

Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board
Spring 2008

Welcome Spring 2008!

We're off to a great start this spring! No more snow and the arrival of our feathered "fair weather" visitors tends to lift most of our spirits a little bit. We watch as the robins return, be-bopping through the grass, cocking their heads to the side, then striking at the ground, raising their head in triumph over a writhing annelid. However, they're not the only ones returning. Some folks are returning from their winter homes in other states, like Florida, New Mexico or Arizona. Of course, they're much less likely to be out in your yard searching for annelids...unless they're going fishing. Don't forget to purchase your 2008 Iowa Fishing Licenses **before** you go out fishing!

Tree of Birds on Display!

We have been collecting various birds to have mounted and displayed in our office at Pony Creek Park. These were birds that were found dead – primarily along roadsides. This past winter our Conservation Technician and resident taxidermist, Gary Johnson, was able to get some of them prepared and mounted on a base that will accommodate more specimens. This 'Tree of Birds' has received praise from everyone attending programs hosted at Pony Creek Park. The tree is presently occupied by 4 mounted specimens: a blue jay, a wren, a juvenile northern yellow shafted flicker, and a brown-headed cowbird. We welcome the new addition, and understand it is a work in progress.

Thank you, Gary, for your hard work and dedication in bringing this project to fruition, and on your being with the Mills County Conservation Board for 2 years!

Meet Your WILD Mills County Neighbors!

We have seen a lot of animal activity here at Pony Creek Park. This winter we've seen turkeys, hawks, various songbirds, a few opossum waddling around, deer and squirrels. We also have had a few suet feeders robbed and stolen by a crafty fur-bearing creature. This masked bandit's name is *Procyon lotor*, but you may know it as the Common Raccoon.

Raccoons are a hardy and prevalent species, masters of diverse habitats from Canada to Mexico. These critters can be identified by the black mask around their eyes, which is typically outlined in white or gray. If you can not get a good view of that end of the animal, the tail is marked by 4 to 6 alternating black and brown or brownish gray rings.

The Raccoon's size varies due to season, habitat, and available food sources. They range from two feet to nearly three feet in length (including tail) and can be up to 16 inches tall while on all fours. They can range from just a couple of pounds when young to over

40 pounds as a large, fattened and winter ready adult. The largest I have personally heard testimony of was 37 ½ pounds and came from a grain elevator in my hometown. It was purchased by the furrier (fur buying business) that I worked for through high school. Upon my last visit (which was in February of 2008) I was able to see the pelt of a raccoon from South Dakota that was over 4 feet long, not including the tail. It was mounted on a stretcher meant for Coyote pelts. This is the largest raccoon I have seen – dead or alive.

Raccoons mate from January to March and females bear a litter of up to 8 young in May - June. The young are raised in a den, which can take many forms – an old hollow tree, an attic, old hay loft, abandoned muskrat lodge, hollow logs, chimneys – nearly anything they can fit into that offers safety and security. The young leave or are kicked out when the mother is ready to have another litter. During winter months, they do not hibernate. They simply sleep for periods of time – often days on end. They prepare for winter by storing up to 1/3 of their body weight as fat, and can survive the entire winter without eating, though they often venture out on warmer nights to forage for food.

Raccoons are not too picky when it comes to food. However, when near water, they have a tendency to put food items in water and work it over with their paws to see if anything inedible can be discarded. This resulted in the species name being *lotor* which means "washer". They will eat nuts, berries, insects, fish, turtles and turtle eggs, small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds & their eggs, worms and grubs, visit chicken coops for eggs and chicks, and even porches for the food we leave out for pets. They are one of the top nest predators in upland game birds and waterfowl, impacting populations of upland game birds by eating eggs, nestlings and even adults. In more urban settings they will rummage through our garbage and eat our leftovers, and even raid our bird feeders. They have a neat little tool that helps them grasp things that they climb or eat. A thumb.

Raccoons leave many signs when they are present in an area. They have paws that resemble small human hands and feet, but with claws. When walking, their tracks show the left rear foot being near the right front foot and when running, they resemble squirrel tracks, with the rear feet appearing outside and before the front feet. They will leave shells of clams and crayfish on the shores of water bodies; they leave tracks in various substrates; they will leave scat (dung) on rocks, logs, in trees, on hay bales, and even in tray bird feeders (personal experience). Sometimes you can hear them vocalizing – from their typical sort of 'gurgling' noise, to hissing, to a full on caterwauling when defending their territories or themselves. Other times, they remain completely silent and act innocent and invisible – expecting people to leave them alone, which is generally a good idea.

