



# 2023 ANNUAL REPORT



PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOTS



## OUR MISSION

To collaboratively develop and lead community, conservation, and cultural initiatives to improve our quality of life in rural western Iowa.

## OUR GOALS

- Develop industries in local communities that utilize local resources.
- Ensure healthy natural resources that meet the needs of agriculture, industry, private use, and recreational facilities.
- Promote and enhance art, culture and historic resources in rural communities
- Collaborate with local governments and organizations on projects that benefit the environment.
- Work on projects that fill gaps in community services to benefit people of southwest Iowa.

## CONTACT INFO

### Golden Hills RC&D

712 S. Highway 6

PO Box 189

Oakland, IA 51560

712-482-3029



[www.goldenhillsrcd.org](http://www.goldenhillsrcd.org)



[info@goldenhillsrcd.org](mailto:info@goldenhillsrcd.org)



[@goldenhillsrcd](https://www.facebook.com/goldenhillsrcd)



[@goldenhills](https://www.instagram.com/goldenhills)



[@goldenhillsrcd](https://www.tiktok.com/@goldenhillsrcd)

ABOUT US





# MEET OUR TEAM



**CARA MORGAN**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
CARA.MORGAN@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Cara Marker-Morgan joined Golden Hills RC&D in 2017, working on watershed management projects. Cara and her husband Brandon have 3 children, Mavryc, Czandrya, and Cytara. She enjoys the outdoors and living in the Loess Hills, taking advantage of everything the hills have to offer.



**LANCE BRISBOIS**  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR  
LANCE.BRISBOIS@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Lance started in 2014 working on water trails and quickly moved into other outdoor recreation, land stewardship, and local foods projects. He currently helps lead those three program areas and assists with daily operations for the organization. Lance spends his free time exploring and learning about the great outdoors.



**JACKIE JOHNSON**  
FISCAL MANAGER  
JACKIE.JOHNSON@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Jackie is a native of Southwest Iowa, graduating from Riverside in Oakland. She attended Iowa Western Community College and worked at Riverside Community School District before joining the Golden Hills team. She currently resides in Harlan with her husband, Nate, their 4 daughters Carly, Brylei, Layla, and Brecklin; and their two dogs, Marv and Ella. In her free time, Jackie enjoys photography and singing.



**DAWN HARDER**  
OFFICE ASSISTANT  
DAWN.HARDER@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Dawn started with Golden Hills in 2006 working on the SIRE (Southwest Iowa Renewable Energy) project and has since been involved with various projects, including Iowa Byways.





# MEET OUR TEAM



**SHAUN AHERN**  
PROJECT COORDINATOR  
SHAUN.AHERN@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Shaun joined Golden Hills in 2022 focusing on watershed projects. Having studied both community & regional planning and environmental studies in college and then serving with Conservation Corps Iowa, he's excited his work intersects with those areas. He enjoys volunteering at multiple preserves doing habitat restoration and exploring the Loess Hills.



**SETH BROOKS**  
PROJECT COORDINATOR  
SETH.BROOKS@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Seth joined Golden Hills RC&D in 2022 as a project coordinator focusing on scenic byways, local foods, and other projects. Fluent in Spanish, he also seeks ways Golden Hills can reach Spanish-speaking communities in rural western Iowa. Seth spends his free time writing hiking guidebooks and trying to keep up with his dog Jasper.



**JAMIE FOWLER**  
LOCAL FOODS COORDINATOR  
JAMIE.FOWLER@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

Jamie joined as Local Foods Coordinator in 2022. Having grown up in a family that operates a nursery and produce stand, she is passionate about how small business and local food benefits rural communities. Jamie with her husband JP, and their young daughter, spend hours in their garden growing and sharing produce with friends and neighbors.



