

## THE WATER WAY

OUTDOOR FUNSPOTS ALONG JACKSON COUNTY'S GRANT WOOD SCENIC BYWAY IS A TRIP THROUGH IOWA'S LIFEBLOOD



South entrance to quarter-mile long Dancehall Cave, one of 13 caves at Maquoketa Caves State Park. Dancehall features paved walkways and lighting, but some—Dug Out, Widemouth, Match and more—require crawling. Pack old clothes, flashlights and helmets. Drop by the interpretive center to soak up cave geology and history.

PHOTOS: THIS PAGE, BY CLAY SMITH; OPPOSITE PAGE, CASEY GRADISCHNIG

There's a full moon over eastern Iowa. Cold, clear streams glisten like silver threads through fields and farmland. Moonbeams caress the southward pull of the Mississippi River. In this tiny swath of paradise between Maquoketa and Bellevue, man and nature have found a balance that sparkles on a chilly spring night.

A road winds through this bastion of traditional farmscape. The Grant Wood Scenic Byway leads travelers past local limestone structures, dairy farms and undulating hills that Interstate drivers will never know.

Water sets this place a notch above the rest. Anglers hook into brown and rainbow trout from stocked, spring-fed streams. Paddlers embrace the manageable Maquoketa River. The Mississippi snugs right up to Bellevue, a rare river town without railroad tracks obscuring the views. Water carved Maquoketa Caves State Park, and panoramic river views are the ultimate payoff for hikes in Bellevue State Park.

In Jackson County, along the Grand Wood Scenic Byway, if you come for the scenery, you'll stay for the water.

### SMALL WONDERS

Rowdy owls romp through mature pine trees. Coyotes yap. Lest one forget that this is Iowa, a cow joins the chorus. In a tent, nighttime at Maquoketa Caves State Park is an aural hoe-down.

This petite park on 323 acres, seven miles northwest of Maquoketa is a state favorite. All 13 caves, formed by rainwater erosion in the limestone, are fair game for exploration. Six hearty miles of trails pass limestone formations, rugged bluffs and photo-ready features like a natural stone bridge 50 feet above the Raccoon Creek and a 17-ton "Balanced Rock."

Judging by the arrowheads and pottery found long ago in the caves, the location has been popular for millennia. An on-site interpretive center fills in historic details.

Jill and Kyle Gauley of Pella make their way through gigantic Dancehall Cave with sons Connor, 3, and Thomas, 6. The boys boulder over the chilly rocks, flashlights glinting into the dim depths.

"I see bats!" frets Connor.

"Bats won't hurt you," assures Jill. "Besides, there are no bats right here."

The boys cram their small bodies through a mud-brown wall crevice.

"Wow!" sounds Thomas' voice from within.

"Bats!" answers Connor.

The caves could easily swallow two days of rapt exploration. So it's a good thing that Bluff Lake Catfish Farm, a few miles west, serves all-you-can-eat dinners through the weekend. The hour-long wait is doable between the bar, the ducks and geese, and a catfish pond where the Friday night special lurks.



Hikers can explore Natural Arch Bridge from above and below.

### ELUSIVE FISH

The Grant Wood Scenic Byway stretches 60 miles between Anamosa and Bellevue. Steep hills, valleys, deep creek bottoms, high church spires and limestone buildings were inspiration for Iowa artist Grant Wood in the 1930s, who wrote: "A true art expression must grow up from the soil itself." The regionalist began Stone City Art Colony near Anamosa to honor, with art, the subtle beauties of the Midwest.

The area inspired classic paintings as "Stone City" and "Fall Plowing," but the drive is far from the county's highlight. Leaving from Maquoketa Caves, following the byway toward Bellevue, stocked trout streams such as Big and Little Mill creeks and Brush Creek are about the best way to see some of Iowa's best scenery.

"One thing about trout, they don't live in ugly places," says Bryan Hayes, the DNR fisheries biologist who keeps track of the streams. "This is spring-fed water, clear and cold, with rocky outcroppings, pretty trees alongside... It's nice country."