Remember to use and take care of your County Parks. They belong to You!

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Raccoons are not meant to be pets. I have seen raccoons go through the stages of growth, resulting in them becoming 'sour' when they become adults and want to seek mates – regardless of their sex. This can result in people being bitten or scratched, and the grown raccoon being killed or worse – released to fend for itself. This 'release' is not as humane as it may seem. The released raccoons may not interact well with wild raccoons, may not be able to avoid predators readily and may expose wild raccoon populations to diseases. They may have trouble finding food for themselves. They commonly associate people with easy food, and seek to be closer to food, which means closer to humans. They visit our trash cans and the food we leave outside for our pets. This creates interactions between raccoons and household pets. The raccoon is a formidable opponent – able to hold their own against Labrador retrievers and other dogs.

In the past 10-15 years, raccoon populations have increased greatly, leaving young raccoons to establish territories and dens closer and closer to humans. This can be, and is, a problem. Besides being a nuisance, raccoons can carry diseases including rabies – a virus that affects the nervous system in warm blooded animals. Most commonly passed through biting, this virus is fatal to most mammals, including humans if not treated fast enough. Raccoons also carry an intestinal worm that can be dangerous to other mammals including humans. Iowa predators, like the coyote, bobcat and different raptors, may claim some raccoons, but automobiles, disease and accidents claim more.

For many years raccoons were a staple for fur trappers. Raccoon fur was used for coats, and the demand was high up to the late 1960's. Over time, prices for furs (of all sorts) have dropped, much like the interest in trapping. I was fortunate enough in my youth to be educated in trapping and had the opportunity to work in the fur business. People once made a living out of this skill in more than the monetary sense. Many trappers in the early history of the USA would not only trap for the fur and money, but also for food.

In the past 2-3 years, fur prices have shown improvement. More people are finding their way into fur harvesting. I don't know if it's from knowing someone who does it and it's getting passed onto them, or if many of them are realizing that a fur harvesters license can get them about \$10-\$20 per road-kill raccoon as they drive to and from work during trapping seasons. Would you pass up a twenty dollar bill that was just sitting there with no one WANTING to claim it? I've picked up a few raccoons myself – one of which I sold for \$25.

I mention fur harvesting simply because, in the sense of a functioning ecosystem, raccoons are generally overpopulated. When you can run the same route and collect over 500 raccoons each season for 5 years in a row, you are not seeing a reduction in the population. High populations gradually lead to low

populations due to extreme stress on available resources (food, water, space, den sites, mates), competition over these resources and faster spread of disease from being so close together. This will also lead to heavy traffic across roadways, which will result in more deaths via automobiles.

Trapping and hunting are management tools used to regulate wildlife populations. An area can withstand a limited number of users before the area begins to deteriorate. This is called Carrying Capacity. When populations (including humans) exceed the CC, it doesn't just affect the species at fault, it affects all species in the area, some for the better, most for the worse.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Please call James at (712) 527-9685 to register for these events or if you have questions or would like to schedule a program for your group.

March 22, 2008 1 PM at Pony Creek Park
Iowa's Invaders!

Join me as we talk about Iowa's current plant, animal and insect invaders. Learn why these species are a cause for concern, how they're transferred, hazards they pose and possible treatments.

April 12, 2008 10 AM at Pony Creek Park
Mushrooms & Blooms I!

Let's take a walk on the wild side...or at least a walk through the woods looking for mushrooms and early spring wildflowers! Please bring your own bag for collecting mushrooms & bottle of water and please dress accordingly.

April 26, 2008 10 AM at Pony Creek Park
Mushrooms & Blooms II!

Let's take ANOTHER walk through the woods. We will again be searching for mushrooms and spring wildflowers. Please bring your own bag for collecting mushrooms & bottle of water and please dress accordingly.

MCCB WISH LIST

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

- 1 tanned Muskrat pelt
- 1 tanned Opossum pelt
- 2 tanned Squirrel pelts (Fox and Gray)

Please call us and inform us if you are willing to donate any of these items to the Mills County Conservation Board. Your assistance, donations and support of

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Environmental Education programs in Mills County are greatly appreciated. Thank you!

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