



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Mount Ayr Wildlife Area is southern Iowa's rugged retreat



Mount Ayr Wildlife Area has a mix of forest, prairie and shallow lake habitats. The forested area has a series of firebreaks that helps with timber management and is often a welcomed sight to successful hunters when packing out their game. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Mount Ayr, Iowa – The Mount Ayr Wildlife Area is a 1,500-acre outdoor playground on the way to nowhere. While travelers are not likely to stumble upon it, hunters would be wise to know its location.

The Mount Ayr Wildlife Area is part of the seven county Grand River Wildlife Unit in southwest Iowa. Chad Paup is the wildlife biologist responsible for managing the area and all its diversity. He receives a lot of phone calls, mostly from nonresidents, who have specific questions about deer hunting on specific areas.

His advice?

“I tell them not to overlook Mount Ayr. It’s a tremendous deer hunting spot,” he said.

Sitting just eight miles from the Missouri State Line in southwest Ringgold County, the Mount Ayr Wildlife Area has been providing high quality hunting since it was formed in the 1940s. The phrase “off the beaten path” is an often overused cliché, but in this case, it applies. Most of the beaten path around the Mount Ayr area is Level B maintenance dirt road.

The area has a mix of forest, prairie and shallow lake habitats that offers a little something for everyone.

The forested area is a mix of oak and hickory with some high quality walnut trees mixed in. A series of firebreaks have been cut through the forest that helps with timber management. Using fire in the timber opens the forest floor to sunlight and is one tool to knock back the invasive honeysuckle bush.

Firebreaks provide easy access through the timber and are often a welcomed sight to successful deer hunters when it’s time to drag a deer out in the fall. These wide lanes also offer potential turkey strut areas in the spring.

While deer hunting generally claims the spotlight, starting Sept. 1, dove hunting will take center stage.

A large sunflower field on the southwest part of the wildlife area held thousands of doves three years ago. Dove food plots rotate from sunflowers to winter wheat then to beans and this year it’s in sunflowers again.

The field is weedy and while not the optimal situation, it is holding doves. Weedy sunflower plots offer other benefits including serving as an excellent brood rearing area for young pheasants providing a high quality protein insect diet and travel lanes for cover.

These rotating dove food plots are also benefitting other birds, including the local quail population.

“The area has good quail numbers and decent pheasant population. For hunters, it’s definitely worth a trip and it’s not far from other public wildlife areas,” Paup said.

Restoring the lake

The long, narrow 60-acre Walnut Creek Lake on the north side has good hunting for teal and wood ducks, and serves as a stopover point for flocks heading south. When the word gets out that a new flock of ducks has hit the marsh, the local hunters are there the following morning.

The shallow lake is refilling after being renovated to remove silt. A channel has been added to improve access from the boat ramp. That deeper channel created an overwintering area for fish.

Prior to the renovation, lotus had taken over much of the lake. The unwanted aquatic plant has all but eliminated during the renovation because the lake was dry.

Hiking, paddling, sleeping, picking

The Mount Ayr Wildlife Area has a clearing in the timber, near a series of fishing ponds that serves as a year round rustic, no frills campsite. There is no electricity, no water and no restrooms. But it does have fire rings and picnic tables and an impressive view of the night sky.

While it currently doesn't receive much use by the paddling community, the shallow lake could be an attractive option for paddlers looking for a quiet experience.

The lake is nearly encircled by a mowed path. The wildlife area is popular with mushroom hunters.

Northern saw-whet owl study

The Mount Ayr Wildlife Area was selected as a site by researchers who were monitoring for northern saw-whet owls during their spring and fall migration, as part of a larger, national study on owl and hawk migration patterns.

Researchers set up a series of 7-8 foot high mist nets that were unrolled in the evenings along lanes mowed through a cedar thicket on the area. Speakers were used to broadcast saw-whet owl calls to peak the curiosity of any saw-whets in the area. When the tiny owl would investigate, it would get trapped in the soft netting.

