

# Lost In Iowa

BY SANDY FLAHIVE PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

DNR botanist and ecologist John Pearson documents one of more than 220 prairie plant species found at Anderson Prairie State Preserve in Emmet County. Later, he leads a throng of eager students, educators and prairie enthusiasts on a tour of the preserve.



# A PIECE OF THE PAST

*Emmet County may not have the flashy nature credentials of, say, neighboring Dickinson County and the Iowa Great Lakes. But if you overlook this gem, you're missing some of the best scenic landscapes and recreational opportunities in Iowa.*

**WRAPPED IN A BILLOWING REDDISH-BROWN BUBBLE OF DUST**, a gussied-up Ford F-250 barrels over the crest of a small hill on county road 360 in Emmet County and noisily jets past the inconspicuous entrance to Anderson Prairie State Preserve.

Absorbed in the cosmos of the preserve, which lies within several yards of the road, John Pearson, a botanist and ecologist extraordinaire for the DNR, is oblivious to the rumbling pickup and the blaring Kenny Chesney tune spilling from its cranked-open windows:

*"Ain't nothing out here but me, the road, and the radio. Mmmm-mmm-mmm. The road and the radio. The road and the radio"*

"Butterfly milkweed," states the impervious Pearson, gingerly handling the common prairie plant as if it were the rarest of specimens. "*Asclepias tuberosa*," he instinctively adds, identifying it by its Latin name.

Meanwhile, the Chesney fan rambles on his merry way, no doubt one of countless daily passersby who mistakenly believe that along this stretch of road there really is nothing of note.

If only they knew what Pearson and other prairie experts know. Anderson Prairie State Preserve is likely the most vibrant, teeming-with-life bit of land in Emmet County. Although it may not have the notoriety of its flashy next-door neighbor, Dickinson County, with its proud offering of the Iowa Great Lakes, Emmet County holds its own with scenic landscapes, natural wonders and recreational opportunities.

"Don't overlook us," warns Eric Anderson, the county conservation board director. "We'll surprise the heck out of you," he promises, good-naturedly.

He's not kidding. This inviting area of northwest Iowa beckons longtime residents and visitors alike to enjoy quietly charming state parks; relaxing kayaking, canoeing and fishing experiences on the West Fork of the Des Moines River;

multiple lakes; and easily accessible wildlife, nature and camping areas.

Add to that some of the best—by far—birdwatching sites in the state, top it all off with Anderson Preserve, and Emmet County proves to be a welcome destination for anyone seeking a variety of outdoor activities. Or perhaps, merely a respite from the commotion and razzle-dazzle of its popular neighbor.



## A show of its own

Anderson Preserve, located near the western edge of the Des Moines Lobe landform region (the area occupied by the last advance of glacial ice into the state a mere 12,500 to 15,000 years ago), features a hummocky, rumpled landscape that marks the accumulation of debris left by the melting Altamont glacier.

It is out of this unattractive-sounding topography that the preserve evolved—its scenic beauty (panoramic views), diverse wildlife habitat (dry, gravelly hilltops to wet swales and marshes) and thriving botanical

# Lost In Iowa

Sunflower



Butterfly milkweed



Purple prairie clover



Horsemint



Mountain mint

Prairie coreopsis



**WILD FLOWER SEED COLLECTING:** Students, educators and prairie enthusiasts fan out across the nearly 900-acre Anderson Prairie in Emmet County, collecting prairie flower seeds for use in future prairie restoration projects.

New Jersey tea



Canada anemone



White sage



Milkweed



Culver's root

# Lost In Iowa



**THIS PAGE:** Last year's Iowa Prairie Conference at Anderson Prairie attracted 60 attendees from all walks of life with varying reasons to be there. Participants came from across the state, and as far away as Chicago and St. Louis. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Fort Defiance State Park near Estherville offers limited non-modern camping. An inconspicuous sign to Anderson Prairie gives little indication to the natural diversity that lies beyond. High Lake, a 467-acre natural lake, provides opportunities for pike, walleyes, crappies and perch. **CENTER:** The West Fork of the Des Moines River is navigable by boat, but best floated by canoe or kayak.



communities (more than 220 plant species)—making it no slouch at putting on a spectacular show of its own.

Its performance is especially stunning on a breezy, white-hot July day when 60 attendees of the Iowa Prairie Conference gather midst its rippling waves of goldenrod, purple prairie blazing star and pale-yellow oxeye, not to mention the sweetest flower of all, the wild rose, and that least-loved, pernicious prairie invader, brome grass.

