

Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board
Winter '07 / '08

THANK YOU!

I'd like to take a moment and thank Buck Larsen and his students for assisting in beautification efforts at Pony Creek Park and Mile Hill Lake. As usual, it was a great outing, and we were able to remove a great amount of litter from the parks. Thank you for a great job!

We would also like to thank the Mills County Endowment Fund for the grant we received and their support on our MCCB Environmental Education Amphitheater Project. Thank you!

If you have a group or club that is looking for places to complete volunteer hours, please remember your MCCB parks. They provide a great opportunity to get outside and be active while serving your community.

Iowa Venison: Safe to Eat?

In recent years, there has been a whirlwind of media coverage on four diseases that have the *potential* to infect Iowa's wild white-tailed deer population.

CWD: Chronic Wasting Disease

CWD affects the central nervous system of cervids (Elk, Moose, Caribou and Deer), and is closely related to Mad Cow Disease. Both are TSE's or Transmissible Spongiform encephalopathies, aka prion diseases. Prions are mutated proteins that bore holes into brain tissue. The prions bind tightly to certain clay soils and lay dormant until deer and other cervids swallow the soil. CWD has been found in free ranging elk and deer herds in CO, IL, KS, NM, NY, UT, WV, WY, NE as well as in Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada. It has appeared in captive herds in those states and provinces as well. This is partially due to the frequency of "trading" amongst captive deer herders. This practice inadvertently spreads the disease to other captive herds.

BT: Bovine Tuberculosis

BT is transferable to all mammals, including humans. It is a bacterial infection that can be treated with antibiotics. Iowa has been a BT free state since 1986. Outbreaks occasionally happen in the Midwest. Some outbreaks have occurred in dairy herds, deer and elk in Michigan.

FMD: Foot & Mouth Disease

Foot and mouth disease is a viral infection that runs its course in a few weeks, and is unlikely to infect humans. It occurs frequently outside of North America, infecting cloven-hoofed mammals.

HD: Hemorrhagic Disease

This virus occurs mostly in the southeastern United States, with very few outbreaks in the Midwest. It can infect a wide range of ruminants (animals with 4 stomach chambers), both wild and domestic, but does not infect humans.

It is highly unlikely that eating venison from wild Iowa deer will induce any of these diseases. However, you can limit your exposure by following these preventative measures:

- Avoid harvesting obviously sick or thin deer.
- Wear latex or rubber gloves when field dressing deer.
- Bone out the meat.
- Avoid handling and do not eat the brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils and lymph nodes.
- Wash hands and instruments thoroughly after dressing out and handling.
- Thoroughly cook all meat, including sausages and jerky, until juices run clear.

Report dead deer that appear thin or have lesions or growths on the internal organs or chest cavity to a DNR Biologist or Conservation Officer. Michael Miller is the DNR Conservation Officer for Mills County and can be reached at (712)-520-0121.

Meet Your *WILD* Mills County Neighbors!

This issue's "*neighbor*" happens to be one of my favorite birds to observe, the White-breasted Nuthatch. This bird is a common year-round visitor to our birdfeeders here at Pony Creek Park, due to our feeders' proximity to the bird's natural habitat, deciduous woodlands. The name "nuthatch" actually comes from the Middle English name "Nuthak", which refers to the way the bird wedges seeds into crevices then hacks them open.

Roughly the size of a sparrow, these blue-gray birds have a white face and white breast and the ventral portion of their tail is a light brown. Their "beak" is about an inch long, thin and narrow, and is turned slightly upwards. The male has a black cap and the back of the neck is black as well. The female's cap and nape are more of a gray color.

Mates are usually together year round, and stake out and defend a small territory surrounding their nest, which is typically a cavity in a tree. They work together to construct a nest, using twigs and grass in the main construction and lining it with hair and feathers. The eggs are white with brown markings and hatch after being incubated for 12 days

Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board

Winter '07 / '08

by the female. Both parents will then feed the young until they leave the nest.

