

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



July 19, 2017

As summer keeps rolling along, it's time to get rolling on the upcoming 2017 Jr. Naturalist Day Camp. All area and visiting students entering Grades K – 6 Grade are welcome! We will meet at the PCCB Nature Center on August 1 & 2 from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. for activities, crafts, games, & snacks. This year's field trip will be an outing on August 3 to the Henry Dorley Zoo in Omaha. Registration deadline is July 27 – sign up soon!

This year's camp adventure will feature the Sights & Sounds of Wild Iowa. As I was listing the various sounds heard across our prairies, wetlands, and woodlands, the clear whistle of a bobwhite echoed across my memory. Although no longer a

common sight and sound in Iowa, the Northern Bobwhite will be this week's feathered friend.

Northern Bobwhites, *Colinus virginianus*, are year-round residents throughout eastern North America from Canada south to Mexico and from the Atlantic Ocean west to the Rockies. Our only native quail, bobwhites live in brushy open country, fencerows, roadsides, and open woodlands.

Bobwhites are easy to recognize with their rounded bodies, small heads, rounded wings, and short tails. Their dappled plumage is great camouflage. The distinctive white throat and eyebrow stripes of males are buff colored in females. Across the 22 subspecies, bobwhite females look much the same but males may vary dramatically in looks.

Bobwhites are ground foragers, eating mostly seeds, leaves, fruits, and invertebrates. They are social birds, feeding in coveys early in the morning and late in the afternoon. They spend the nights roosting on the ground in a close-packed circle with their heads facing out.

Bobwhites have short life spans, less than five years, and high mortality rates of 80% in the first year. They are able to compensate with their prolific breeding abilities, raising two or three broods that total 25 young or more a season. Their ground nests are lined with grasses and covered with woven grass domes to further hide them from predators which include hawks, owls, raccoons, opossums, skunks, foxes, and snakes.

Did you know bobwhite fossils date to 2.5 million years ago? Currently over 700 fossils of the bobwhite genus have been discovered in Florida, Arizona, and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.

Unfortunately, the Northern Bobwhite is one of many common birds in steep decline here in North America. Once one of our most important game birds, Northern Bobwhites are now classified as near threatened. Degradation and loss of habitat due to changes in agriculture and forestry practices have resulted in an 85% decline in bobwhite populations from 1966-2014.

Northern Bobwhites are best known for their namesake call of *Bob-white!* or *poor, Bob-whoit!* And while it was their top hit that I found myself whistling this week, bobwhites have several other tunes that have been recognized: 1 call for food location, 11 calls to avoid enemies, 6 mating calls, and 2 parental calls. Have you heard the bobwhites calling?