Researchers would collect the owl's weight, measurements and age data, then band and release it. The study lasted from 2011-2015.

This tiny owl, about the size of a can of pop, was so named because its call is similar to the sound a whetstone makes when sharpening a knife.

Media Contact: Chad Paup, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-783-2166.

Squirrel season begins September 2



Hunting opportunities for squirrels is excellent with higher squirrel numbers in areas with quality oak and hickory trees. Squirrel season is Sept. 2 through Jan. 31, 2018. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Squirrel hunters should expect to find an average to above average squirrel population over most of the state, with higher squirrel numbers in areas with quality oak and hickory trees. Squirrel season opens Sept. 2.

Fox squirrels can be found anywhere there are a few acres of trees, but gray squirrels are generally limited to the heavily forested areas in eastern and southern Iowa.

Hunting opportunities for squirrels are excellent because competition is low and hunters could have the area all to themselves. Because of the lack of competition, squirrel hunting is a good way to introduce novice hunters and youth to the outdoors. It also benefits experienced hunters by honing their skills before other seasons open.

“If you spook a squirrel or mess up something, there’s probably another squirrel over the next hill. Young hunters can learn and fail which is how many of us learned our woodsmanship skills – without the pressure of a short season or competition from other hunters,” said Jim Coffey, forest wildlife research biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “We need to rejuvenate the fall ritual of going squirrel hunting. It’s fun and takes a lot of skill to outwit a squirrel.”

Squirrel hunting is done by either sitting-and-waiting, or by still-hunting.

The sit-and-wait technique is similar to turkey hunting. Hunters will sit near likely feeding areas, such as beneath oak, walnut, or hickory trees or along corn-forest edges and many will call them. Plan to wear plenty of camouflage and consider a face net to avoid bugs.

The still-hunting technique is employed by slowly walking through forested areas and stopping frequently to watch for feeding squirrels, then sneaking up on them.

The best hunting times usually are during the morning and afternoon feeding hours.

Squirrel season runs through January 31, 2018. The daily bag limit is 6 (fox and gray squirrels combined) and the possession limit is 12. There are no restrictions on shooting hours.

Media Contact: Jim Coffey, Forest Wildlife Research Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 641-774-2958.

State Forest Nursery Launches New Online Store

Ordering trees from the DNR's State Forest Nursery just got easier. A new online sales site – <http://nursery.iowadnr.gov/> – features dozens of quality native Iowa trees and an easy check-out process.

Also new in 2017 are changes to how nursery stock can be used to accommodate a wider audience of people wanting to order bulk trees:

- Customers can purchase trees in bundles of 25, compared to previous order minimums of 200.
- Seedlings can be used for any purpose, including windbreaks or decorative landscaping.
- People who purchase nursery seedlings can resell them or give them away. Before, state laws dictated that nursery stock had to be planted by the purchaser.

According to Nursery Manager Aron Flickinger, the nursery provides affordable, quality native plant materials for numerous natural resource needs.

“Planting trees and shrubs can help landowners reach a variety of goals,” said Flickinger. “Trees from the State Forest Nursery can be a cost-effective way to create wildlife habitat, beautify landscaping, improve erosion control, establish windbreaks and even save energy through shade.”

Tree varieties include 20 species of native hardwoods, nine evergreen species and 14 smaller trees/shrubs. Prices range from \$.30 to \$1.40 per seedling, and tree species are sold in three sizes ranges on the site, with the tallest around 30 inches. Some species are available in only one or two sizes, and may also be available for spring delivery rather than fall.

Orders can be placed anytime between August 1 and May 31. As part of the ordering process, customers can choose a shipping window for delivery – fall shipments begin the last week of October, and spring shipments begin April 1.

The State Forest Nursery is located in Ames and managed by the Department of Natural Resources. For more information visit the online sales site at <http://nursery.iowadnr.gov/> or call during regular business hours, Monday – Friday, (800) 865-2477.

Media Contact: Kandy Weigel, State Forest Nursery, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-233-1161.

