

# Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board  
Winter '08 / '09

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## THANK YOU!

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We would like to thank the Mills County Endowment Fund and the local Quail Unlimited chapter for their recent contributions to the Mills County Conservation Board. With the funds received from these organizations and REAP, we are able to purchase a new Dew Drop Native Grass Drill for prairie restoration efforts on public and private properties in Mills County. Thank you!

## Winter in a Mills County Park

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In winter, the parks that we maintain for the public take on a new identity. The colorful fall leaves are gone from the trees, exposing the leaf nests that are occupied by squirrels during the summer. Of course by this time, those squirrels are now residing in their winter homes, venturing out on occasion.

The grass and forest floor, which were just yesterday covered by fallen leaves, are now blanketed by the new snow. As one meanders their way through the trails at parks like Pony Creek, Mile Hill Lake or West Oak Forest, we become even more aware that we are not the only ones using these avenues of travel.

Although created and maintained by man, we find evidence that they are used by multiple other creatures as well. We find the tracks of the myriad of birds and squirrels that call the forests home. We find the tracks and scat of the White tailed deer, as they browse for food and a bedding area. Near the lake, we find the fallen tree, whose base is chewed to a point – evidence of beaver activity. We hear the shrill cry of a raptor in the skies overhead, the red tailed hawk searching for its prey.

As the darkness draws near on the trail, the moons glow reflects on the snow, giving a refreshing contrast with the darkness beyond the trees. While exiting the trail, we hear something call out to us, asking the question “who cooks for you” – the Barred Owl, as it begins its silent nocturnal flight through the forest.

As if on cue, our stomach begins to grumble, and we realize that it is dark and we must return home for supper. We enter our vehicles and crank up the heater and head home, leaving this winter wonderland behind.

## Meet Your *WILD* Mills County Neighbors!

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This issue's “neighbor” happens to be one we all are somewhat familiar with...the red fox.

The red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, is a fairly common animal in the Midwest. The fox varies in color from pale yellowish red to deep reddish brown on the dorsal surface (top) and white, ashy or grey/black on the ventral surface (bottom), and always has a bushy tail with a white tip. The lower legs, backs of the ears and feet are normally black. The fox can reach up to fifteen pounds in weight, but only under the most favorable circumstances. It is roughly 15-16 inches tall and normally ranges from 48 to 58 inches long (including tail). The red fox is a short-lived species, with only a few surviving beyond 5 years in the wild.

Red fox prefer to use dens that are underground – usually old badger dens but they also use hollow logs, and even wood piles. The typical mating period of the fox is from January until mid March. They will have their litters of up to 10 kits (baby foxes) from March to mid May in a den specially selected for this purpose.

The red fox is an omnivore, eating both vegetation and meat. Their diet, like most animals, depends on the season and what is available. A lot of animals (even those typically considered Carnivores) eat amounts of grass to aid in food digestion and passage. During the warmer months it seems they feed heavily on insects, eggs and vegetation like corn, berries, grapes and acorns because these foods are available in quantity. In colder months, they do the opposite, tending to focus on small prey animals and birds. A mother red fox will eat food items and regurgitate (vomit) the partially digested food into the mouth of the kits. This is a common practice with many wild canines. In time, live prey is brought back so the kits can practice killing on their own.

The young females usually stay in close proximity to their mother's territory and may help her raise future litters until they produce litters of their own. The young males will leave their mother's territory, sometimes travelling over 100 miles to establish their own territories.

The fox has few natural predators. Larger dogs (domestic and wild), mountain lions, and even large birds like the Bald Eagle will kill (but not always eat) red fox. Red fox deaths are also attributed to diseases like canine distemper, mange and rabies. Automobiles and humans also account for many red fox deaths.

In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century a lot was happening in North America. English colonies became states and these states became a unified government. Many immigrant noblemen from England brought fox hounds with them, and English red foxes to hunt. The

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imported English red fox eventually interbred with the native red fox, giving us the strain we have in Mills County and over most of the United States.

Years ago fox pelts were used to produce fancy clothing. The fur coats and shawls made of fox were very expensive in clothing shops in the larger cities. Trappers started to bring in more fox pelts. When the fur industry started to decline years ago, the numbers of active trappers started to decline as well. Fur markets have slowly risen in the past few years, yielding an increase in trappers in the field. This market rise usually does not last long.

The fox is one animal that many people consider to be extremely intelligent. Phrases such as "Sly as a fox" or "Smart as a fox" are attributed to the intellect of a fox. The red fox is an animal that is extremely cautious, observant and learns from experiences. I was once fortunate enough to view a red fox perform a rather humorous act in a forest in NE Iowa. I had stopped and leaned against a tree when a red fox trotted out of the forest to my right and proceeded to a woodpile not far from me. I watched the fox sniff around the woodpile and then slowly wiggle under it. In a few minutes it emerged with a mouse in its mouth. I watched as the fox took a few steps from the pile and threw the mouse up in the air, letting it fall back to the ground and pouncing as the mouse started to scurry for cover. The fox repeated this many times. When the mouse stopped trying to run, the fox gave up its fun and ate it. It was quite honestly one of my favorite memories from being in the woods.

There's an old tale in the southwest about a fox and a scorpion crossing paths on a river bank. They both had the same thing in mind, crossing the river, but the scorpion could not do it on its own. The scorpion begged to climb onto fox's back and ride across the river, promising not to sting. The fox did not trust the scorpion, but the scorpion assured the fox that if it were to sting while they were in the river, they would both die. The fox looked at the river and warily decided to help the scorpion. As the two neared the center of the river, the scorpion stung the fox. The fox, no longer able to swim, asked why it had been stung. The scorpion, fully aware they were now both going to die, simply responded "Because it is my nature".



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## UPCOMING EVENTS

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### January

**1/10/09 9am**

Winter Bird Watching @ Pony Creek Park

We will be observing some of Mills County's feathered residents as they visit the feeders we have in place at Pony Creek Park. We will also discuss common feeder pests and some food and feeder options for those interested in attracting a more diverse group of birds.

### February

**2/27/09 7:30pm – 9pm**

Owl Prowl I @ Pony Creek Park

We will discuss some of the common owls of Iowa and some of their more common calls and then go for a walk. With the owls on their nests, we should be able to hear some replies. Please bring a flashlight, and dress accordingly.

### March

**3/20/09 5 pm**

Iowa's Invaders @ Pony Creek Park

Join me as we touch base on many of Iowa's current plant, animal and insect invaders. Learn why these species' are a cause for concern for Iowa, how they're transferred, hazards they pose, and possible treatments. We will also be hiking trails here at Pony Creek Park as we search for a fairly common wood and grassland invader. Please dress accordingly.

**3/28/09 10 am**

Rocks, Gems & Minerals @ Pony Creek Park

We will start out with a video about Gems & Minerals that are found in the USA. We will have on display many books and specimens from the Naturalist's personal rock, gem & mineral collection, including many found here in Iowa! (James is neither a certified gemologist nor an appraiser.)

To 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.