

Conservation Corner

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Each year naturalists across the state share first spring sightings as migrators return and hibernators wake up across Iowa. This year our early warm spell brought early risers, and by mid-February the sightings were pouring in. From night hawks in Lee County to kingfishers at Lake Okoboji to turkey vultures in Louisa County and, of course, geese and ducks everywhere. The skunk cabbage was blooming in Winneshiek County while nightcrawlers were emerging in Mahaska County. In Wapello County a kestrel was spotted eating a snake to the sound of spring peepers and chorus frogs, while in Scott County a Mourning Cloak and Question Mark were spotted – the first butterflies to appear in the Wapsi Woods.



It's not just Iowans who have been enjoying the respite from winter weather. In cities across the nation spring is arriving about a month earlier than average. One of the tools scientists use to measure climate change is the spring leaf index. Dating back to 1900, the index is based on observations of lilacs, honeysuckles, and temperature records. And while 2012 is the current record holder, it appears the spring of 2017 will set a new record. Early wildlife sightings are being called "off-the-charts weird" while weather extremes and record high temps spawn February tornadoes and thundersnow across the country.

I haven't spotted any butterflies in Pocahontas County yet, but last week we did receive the results from the 2016 Iowa Butterfly Survey Network. Surveyors observed 54 of the 120 species found in Iowa and a total of 16,115 individual butterflies at 34 sites statewide. Our local team of Linda Christoffers (Cooper's Cove), Sue Weiskopf (Pocahontas), and Corinne Peterson (Varina Wetlands) enjoyed our second season in the field, completed 19 surveys, and observed 13 species and a total of 724 individuals. If you enjoy walking and nature, please consider a route of your own. Give Conservation a call at 712-335-4395 and we'll set you up.

Monarch butterflies in particular have been in the news lately as their spring migration is also underway. 2016-17 overwintering numbers from Mexico, as reported by the World Wildlife Fund, total 109 million individuals in 13 colonies over 7 acres, down 27% from last year's count. Did you know that 40% of Monarchs that overwinter in Mexico come from Iowa and neighboring Midwestern states?

And so it rests upon us in Iowa to do our part, whether as part of state and nationwide consortiums or in our own backyards. Plant some milkweeds native to our region to help provide host plants for Monarch eggs and caterpillars. Don't forget to include some native perennials to help provide nectar sources for adult butterflies. Eliminate or minimize the use of insecticides and herbicides to help provide safe breeding and foraging habitats. Finally, help establish and maintain waystations along migration routes. We'll save that important piece of the efforts to bring back the Monarchs for next week.