



Making Iowa safe for rattlers

by Michael Dhar

Curt Goettsch speaks for the snakes.

The first-year AmeriCorps member serves in northeast Iowa, helping to preserve wetland habitat for the endangered massasauga rattlesnake. But, unlike most people working in habitat preservation, Goettsch contributes mostly by talking.

As a private lands member, Goettsch tells landowners about government conservation programs—and tries to convince them to enroll land in the efforts.

“My main focus is to look for areas that could possibly go in, talk to people in the area, get them involved and signed up,” Goettsch said.

Based out of the Sweet Marsh Wildlife Unit in Bremer County, Goettsch assists the Natural Resources Conservation Service with its Wetland Reserve Program. With his help, the program has enrolled an additional 372 acres of land, according to a report prepared by NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Jacob Groth.

“Curt’s been a big help,” said NRCS Wetland Specialist Mike Webster. “He’s been able to do a lot of the groundwork.”

The Bremer County wetland project is part of an ongoing effort, in conjunction with the DNR and the Bremer County

Conservation Board, to create a publicly owned greenbelt along the Wapsipinicon River Corridor. Farmers and others enroll their land (essentially selling land-use

“The Wapsipinicon came out of its banks 6 or 7 times. You just have to let them know about the programs.”

The massasauga’s status as an endangered species



rights to the government program) and NRCS officials then transform it back into wetlands. Landowners maintain recreation rights, but the land can’t ever be cropped again.

Goettsch helps by visiting and calling landowners, sending out press releases and letters, and trying to increase overall public awareness of conservation efforts. Farmers often want to take part in the program and sell strips of their land to the government because of flooding and erosion problems, Goettsch said.

“A lot of times people are interested when we’ve had a spring and summer like this year,” he said.

has helped the WRP enroll more land, Webster said. Government agencies rank reserve lands in order of priority—the highest-ranking lands receive the most funding. The presence of an endangered rattlesnake—especially one found only in Iowa and Ohio—greatly increased the funding available to the WRP.

In his capacity as a DNR employee, Goettsch keeps DNR officials, and the landowners with whom they work, aware of other government programs.

“He promotes what the DNR programs can do and puts private land owners in touch with NRCS and FSA [Farm Services Agency] programs that come up,”

said Sweet Marsh Wildlife Biologist Jim Jansen.

“He’s kind of a link. We get calls from private land owners to do conservation things and we need that link.”

Goettsch joined AmeriCorps in an attempt to get back into natural resources work, he said. After three months at a pharmacy job, Goettsch decided he was done working indoors.

His position with the private lands has given Goettsch the opportunity to do beneficial work on behalf of wildlife, something the lifelong hunter appreciated, he said.

The massasauga, dependant upon extremely

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AmeriCorps, the domestic version of the Peace Corps, sponsors service positions across the country, including 47 within the Iowa Department of Natural Resources’ volunteer program, The Keepers of the Land.



Adding it All Up

by director Linda Terry



The Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps members in the IDNR have been busy!

In 2004, members collectively:

- burned 5,553 acres of land to enhance prairies
- produced and planted 19,125 prairie plugs
- helped 108 private landowners enroll 622 acres in Farm Bill land conservation programs
- helped restore 1042 acres of wetlands
- managed 185,520 acres of wildlife habitat (maintaining 456 nesting boxes, building 82 bird banding traps, banding 2704 birds, repairing/building 53 docks, replacing 266 signs, planting wildlife food plots)
- cleaned 38 miles of Iowa's waterways retrieving more than 4 tons of debris, plus 96 cubic yards of trash on Project AWARE
- started 5 new "Friends of State Parks" groups
- repaired/constructed 94 miles of trail in state parks and preserves for the safety of their users
- constructed ADA accessible trail/wildlife viewing area at Elinor Bedell State Park
- Planned, designed and constructed 2 multi-purpose bridges at Pine Lake and Maquoketa Caves State Parks
- repaired flood damage on trails/built silt retention dams in Backbone State Park
- attended 67 career fairs, explaining our AmeriCorps program and recruiting future members
- provided 43 programs on the Lewis and Clark expedition to over 949 attendees during the nationwide Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Celebration
- presented over 260 environmental education programs to nearly 4,600 state park visitors across Iowa
- participated in 174 and organized 95 volunteer activities across Iowa
- recruited 2,190 volunteers who donated over 15,000 hours of service
- presented 585 environmental educational programs and workshops

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Supervisor Updates: What AmeriCorps Keepers Members are Doing...

