

Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board
Fall 2010

A Thank you to Gary Johnson

Many of you may know our Conservation Technician, Gary Johnson. Gary had been with the Mills County Conservation Board for the greater part of the past 5 years. The end of September brought upon the final day of Gary's role as MCCB Conservation Technician. We want to take this time to thank him for his dedication to fulfilling his duties, often going above and beyond to complete a project. He has been the greatest contributor to the development of the MCCB taxidermy collection. Thank you, Gary.

Iowa's Water & Land Legacy Amendment (IWILL)

This Conservation Matters issue begins with an important topic that was initially covered in the Summer issue.

Iowa voters will have an opportunity on November 2, 2010 to vote for Iowa's Water and Land Legacy constitutional amendment. The amendment would, for the first time in Iowa's history, establish a constitutionally protected trust fund to preserve Iowa's natural resources and outdoor recreational opportunities. Specifically, the amendment will create the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund which will provide a permanent, reliable and accountable revenue source to improve water quality and natural areas in Iowa, in addition to aiding in conservation of agricultural soils and restoring wetlands to protect against future flooding.

Recent data from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources shows that 53% of Iowa's water sources rate "poor," and Iowa currently loses an average of five tons of soil per acre each year due to erosion. As of today, Iowa ranks 47th out of 50 states in funding for conservation, despite the fact that more than 27,000 Iowa jobs are supported by outdoor recreation.

County Conservation Boards would benefit directly through increased funding for the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) program and funds allocated through the Local Conservation Partnership Account as part of the new Trust Fund.

Additionally County Conservation Boards would be able to compete for increased grant funds for soil and watershed improvement and lake restorations as well as trail development.

A vote for Iowa's Water and Land Legacy Amendment is a vote for the creation of the Trust Fund – not a vote for a tax increase. Revenue for the Trust Fund will come from allocating 3/8ths of one cent from sales tax revenue the next time the Iowa legislature raises the state sales tax –

providing the Trust Fund an estimate of \$150 million per year.

This funding recommendation was based on over three years of research and study conducted by a legislative advisory committee. In 2008 and 2009, more than 90 percent of Iowa's state legislators overwhelmingly approved the legislation which allows voters to vote on the amendment this November. Iowa would join Missouri, Arkansas and Minnesota as states to approve constitutional amendments to dedicate funding for natural resource conservation.

For more information, visit:

www.iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org

Monarch Migration, Dragonflies & MOSQUITOES!!

While visiting northeast Iowa over Labor Day weekend, I was fortunate to be able to see the trees at my parents' farm covered in Monarch butterflies. They were clinging to leaves on the north side of the elm and catalpa trees. As I got closer and closer to take some pictures, they motioned like they would take flight at any moment, but very few actually flew away. They were also all over a tall silver maple near the end of the drive, but oddly enough, they would all get up and fly away when we got near that tree - and the nearest leaf was about 15 feet high. It was truly an amazing sight to see that many butterflies aloft at once.



As I looked around the farm, I could see dragonflies all over, hovering in mid air and following dad as he mowed the grass. The dragonflies were feasting on mosquitoes and other small winged insects that we were stirring from the grass with the mower and our feet.

We've had people ask about the volume of dragonflies this year, and the resounding conclusion is that there was a higher success rate in the number of dragonflies that survived the egg and nymph stages and made it to the adult stage. Usually there is a higher mortality rate, but due to the conditions over the winter and spring, many more survived. Dragonflies are the most

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effective natural predator against all life stages of the mosquito. As nymphs, the dragonflies will eat mosquito larvae and pupae, and as adults they eat the adult mosquitoes. I've been enjoying the darting blues, greens and reds and feeling grateful that I am not a mosquito.

Wabash Trace Nature Trail Project Notes

We have received many questions regarding what is happening to the Wabash Trace Nature Trail near Silver City and Malvern.

Sections of the Wabash Trace Nature Trail are being paved. That being said, we need to emphasize that the paving project was NOT funded by Mills County tax dollars. This project was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The funding allowed 1.22 miles of the Trace through Silver City and 1.55 miles of the Trace through Malvern to be paved.

