

CHASE THE *Red Buffalo* IN MAHASKA COUNTY

Native Americans called night fires the “red buffalo” for the way it painted the sky and scorched prairies with thunderous, roaring speed. “It looks twice as big as a daytime fire with the orange glow,” bursts naturalist Pete Eyheralde. “When the head fire comes racing after you it is pretty dramatic. It is intense.”

As many as 150 open-mouthed visitors watch the conflagration and learn about fire management at the Russell Wildlife Area in Mahaska County. Spectators journey as far from Des Moines and Iowa City to view the crackling, pyrotechnic scene from the safety of a hill, but close enough for skin-warming heat and kiss of fire-generated winds. “It’s like a fireworks display on the 4th of July. There are a lot of ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs.’ Afterwards, people want to learn to burn their own prairies and CRP lands,” says Eyheralde. That’s part of the mission: ecstatic learning.

Before the scorch, naturalists relive the history of prairie fires, espouse ecology and highlight the negatives of fire suppression. A 12-person fire crew demonstrates tools of the trade: drip torches, Nomex fire suits, flappers, fire brooms and spray backpacks and reveal fire plans as visitors handle the gear. “It’s not just about dropping a match. There’s a lot of planning involved with burns,” he says.

Onlookers see aerial photos, burn plans, firebreaks and data on humidity, wind and temperatures. Fire rages for 10 to 20 blazing minutes, but allow an hour or more to soak up fire ecology, hear historical prairie fire diary entries from local settlers and attend the post-fire debriefing inside the center where kids and the young at heart also examine bison hides and bones, learn how animals escape fire and pepper naturalists with questions.

Make it a day: Before sundown, explore the wildlife area’s old limestone quarries known for their Mississippian Age fossils. Collectors from across the country trek here to search the remains from Iowa’s ancient ocean. The center’s maps to the fossil beds and identification sheets make for easy pickings in limestone so loose fossils wash out from rains. No tools required, and yes, you can keep your finds.

Wet or windy conditions can postpone burns, so check with the center at 641-673-9327. Burn location: Meet at 8 p.m., April 20 at the Mahaska County Conservation Board Nature Center located at the Russell Wildlife Area five miles north of Oskaloosa on 200th Street, a gravel road, off Highway 63.

**NATURE CENTER HOURS: 8 A.M. - 4:30 P.M. M-F.
THE CENTER IS OPEN AFTER HOURS ON BURN DAY.**