AmeriCorps Keepers of the Land members are serving across the state. Read on for updates from some of their supervisors:

For the Birds

James Beebe, serving at the Riverton Wildlife Unit, led a youth duck hunt sponsored by Ducks Unlimited, generating 40-50 volunteers. In coming months, he will lead a volunteer effort to place wood duck houses on state wildlife areas. Two eagle scouts constructed houses for the project.

In addition to his work at the wildlife unit, Beebe has helped with projects at Waubonsie State Park on his own time.

Public Lands

Pat Christianson led a crew of temporary wildlife employees in the removal of 12,000 ft. of boundary fences on new public lands at the Ingham High Wildlife Unit. He also cut invasive trees, collected deer samples, helped with a prescribed burn, prepared for winter and spring prairie planting, and helped maintain wood duck, mallard, and goose nest structures. He led two volunteers in the construction of wood duck nesting boxes. In coming months, he will complete basic fire training courses.

Cube Dwellers

Michael Dhar and **Tom O'Neill** served in the

Keepers of the Land central office in Des Moines. They assisted with the annual volunteer awards banquet and helped with other volunteer-related programs.

Dhar produced a Friends group newsletter and performed marketing work for Project AWARE, a summer river cleanup project. He also produced a new volunteer page in the DNR's Conservationist magazine. O'Neill has worked to tally volunteer hours. He also initiated a program to involve college students in natural resources volunteerism.

Dhar and O'Neill worked together on an urban cleanup volunteer event.

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Fish and wildlife member Joe Baumann inspects a wood duck box at the Hawkeye Wildlife Unit



Taking her work home: one member’s devotion to volunteerism

by Michael Dhar

For Kim Rasler, volunteerism is a way of life.

The second year AmeriCorps Keepers of the Land member serves as a naturalist at the Springbrook Conservation Education Center. When she gets home from “the office,” however, she doesn’t flip on the TV—she volunteers somewhere else.

“A lot of people see service as an obligation,” said David Woolsey, pastor at St. Thomas’ Church in Panora, one of the places at which Rasler volunteers. “I think she sees it as a joy.”

At St. Thomas, Rasler has helped perform an internal audit, put out a newsletter, serve meals, and lead Bible study. She also lends her services to a Panora nursing home and the Guthry County Thrivent Financial Board, a group that provides economic aide to community members.

“I think Kim is definitely unique,” Woolsey said. “I’ve never seen a visitor come and be such an important part of the church. I haven’t seen anything like this, and I’ve been doing this since 1998.”

At Springbrook, as part of her “official” duties as an AmeriCorps member, Rasler acts as a naturalist during spring, summer, and fall. She prepares and conducts several programs every week, including presentations on orienteering, bird banding,

“It was a surprise,” Rasler said. “I received a call from the governor’s office and I said, ‘Are you sure you were trying to reach me? I was just plugging away at my job and enjoying my job.’”

During the winter, when fewer school groups visit,

relations work at Springbrook has suited her well, Rasler said, though she gets the most reward from reaching her young audiences.

“I like to hear kids learn something new,” she said. “And then, if I hear them talking about it afterward, that’s even more awesome.”

Rasler’s dedication to public service began with her experiences as a mother. When her son Jon, now 24, was growing up, Rasler dedicated herself to school-related activities. She helped with scouts, coached soccer, served on the Parent Teacher Association,

and helped out with a reading program. She branched out into community-based service when her son graduated. Since she was so involved in school activities, Jon Rasler’s mother became a star among his friends, he said.

“I’ll be chatting with my friends and they’re like, ‘oh, we love your mom. She’s so cool,’” Jon Rasler said. “She was a good mom and a great role model.”

After she took a course on environmental science



Rewarding Work: The night after Rasler gave an owl presentation, she heard campers using owl calls.

archery, conservation issues, animal identification, and other topics.

“In the summer, we get maybe 100 kids a day and funnel them through different programs all week,” Rasler said. “I’ve taught literally thousands of kids.”

In recognition for that work, Rasler received an award from the state last summer. In August, Governor Tom Vilsack presented Rasler with an “Above and Beyond Certificate of Appreciation” for her work with children.

Rasler keeps busy doing marketing and computer work at Springbrook. Her background, which includes work in education, public relations, and computer tasks, makes it possible for Rasler to contribute in multiple ways, said Springbrook Training Specialist AJay Winter.