The white-breasted nuthatch, like many birds, makes a variety of calls or songs. The male produces a song which consists of a series of repeated notes like "hah hah hah", which is commonly repeated 7 to 10 times, unless interrupted. Both sexes will produce brief calls which sound like "hit" and "tuck", which can be locating calls between mates. When mildly excited they produce a "quank" or "weent" sound.

The white-breasted nuthatch starts at the top of a tree and works it's way down foraging for insects, the complete opposite direction of many other birds (like the Brown Creeper) that move up trees, looking for insects. The white-breasted nuthatch has an elongated hind toe claw on their feet (twice the size of their other claws), allowing them to grip the bark as they work their way down trees headfirst.

The white-breasted nuthatch will visit many types of bird feeders. They will eat from seed feeders that include black oil sunflowers (shelled or not), wild bird mixes, and they will definitely take advantage of your suet feeders. In nature (beyond bird feeders) these birds will eat insects, acorns and other nuts. They are often times observed with other groups of smaller birds including black-capped chickadees and downy woodpeckers.

In the coming winter months, be sure to keep your feeders full for the best chances of viewing the white-breasted nuthatch and some of our other feathered residents of Mills County.

Alternative Home Heat Sources: They're Here!

It is no mystery that winter can become a huge burden on the finances. The heavy snow, ice or being ill can yield a missed day or two from work. The holidays can yield extra stress with all the presents to buy and traveling, too. But the one major component of winter induced financial stress revolves around one subject: the cost of heating your home. Today, natural gas, propane, wood and electricity are finding themselves replaced by alternative heating sources.

Stoves that burn wood pellets are an alternative for home heating. The pellets can be purchased in bags or by the bulk ton. One bag (40 – 50 lbs) can heat your home up to 36 hours, depending on your temperature preferences. Using inexpensive bags of pellets may result in higher costs due to pellet consumption and heat value. Remember – you get what you pay for.

Our search for new ways to fuel our automobiles has landed upon corn as a source of ethanol. Research is also being directed at our native

grasses (big bluestem, Indian grass, Switchgrass) for a more productive source of ethanol. Research shows that native grasses can provide up to 5 times more ethanol than corn processing, and they do so with very little cost. Gives you a new appreciation for that CRP ground you see on your way to work every day, doesn't it?

The current source of Ethanol – corn – can also play a significant role in our battle against high home heating costs. Corn burning stoves can provide heat for up to 36 hours from just one time filling the hopper. The corn used should be clean, untreated, and have less than 15 percent moisture content. Corn burns safe, clean, quickly and leaves very little to clean up.

To give you an idea – if costs of corn reached \$5 per bushel, it would still be cheaper than using natural gas or propane, or it could reach \$9 and still be cheaper than electricity. Corn takes about 120 days to replenish, whereas wood takes 20-40 years or more, and petroleum products take 3000 years or more. Plus, corn is prevalent in this region of the USA. No wonder they call us the "Heartland".

Fuel Type	Prices	\$/Therm	\$/Day
Corn	\$3.20 / bu	\$0.64	\$3.07
Wood	\$140 / cord	\$0.64	\$3.07
Propane	\$1.59 / gal	\$1.73	\$8.33
Natural Gas	\$1.40 / Therm	\$1.40	\$6.72
Wood Pellets	\$180 / ton	\$1.10	\$5.27
Fuel Oil	\$2.60 / gal	\$1.86	\$8.93
Electricity	\$0.10 / Kw	\$2.93	\$14.06

Then again, you could look into Ground Source Heat or Geo-Thermal for your homes as well. They may have somewhat high initial costs, but they pay for themselves in the long run and leave some money in your pockets for those other winter emergencies.

UPCOMING EVENTS

1/12/08 9am – 10:30am
Winter Bird Watching at Pony Creek Park

2/22/08 7:30pm – 9pm
Owl Prowl I at Pony Creek Park

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.