



# The Jasper County Jewel

Jasper County Conservation Board Quarterly Newsletter 2020

## 2020- A year to understand what being thankful is all about

**Keri Van Zante, Director**

The year 2020 means something different to so many people. But staff at Jasper County Conservation have tried to look at the challenges of 2020 in a positive light! So many new friends looking to us for outdoor family bonding activities, helping hands that work hard to chip in during a disaster, clever ways to interact virtually and to teach our youth and adults about the environment, and so many generous donors supporting conservation projects! We know we have been gifted with so much love and for that, we are thankful for this year!

After the pandemic hit in March and people were confined to home, Jasper County Conservation staff took the opportunity to invite families into our parks to enjoy self-lead activities. We started with a “bear hunt” at Ashton, Mariposa, and Krumm, which then lead to a “goose chase” that took families on adventures all over the county! At school, our naturalists began leading Zoom programs and then we created our own YouTube channel with dozens of educational videos and activities for family enjoyment. As warm weather approached, we admitted to ourselves that our famous summer camps were not going to happen like they would during a normal year. We looked at this not as a problem, but as another opportunity. We partnered with Newton Noon Kiwanis to provide three summer camp boxes that were released in May, June and July. What a hit these were! Kids were learning about conservation, families were playing together in our parks, and we were still being allowed to provide education, not only to kids, but also for their parents! And again, we were thankful!

And really, who knew what a derecho was until that fateful day in August? Not too many, but we sure know now! Our parks were all massacred,

with the very worst damage on the Chichaqua Valley Trail and at Ashton Wildwood Park. While overwhelmed at first, conservation staff did what they do best, and we made a plan and began working *together* to get through the mess. Never have I been so proud of a team, working through grueling heat, poison ivy infestations, and impossibly tall piles of trees and debris. It was an all hands-on deck sort of show; park officers, maintenance staff, naturalists—all of us working long hours every single day for several months to get parks back open for public enjoyment. And the strangest part of it all? We had a great time doing it! We laughed, even as we sweated through our clothes and worked in the rain. What a fantastic career to have, where you get to enjoy your work family so much, that you forget how terribly your muscles ache from the work you just accomplished. Thankful is an understatement for something like this.



As 2020 draws to a close, Jasper County Conservation staff are still working on cleaning up from Mother Nature’s fury, but we are also doing so much more to make improvements in our Jasper County Parks. Our Caring for Conservation Auction, though only presented on a virtual platform this year, raised over \$15,000 for our Envi-

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## Virtual Programming

### Katie Cantu, Naturalist

When schools sent children home last March, it brought our typically very busy spring programming season to a screeching halt. In a normal year, we would be hosting a few thousand students in our parks throughout April and May on their annual field trips. In addition to school programs, public events were cancelled such as the Caring for Conservation Auction, evening prairie burn at Krumm Preserve, wildflower walk at Ashton Park, public paddles, and our annual hunter education class.

After purchasing some better camera equipment and learning the ins and outs of video editing, naturalists quickly began to start recording programs and activities, sharing them through a new Jasper County Conservation YouTube channel and on Facebook. Recordings were made of school field trips at Wagaman Mill for 4th grades and at Ashton Park for 5th grades. A few elementary classes used Zoom to chat with the naturalists as well.

As the pandemic went on, we also quickly realized that hosting summer camps for kids was going to be a problem. We'd been seeing around 400 children through our "wildly" popular summer camp programs. Was it worth having camp for just a few kids at a time, or could we create something that would have a greater reach across the county? Thus, the "Summer Camp in a Box" was created, a box full of outdoor activity ideas that could be done at home or at a local park and included all the materials needed. The first 50 boxes were quickly purchased in May with an overwhelmingly positive response. Fifty more different themed boxes were sold in June, and almost all of the boxes in July were also spoken for. We were able to reach many of our regular participants plus many more children who have never attended a JCCB camp before.

In March, JCCB had already been approved through the Iowa Governor's STEM Advisory Council program to have two summer teacher externs on staff. Sammie Hoffman, a middle school science teacher at Baxter Community Schools, and Thepmala Pearson, a Kindergarten teacher at SE Polk Schools, were ready to assist with a busy summer season with kids, but instead focused their time on helping with virtual events, assembling summer camp boxes, and working on the natural playscape trail at Mariposa Park. They both were vital resources of information to the naturalists as we planned ahead for the coming school year.