“She brings a great wealth of knowledge and experience to this position,” Winter said. “She is willing to try whatever we put in front of her.”

The combination of education and public

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Healing a fractured habitat: The massasauga in Iowa

Goettsch

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small wetland regions for its survival, is especially in need of help. This small rattlesnake is one

of only four poisonous snakes found in Iowa. It has a powerful venom, but lacks a strong enough bite to inject it into humans.

The massasauga's habitat, fragmented by agriculture, has been reduced to five isolated areas in the state, including along the Wapsipinicon River.

"Back in the '60's, the old timer will tell you, you couldn't go down to the river without getting rattled at," Goettsch said. "Now, you only hear one every five years or so."

AmeriCorps Keepers members deserve a "thank you!"

Director

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- developed 197 posters, kiosks, and brochures on environmental topics
- wrote 44 newspaper stories

and 11 articles for "The Conservationist" magazine

- produced "The Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps Newsletter" and created the "Friends Group Newsletter"

- built partnerships with statewide City Chambers of Commerce focused on increasing tourism to our cities and state through the highlighting of our natural

resources and recreational areas

Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps members get things done! Please say "thanks" to the next member you volunteer with for their contribution to the restoration of Iowa's environment.

Rasler always looking for more volunteer opportunities

Rasler

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and conservation ecology five years ago, Rasler decided to apply her interest in public service to the field of natural resources.

"[The course] was a mixed blessing," she said. "My ignorance is bliss bubble was burst and you can't go back from that. I found myself



Rasler being recognized by Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack

signing up for personal growth classes with reference to the environment."

She began teaching courses on micro-invertebrates and water quality at Nahant Marsh in eastern Iowa, experiences that led her to apply for an AmeriCorps position.

As she enters her second term of service

with AmeriCorps, Rasler said she's keeping her options for the future open. But she will definitely be volunteering.

"I'll go wherever God puts me," she said. "I may end up working at Wal-Mart as a greeter. But I'll fill the rest of the hours with volunteer work somewhere."

Fall/Winter 2004-05 AmeriCorps Keepers of the Land Members

Fish and Wildlife

- Rene Richter
- Justin Clark
- Brian Hickman
- MJ Hatfield
- Joe Baumann
- Pat Christianson
- Ben Mullarkey
- Casey Trine
- James Beebe

Living Lands & Waters

Conservation Education Center

- Kim Rasler
 - Mark Fields
- ### Wallace State Office Building

- Curtis Goettsch
- Brad Mohr
- Tom O'Neill
- Tricia Rummer
- Michael Dhar
- Jason Jesina
- Katie Kemp
- Shannon Meister
- Chris Ullrich

Part-time

- Laurel Sellers
- ### New Members Trail Crew
- Paula Perdy
 - John Sanden
 - Russell Koskovich



Making Bridges: Former AmeriCorps member finds a place in natural resources

by Michael Dhar

You don't need a master's degree to enjoy a beautiful park. And clean water doesn't taste any better when you work for the DNR.

The environment, in other words, matters to everybody—not just the experts. For former AmeriCorps Keepers of the Land member, Tom O'Neill, volunteerism was a way to bridge that gap, and involve everyday citizens in natural resources.

O'Neill served with AmeriCorps as the Keepers of the Land Program Administrator from 2003 to 2005. In that position, O'Neill matched volunteers with opportunities, served as the liaison with "friends groups," and helped volunteers in countless other ways.

"He was my right hand with regards to the program," said Keepers of the Land director Merry Rankin. "Tom was

always looking for ways we could give people more access to volunteer projects."

In February, O'Neill finished his second AmeriCorps term and took a position with the DNR's "Kaizen" Business Process Improvement team. This job grew out of work he had done with the Kaizen team while still serving in AmeriCorps. He saw it then as another way to lend his management skills to the natural resources field, he said.

O'Neill now serves as a team leader with the Kaizen group, working to simplify and streamline operating procedures within state government "and reenergize people about their jobs," O'Neill said.

The work requires good management skills and a desire to help people through a sometimes difficult process, said Teresa Hay-McMahon, director of the DNR's Kaizen program.

"His single greatest strength has been his people skills," Hay-McMahon said. "I've heard good things from the friends groups he's worked

with, too. He's been a good team leader."

During his time with AmeriCorps, O'Neill saw himself as a bridge between the experts and enthusiasts. After 17 years working in various businesses, he lacked environmental expertise but wanted to contribute to natural resources.

AmeriCorps gave him the opportunity to get involved and see what the field had to offer, he said.

