

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



March 28, 2018

Last week, as we drove across the state to watch our son Luke's robotics team compete at Cedar Rapids, we enjoyed the convenience and freedom offered by Highway 20. Today I'd like to share with you another story of Highway 20 as told by Katy Heggen in "Protecting Something Sacred," 2018 Winter Edition of the *Iowa Natural Heritage* magazine.

In 2013, the Iowa Department of Transportation was preparing to expand US 20 in Woodbury County when a team of archaeologists came across something they hadn't anticipated – geoglyphs. Varying in size, construction, and subject, geoglyphs are human-made designs etched into the ground that are often best seen from an aerial perspective. Perhaps you're familiar with the eagle and marching bear geoglyphs at Effigy Mounds National Monument in northeast Iowa. Among the geoglyphs in western Iowa is an effigy of a bison measuring about 50 feet from head to tail – the first of its kind to be rediscovered in Iowa.

The Loess Hills of western Iowa, once home to Native American tribes including the Omaha, Ponca, Ioway, Dakota, and Sioux, abound in historic, cultural, and spiritual sites. As part of their ongoing efforts to protect areas of Native American significance, in 2017 the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation purchased 90 acres of woodland in Woodbury County. Once fundraising is complete, this land that is part of the protected area that includes the rediscovered geoglyphs will be open to the public and managed by Woodbury County Conservation.

And while the bison geoglyph is unique, the presence of Native American land features across Iowa and the greater Midwest is not. Many of these burial grounds, spiritual sites, and villages still hold meaning for native communities. As State Archaeologist John Doershuk explains, "There are 26 tribes we currently work with that have an interest and connection to Iowa. Many of those tribes don't live here anymore but still feel that this is their historical homeland and that the features found here are an active part of their culture today."

Or, as Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Samantha Odegard of the Upper Sioux Community explains it, "For us, everything is in a circle. It's not just a place, it's part of who we are. It's all connected. The more we know about the site, the more we know about our history, culture, and spirituality. The more we know about those things, the more we know ourselves."

I think the same may be said for us. Recently Rob Ahlrichs stopped by the Nature Center over spring break to bring us up to date on the Dunn Collection, whose artifacts he feels represent a potential significant contribution to the archaeological understanding of western Iowa prehistory. Perhaps we can also learn more about our connection with nature and the land from these early residents of Pocahontas County who were wholly dependent upon the land. Whether through bison geoglyphs or artifact collections, I believe the more we learn about these things, the more we learn about ourselves. What do you think?