JCCB held a "virtual" fishing derby through social media. Participants simply had to take a picture of themselves fishing during the DNR's Free Fishing Weekend and share it on Facebook to be entered to win a fishing kayak donated by Quarry Springs Outfitters.

The Newton Public Library partnered with us to create a fun family scavenger hunt through the Goosechase app. Spanning over a month, families discovered nature around their homes and visited four different county parks, collecting photos of their challenges and competing to win a kayak. Nine teams tied for 1st place, so a name was drawn for the kayak and the other winners all received a fun JCCB prize bag.

Always looking ahead to the next season, summer is a time to prepare for the coming school year, and again, 2020 was going to present some new challenges. After meeting with local school administrators, it was clear we were not going to be entering any school buildings this fall, nor would buses would be taking students to our parks. We needed a way to reach remote learners at home. So again, we recorded videos of our classroom programs and put them into slides which also included activities and other informative links. To make the slides attractive and fun, the naturalists created Bitmojis of themselves "presenting" the topic. Programs were posted in folders on our Google Drive and teachers were sent links to access them.

We were able to hold our Caring for Conservation Auction online and we had a take-and-make fresh evergreen wreath kit available for the holidays. We are creating a program email list this winter so that more people have access to our videos (more information on page 6).

It has no doubt been a challenging year for our education program, but we've made many adaptations and hope we can see everyone in person again in 2021!



Above: Naturalist Bitmojis Katie and Greg presenting the 7th grade watershed investigation field trip virtually. Normally, this field trip would be at Mariposa Park.

## Goodbye to a Dear Friend

2020 brought the loss of a dear friend and conservation board member. Calvin Winn, 76, of rural Newton died on September 10, 2020, at MercyOne Newton Medical Center. Calvin, the son of Kenneth and Byrdene (Brodersen) Winn, graduated from Newton High School in the class of 1962. Calvin was a self-employed farmer and co-owner of In Remembrance. On November 23, 1991, Calvin was united in marriage with Kathy Kalma at the Community Reformed Church in Newton. In the early 1970's Calvin was a pioneer in no-till farming and continued in no-till farming until his health didn't allow. In the late 1990's, after his hog production ended, Calvin teamed up with Jim Hickman to help at H/C Construction, although they would call themselves "Him and Calvin" and Calvin would remind Jim frequently that "he didn't want a job!"



Calvin served on many area boards including Farm Bureau, Soil and Water Conservation, United Methodist Church, Jasper County Conservation, and was the chair of the Palo Alto Township. He also was a long time member of both the Newton Elks Lodge and the Emerson Hough Chapter of the Izaak Walton League. Calvin served at the sexton of the Palo Alto Cemetery for many years.

Calvin enjoyed working on antique tractors, taking naps in his office, going to the pond to fish, and sitting out on the deck visiting with friends. Calvin always enjoyed a good story and making people smile. Calvin is so greatly appreciated for everything accomplished while serving on the Jasper County Conservation Board and will have a memorial grain bin picnic shelter in his name at a new county park, opening in 2021.

## Derecho Storm

The derecho on August 10, 2020, was a day that most people in Jasper County will not forget, and it left a lasting imprint on our county parks.

Derechos are fast-moving bands of thunderstorms with destructive winds. The winds of a derecho travel at least 58 miles per hour and have been recorded as fast as 130 miles per hour. Instead of spiraling like a tornado or hurricane, the winds of a derecho move in straight lines. That's where the storm gets its name; the word derecho means "straight ahead" in Spanish. The winds experienced in Jasper County last August wiped out so many of our mature trees; no park was left untouched.

Some of the hardest hit areas included the Chichaqua Valley Recreation Trail and Ashton Wildwood Park. The 20 mile trail had large trees down across it almost the entire length. It took months of manpower and very large machinery to clear it off. Ashton Park is 115 acres of oak/hickory timber and also was hit hard. The campground at Ashton almost looked as if a bomb went off in it and had to be closed for the remainder of 2020. The derecho winds whipped the roof off of Ashton Observatory, thankfully not harming the telescopes, but leaving the large classroom a complete mess. Members of the Des Moines Astronomical Society (DMAS) were able to clear the classroom right away. Conservation staff stripped everything out and the building was professionally cleaned.