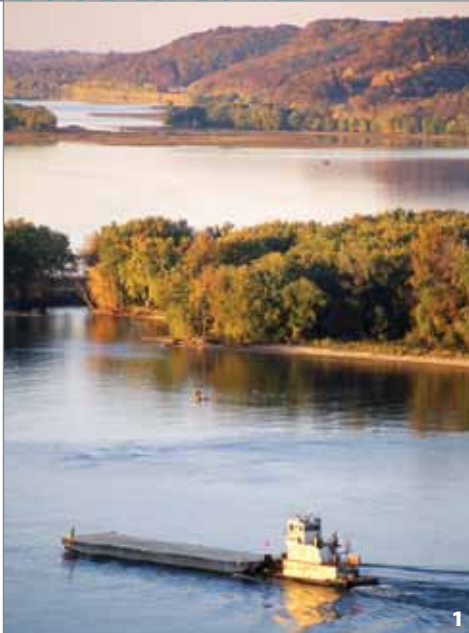
Surprisingly, you don't need a lot of equipment for trout fishing. Farm-style angling is not "*A River Runs Through It*" fancy (though it certainly can be). Trout fishing can be as easy as split-shot, Power Bait, rubber boots, and the ability to be very sneaky.

Fisheries biologist Scott Gritters ties a spinner to his two-pound light line along a section of Little Mill Creek. He points to a quiet pool just beyond a burbling riffle.

"I guarantee you there are 200 or 300 trout out there," he says.

As Gritters walks the bank, he keeps his distance from the water until he's ready to fish. If trout see you, they won't bite.

Trout swim facing upstream, and Gritters is essentially sneaking up on his catch. He casts—a feisty, quick swat—and allows his bait to flow back downstream toward him. He casts twice more, then moves on.



1) Mississippi River view atop 300-foot limestone bluffs on Overlook Trail at Bellevue State Park. 2) Potter's Mill, Iowa's oldest, built in 1843, just outside Bellevue S.P., offers its famed 10-ounce Iowa chop and bed and breakfast rooms with nature views adjacent Big Mill Creek. 3) New England-like view of Bellevue in autumn splendor. 4) Vertical levels of trails and rugged topography make Maquoketa Caves seem far larger than its size. Caves like Up-N-Down, Shinbone, Ice Cave with its chills, Hernando's Hideaway and others have long beckoned lovers of lush hills and meandering trails. Centuries ago, American Indians left tools and projectile points in the caves. More recently, early cavers stole milk-white stalactites and stalagmites, although other formations remain. Growing an inch per century, new formations slowly return. 5) Big Brown bats cluster to share heat in Dancehall Cave, where up to 750 bats overwinter. Cave is unlit and off limits to hikers during cold weather to protect slumbering bats, usually reopening around April 1, depending upon weather.

If they aren't biting, he says, they won't be changing their minds soon.

Gritters wends his way upstream, though some anglers work one site all day, fishing a little, letting the water rest for a half-hour, then fishing it again.

Area farmers are generally open to sharing their stream access—just ask. The properties with permanent permission have DNR signs posted and wooden ladders across the fences. Consult a DNR trout map, which lists county plat numbers for public access points.

However you find your sweet spot, remember: It's good karma to leave sites cleaner than you found them and farm gates closed behind you.

## SMALL TOWN CHARMS

Bellevue is a wee town with a fascinating lock and dam, a municipal park hugging the Mississippi, and tasty ice

cream at Grandpa's Parlor on Main Street.

Bellevue's character is cemented by an idyllic red structure—Iowa's oldest gristmill—seated on the bank of Big Mill Creek. Retired Marshalltown doctor Darryll Eggers saved Potter's Mill when he purchased it, in decrepit condition, in 1980. The foundation and 11-foot-thick dam that powered the mill were built with limestone from bluffs across the creek. Local timber (hand-hewn walnut and oak beams) framed it out.

In 1985, Eggers and his wife, Carolyn, opened Potter's Mill as a restaurant. Roast pork loin with Carolyn's horseradish jelly is a local favorite. So is the tirelessly upbeat staff. Potter's Mill now offers four bed-and-breakfast rooms upstairs.

"Townpeople still thank us for saving this place," he says. "I have no doubt this building would not have been saved."

