

A Little Bit About a Lot of Things!

Mike Wallace, Conservation Director

First of all, on behalf of the Dallas County Conservation Board, our staff, and myself, we wish Chris Adkins, our Environmental Education Coordinator, the best in his upcoming retirement from this department. I know he has many things he plans to do, many of them with his family, which is the way it should be. Chris has been employed with the DCCB since 1997. Everyone has a story they could probably tell about Chris, who is one of the best storytellers on the planet. My story about Chris is more of an observation. One of his favorite things to do is tag monarch butterflies. It is so satisfying to see such a mountain of a man enjoy the intricate and precise process of putting a tiny tag on the wings of a butterfly. For Chris, it isn't only about putting the tag on the butterfly; it's also about how the butterfly and everything around it, and us, tie into the world we live in. Chris touched the hearts of thousands of people by promoting environmental education in a unique and captivating way. He will be missed, but his core values of getting people outside to experience the "wilds" of wherever you live will continue.

A new mew for our Barred Owl is complete at Forest Park Museum. A mew is a structure that provides a raptor with a safe, secure home where it is protected from predators, domestic animals, and the environment. This mew, or "raptor exhibit," will be the new home for our head ambassador for raptor education, a Barred Owl. The facility was constructed using funds from the Bock Family Foundation and the Tom Lawson Memorial Fund. The structure was mainly designed by one of our naturalists, Mike Havlik. Mike has decades of experience with raptors and how they should be cared for. Our owl programs will continue as in the past, but now the owl will be readily available for viewing at its new home at Forest Park Museum in Perry.

You may have seen some tree and shrub cutting at Kuehn Conservation Area and Voas Nature Area in the past. In particular, larger sections at Kuehn Conservation Area were worked on this past summer by a Conservation Corps of Iowa team. This is part of an overall plan to improve the forested areas in our parks. We plan to continue implementing forest management work on these and other DCCB properties.

Also at Kuehn Conservation Area, we are converting about 30 acres of former crop ground to prairie. This area is located at the north end of the public hunting area, just south of the bridge along H Ave. Reestablishing prairie there will enhance the diversity of habitat in the park. We plan on using an Iowa ecotype prairie grass and forb seed mix. Funds for this project have been provided by the Dallas County Pheasants Forever Chapter.

There are also some exciting updates on our trail projects. 2024 will be the year! Yes, the Raccoon River Valley Trail to High Trestle Trail Connector (officially recognized as an



Naturalist Mike Havlik with Barred Owl outside the new raptor exhibit

extension of the High Trestle Trail) is scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2024. Bids for the **FINAL Phase** of this project will go out in February 2024. A recently announced State Rec Trail Grant of \$675,000 for the final phase will help us push this project over the end zone. The 2024 phase will consist of the trail segment from the City of Bouton east to Quinlan Ave.

We are continuing with our upgrade of the south loop of the RRVT. The south loop contains the section from Waukee through Adel, Redfield, and Linden to the Dallas/Guthrie county line. A couple of years ago we worked on the section from Adel to Redfield. The bridges on that section were all renovated and much of the section received an asphalt overlay. This year, the process continues with the section from Redfield to Linden. This phase includes the total rehabilitation of all of the bridges, and instead of an asphalt overlay, we are stepping up to enhance the trail by making it a concrete trail surface. This phase will be completed in the spring of 2024. We also anticipate rehabilitating bridge “D” in 2024, which is the bridge on the east edge of Adel that crosses the North Raccoon River. We will continue with additional upgrades of the south loop of the RRVT in Dallas County over the next few years as funding is available.

As you may remember, last year we started a fundraising campaign called “Support the Trails of Dallas County.” All of our trail projects help maintain the effort to continue building and maintaining a world-class trail system in Dallas County. Whether it is new construction or rehabilitating existing trails and bridges, it is a multi-million-dollar continuous effort. Matching funds are needed to leverage other contributions, budgets, and grants. You, our faithful trail supporters, stepped up in a great way last year to kickstart our “Support the Trails of Dallas County” campaign. We are grateful for your contributions and hope that you will consider donating to our funding needs again this year. Please help us continue to be a nationally-recognized leader in quality recreational trail opportunities. Go to our website or contact our office for more information on how to contribute.

As we end 2023 and move forward to 2024, I would like to express my sincere thank you to all the volunteers who have assisted us this past year. There are many projects which would not have been completed without the efforts of people from outside our staff. Thank you for your many hours of work, support, and contributions to our department.