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Jan. 20 Iowa Outdoors

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IOWA OUTDOORS

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES | CONSERVATION AND RECREATION DIVISION

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WILDLIFE SURVIVING WINTER

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

A week of subzero cold early this month—and more yet to come—provide a quick jolt of Iowa reality. It gets uncomfortable in the winter! Still, we humans can escape the elements when needed. We just go inside. Not so, with wildlife.

Some take the easy way out.

“Waterfowl are smarter than all those other critters. They have wings. They fly away,” explains Al Hancock, of Clear Lake. Of *course*, he would feel that way. He’s an Iowa DNR waterfowl specialist.

“It’s a simple balancing act. Geese need very little open water. As long as they can find fields to feed in—windswept, bare crop fields—they will remain,” says Hancock. “When it takes more food to maintain energy to survive up here...they fly right out.”

Some look for a cold weather oasis.

“Ducks do it even more so,” says Hancock. “A ‘micro climate,’ say a city waste water lagoon, a stream or the drainage just below? If it’s out of the wind, a few mallards will stick around.”

Mammals have various survival methods. Some hibernate. Others lie low, but eat as much as they can.

“You might find deer moving earlier to feed; in the afternoon rather than as dusk falls,” notes DNR forest research technician Jim Coffey. They have larger body mass; larger frames—efficient for maintaining core temperature.

“Deer have hollow hairs, insulating them from the cold,” says Coffey. “That’s why you see them (bedded down) and covered with snow. It won’t melt.”

In the woodlands, it is adapt or die. Found around Iowa, the 20-pound-plus eastern wild turkey is the largest of five subspecies in the U.S. Again, its larger body mass is more efficient. Black and brown feathers absorb heat. By fluffing those feathers, they hold in heat.

“They will minimize heat loss, by roosting downhill, out of the wind,” says Coffey. If it gets too cold, they hunker down. They can go ten days without food; or wade through ten inches of snow (to find it).”

Pheasant populations, survival and lack of habitat in Iowa have been well documented in the last decade. They do well for about eight months a year. It’s the cold weather season that does them in.

“Four years--2007-2011--really brought to our attention the *extreme* winter weather,” stresses DNR upland wildlife technician Mark McInroy. “It has drawn our focus to more winter habitat; for survival in extreme conditions.”

That means more than native grasses; even cattail marshes; which protect pheasants and other grassland birds in first level snowstorms.

“A lot of times they fill quickly,” warns McInroy. “(Then,) we’re talking shrubs; really course, heavy stemmed stuff. Ragweed, willow bats; shelter belts with several rows of shrubs and pines are good.”

Put them near a food source and most pheasants can ride out the extreme weather that has collared Iowa recently. And that the same cover helps other wildlife species, too.

On the plus side, Iowa’s favorite game bird has staged a bit of a comeback. “Our bird numbers are getting to probably the best we’ve seen in six, eight years. We finally had a break this winter from all the extremes. It’s been a pretty good hunting year,” he proclaims.

Sidebar: no wildlife feeding.

Pour out some corn for the pheasants? Worst thing you can do.

You may have your heart in the right place. However, predators also enjoy it. Dumping grain pretty well guarantees anything with paws, claws, beaks and bellies will get their fill, as well.

Want to help game birds get through the winter? Plant the habitat they need. If it's near a food source; great. That needed cover is nearby.

Also...waterfowl watchers, and more recently deer biologists, point to the spread of disease as a reason NOT to concentrate wildlife in one location. Disease can be spread by close contact, such as dozens of deer muzzles browsing on the same food source.

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THE CHICKADEE CHECK-OFF CONTINUES ITS MODEST RISE ON STATE TAX FORM

Last year, roughly 8,000 Iowa taxpayers helped boost wildlife conservation with donations to the Fish and Wildlife Fund on their state tax form. This marks the fourth straight year donations to the fund have increased, a trend that Stephanie Shepherd, DNR Wildlife Diversity Biologist, hopes to continue in 2015.

"The amount Iowans are donating to the fund is growing after a 10-year downward trend," said Shepherd. "Those donations go directly to research and habitat development for some of Iowa's most vulnerable animal species, so the funds are very important for natural resources."

Iowans donated \$136,000 last spring when completing their 2013 tax forms which is a 2 percent increase from 2012 returns and an almost 25 percent increase since the low point in 2009.

The Fish and Wildlife Fund, known popularly as the "Chickadee Check-off," is a mechanism the Iowa Legislature created in the 1980s for Iowans to donate to wildlife conservation on the Iowa state tax form. Before the Chickadee Check-off, so called non-game wildlife had no dedicated funding.