At this time, the Silver City portion of the project is complete. The whole paving project will be completed by the middle of October. The Trace is marked with detours to allow users to get around the projects until that time. Thank you.

Meet Your *WILD* Mills County Neighbors!

This issue's "*neighbor*" is one that once existed in Iowa, but was extirpated from the state by early settlers. The last recorded specimen in Iowa was killed in 1867, but it has been reported to be back in the area within the past 15 years. Mountain Lion, Puma, catamount, cougar, panther - all names for one animal, ***Puma concolor***, formerly *Felis concolor*.

There have been rumored mountain lion sightings floating around in Iowa (including Mills County) for a number of years. However very few investigated reports have ever been confirmed as the large cats. Most tracks that are reported to belong to mountain lions are in fact large dogs. Adult mountain lion tracks are generally four inches wide, while large dogs fall between three and five inches wide, so they could be confused. The Iowa DNR recommends getting a good photo of the cat or its tracks, hair samples, scat samples or actual tracks for them to be able to verify the presence of a mountain lion in an area. Mountain lion tracks are very distinct. Many reported sightings occur at night, in low light conditions, poor weather conditions, at great distances or while travelling at speeds of 55 mph. It makes sense that the cats would be seen at night, since they prefer stealth and their eyes are designed for seeing in low light conditions, however one has to analyze what they believe they just saw and consider all the possibilities.

Mountain lions are large and slender cats, with adults measuring between six and nine feet long, with heavy and slender black tipped tails that measure nearly

three feet long. Weights of the animal depend on age and sex. Adult females are generally lighter than the males, weighing around 100 pounds. Adult males will weigh around 150 pounds. They are the largest of the three wild cats historically documented in Iowa (the other two are the bobcat and lynx).

The big cat's fur can vary in color from a gray to a tawny brown and various shades in between. They have a small head and rounded ears that are not tufted. With the muscular frame of the front shoulders and hindquarters and the large hind legs, one can understand why these cats can reach nearly 18 feet in a vertical jump. Their horizontal jumps can reach over 20 feet, sometimes even more.

The mountain lion, like most organisms, does not want to use a lot of energy when trying to gain food. The cougar can reach 45 miles per hour at a run, but they are not built to run for long periods of time. This means that they prefer to ambush and use short sprints to capture prey. They will, however, continue a fast run to escape from attackers, until they can reach something to climb to get out of the way.

With the large paws (measuring nearly four inches wide) and retractable claws, they are very capable of climbing. These claws, as well as the teeth and jaws, play critical roles when they are attacking prey like small mammals and deer or defending themselves from aggressors, such as dogs. Cougars, like all cats, are strict carnivores. These large cats very rarely scavenge on carcasses that they did not kill themselves. These cats will kill their prey and eat it. If the prey item is large, like a deer, they will hide it and return to feed on it over the course of a number of nights until the meat begins rotting, at which point it is left for scavengers. They are opportunistic and will feed on a wide variety of prey.

Like most large predators, these cats have excellent senses. In most cases, they can see, hear or smell other creatures long before they are near. This gives them time to set up their ambush or time to run away. They are also very territorial. Female mountain lions will have home ranges that spread out for up to 100 square miles, whereas the males have ranges measuring up to 300 square miles, usually with multiple females within their range.

The cats reach maturity at 3 years old, and females have litters of 1 to 3 kits every couple of years. These large cats can live up to twelve years in the wild, very few live longer than that. Their social structure is based on a dominance hierarchy. The sire of the kits is the dominant male in the region. Young male cougars will be forced out of their mother's home range, or be killed. The only other alternative is to challenge their sire and replace him if they are successful. If they challenge the dominant male, they risk injury or death, so most will simply begin a trek to establish their own home ranges.

