



**SIERRA
CLUB**

IOWA CHAPTER

Protecting Iowa's Vulnerable Wildlands and Wild Rivers: Priority Areas

Iowa's remaining tall grass prairies, woods, savannas, prairie pothole wetlands, lakes and streams provide wildlife habitat and recreation. Many of these areas are under risk of being destroyed or developed. Some of the most vulnerable are described below.

Loess Hills

The Loess Hills sit along the western border of Iowa. The hills are a unique landform created from blown silt. The Loess Hills are covered with native prairie, but are at risk of being overtaken with red cedar and other invasive species. In order to preserve the prairies, the land needs to be burned periodically and the red cedar trees removed. The hills are also being mined for the loess soils.

A number of parks and preserves have saved segments of the Loess Hills, in a string of pearls. The Chapter supports expanding those public holdings and protecting additional prairies. In addition to the prairies, the area is also a significant flyway for migrating hawks.

The Chapter supports designating the Loess Hills as a National Reserve, as recommended in the National Park report "The Loess Hills of Western Iowa Special Resource Study and Environmental Assessment", issued in January 2002. This Reserve would be affiliated with the National Park Service.



Loess Hills prairie. Photo by Neila Seaman

Mississippi River Bluffs

The Mississippi River bluffs are known for their rolling hills, native forests, and scenic views.

Mining for silica sand threatens the scenic bluff lands of northeast Iowa. One of the methods used to extract natural gas from rocks under the earth's surface is called hydraulic fracturing, also called fracking. The process first involves drilling a hole into the shale formation, thousands of feet underground. Then the extractors injecting silica sand, water, and chemicals, under pressure, into the bored hole. The injected materials fracture the shale rocks, which frees the natural gas. The sand functions to keep the fractures in the shale rock open. And the demand for the silica sand is huge. The sand is coveted for use in fracking because it has a unique spherical shape which is fairly uniform in size. It is also tough and durable and can withstand the fracking process.

The silica sand is mined in northeast Iowa, along the Mississippi River. It is also prevalent in southeast Minnesota, southwest Wisconsin, and northwest Illinois. The sandstone deposits are readily accessible in the Upper Midwest, in three formations called St Peter Sandstone, Jordan, and Winewoc. The formations are close to the surface in Winneshiek, Allamakee, and Clayton Counties in Iowa. Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties have ordinances to protect the county from sand mining. Clayton County does not and has one active mine.

The sand mining leaves a scar on the surface of the land while the mine is active. Reclamation of the mine once the sand has been removed does not return the bluff, but instead leaves a sunken spot.

Dunbar Slough and the Southern Prairie Pothole National Wildlife Refuge

The Chapter supports expanding Dunbar Slough in Greene County and including it in the Southern Prairie Pothole National Wildlife Refuge. The wetlands in the prairie pothole region serve as the nursery for many of the ducks in North America, but many of those wetlands have been destroyed and converted to crops.

Outstanding Iowa Waters: the Turkey River, the Upper Iowa River

The Turkey River and Upper Iowa River are scenic rivers in northeast Iowa. They are used for paddling, fishing, and wildlife viewing.

When the antidegradation rules were added to Iowa's water quality standards, the Turkey River and the Upper Iowa River lost the additional protection that they had received as High Quality Waters. By naming the Turkey River and Upper Iowa River as Outstanding Iowa Waters, these water bodies would be given additional protection from discharges of pollution into the water when industries and waste water treatment plants ask the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for discharge permits (NPDES permits).



The bank of the Turkey River. Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor

Southeast Iowa Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Area

The Southeast Iowa Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Area is a biodiversity hotspot for amphibians and reptiles - frogs, toads, turtles, salamanders, lizards, and snakes. In fact, this area has the highest number of amphibian and reptile species in the state, along with the highest number of rare species of amphibians and reptiles in the state. This area is so special that it became the first amphibian and reptile conservation area in the country.

The Southeast Iowa Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Area encompasses a topographic region of the state known as the Mississippi Alluvial Plain. The habitat is key to sustaining the diverse species of amphibians and reptiles – wetlands, ponds, rivers, streams, and upland areas. The conservation area includes areas along the Cedar, Iowa, and Mississippi Rivers in Johnson, Cedar,

Lee, Muscatine, Louisa, Des Moines, and Washington counties. Of the approximately 470,000 acres in the Conservation Area, some of the land is owned by private citizens and some of the land is owned by federal and state government agencies.

Even though this area is rich habitat for amphibians and reptiles, four turtle species – common snapping turtle, smooth softshell turtle, spiny softshell turtle, and the painted turtle -- can be commercially and recreational trapped in the Conservation Area. The turtle populations in Iowa are declining significantly. In fact, Iowa's Wildlife Action Plan lists the snapping turtle, smooth softshell turtle, and spiny softshell turtles as reptiles of greatest conservation need. Species of greatest conservation need have low or declining populations as well as those that are listed as endangered or threatened species; all of the species of greatest conservation need are in need of conservation action to prohibit further declines and to begin rebuilding their populations.

As the most diverse area for reptiles and amphibians in the state, this area should be a sanctuary for the reptiles and amphibians living there; the turtles should be allowed to live there free from turtle trapping, especially for those turtles that have been placed on the list of reptiles of greatest conservation need.

Conclusion

We have a responsibility to protect wildlife and wild places and leave a better world for future generations. The natural legacy we leave our children and grandchildren depends on the steps we take today as stewards of Iowa's and America's wild places and wild life.