

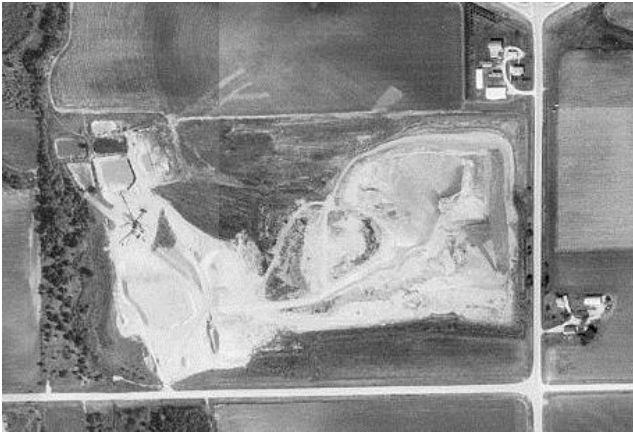
12 more months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

June – Hodges & North Wildlife

Area <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Hodges-and-North-Wildlife-Area.aspx>

Directions: Just south of Jesup and Hwy 20 on the corner of County Road V65 and 240th St with the entrance and parking on 240th St.

If you go: Hodges and North has areas that remain wet nearly year-round: plan footwear that can get wet. There is not currently a trail mowed, so come prepared to walk through prairie and thick patches of invasive crown vetch. Binoculars are helpful for bird and butterfly observations. Insect repellent is recommended.



With Hundreds of miles of gravel roads in every Iowa county, there is a constant demand for limestone gravel to fill potholes and resurface. Quarring is often done in small operations close to the need for the material as it is expensive to move over long distances. Basic Materials operated a quarry at this site (Photo 1) and when their operations ended, they removed their equipment, brought in a layer of topsoil and seeded the land to prairie. They then donated the area to the Buchanan County Conservation Board

in 2001 for long-term management. Hodges & North Wildlife Area (H&N) was named for Jesup area educators John Hodges and Burton North.

Over the 17 years I have been a naturalist for the BCCB, H&N has been a study in extreme restoration; transforming from a raggedy looking planting to a rather lush natural area. But major challenges remain – especially invasive species and erosion. Fire is one tool the BCCB staff use to help (photo 2). Controlled burns are scheduled for portions of the area every 3-5 years; this helps eliminate plants not adapted to fire, especially woody plants like willows and cottonwoods that line the draws where water keeps the fire at bay.



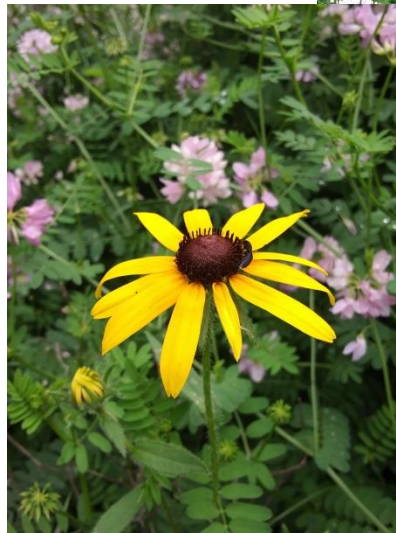


With its pink to purple blossoms, crown vetch, an invasive non-native, currently dominates the landscape (photo 3) at times covering everything you see. But it is not the only outsider: Sweet yellow clover, wild parsnip, alfalfa, white and red clovers, honeysuckle and canary grass are also competing with native plants for resources.

Originally planted by agencies to provide erosion control in roadside right of ways, crown vetch reseeds readily and its branching growth can out-compete native plants for

sunlight. But that same cover can provide shelter and food for wildlife. As I lift my feet high to avoid tripping among the vetch, a cottontail scurrying away from my tromping almost landed me on my rear. I saw many other signs, but only the one rabbit was so scared by my activity that he felt the need to bolt. Flattened vetch indicated where white-tail deer had bedded overnight and the raccoon that left scat behind had found a mulberry bush somewhere.

Native plants also manage to poke through in places, including common milkweed and Black-eyed susan (Photos 4 & 5). And there is enough milkweed at H&N to support monarch butterflies. In just over an hour at the site last week I spotted at least 5 adults flittering around - meaning we are into the second generation of the summer.



Bumblebees, wasps, butterflies and dragonflies also flit off when disturbed to quickly light again amongst the vetch and prairie flowers. Purple prairie clover was especially abundant and the

bumblebees visiting there had pollen baskets on their back legs loaded with the orangish prize. Unfortunately, the day was windy enough that these photos were too blurry to see. The wind also kept the mosquitoes at bay – but not so much the horseflies. Although they buzzed around, I was not bitten – maybe they were satisfied feeding on nectar of the blooming milkweeds (Photo 6).





Only a few butterfly milkweed plants were sporting their bright orange blossoms, but they were beacons to the pollinators. With butterflies, flies, bees, beetles and wasps all visiting the blooms and buds, it was no surprise to spot a hunter amongst the flowers – can you? (Photo 7).

Along with the open areas, H&N also features a small quarry pond. Without any trails currently mowed,

anyone venturing around the pond must have a desire to be in the natural environment and a sense of adventure to discover what it hides. Sneak up quietly enough and you may be able to watch a heron feeding on frogs before it sees you and flies off (Photo 8).



An Earth cache of fossils is hidden amongst the remnants of the old quarry stones – corals and brachiopods are most notable. (Photo 9) These are the signs of life in the area as long as 350 million years ago when the area was covered by shallow



dying animal bones were the bottom. With time and more and more layers on top of them, the shells and bones created the limestone layers that were the product sought by Basic Materials in building the quarry here.

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While there are gentle slopes along the south side of the pond, the north side is more of a challenge. You must climb over boulders and tree limbs as you enjoy the shade of cedars and other trees. In places the shade is rather dense, creating a microhabitat that is ideal for moss and lichens. I was amazed at the palate of green that one branch sported (Photo 10). Deer trails make the way a bit



easier in places. Following one, I emerged back to a lake view where a granite boulder stood sentry – How did this large chunk of igneous rock end up in this part of a quarry that harvested sedimentary limestone???

Making my way back to the parking area I focused on the birds – meadowlarks, robins, crows and jays made their presence known in song (or they tried). Red-wing blackbirds and what I believe was a dickcissle (I did not bring my binoculars) used old flower stems as sentinel posts, chasing other birds from their nesting territories. And near the end of the visit, a hummingbird scolded me as I disturbed its feeding on the blooming foxglove.

Back at the car, I took off my soaking shoes and discovered that I had – in both of them – vetch that decorated my socks. It is no wonder that plant is doing so well here – it knows how to travel.