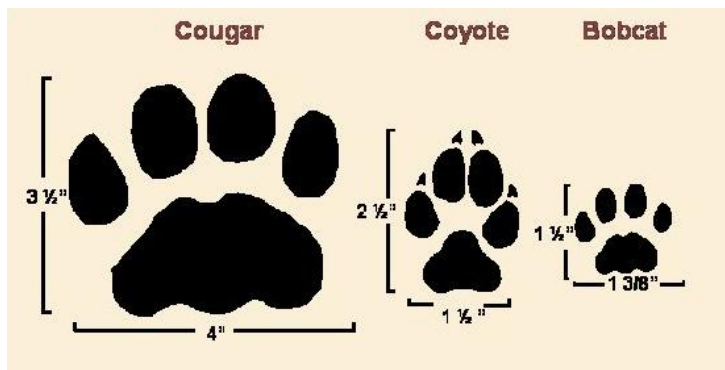
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These young males make up nearly 95% of the cougars we've heard about in the news that have been found and killed in Nebraska and Iowa. They are wandering around trying to establish their own home ranges, which means they are exposed to humans as they move from their origins.

Mountain lions have been absent from Iowa since 1867. There are numerous elaborate rumors about how the Iowa DNR "is using black helicopters and releasing cougars at night". These are rumors, with no truth. The Iowa DNR have not and will not release mountain lions in Iowa. Currently, there are no game laws concerning mountain lions in Iowa.

Mountain lions are large predatory animals, however they are also somewhat timid and confused when they happen upon humans. In the past 150 years, there have been only 19 fatalities from mountain lion attacks in the United States. I will reiterate here that mountain lions have excellent senses of smell, hearing and sight, so chances are they will run away before you know they are in the area. If you encounter a cougar in the wild, DO NOT RUN away. If you run it triggers an innate response that identifies you as prey. You are not prey. DO NOT RUN. Maintain a visual of the animal and slowly retreat by backing up. If children are present, keep them close to you (pick them up) and retreat without taking your eyes off of the animal. Make yourself appear larger by holding your arms and a jacket above your head. Make noise - yell at the animal. If you can throw items at the animal, do so - not to hurt it, just to scare it away. If you are in a vehicle - stay in the vehicle until the animal is gone. If they do not turn and run, you need to be observant: Why aren't they running away? Is it cornered? Is it in an elevated position? Are you near its young or meal? It is up to you to make sure you can all get away safely, including the large cat.



(Track image courtesy of Michigan DNR)

Until we have tangible evidence and the resulting verification, this is one animal that we can't decisively claim as our Wild Mills County neighbor.

UPCOMING EVENTS

October

**10/16/10 9 am - Noon (for ages 10-15)
Beginner Fishing! @ Pony Creek Lake Access**

Fishing is a great way to spend some quality time with your family. Learn how to identify many of Iowa's fish, how to tie knots, how to cast and what baits can be used. Pre-registration is required. Call for more details. Adults are required to remain through duration of program.

**Owl Prowl II @ Pony Creek Park
Date & Time To be announced**

Once again we will have Denise Lewis from Raptor Recovery Nebraska on hand with some of her fine feathered assistants for our second Owl Prowl of the year. The event will be advertised when the date is set. Space will be limited.

November

**11/20/10 10 AM
Fire! @ Pony Creek Park**

We will be covering multiple topics relating to fire. There will also be demonstrations as well. Please dress appropriately for the weather. Pre-registration is required. Call for more details. Adults are required to remain through duration of program.

December

**12/11/10 7 pm
BRRR Hike @ Pony Creek Park**

Come and enjoy a wintry walk through the trails of Pony Creek Park. We will be listening to, looking for, and possibly seeing some of the wild residents of Pony Creek Park, as they begin their nightly rituals. We will return to the Conservation board office to talk about what we did and didn't observe during our trip. Please bring your own flashlights, and please dress accordingly.

To pre-register for these events or to ask questions, please call James at (712) 527-9685. Thank you.

The Mills County Conservation Board is able to accept, in the name of Mills County, any gifts, bequests, contributions and appropriations of money or other personal property for conservation purposes. Your tax-deductible donations, and our grant writing, promote the growth and betterment of our facilities for the enjoyment of the citizens of Mills County and its many visitors.