link under the Helping You Prepare heading.

"If hunters are interested in using more than a center-fire rifle, they should consider purchasing the Population Management tags to have larger menu of options for the method of take," he said.

Late Muzzleloader Season lasts Dec. 23 — Jan. 10, 2025. Method of take includes bows, muzzleloader, handgun or crossbow.

WHY DO WE GO FISHING?

By BOB JENSEN

Sometimes I ask myself, and I'm sure other people who enjoy fishing ask themselves, "Why do we go fishing?" I've found in recent years that my reasons for going fishing have changed. In conversations with other anglers, I've learned that their reasons for going fishing have changed also.

When I first started fishing many years ago, I went for one reason: To catch fish! I enjoyed being outdoors and didn't enjoy being around people that much, so I would park my truck, put on my waders, and walk up and down area rivers by myself.

I usually caught some fish. Mostly smallmouth bass and northern pike, but every now and then a walleye would bite my bait. And when a carp would try to eat my jig with his tail, that's when things got really exciting!

Somewhere in the passage of time, my priorities while fishing changed a bit. Maybe more than a bit. I still like to catch fish. The more and the bigger

the better. But I've discovered other elements of fishing that are taking on a larger role in my enjoyment of fishing.

It was in my late teenage years that I learned that sharing the fishing experience was enjoyable. I started inviting a family member or a friend to accompany me on those walks along the river. I also learned that it was as much fun to watch my partner catch a fish as it was for me to catch a fish.

As I got older and started fishing from a boat, I realized that not only was it more fun to fish with a partner or two, it was also easier. Two people putting a boat in the water and parking the truck was easier and faster than one person doing so.

It also sunk in that when a couple people were fishing, we could try different baits. One angler would use a faster moving bait, the other a slower moving bait.

Or one angler would use a bait of one color, the other used a bait of another color. We could figure out faster what

I learned that every now and then, I truly enjoy setting my fishin' pole down and just watch the wildlife or water fowl. On a fishing trip a couple of years ago, for the first time, I saw a family of otters on a small rock island.

type of presentation the fish were most likely to respond to when we had more lines in the water. We caught more fish.

I learned that every now and then, I truly enjoy setting my fishin' pole down and just watch the wildlife or water fowl. On a fishing trip a couple of years ago, for the first time, I saw a family of otters on a small rock island. I had never seen this many otters(6) this close. It really added to the day on the water. I've watched otters, beavers, deer, loons, and a variety of other critters since then and, every time, it's enhanced the fishing experience.

Some anglers say they go fishing to

catch a meal of fish. They say that it helps stretch their food budget. Going fishing probably isn't the most economical way to obtain a meal of fresh fish, but it is definitely the most fun way to do so.

So, back to the original question: Why do we go fishing? I don't know! It's not one big thing that encourages me to go fishing; it's a bunch of big things.

But the biggest thing is that fishing is something that I enjoy and helps me get away for a while from the things that I and many others need or want to get away from. For me, that's enough of a reason to go fishing.

PROJECT, Continued from Page 1C

Mini-Wakan State Park entrance (north side of Big Spirit Lake) on the Minnesota side of Grade Road or Stalene Road, this parcel of farmland has historically flooded during the early spring runoff and again during heavy spring and summer rains, sending the temporary nutrient rich water across into McClelland Slough, finally reaching Big Spirit Lake.

Conservationists, clean water advocates and lake homeowners in the Iowa Great Lakes Watershed worked for years to secure this property. Finally in May of 2022, the land was secured through the contributions from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (USFWS), Wildlife Habitat Society of McLeod County, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Spirit Lake Protective Association, the Dickinson County Water Quality Commission (IA), onX Hunt, Nestle PURINA, Jackson County Chapter of Pheasants Forever, along with business and individual donors who believed in the need to purchase the land. All contributions support the Build A Wildlife Area® program which is seeking to raise funds to complete this project and pursue a second phase addition to build upon this habitat complex.

Moving forward

The property will now be managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for quality habitat and outdoor recreation such as hunting, hiking, trapping, photography and bird watching. When completed, the Howard K. Vincent WPA (Moore Slough WPA) will also address several conservation plans, including the MN Pheasant Action Plan, North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the Iowa Great Lakes Watershed Management Plan.

Lots of physical work to get to "the now"

If only we could have simply waved a magic wand on September 14, 2023, and completed all the work on the property that has occurred over the last 15 months...but projects like this don't just happen.

Instead, it's taken a series of steps.

Beginning in late September of 2023, Pheasants Forever seeded 105 acres of prairie uplands with native prairie species to create a large habitat complex critical to resident and migrant wildlife species. The resulting growth has been a positive sight on the seed-land.

At the same time, Ducks Unlimited was asked to lead the restoration of the 76-acre shallow lake in the heart of this WPA. Survey and design work were completed in the winter of 2023/2024. The next step in restoring this shallow lake was removing the surface water from the heavy spring rains so dirt work could begin.

History of farming the lowland

This is where the most labor-intensive work has taken place on the Howard K. Vincent WPA (Moore Slough WPA). First off, this land had been farmed in some capacity since the early 1920s. Meant to be a wetland, the land was tiled with clay tile in the 1920s with a minimal amount of success, followed by more drainage in the 1950s with the addition of cement tile hooked to the original clay tile. Row crop planting continued with more flooding issues, so in the 1960s, plastic tile was added and in the 1970s a pumphouse was installed to pump the water out of the bottom ground and across the road to McClelland Slough and eventually into Big Spirit Lake. This would get the water out, but with huge rainfalls, the bottom land would continue to flood and have to be pumped out.