"It's been nice to take a look around and see what

needs I could help meet," O'Neill said. "What I brought was an outsider view. I was someone new to natural resources, and

an impact. That was the word I kept coming back to: impact."

In his role with AmeriCorps, O'Neill's



I hear ya': O'Neill listens to a member of the Friends of Cedar Rock State Park

that's who they were trying to target with the volunteer program."

After ending his last job at a steel door factory,

impact was clear. Over the course of his two years of service, O'Neill helped bring on seven new volunteer friends groups.

He initiated an effort to involve college students in natural resources volunteerism.

"What I brought was an outsider view. I was someone new to natural resources and that's who they were trying to reach with the volunteer program."

-- Tom O'Neill

O'Neill took some time off to travel, reconnect with the outdoors, and think about what he wanted to do with his life. He went to Utah, Colorado, and biked through Ireland. A longtime outdoorsman—interested in biking, hiking, camping, and kayaking—O'Neill decided to build a new career around his concern for the outdoors.

"I wanted to do something more fulfilling," he said. "I looked at what my interests were and thought how I could have

He also played a key role in organizing the first Project AWARE river cleanup, one of the DNR's most popular volunteer programs, and took responsibility for organizing the Keepers of the Land volunteer database.

"It's been a real pleasure to have Tom a part of the team," Rankin said. "We'll miss him, but he's still doing something he cares very strongly about."



Supervisor updates: From the office to the river to the prairie

Updates

Continued from page 2

IA Law

Laurel Sellers helps organize and create databases for the Law Enforcement Bureau at the DNR. She has compiled databases for state parks, storage inventories, investigation kits, office hours, and compiled statistics for snowmobile, ATV, and Boating and Drowning incidents.

She also helped teach a hunter education class and fulfilled requirements to become a hunter education instructor. She has ridden along with conservation officers and conducted a Halloween Hike volunteer

event at Saylorville Lake, attracting 60 participants.

Mighty River

Woodson Spring leads the Riverbottom Forest Restoration Project for the Living Lands and Waters program on the Mississippi River. Spring's project plants nut and shade trees on the Mississippi's shorelines.

As a crewmember on the Living Lands and Waters river trash collection barge, Spring also collects refuse from the Mississippi and other rivers.

During one week recently, he and the rest of the crew collected 530 tires, 23 refrigerators, and three tons of miscellaneous

garbage from the Ohio River.

"This is a huge amount of garbage for a small crew in such a short period of time," wrote LL&W director Chad Pegracke. "A job well done!"

Wildlife

Casey Trine ran a waterfowl check station for hunters from October to December at the Odessa Wildlife Unit, processing nearly 4000 hunters. This work involved skills in speaking to a large group, interpreting regulations and

identification of waterfowl species.

"These projects are a priority because they have a direct impact on wildlife habitat and wildlife populations," wrote supervisor Bill Ohde of Trine's work.



Woodson Spring on a community cleanup last year

Coming up...

Volunteer Opportunities

* Statewide Prairie Rescue

Prairie rescue workdays will take place across the state during **April and May**. Volunteers will clear out invasive trees and brush, plant native wildflowers and grasses, and conduct other management activities. Check www.iowadnr.com/volunteer/pr05/ for details.

* Plant Some Shade/Operation Relief!

Help bring landscape trees to Iowa communities. Volunteers are needed to help distribute and tag trees and educate customers. Distribution events take place across the state during April, May, and June. Check www.iowadnr.com/forestry/ for more information.



Project AWARE 2005

This year, Project AWARE (A Watershed Awareness River Expedition) travels to the Little Sioux River from June 18 to June 25. During this popular weeklong river cleanup, volunteers will float the Little Sioux and remove garbage from the water. Along the way, they will camp for free, receive low-cost meals, and take part in evening educational programs about Iowa natural resources.

Registration is due May 1. Check www.iowaprojectaware.com for more information and for registration forms.



AmeriCorps Staff

* 2005 AmeriCorps Keepers of the Land Member Orientation

Orientation takes place this year from May 31 through June 3 at the Springbrook Conservation and Education Center near Guthrie, Iowa.

Attendance required!

Returning members, please bring your AmeriCorps member handbook for updated information. Everyone, please bring your AmeriCorps clothing for the group picture.

* The 1st Annual National Service Leadership Institute/Service Recognition Day

will take place May 25-26 at the Iowa State Extension 4-H Camp near Boone, IA. Attendance is required.