With Pearson, DNR biologists Bryan Hellyer and Bill Johnson, State Preserves Board Chair Deb Lewis and University of Northern Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center Director Daryl Smith lead discussions and field questions under a summer sun arcing high in the cloudless sky. Nearby, scores of prairie enthusiasts roam through chin-high foliage in their study of the preserve. The bandana-wearing, camera-toting participants come from near and far, from all walks of life and for a variety of reasons.

"I do excavation and restoration work," says Carter Johnson, a Coralville contractor. "I try to have the least negative impact on the landscape as possible and thought I might get some useful information from these folks."

High on a knoll, Pearson explains to a group of eight that the preserve is really two in one. "Much of this was once a heavily grazed pasture," he says, "and it's being restored, but the western 60 acres is natural

tallgrass prairie. As a result, we have to apply different management practices to the two areas."

As he elaborates, explaining prescribed burning processes, Christine Riley, who lives near Chicago and volunteers at Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie in Joliet, Ill., nods in satisfaction. "This is the information I'm interested in," she says.

Many in the crowd fan out, clutching clear plastic baggies distributed by Johnson for the purpose of harvesting seeds from various species for reseedling. Among them are St. Louis residents Ann Easley and Bob Siemer. "I belong to the Iowa Prairie Network and schedule my vacations so I can attend events like this," Easley informs a fellow harvester.

After an afternoon with the experts, Andy Nelson and Scott Christensen, students in the highly-reputed Iowa Lakes Community College environmental studies program, can take back to their classroom the knowledge that Anderson Preserve hosts, in addition to "regular" butterflies, several rare butterflies (though Pearson laments, "Rare butterfly numbers are plummeting due, possibly, to a combination of habitat loss, climate change, pesticides and over-application of fire.") They also discover the preserve is home to "the standard array of mammals," voles, badgers and pocket gophers (the



Emmet County Nature Center



Emmet County Nature Center

earthen mounds created by these latter critters allow for lots of plant reproduction) and that, not surprisingly, grassland birds (bobolinks rock the preserve with their throaty voice) relish the prairie scene, as do upland sandpipers and short-eared owls. Lastly, the college sophomores can report that five amphibian and reptile species contentedly reside in the small ponds and depressions of the preserve.

“A lot has been achieved here in the last 10 years,” affirms Pearson, surveying the prairie that has come back from near extinction. “Additional land is being added as it becomes available, and, importantly, many private landowners today are actively engaged in protecting our preserves and prairies. The future looks good.”

### From preserve to park

Each Iowa State Park struts its own personality. At first brush with Fort Defiance State Park, the calm ambiance inspired by graceful woodland flowers, the unhurried flight of a scarlet tanager and the casual rambling of several white-tailed deer might easily lead a visitor into thinking, “Oh, this is a piece of cake. All I have to do here is choose one of the 16 campsites, kick back around a roaring fire and while away the hours.”

“Don’t necessarily count on that,” laughs Tim Richey,

Gull Point State Park manager, who also oversees Fort Defiance. “This park can keep you plenty busy.”

It is possible to ease in, however, with a non-exerting look-see at the impressive day-use lodge built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the style of the frontier army stockade for which the 221-acre park received its name.

A pause at the park’s scenic overlook doesn’t disappoint. The panoramic view shows rugged timbered ridges ascending from the winding shores of School Creek, which has created a valley nearly 200 feet deep before the creek’s confluence with the West Fork of the Des Moines River.

At this point, it’s easy to turn the action up a notch by grabbing a walking stick and hiking those rugged ridges all the way down to School Creek. Here you can switch into full gear by climbing aboard a canoe or kayak for a scenic journey on the meandering West Fork of the Des Moines River.

On one side of the river, in the cavity of a tree, the bold, multi-colored plumage of a wood duck is visible. On the other side, a great blue heron issues a harsh squawk as it lifts up and flies away on huge arched wings. Below the water’s surface, abundant pools of catfish, walleye and bullhead wiggle about anxiously, awaiting the anglers’ invitation to chomp down on the dangling bait.

# Lost In Iowa





Fort Defiance State Park is named for a stockade built in nearby Estherville in 1862 to protect settlers from attacks during the Sioux uprising. The current lodge was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the style of the original frontier army outpost and is used primarily for social events.

# Lost In Iowa

Richey is right. If you're up for it, Fort Defiance State Park can keep you hopping. However, if you're bound and determined to capture a few totally laid-back hours of contentment, Okamanpedan State Park is just minutes away. And yes, that interesting-sounding name is of Native American origin and means "nesting place of the herons."