To appreciate Bellevue's status as an iconic Iowa town,

#### TRAVEL NOTES:

- **THE GRANT WOOD SCENIC BYWAY** travels Highway 62 from Maquoketa, to E17 in Andrew, then Z15 to Highway 52 into Bellevue.
- **CANOE ACCESS** information at [www.jacksonccb.com/Sfork.html](http://www.jacksonccb.com/Sfork.html), or in Nate Hoogeveen's book, *Paddling Iowa* (ISBN 1931599335; \$19.95); at bookshops or buy online at [www.paddlingiowa.com](http://www.paddlingiowa.com).
- **MAQUOKETA CAVES STATE PARK** 10970 98th St., Maquoketa. Savvy campers reserve spots well in advance, or arrive on Thursday for first-come, first-serve offerings. Camping fees through Apr. 30 \$6-\$11; 563-652-5833; Reserve a site at [www.reserveiaparks.com](http://www.reserveiaparks.com)
- **BLUFF LAKE CATFISH FARM:** Don't be alarmed if Mapquest directions take you on a Level B Maintenance Road. You're on the right path—but find an alternate route if it's muddy. Open weekends for dinner, Sunday for all meals. 9343 95th Avenue, Maquoketa. 563-652-3272.
- **THE DECKER HOTEL RESTAURANT AND LOUNGE.** Casual dining, plus a Sunday breakfast buffet, in a beautifully restored 1875 inn. Lodging from \$60. 128 N. Main St., Maquoketa. 563-652-6654.
- **THE MAIN STREET CAFÉ.** Standard, inexpensive small-town breakfast, lunch and dinner joint. Smoking allowed. 136 S. Main St., Maquoketa. 563-652-6679.
- **BELLEVUE STATE PARK,** 24668 Hwy. 52, Bellevue. 220 acres of public hunting ground, with 45 campsites and one organized youth group site. Camping fees through Apr. 30 \$6-\$11. 563-872-4019; [www.iowadnr.gov](http://www.iowadnr.gov).
- **GRANDPA'S PARLOR,** 306 S. Riverview Rd., Bellevue. Ice cream delicacies named after river facts—or vote with your mouth on the Hawkeye or Cyclone breakfast specials. 563-872-4240.
- **MOON RIVER CABINS.** Rustic lodging with a fine location, right on the Mississippi River in Bellevue, with direct river docking. Prices range between \$99-\$175 per night. 905 S. Riverview Dr. 563-872-5443. [www.moonrivercabins.com](http://www.moonrivercabins.com).
- **POTTER'S MILL RESTAURANT BED & BREAKFAST.** Beautifully restored historic mill, with a restaurant below four rooms ranging from \$145 to \$175 per night. 300 Potter Dr., Bellevue. 563-872-3838; [www.pottersmill.com](http://www.pottersmill.com).
- **WHISPERING MEADOWS RESORT.** Three cabins on 200 country acres, plus a fishing pond and free hayrack rides upon request. The best of the bunch is the Patriot, at \$200 per night (\$175 for the others). 34580 100th St., Spragueville. 563-590-1123; [www.whisperingmeadowsresort.com](http://www.whisperingmeadowsresort.com).



**THE DNR'S SECRET HANDSHAKE FISHING HOLE** (a good starting point for trout anglers): From the Grant Wood Scenic Highway 62, take a left on County Road D-61 before Bellevue. Then another left on the first gravel road. Next, you'll take a—you guessed it—an immediate left into a DNR parking lot. Cast away on Little Mill Creek.



see it from high above, in Bellevue State Park. The 720-acre beauty is known for panoramic views, Iowa's largest butterfly garden (see sidebar), and nomadic Woodland Indian mounds.

Oak and maple trees shimmer in the breeze, as park ranger Ron Jones explains that the park once served as a golf course. "We still find golf balls up here," he chuckles. Eight miles of trail wind through.

"This is probably my favorite park," Jones says, looking out from Pulpit Rock near the main overlook, where groups pose for what'll likely end up in the family Christmas card. "You can just sit up here, and use your imagination as to what it was like in the days of the Native Americans."

Jones walks the chain-link fence protecting the Indian mounds along a bluff. The local Native Americans honored the sun, moon and river, he says, and burying

their dead here was a logical choice.

"They built these mounds one basket of dirt at a time," he says. "Places like this got them as close as they could to their lifeblood."