Other areas hit hard by the storm included Mariposa Park, Jacob Krumm Nature Preserve, Reimer Refuge, and two new areas the conservation board is trying to develop into parks. Clean-up went well into the fall and JCCB Director Keri Van Zante has been working with the insurance company and FEMA on damage costs.



Above: Trees fallen across the Chichaqua Valley Trail after the August derecho storm.



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ronmental Education Center project! Two new restrooms are being installed at Ashton Park, thanks to a grant from The Jasper Community Foundation and a donation from the non-profit group, Jasper Conservation Connection.

Additional grants were obtained for a recreational trail project that will begin construction next summer, connecting Monroe and Prairie City, first to the entrance of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, and then on to Mitchellville and Des Moines in future phases.

A grant was also secured to install a modern campground at Mariposa! We are hoping for construction to begin in 2021. And stay tuned for TWO NEW PARKS opening in 2021!!!

Through the pandemic and the derecho, staff has been working hard to get these areas ready for you to enjoy. 2020 was an arduous year, there is no doubt about that, but looking back on it all makes me thankful for so many good friends, family, hard work, generosity, and kindness that have helped us all through the year most of us would prefer to celebrate ending on January 31 at midnight! Cheers to a happy 2021 for us all!



Above: Jasper County Conservation staff take a break after clearing trees off the Chichaqua Valley Trail in the rain.

### 50th Anniversaries

Two big anniversaries happened in 2020, but the public events to celebrate them were cancelled due to the pandemic.

2020 marked the 50th anniversary of Mariposa Recreation Area, made even more special with the fact that the lake restoration project was completed and the “new and improved” park opened this past spring. Mariposa’s 18-acre lake was drained and over 19,000 dump truck loads of sediment removed. Fish habitat, a fishing jetty, boat ramp, a new wetland with an educational seating area and a new sediment pond were all created to further improve the habitat and recreation opportunities at the park. Conservation staff had also worked to develop more of the new nature play-scape trail, just north of the picnic shelter. JCCB had hoped to celebrate this milestone and grand reopening with a large family event last June.

Also celebrating 50 years in 2020 was the Des Moines Astronomical Society (DMAS) organization. They were planning a banquet with a nationally known astronomer keynote speaker, a “Star-B-Que” at Ashton Observatory, and tour of the Ashton Park and Drake University Observatories. Upon cancelling these events, DMAS announced that they hoped to have a big 50+1 celebration in 2021 instead.

Keep watching for updates as we still try to plan activities in honor of these major milestones. Mariposa Park is open to the public, and even though the fish stocked this year may not be quite big enough for fishing, we’ve had many campers, hikers and kayakers frequent the area. And, while Ashton Observatory sustained substantial roof damage in the derecho storm, it is looking like work will be completed sometime this winter.



Above: Astronomy programs at Ashton Observatory are given by the Des Moines Astronomical Society, celebrating 50 years in 2020.

## Lighted Halloween Drive

This past fall, JCCB would have had the 16th annual Halloween Hike, a non-scary family event that began at Mariposa Park with Boy Scouts performing animal skits, and evolving over the years into a musical act with volunteers from the Newton Community Theatre, held at the Emerson Hough Chapter of the Izaak Walton League.

After a rough few months of cleaning up the derecho mess and repeatedly hearing from folks who really wanted to be using our parks again, we decided we needed something to replace our fall event. The main circle area at Ashton Wild-wood park had been cleared and provided a large space for a drive through lighted display. We called it “Howl-o-Day Lights” and included trick-or-treating along the way. This event was held on Saturday, October 17.

So many wonderful volunteers purchased candy, loaned us their decorations and lights, and came in costume to help make it a really fun night. The weather actually cooperated for us, and about 700 people drove through the park to have some Halloween fun from the safety of their cars, many dressed in costumes themselves! This event was such a success that we will be taking another look at what we offer in 2021. If you'd like to be involved with this great annual tradition or become a sponsor, please contact us at the JCCB office in Newton!