At its height, Iowans donated more than \$200,000 annually to the fund. The main reasons for the decline are unknown but Shepherd said taxpayers need to be alert when filling out their form or working with a tax preparer.

"It is an inconspicuous line that is easy to pass over or forget, and many tax preparers may not remember to ask whether a client wants to donate," she said. "It may be up to the taxpayer to remind their preparer, or make a point of looking for it whether they are doing their form on paper or electronically."

Donating on the tax form is easy: simply write the amount to donate next to the Fish and Wildlife Check-Off, line 55A on Form 1040, and the sum is either automatically deducted from the refund or added to the

amount owed. As with all charitable contributions, the amount is deductible from next year's taxes.

"Currently only about half of one percent of Iowans donate," said Shepherd. "If every Iowa taxpayer donated just \$1, it would mean \$1.5 million for wildlife and natural resource conservation so we think our goal for 2015; for more people to find the check off on their tax form, and to increase donations by 10 percent; could be accomplished."

All proceeds from the check-off support the Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Diversity program, responsible for protecting more than 1,000 fish and wildlife species in the state. Money helps improve wildlife habitat, fund research studies, support the reintroduction of threatened or endangered species, and much more.

DNR CONTACT: Stephanie Shepherd, Wildlife Diversity Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, at 515-432-2823 ext. 102 or stephanie.shepherd@dnr.iowa.gov.

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ACRES REMAIN FOR LANDOWNERS WANTING TO IMPROVE PHEASANT HABITAT

Time is running out for landowners in Iowa's 46 best pheasant counties to secure funding to restore pheasant habitat in Iowa's core pheasant range.

The Iowa Pheasant Recovery – State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program is for Iowa landowners who want to restore top notch pheasant habitats to their property. It is a new USDA continuous CRP practice designed to restore native grasslands and wetlands where they will be the most beneficial for ring-necked pheasants.

Iowa received 50,000 acres split between the 46 primary pheasant counties (37,500) and the 31 secondary pheasant counties (12,500). The 31 secondary counties enrolled all 12,500 acres before the 2014 pheasant season opened. An estimated 20,000 acres remain in the 46 primary pheasant counties.

"We are getting a lot of pressure from landowners in the secondary counties to release these acres so they can make offers to enroll," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

"Landowners in primary pheasant counties who are interested in this program shouldn't wait to contact us because acres may be shifted to the secondary counties," Bogenschutz said.

Primary pheasant counties are Adair, Adams, Audubon, Boone, Bremer, Buena Vista, Butler, Calhoun, Carroll, Cass, Cherokee, Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, Franklin, Greene, Grundy, Hamilton, Hancock, Hardin, Humboldt, Ida, Iowa, Jasper, Johnson, Keokuk, Kossuth, Lyon, Mahaska, Marshall, Muscatine, Obrien, Osceola, Palo Alto, Plymouth, Pocahontas, Poweshiek, Sac, Sioux, Story, Union, Wapello, Washington, Webster, Winnebago and Wright.

Pheasant and other grassland birds are particularly vulnerable to harsh winters and wet springs. Restoring top quality winter and nesting/brood-rearing habitat will help pheasant populations recover and could boost annual harvest by 100,000 roosters.

CRP rental rates are at an all-time high in Iowa. Landowners should contact the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Bureau private lands staff to discuss eligibility and cost share assistance. A map of DNR staff contacts and a factsheet on the Iowa Pheasant Recovery program is available at www.iowadnr.gov/habitat

MEDIA CONTACT: Todd Bogenschutz, Upland Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-432-2823 ext 111.

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IOWA CITIZENS PLAYING KEY ROLE IN TRACKING IMPERILED WILDLIFE

It's 10 o'clock on a summer night along a gravel road anywhere in Iowa. In the farm pond next to the road a raucous chorus of male frogs are making themselves heard as they vie for mates. A volunteer stands - clipboard in hand - ear cocked, mentally sorting out each of the calling species and the number of individuals using this seemingly ordinary pond.

Skip over to a Saturday morning by the river where another volunteer has binoculars and spotting scope trained on the tallest tree in the vicinity. In this tree is a huge nest, home to two bald eagles and their young. Are there two or three young in that nest? Hard to tell and a follow up visit will be needed; in the meantime, notes are taken and a peaceful hour is spent watching one of the most spectacular birds in North America.

Every year, all across the state of Iowa, citizen scientists are making enormous contributions to wildlife conservation.

