

12 more months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

December – Boies Bend <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Boies-Bend-Area.aspx>

Directions: 2465 278th St., Rowley, IA 52329 – 2 miles west of Quasqueton on gravel road 278<sup>th</sup> St.

If you go: Boies Bend is about ¼ mile north of 278<sup>th</sup> St down an access lane that is not maintained during snow. The lane ends at a gate with parking. The park is closed to drive in traffic for the off season. This 26 acre park sits just South of the Wapsipinicon River on a high bluff that causes the river to make a sharp bend to the East. A short trail leads to a set of steps to the river. Hunting is allowed, so wear bright colors during hunting seasons. With only one road access point, it is easy to see if others are there.

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Our forecast calls for this stretch of above normal temperatures and dry weather to continue through the next week. Visiting Buchanan County's natural areas with family home for the Holidays is a great way to burn off some of those extra calories while taking in the peace and beauty of the winter world.

With hunting season continuing, it is important to feel safe when visiting Buchanan County natural areas. I suggest choosing our nature preserves where there is not public hunting or wearing bright colors that are easy to see and choosing our areas with single access entries. One of these properties is Boies Bend.

Leaving the parking area, follow the roadway past the gate and into the main park property. You will wind past a stately row of planted white pines and then open into the maintained section of the park. Just north of the pines is a reconstructed prairie of about an acre. Though small, it is quite diverse and obviously enjoyed by deer and other wildlife as evidenced by the deer trails, beds, and scat. The nest-like stems of Queen Anne's lace were coated in tiny crystals of white frost (Photo 1), perfectly living up to their decorative name. With the melting heat of the sun blocked by the row of white pines, many of the standing dead prairie plant stems still sported their coating of frost at noon during my visit, though the temperature was above freezing.



After exploring the prairie for a bit, I continued along the road past the primitive camping sites and the outhouse. Along the roadway, I picked up several bright blue bait containers, cups, pop and beer cans that had been shot open, and shot gun shells.

It always amazes me that people who are obviously out and enjoying our natural areas – fishing, hunting, camping – choose to drop or leave their waste behind for others to clean up. It seems clear to me that if we all did that, the resources for fishing, hunting and camping would be impacted and less enjoyable. It really makes me appreciate it when I see someone pick up litter that was not theirs and put it in the trash or carry it out.



From the loop of the road at the west end of the park is a short nature trail. The well-marked trail leads through the forest of primarily oaks along the river bluff and to both the old river access – now just a lookout – and the newer access steps. Among the auburn brown of the oak leaves littering the forest floor a bright green carpet of moss growing on the trailside timbers pops out. Get down to moss level and you can see the army of tiny sporangia – containers of reproductive spores on tiny stalks (Photo 2). The moss growing at Boies Bend has sporangia that are a distinct brownish color. If you want to get more specific on moss identification, these are the structures used to tell one species from another.



While the prairie and forest are definitely something to enjoy when visiting Boies Bend, the bluff and what the river reveals as it scours the rock away is what I enjoy most about this park. I continued down the steps to the small landing area where river travelers can pull out their canoes or kayaks to stop and use the facilities or just get a chance to climb up and see the scene



below. With our recent dry conditions, the river level is low enough to explore for quite a distance. Ice had formed along the banks and the temps along the river remain cooler as it gets little winter sun. Whorls and bubbles formed in the ice along the river's edge among the rocks and leaves create stunning sculptures (Photos 3 & 4).

Chunks of limestone from the bluff have fallen in an ordered disarray and you need to be careful as you navigate among them. Depending on my focus, different things caught my eye as I wandered. At the landing itself, much of the rock was dried in the sun and chalky in color. Flat pieces perfect for skipping beckoned and the one I chose skipped 6 times before sinking below the surface of the Wapsi. I quit while I was ahead.



Next to attract my attention were horn corals (Photo 5). When we do fossil programs for the schools, we often make plaster "rocks" and embed real fossils for the students to excavate. Horn corals are sparsely used as we just don't have many. As I walked west along the riverbank, I found horn coral after horn coral – and huge ones at least 1-2 inches across and 3-6 inches long. Many had distinct branches where another coral attached and marked striations. I picked up the first couple I found, but left them behind in exchange for more "perfect" ones as I continued. In the short ¼ mile riverside I walked, I saw easily a hundred nice specimens.

Something in the habitat here was ideal for the horn corals during the time of 480 million years ago through 251 million years ago when this type of coral became extinct. Each horn was an individual coral and the horn continued to grow as the animal got bigger. Much of Iowa has bedrock limestone with prolific brachiopod (clam like) fossils, but the horn corals are not as common.



Along with these large horn corals were several fossils of colony corals (Photo 6) – the ones that somewhat resemble a bee hive. It is possible that the large sizes of both types of corals along this stretch of riverside is due to the fact that they are located near where they had been embedded in the rock. As they later wash



downstream during flood events, it is likely that they would be scoured and broken into smaller pieces. I found a few brachiopods as well, but it was the corals that were really impressive.

Reaching the western property line, I had the choice of retracing my steps back to the landing or trying to scale up to the lookout. I decided it was best to return along the river, and this time I really looked more at the bluff and how

tenaciously many of the trees held on. Some trees seemed to be growing nearly horizontally to the water in an attempt to better reach the sun. Roots that once had a firm hold on the rocky ground remained behind when the rock and soil was scoured away by floodwaters (Photo 7) leaving the impression of an “empty hug.” Still other roots retained their firm grasp on remaining rock to anchor themselves in place. The struggle to find a way to grow on the steep hillside continues – another lesson to learn from nature. What will your visit have to teach you?