An historical pony truss bridge marks the entrance to this 15-acre haven that resides along and offers a spectacular view of 2,300-acre Tuttle Lake, sometimes referred to as Okamanpedan Lake. Picnic areas and two shelter houses, one built during the CCC era and fashioned after a trapper's cabin, are features of this miniscule state park. Even so, if ever there were a place to pursue the challenge of shoreline fishing for perch, pike and bullheads, Okamanpedan is it.

## Preserving the great outdoors

It's a jolt to be nonchalantly rolling through Emmet County's rich, green farm county, cruising past red-barn farms and cud-chewing cows and, without warning, shoot straight into a wildlife area. But then, what was that other comment Anderson, the county conservation head, made? "There is so much diversity of natural resources here." To which one might add, "And so many."

"We have 10 sites to manage," says county conservation naturalist Anita Fisher, whose office, along with that of Anderson, is in the handsome, multi-functional Emmet County Nature Center. "Our goal is to protect and preserve these areas so everyone can enjoy them for years to come."

No problem. The sites speak proudly for themselves, as proven by a couple of examples.

Wolden Recreation Area's 65 acres snuggles comfortably against 467-acre High Lake. One of its several trails leads into an intriguing wild setting of birds and brambles, but not to fret. Voices floating from the 90-unit campground filter through the trees and assure that civilization is within reach.

Sure, Ringham Habitat is blessed with 76 acres of timber, native prairie vegetation and trails, but what you really need to know is that it is a terrific archeological site. Those low-profile, circular mounds you're staring at? They were constructed by Native Americans close to 1,200 years ago.

Your hankering for "new" can be accommodated easily enough, too. Set beside 802-acre Iowa Lake, the state-owned, county-managed Iowa Lake Wildlife Area sports 16 acres of spanking new campground. Small and quiet, it features both restored wetlands and native prairie.

## Birding at its best

It's not hard to locate Birding Central in Iowa. Just head to Emmet County. In its wetland areas, great egrets migrate through and Canada geese nest. Pileated woodpeckers and eastern wood warblers inhabit the dense

deciduous woods of Fort Defiance State Park. The tall, waving grasses of Anderson Preserve cause bobolinks to sing in flight, while indigo buntings prefer the edge where grassland meets the oak and walnut trees along the river.

"This is the best place for birding in the state. Positively!" declares sprightly Belva Henrickson, a long-time Emmet County resident. "I should know. Dennis and I have been doing it for decades."

Dennis is Belva's husband. Binoculars to eyes, scopes in hand, insect repellent at the ready, the retired school teachers-turned-farmers have scanned their rolling pastures, scoured the rugged timberland and checked out miles of tree-lined lakeshores for a gander at as many different species as possible.

"Along the way, we've been introduced to a wondrous variety," muses Belva. "We're always thrilled to see an unusual bird but still enjoy the common folk of the bird world. Pelicans are my favorite," she announces, cutting to the chase.

A woodland bird-watching trek with the energetic couple is an educational and entertaining experience, a stop-and-go adventure punctuated by twin "shhhs!" as they pause dead in their tracks, uncannily simultaneously, at the clear double outburst of "chick-a-dee-dee-dee."

"Hear that pair of chickadees? They'll probably follow us," speculates Belva. Sure enough, they do.

So how does a novice approach birding? Are there rules?

"No rules. Don't pay any attention to that nonsense," advises Belva, vigorously shaking her head.

"True," agrees Dennis, "but you might want to brush up on bird calls and learn to recognize tones. Obviously, patience is the main virtue when it comes to birding."

The Henricksons have practiced that virtue repeatedly through the years as they waited for the more elusive species to appear through their binocular lens.

"Years ago we'd drive all the way to the Mississippi River to see a bald eagle, then wait for hours before spotting one. Now we have them right here," chuckles Belva.

"And I've waited ages to see an orchard oriole on our farm," throws in Dennis, "and this year one showed up at our bird feeder. I've also waited for scoter ducks to appear. In time they came around, too."

A story Belva enjoys telling is that after hunting for pileated woodpeckers in North Carolina and even Germany, they finally saw one. "Where?" she giggles. "Right over in Fort Defiance State Park."

With the scarlet and lavender sun showing signs of heading toward the horizon, the Henricksons head for their car. "This was the best time to be out bird-watching," proclaims Belva, as if anyone would question her good sense in doing so. "You never want to go out too early. Seven o'clock is perfect. A little after supper but before the birds' bedtime, when they're still out and about. They're just like Dennis and me. They like to tank up before going to bed." 🐦