The volunteers described above were trained through the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' Volunteer Wildlife Monitoring Program (VWMP).

"We don't have enough staff in the DNR to adequately monitor all the vulnerable species that we need to. This is where citizen scientists play a crucial role," said program coordinator Stephanie Shepherd.

Every March and April, Shepherd travels around the state to lead training workshops that prepare volunteers to collect data on some of Iowa's critical wildlife.

So what are these critical wildlife species?

One training workshop focuses on some of Iowa's more spectacular bird species such as bald eagles, osprey, peregrine falcons and colonially nesting waterbirds such as herons and egrets. Volunteers collect data on specific nesting sites around the state and submit pertinent data such as how many young birds fledge.

"This data collection requires lots of patience and some good optics in order to watch the nest from a

distance and not disturb the birds," Shepherd said. Last year volunteers reported on 76 bald eagle nests and 11 colonial waterbird rookeries.

The second survey is more aural than visual.

Volunteers are trained to listen to and recognize the 16 species of frogs and toads in Iowa based on their breeding calls. In 2014, volunteers surveyed 64 survey routes which translate into 574 wetland sites monitored for frog and toad activity.

"The frog and toad surveyors are particularly special as to perform the surveys they have to be prepared to drive back country roads at night along a specified route which would not be everyone's cup of tea," she said. "I think most feel that exploring the Iowa wilds at night is a unique experience and opportunity.

"The Volunteer Wildlife Monitoring Program provides an opportunity for adults who love the outdoors and wildlife to be directly involved with the conservation and monitoring of Iowa's resources."

Interested in getting involved? Attend an upcoming training.

The Iowa DNR is partnering with the Dallas, Sac, Scott, and Wapello County Conservation boards to host workshops.

Bird workshops will be held on two Saturdays, one near Ottumwa on March 7th and one near Perry on March 14th.

Frog and Toad survey workshops will be held April 10 in Scott County, April 13 in Dallas County and April 16 in Sac County. Workshops are held in the evening. For more information visit: <http://www.iowadnr.com/volunteerwildlifemonitoring/> or e-mail vwmp@dnr.iowa.gov.

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GRANT HELPS COMMUNITIES INVENTORY PUBLIC TREES

This year, 10 Iowa communities will participate in a public inventory of their trees through a U.S. Forest Service grant called Sustainable Urban Forestry Training and Assistance (SUFTA). The grant will fund training to municipal staff, non-profits and interested citizens, so communities can complete a public tree inventory, prepare for emerald ash borer and create a sustainable urban forestry program.

The eight-session training, administered by the DNR forestry bureau, will include tree identification, risk assessment, forest pest identification, technology training, tree planting, pruning/maintenance and inventory data collection.

"This will be a great opportunity for interested individuals and groups to increase their knowledge and skills in horticulture and forestry," says Laura Wagner, SUFTA grant coordinator for the Iowa DNR, "and in turn play a vital role in contributing to their community's urban forest."

Attendance at all eight training sessions is mandatory to take part in the community tree inventories. Communities and their first training session dates are listed below. Interested individuals, civic groups and clubs are asked to contact the local coordinator at the respective phone number for further details.

- Atlantic, Feb 24; John Lund at [712-243-4810](tel:712-243-4810)
- Fairfield, March 11; Scott Timm at [515-291-2560](tel:515-291-2560)
- Grinnell, March 24; David Popp at [641-236-2632](tel:641-236-2632)
- Marion, March 26; Mike Carolan at [641-236-2632](tel:641-236-2632)
- Marshalltown, March 31; Terry Gray at [641-754-5715](tel:641-754-5715)
- Mason City, April 7; Bob Berggren at [641-421-3675](tel:641-421-3675)
- Muscatine, Feb 18; Richard Klimes at [563-263-0241](tel:563-263-0241)
- Oskaloosa, March 23; Dylan Mulfinger at [641-673-9431](tel:641-673-9431)
- Pleasant Hill, March 12; Heath Ellis at [515-208-5212](tel:515-208-5212)
- Storm Lake, Feb 27; Jim Patrick at [712-732-8000](tel:712-732-8000)

For more information about the Sustainable Urban Forestry Training and Assistance (SUFTA) grant program, contact Laura Wagner, grant coordinator at 515-725-8456 or laura.wagner@dnr.iowa.gov.

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Leading Iowans in Caring for Our Natural Resources.

Please Note: My new phone number is 515-725-8280, and new fax number is 515-725-8201.

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