And just like that, Jones sums up the mystique of Jackson County. For Iowans who wander its fields and farms, watered and buoyed by its river and streams, the attraction is Iowa's beauty—and the lifeblood that keeps it around. 🐼

- 1) Backpackers escape to walk-in sites at Maquoketa Caves or trek 6 miles of trails past restored prairies and oak savannah.
- 2) A young great horned owl nestles among the campground's mature pines.
- 3) Atop 300 foot bluffs, the Overlook Trail at Bellevue S.P. leads to river views. **OPPOSITE**) Monarchs roost evenings during their fall migration. The Butterfly Garden at Bellevue S.P. attracts 60 species. Built to attract butterflies and caterpillars with nectar and host plants, the garden is divvied into 148 plots, each cared for by a volunteer who plant, water and weed for all to enjoy.

PHOTOS: #1, 4, TOP RIGHT AND BUTTERFLY GARDEN, OPPOSITE PAGE, JENNIFER WILSON; #3 BY ROGER HILL; MONARCHS, OPPOSITE PAGE, BY CLAY SMITH



## IOWA TROUT FISHING GUIDE



Department of  
Natural Resources  
Des Moines, Iowa

### TROUT FISHING TIPS

• Get your hands on an *Iowa Trout Fishing Guide*, published by the Iowa DNR. A bargain at \$2, essential and where the rest of these tips are taken from. ([www.iowanaturestore.com](http://www.iowanaturestore.com)).

• Use the DNR guide to locate a good fishing spot. Always ask permission for fishing areas not specifically marked as public areas. Be a considerate visitor.

• Bring light-action spinning or fly rods, line no heavier than 6-pound test (try 4 or 2). For fly-fishing, use a tapered leader with 1 to 4-pound test tippet.

• Wear rubber boots to cross or wade streams. Waders aren't necessary, but they certainly look cool.

• Approach the stream cautiously and don't cast a shadow over the water you'll fish. When the water is clear, lower your profile by kneeling or crawling. Yes, trout are that easily spooky.

• Cast delicately and accurately. Polarized glasses will help you see the fish better.

• Trout face upstream and stay put by swimming against the current. Cast upstream so your bait floats by a potential fish hide-out.

• Though trout are exceedingly timid about biting in general, they aren't necessarily picky about food. Trout can be caught using cheese, sweet corn, synthetic baits, marshmallows, salmon eggs, night crawlers, worms and minnows. And crawdads. And water bugs like caddis flies or midges. And what the heck, try grasshoppers, crickets or ants, too.

### HELP OUR WINGED FRIENDS

*Monarchs are the only butterfly that makes a true migration—every generation born in late summer will over-winter in Mexico, where they become sexually mature.*

*"How they know how to get there, and back again, we don't really know," says park ranger Ron Jones of Bellevue State Park.*

*That migrating generation lives seven months—compared to the month-long lifespan of most Monarchs. That's about 500 years old in human years.*

*In short, they could use a little rest. Monarch resources are declining with ever-increasing land development and the widespread use of herbicides. Ninety percent of the monarch's milkweed habitat (its preferred food and place to lay eggs) is found on the agricultural landscape, and that's disappearing rapidly.*

*Here's how to supply food and shelter for egg-laying, according to Jones and the website [www.monarchwatch.org](http://www.monarchwatch.org):*

• Plant butterfly-friendly plants. Using anything from a window box to a wild, untended acreage, plant any variety of milkweed, as well as nectar plants like purple coneflower, zinnia and prairie blazing star. Purchase individually, or order a seed packet from the Monarch Watch website for \$16 (**800-780-9986**). [monarchwatch.org](http://monarchwatch.org)

• Encourage your local schools, Department of Transportation, and municipalities to do the same. Volunteer to coordinate the effort, if need be.

• Do not use any insecticides or pesticides in your garden. Quite simply, they kill butterflies.

• Offer protection from wind. "Butterflies don't like windy days," says Jones. "Tall trees, tall grass, or prairie area gives them shelter."

• Create places for puddles so butterflies can drink—try sinking a container of sand into the ground. Add rocks or sticks for perches.

• Don't overgroom. Your butterfly plot needn't be tidy. In fact, if it's a little messy and weedy, it provides the winged ones more shelter.

• Volunteer. If you visit Bellevue State Park, call in advance and offer to spend an hour in the butterfly garden. The park is low on staff to maintain the site, which has been in operation since 1985.

Call or stop by at South Bluff Nature Center in the Nelson Unit when you arrive. (**563-872-4019**).