## Virtual “Off the Beaten Path”

The Off the Beaten Path race was held as a virtual event this year. Runners had the opportunity to run a 3K or 6K over a week long period and were asked only to report where they got in their miles. Runners participated from all over Iowa on the road, trail and treadmills!

While this was fun, we sure missed seeing everyone's big finish! We are hopeful that 2021 will allow for a live event. All runners received a Jasper County Conservation Yowie/face covering for participating. These are still available for purchase for \$5 at the Jasper County Conservation office.



*Above:* Jasper County Conservation Yowie face coverings are available for \$5 at the JCCB office in Newton.

*Below:* Some of the volunteers and displays at “Howl-o-Day Lights Drive” at Ashton Park.





### Caring For Conservation Auction Benefitting the Environmental Education Center

Fundraising for the Jasper County Conservation Nature Center looked a little different this year. We were all set up to have a “second annual” auction at Sugar Grove Vineyards the last part of March, but cancelled it due to the pandemic.

As the year went on, we waited to see if anything would change, but it looked as though we weren’t going to be able to have an in-person event. Since all the auction items and donations were ready to go, it was decided to have a “virtual” fundraiser. Our virtual Caring for Conservation Holiday Auction was held Saturday, December 5 from 6-8pm.

We worked with Greater Giving to create an online site for bidding. Some of the fun items we had were themed gift baskets, state fair winning cinnamon rolls, wildlife paintings by Art Junkie students, a hot air balloon ride for two and a sweetheart snowshoe staycation. Major sponsors for the auction were Jeff and Jodi King, Dodd’s Trash Hauling and Recycling, and The Jeweler’s Bench.

On the night of the online auction, there were 82 bidders participating. Those who wanted to participate, but were unable to, contributed after the event making the total raised \$15,200.

We are excited about the success of the auction, especially since it had been changed to an online event. We wish to thank everyone who participated in the auction and who donated outside of the auction. Our total funds raised for the nature center to date is nearing the million-dollar mark.

We are looking forward to having our next Caring for Conservation Auction the spring of 2022. In the meantime, we’ll be having another event, the Caring for Conservation Concert, featuring local band Slipstream, July 2021 at Ashton Wildwood Park. We will update with details of that event as it gets closer!



*Left:* For a unique gift, JCCB t-shirts, blank greeting cards from our photo contest and monarch ornaments are for sale at the conservation office.

### Upcoming Maple Syrup Season

Almost all of the 2020 Uncle Jake’s Maple Syrup batch has been sold and we’re looking ahead to the upcoming sugaring season! The Sugar Shack at Jacob Krumm Nature Preserve will be open and operating this coming February/March. Because much of the process can be viewed outdoors, there may be some public open houses scheduled. Please watch our Facebook page and website for updates. Syrup will be for sale through the Jasper County Conservation office in Newton.

If you are at Jacob Krumm Preserve, stop over at the Sugar Shack, located at the east entrance of the park. We have a new interpretive panel that explains the history and process of making maple syrup.



### Program Email List

Sadly, the Covid pandemic kept our OWLS (Older, Wiser, Livelier Seniors) group from meeting at the Jasper County Armory Building for monthly programs. Conservation staff members really missed seeing the group and would like to offer online programs for those interested.

Simply send an email to [jread@jasperia.org](mailto:jread@jasperia.org) or call the office at (641) 792-9780 and you can be added to our program email list. Each month you will receive a link to our YouTube channel featuring a new program and will have up to a month to watch it online. This is not limited to regular OWLS participants, so please share this with friends and family and we’ll get them on the list as well!

### **As the new year approaches, make resolutions to:**

- Get involved with a group that is making a difference locally
- Donate to a great cause
- Help protect wildlife and take care of the environment
  - Stay active and young at heart
- Learn new things
- Spend more time outdoors
  - Meet new people
  - Have fun!

Please consider volunteering with Jasper County Conservation! We would love to add you to our dynamic group of supporters. Contact our office by phone or email to learn more about the opportunities available.

## 120 Hours Outside

Looking for a fun and easy New Year's resolution? Why not make a commitment to spending 120 hours outdoors in 2021!

