

Conservation Corner

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Happy New Year from Conservation! We trust 2017 will bring new beginnings, new dreams, and new friends within the wonderful world of nature. We'll start the new year with a closer look at one of nature's more interesting and unusual creatures that is also one of the world's longest insects. Just before Christmas, our son Neil sent a photo of this week's guest clinging to the fender of his parked pickup on the farm in Laos. Meet our first new insect friend of 2017 – the walkingstick.

Walkingsticks, members of the insect Order Phasmatodea, comprise over 2,500 species found around the world. Most stick insects, along with their cousins the leaf insects, are found in the tropics. The Upper Midwest, however, is home to four hardy souls, one of which is the common or northern walkingstick and Iowa's most common species. You may know them as a stick insect, prairie alligator, or devil's darning needle.

Like their name suggests, walkingsticks look like a long, slender stick on six spindly legs with two long, thin antennae. Because they can't fly or jump, they depend on their ability to mimic and blend in with their natural background, and their stick camouflage and coloring of brown, green, and gray allow them to almost disappear into the scenery.

Unlike many insects, walkingsticks produce only one generation per year. They start life as eggs that are laid in late summer and autumn before catching a ride to the ground on falling leaves. The eggs overwinter on the ground camouflaged as hard, flat, 1/8 inch seeds. The eggs hatch in May or early June into quarter-inch long green nymphs that feed near the ground until moving to the upper canopy in mid-summer. They reach their final adult size of 2 1/2 to 4 inches in late July or August, impressive for an Iowan insect but far shorter than some tropical species which may reach a foot or more in length.

Walkingsticks are herbivores with chewing mouthparts. They can be picky eaters and prefer the leaves of oak, basswood, and wild cherry. They will also eat the leaves of ash, paper birch, hickory, locust, apple, and chestnut trees but will avoid maple trees and conifers.

Many naturalists, of course, have a favorite walking stick for hiking in the prairie or woods. Brian Reis, our director, has a favorite walkingstick story from the prairie and woods of Plymouth County. The date was 9-11-2001, the job was cutting a fire break for a controlled fall burn, and the setting was the oak timber bottoms along Five Ridge Prairie in the northern Loess Hills. The plot involved conservation workers following the ongoing terrorist attacks throughout the day as hundreds of adult walkingsticks, like the heroes of 9-11, fell from the sky and covered the ground.

Pocahontas County doesn't have its own Walkingstick Valley, but these masters of disguise may be found in many of our wooded areas, including Cooper's Cove and Whitetail Ridge along Lizard Creek. Have you seen a walkingstick here in Iowa?

