

Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board

Fall 2011

New MCCB Naturalist

Hi! As most of ya'll know James Gates the Naturalist for the past five years has moved off to the north eastern part of the state. My name is Dessa Montgomery and I am very excited to introduce myself as the new Mills County Conservation Board Naturalist. I am a new resident of Iowa as of January 2011. I made the long move north from the great state of Texas and am eager to learn about the new state that I now call home. My family and I bought a house near Emerson and have been settling in and learning about the area.

I spent nearly every summer in Iowa as a child with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins that live in Villisca. What a difference there is between Texas and Iowa! One thing that seems to be the same is friendly people that work hard and enjoy being outdoors. I look forward to meeting everyone and making a long list of friends here in Iowa.

My love of the outdoors started very early. There was not a critter that I encountered that I did not want to catch or at least observe. After high school I attended West Texas A&M University and earned my Bachelors of Science degree in Wildlife Biology and my Masters of Science degree in Biology. My thesis project involved capturing North America porcupines and attaching radio collars for tracking. After two years of tracking them I concluded my data and finished college! I have also worked on projects involving bats, bobcats, birds, ringtails, rodents and snakes. I am always eager to experience new things and love to learn. This area is full of new ecosystems that I cannot wait to get out and explore.

FALL IS COMING

The first official day of fall is September 23rd! This is a busy season for everyone. Fall is a crucial time for many species, the preparations they are making now will determine if they survive the harsh winter months. Mammals such as squirrels and mice are busy caching food away, while other species like woodchucks are eating as much as possible to insure their fat reserves last them through hibernation. Birds are beginning their migration routes back to southern warmer climates.

Fall is a great time to get out and enjoy the area woodlands as the beautiful colors are changing. Wildlife and bird viewing can be very successful during this season while everything is busy preparing for winter.

Fall is a time of many changes so get outdoors and experience as much as possible before the winter arrives.



Meet Your WILD Mills County Neighbors!

The North American porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*) is a unique mammal that has a trait found on no other animal in North America, it has QUILLS! Porcupines inhabit a variety of habitats including northern forests, open tundra, grasslands, and deserts. Its distribution expands from western Mexico to the Arctic Circle in Canada. Unfortunately, it has been extirpated from the Southeastern United States so it is no longer found in Iowa.

Porcupines are the second largest rodent in North America following the American beaver. The average adult weighs about 12 pounds but can range from 6-30 pounds. They are covered in a dense pelage of 30,000 quills. The quills are actually modified hairs with a barbed tip that anchors into their unfortunate victim. The face, stomach, and legs of the porcupine are the only places that are not covered by quills. For this slow moving critter, quills are essential for personal protection. Contrary to popular belief, the North American porcupine CAN NOT shoot its quills. The only way to get a quill stuck in you is by coming into physical contact with them. When approached by a predator the porcupine will try to hide its head and slap at the predator with its tail. So, which predators would take the risk of a quill for a meal? Bobcats, coyotes, American fisher and mountain lions have all been documented to successfully prey upon this prickly critter. The American fisher is extremely successful at preying on porcupines and have been known to completely eradicate populations of them. As many people that live in porcupine country have experienced family dogs, horses, and cattle frequently have encounters with species as well.

Porcupines are herbivores that are mostly arboreal. They feed on the leaves, stems, fruits, and cambium tissue of trees. They also feed on some ground vegetation. Porcupines have an intense drive to find sodium which causes them some significant problems. The most readily available sources of sodium are associated with humans. Road salt used on highways attracts porcupines to the roads which is usually certain death. They have also been known to gnaw on tires, buildings, and tool handles to fulfill sodium cravings

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Porcupines mate in the late fall and seven months later a single young is born. The porcupine has the longest gestation period of any rodent or other animal of comparable size. The baby is born weighing almost 1 pound, which is the same size as an American black bear at birth. They are covered in soft quills and about one hour after birth the quills harden. Babies are born on the ground under dense vegetation and are fully mobile soon after birth. They rely on their mother's milk like all mammals, but start foraging on some vegetation within days.

In many parts of the porcupines range it is considered a pest. In regions of the North America where timber is produced, porcupine can cause economic loss by damaging trees. If you are in the North American porcupines range the best way to find one is looking in trees during seasons when the trees have dropped their leaves. If left alone they are a great species for viewing because they know most things do not want to mess with them, so they continue with their normal routines. The porcupine is listed as Least Concern on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) conservation list. Although this species may not be our neighbor here in Mills County any longer, it is definitely worth looking for such an unusual critter if you are ever within its range.

Birdhouse Dedication to James Gates

Kadynn Hatfield donated a bird house in honor of James Gates. The bird house was built by Kadynn and his father to show their appreciation for James' kindness and always taking the time to answer questions.



UPCOMING EVENTS

September-



9/24/11 @ 10 am
"Colors of Fall Canoe Float"- Join us at Mile Hill Lake as we take in the beautiful colors of Fall. Pre-registration is required and space is limited.

October- **10/29/11**



"Halloween Fun"- We will be decorating pumpkins with paint or carving them (depending on child's age) as the naturalist unravels some of the spooky "myths" about critters of Halloween. Adults are required to remain through the duration of program and you must bring your own pumpkin. Pre-registration is required. There will be two programs held. 10-11 am @ Pony Creek AND 2-3 pm @ Lake George, weather permitting.

November-

11/5/11 @ 6:00 pm
Owl Prowl II @ Pony Creek Park
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. Pre-registration is required. Space will be limited.

December-

12/3/11 @ 9 am
"Breakfast with the Birds"
We will gather at Pony Creek Park in the MCCB office to enjoy donuts and coffee while watching birds utilize feeders set around the building. Weather permitting we will go on a short hike for more bird watching. Pre-registration is required.

To pre-register for these events or to ask questions, please call (712) 527-9685. If you have suggestions for articles or programs we would love to hear them!

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MCCB Wish List

We are in need of the following items to complete our collection of pelts representing common mammals found within the state of Iowa. Animal pelts are used in several of our various Environmental Education programs.

Mills County Conservation is currently seeking:

- (1) Badger skull
- (1) Woodchuck skull & hide
- (1) Mink skull
- (1) Coyote pelt
- (1) Opossum (adult) pelt

We are in the process of setting up a live animal collection for educational programs and general viewing at the office. We are looking for :

- (2) Tiger salamanders**
- (1) Milk snake**

If you find any of these critters please contact us. We have a special permit from the DNR to obtain these specimens.

Please contact us at **(712) 527-9685** if you are willing to donate any of these items to the Mills County Conservation Board. Your assistance, donations and support of Environmental Education programs and conservation practices in Mills County are greatly appreciated. **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.

GO GREEN!!!!!!

If you are interested in receiving the Conservation Matters newsletter straight to your email inbox please send your request to millsccbia@hotmail.com. It is also available on the MCCB website: mccb.millscoia.us

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Little Critters Fun Page

*Squirrel
fact:
They do NOT
hibernate!*



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