

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas by Sondra Cabell (Photos also by Sondra except as noted)

March – Wapsipinicon River Access - 2051 Wapsie Access Blvd., Independence, IA

<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Wapsipinicon-River-Access.aspx>

Directions: On north end of Independence off of Wapsie Access Blvd, Turn west on Otterville Blvd off of Hwy 150 N. Then South on Wapsie Access Blvd about ½ mile.

If you go: Wapsipinicon River Access is a low-lying area that is largely floodplain forest – While you can explore some of the area on foot, the best way to enjoy all the nooks and crannies in on a light watercraft. The water is often very shallow and many sandbars sit just below the surface – prepare for wet feet or some poling across low spots. Binoculars are a good idea as most of the migrating waterfowl will keep their distance. Slow paddling into the various inlets and around islands can afford you some great viewing. A camo cover or floating blind would be even better. Birds and waterfowl can be difficult to photograph without long lenses and tripods – try to disturb the birds as little as possible.

March 20 was the first day of spring according to the astronomical calendar – March 1st by the meteorological calendar - and like many of you, I have been looking for those telltale signs of spring. For several years, my colleagues and I have had a playful “signs of spring” competition. Among the early signs that are always welcome are the return of migratory birds. The red-wing blackbirds and sandhill cranes returned in late February, the robins, bluebirds and turkey vultures were all here by mid-March. And as the water opened, migratory waterfowl have returned.

Wapsie River Access (WRA) and Ham Marsh (July 2017 article) are two of the premier birding spots for migratory waterfowl in the county – and I would say even in a several county area. Ham offers a blind, but it is difficult to get to it without flushing the birds on the wetland. WRA can be a great place to bird from the hide of your vehicle. With a pair of binoculars, you can watch numerous waterfowl in the river as well as in the pond and pasture to the north of the park. In about 15 minutes earlier this week, I saw Canada geese, northern shovelers, buffleheads, hooded mergansers, robins, red-wing blackbirds, crows, blue jays, mallards, a cardinal, an eagle, and a pair of noisy sandhill cranes flying over (photo 1 by Kenneth Heiar).



But there is much more to see and do beyond the parking area. WRA is the doorway to the maze of sloughs, islands, sandbars and inlets created by the meandering backwaters of the river held back by the dam in Independence. Even with the water temps still in the 30’s, this is a great place to explore for signs of spring.



Canada Geese (photo 2) will announce your presence as soon as you exit your vehicle – and likely

they will continue their loud warning honks until you disappear from sight. Pairs seem to be stationed about every hundred feet or so; some will stand their ground loudly defending their space, some quietly watch you float past, and a

few take off with a noisy splashing run as soon as you appear. Soon these geese will be sitting on a nest full of eggs and will be much more silent as they hunker down and hide instead.

Alongside the geese this week were hundreds of mallards with the distinctive green heads of the males and the stereotypical quacking of the flocks floating in groups of a few to more than 2 dozen. They see you long before you see them, so listening for the quiet quacking can be your best hope of sneaking up and watching their behaviors. Mallards are large dabblers – they feed from the surface with their tails up as they reach down for bugs and plants growing along the bottom. It seemed that bathing was also in order as I floated along as several of the mallards were completely submerging – confusing me at first as I thought I was watching diving ducks.



The actual divers were there as well – there is no mistaking the bold black and white of a bufflehead (up close you can sometimes see the male’s iridescent head turn green or purple) (Photo 3 by Kenneth Heiar). These ducks were taking advantage of the wealth of aquatic insects, snails and water plants that WRA provides to help refuel as they continue their journey to the lakes and ponds of northern Minnesota and Canada. The pair of mergansers I had seen earlier in the week also made a brief appearance popping below the surface for small fish..

All along the edges of the willow covered sandbars and lowland forest areas lies evidence of beaver feeding (photo 4). Distinctive floating sticks stripped of bark, small branches chewed off at the base of a clump of trees, and canal like areas where the beaver have created deeper channels to allow them safer routes between favorite feeding areas are all clues to the abundance of this water-loving mammal. A float in the early morning hours or just before sunset would likely provide an encounter with one of the large rodents. Beaver swim with their heads up – often carrying sticks or plant materials – and if you get too close, a splash of their flat tail against the surface of the water before they submerge and escape can be startling. In most of Iowa, beaver are able to create dens in river banks, and the large stick built lodges often associated with them are not present.



Along one of the beaver chewed logs, some subtle movement caught my eye. Drifting closer, the movement of an insect became obvious. I first thought it was a winged ant, but soon decided against that (photo 5). The nearby flying of a similar sized insect changed my thinking to caddisfly, but further research as I prepared to share this information changed my mind again. I now believe it was a stonefly. Stoneflies are a group of aquatic insects that indicate high quality water. Immature stoneflies are nymphs that spend 3 months to 3 years underwater before emerging as adults to mate and start the cycle over again. Most stoneflies live in water with rocky substrate and fast moving water, so these were in a place not “normal” in that regard. Observations and learning

new things – one of the best things about nature and my job!



As I turned back toward my car, I watched the deep, rhythmic flapping of a large bird and decided it was not the eagle I had seen earlier. Putting borrowed binoculars to my eyes, the flapping bird now showed long legs and a pulled in neck (photo 6 by Kenneth Heiar) – my first great blue heron of the spring. I also photographed my first blooming flower of the season – the silver maple (photo 7). Chalk up 2 more signs of spring to me in the contest – good thing as I have been a bit behind in the score.

This completes the first year of 12 months in Buchanan County

Parks – but I am continuing the series for a second year. If you missed others from 2017-18, the series is available on our website at www.buchanancountyparks.com – Hope to see you out in one of our amazing local areas. Enjoy spring!