Reclaiming a wetland

Why? People often ask what good is a wetland anyway? Well, here's an important fact. Wetland restoration of the previously drained 76-acre wetland, along with its surrounding upland will provide an estimated 85 percent reduction in phosphorus and nitrogen leaving this tract annually and a reduction of 30 tons of sediment per two-inch rainfall going into Big Spirit Lake. Now that's significant.

The total package of new wetland and grassland offers habitat for waterfowl and upland wildlife, reduced soil erosion, improved water quality, reduced runoff, reduced flooding and sequestration of carbon. Now that's the whole nine yards!

Moving dirt and busting tile

Over the past several weeks, heavy equipment has been used to remove drainage tile, get rid of the pumphouse and pump, remove sediment eroded into the basin, restore shoreline and protect neighboring landowners from future flooding. Jake Chronister, regional biologist for Ducks Unlimited, notes, "A lot of soil has been moved to restore a shallow lake with an average depth of 2-3'. This is ideal for growing both emergent and submergent vegetation. At the same time, during drier periods, there will be exposed soil, which will help these plants to germinate. There will be some areas where we removed eroded sediment that will approach 5' in depth."

To manage the entire wetland system, a custom-built water control structure will hopefully be put in place by the end of December, if the drier weather holds. "If that all happens, Chronister adds, "the goal is to let the snowmelt and spring rains fill the wetland!"

All this dirt work can be seen from the Grade Road or Stalene Road, that goes along the south side of the Howard K. Vincent WPA (Moore Slough WPA). There is also a parking lot just off the road on the east side of the property.

A final perspective

John Smeltzer, president of the Spirit Lake Protective Association (SLPA), shares just how important this project has been to the entire watershed. "The importance of the collaboration and patience required to make a project like this come together should not be underestimated. The SLPA is but a small partner in this entire effort. We have a passion for protecting our waters, and we appreciate the investment we are all making in this area. This is truly a legacy project."

Over \$122m in grants released for high priority conservation projects across the U.S.

WASHINGTON — The Biden-Harris administration recently joined the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and public- and private-sector partners in announcing \$122.4 million in grants through the America the Beautiful Challenge (ATBC). The 61 new grants announced on December 2 will support landscape-scale conservation projects across 42 states, 19 Tribal Nations, and 3 U.S. territories.

The grants will generate at least \$8.7 million in matching contributions for a total conservation impact of \$131.1 million. Approximately 42 percent of all 2024 ATBC funding will support projects implemented by Indigenous communities and organizations, representing another year of record funding dedicated to Tribally led projects for a single grant program at NFWF. America the Beautiful, launched by President Biden in 2021, set the nation's first-ever goal to conserve at least 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. The 10-year, locally led and nationally scaled initiative lifts up efforts to conserve, connect and restore the lands, waters and wildlife upon which we all depend. Over the past four years, the Biden-Harris Administration has conserved more than 45 million acres of our nation's lands and waters.

ATBC grants support projects that conserve, restore and connect wildlife habitats and ecosystems while improving community resilience and access to nature, which also advance President Biden's ambitious environmental justice goals. The competitive grant awards were made possible through President Biden's Investing in America agenda, with funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, other federal conservation programs, and private sources. The Biden-Harris Administration launched the Challenge in 2022 as a partnership with the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture and Defense, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and NFWF.

"President Biden's America the Beautiful initiative has been truly transformative. By working together across the federal family, and through private-public partnerships, we have built an enduring path to support hundreds of locally led collaborative conservation projects across the country," said Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland. "The America the Beautiful Challenge has advanced engagement with Tribes, funding a record amount of Tribally led efforts and elevating the use of Indigenous Knowledge to benefit endangered species and

treasured landscapes. These innovative investments will leave a lasting legacy on our nation's lands and waters."

"The America the Beautiful Challenge is advancing President Biden's ongoing commitment to conserve our lands and waters by supporting locally led conservation and restoration projects in communities across the country," said White House Council on Environmental Quality Chair Brenda Mallory. "Thanks to his historic investments from the President's Investing in America agenda, these projects in communities across the nation will help ensure everyone can access the benefits nature has to offer for years to come."

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said, "Over the past three years, the America the Beautiful Challenge has served as a marker of the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to protecting our nation's natural treasures for future generations. Through these awards, and in partnership with Tribes, NGOs, state partners, and others, USDA will continue to build on its critical work — from voluntary conservation efforts to safeguard our forests and grasslands to increasing access to climate-smart practices and mitigating the risk posed by dangerous wildfires."

Editor's note: In researching the 2024 grants, I found that 61 grants have been approved for 2024 that includes states across the country in the following categories: Implementation Grants,

Planning Grants, Sentinel Landscape Grants, National Forest Grants, Private Forests and Rangeland and Farmland Grants.

Iowa and Nebraska received a grant to Enhance and Connect Tallgrass Prairie and Oak Savanna with the goal of restoring nearly 56,000 acres of prairie and savanna within the tallgrass prairie ecosystem in Iowa and Nebraska through invasive-species control, prescribed fire, planned grazing and prairie restoration. The project will engage landowners, Tribes and partners to implement conservation practices that benefit more than 100 at-risk species, improve ecosystem services and increase landscape connectivity. A complete list of the 2024 grants made through the ATBC is available here. To learn more about the program, including applicant eligibility, funding priorities and submission requirements, visit the NFWF ATBC webpage.



Bald eagle near Estherville's ski hill

New Year's NATURE

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Male American kestrel west of Estherville



Buck near Center Lake



Female American kestrel near Little Swan Lake



Juvenile bald eagle north of Estherville

Inspiration for Our Day- "But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded." ~2 Chronicles 15:7

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