We have noticed a large increase in the number of people visiting our county parks this past year. With many places closed during the pandemic, our county parks remained open and were safe, alternative locations to spend time with family. Whether you like to ride a bike, paddle a kayak, or simply enjoy a walk down one of our many nature trails, we'd like to challenge you to spend 120 hours of your time outdoors. This breaks down to only 2 hours a week! Easy, right?!

To keep track of your hours, print off the 120 Hours Outside chart on our website, [www.jaspercountyconservation.com](http://www.jaspercountyconservation.com), and mark off your time each week. Once you've reached 120 hours, send your chart to our office in the Jasper County Armory/Annex Building in Newton and you just might receive a little prize!

It has been proven over and over again that spending time outdoors not only helps you physically but also mentally, improving your entire well-being. Something as easy as a walk outside, taking in nature around you, can be extremely good for your health!

## 2020 Volunteer of the Year

Yet another event cancelled due to the pandemic was JCCB's annual volunteer appreciation dinner. Even though major events didn't happen, we still had volunteers working with staff throughout the year and one in particular really stood above the rest. Bill Yeager has become almost a full-time staff member himself with the amount of time he has dedicated to helping in the parks. Bill regularly volunteers to mow and help with park projects as needed. He has documented the entire Mariposa Lake Restoration project from start to finish and created a book of it for the conservation department.

Bill is always quick to help out when needed and regularly checks in with all conservation staff, both in the field and at the office. It's for this reason we've named him our 2020 Volunteer of the Year! We will celebrate Bill in 2021 with a special surprise.



## New Conservation Board Member

When Jasper County Conservation lost board member Calvin Winn this past fall, it was long time volunteer, Doug Smith, who stepped up to fill the vacancy. Doug is a resident of Newton and



recently retired from teaching at Berg Middle School. He has worked with the conservation naturalists on countless field trips and school programs over the years and has served on the Jasper Conservation Connection board since the non-profit's beginning in 2005. Doug helped start one of our favorite events, the annual Halloween Hike, and has put his construction background to use, helping build the observation tower and picnic shelter at Jacob Krumm Preserve, among many other projects.

We can't think of anyone who knows the ins and outs of JCCB as well as Doug, and look forward to his leadership in the coming years.

## Celebrate Your Love of the Land

Since 1962, Jasper County Conservation has protected over 3,000 acres of local prairies, woodlands, wetlands, lakes, rivers and streams, and has created almost 40 miles of trails. Our dedicated education staff meet with over 15,000 children and adults each year to teach about the outdoors. At the heart of our mission are people who love the outdoors. People like you.

Whether your gift signifies your love of land and nature, or is a way of remembering a loved one, it will support the ongoing protection, restoration and exploration of special places right here in Jasper County. You can even choose to direct your gift to a specific project or program. Our Environmental Education Center Project is nearing \$1,000,000 in donations and your gift could help get us over that mark! Build on the legacy of the nature lover in your life by protecting more of the places you both love - for the land, water, wildlife, education, and future generations of outdoor enthusiasts.

Want us to notify your honoree? Include your honoree's name and address and we'll mail them a card sharing your special donation. Your honoree's name will also appear in The Jasper County Jewel newsletter. For more information, contact the Jasper County Conservation office at (641) 792-9780 or stop by and see us at 1030 W. 2<sup>nd</sup> St. S. in Newton.

Jasper County Conservation Board  
1030 W. 2nd St. S.  
Newton, IA 50208

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M - F 8:00 - 5:00 (641) 792-9780  
email: [conservation@jasperia.org](mailto:conservation@jasperia.org)  
website: [www.jaspercountyconservation.com](http://www.jaspercountyconservation.com)

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**Special thanks this past fall for....**donations from Ina Heidemann, Doug Gibson, Mike Knoll, Victoria Jordan, and Bill Yeager. Thanks to all our wonderful volunteers who donated to and helped at the lighted Halloween drive and all our Caring for Conservation Auction donors!  
**THANK YOU!**



Jasper County Conservation Board's programs are consistent with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identification, age and handicap. If anyone believes they have been subjected to discrimination, they may file a complaint with the Jasper County Conservation Board or the Office of Equal Opportunity, Washington, D.C. 29240