**RONDA MCCREEDY**  
OFFICE ASSISTANT  
RONDA.MCCREEDY@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG

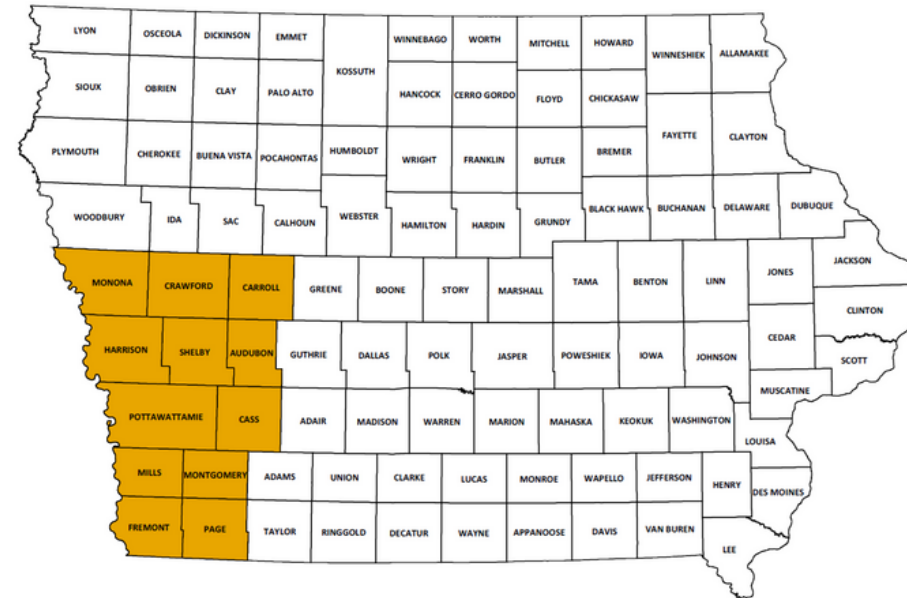
Ronda is a native of southwest Iowa. She graduated from Carson-Macedonia High School in Carson. Ronda attended Nebraska College of Business, and worked for the past 35 years at Mutual of Omaha. She currently resides in Carson with her husband Brien and dog Stella. They have three grown children: Jared, Kylie, and Bailey, and three grandchildren: Cora, Cam, and Jace. In their free time, Ronda and Brien enjoy traveling, attending Creighton basketball games, and spending time with the grandkids.

Golden Hills is governed by a Board of Directors representing our service area. Each county has one director, with Pottawattamie having two due its large size. Additionally, we have two at-large board members. We are currently in the process of selecting new board members due to our 2023 expansion adding four new counties, as well as board members reaching term limits.

Current board members are:

- Steve Baier, Chair
- Kathy Fiscus, Vice Chair
- Sheryl Sanders, Secretary
- Susan Miller, Treasurer
- Brian Rife
- Beau Boeye
- Seth Watkins
- Carol Vinton
- Peter Johnson

### Golden Hills Counties



More information and brief bios about each of our board members can be found at [goldenhillsrcd.org/board](http://goldenhillsrcd.org/board)





## LAND STEWARDSHIP

Our work helps restore and reconstruct prairies in the Loess Hills and beyond, which provides benefits such as wildlife habitat, water quality improvement, erosion reduction, and improved scenery.



## OUTDOOR RECREATION AND TOURISM

Golden Hills has worked for decades to expand and improve upon low-impact recreational opportunities in western Iowa such as hiking, bicycling, birding, wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, and paddling.



## WATER RESOURCES

We partner with Hungry Canyons Alliance to implement grade and streambank stabilization projects and coordinate the East and West Nishnabotna Watershed Coalitions to improve water quality and flood resiliency.



## LOCAL FOODS

Golden Hills works with the Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative (SWIFFI), a multi-county coalition of individuals and organizations that value and work within the local food system.



## ARTS & CULTURE

Golden Hills understands the value that arts and culture bring to southwest Iowa, from both a quality of life and a tourism perspective. We coordinate events and help find funding for a variety of projects.



## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Our talented staff can offer a wide variety of services on a contractual, fee-for-service basis, such as grant writing, project management, strategic planning, visioning, meeting facilitation, and much more.

# PROGRAM AREAS





PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS

# WATER RESOURCES



Flooding and water quality are significant topics of concern within Iowa. Since most waterways in western Iowa flow into the Missouri and then the Mississippi River, the actions we take in our local communities regarding water resources impact both local communities and those downstream. Various land uses and practices affect water quality and flood resiliency. With more frequent and severe major flooding events recently, this is especially important in southwest Iowa. Unprecedented flooding affected life, property, and critical infrastructure in our region in both 2011 and 2019.

The Golden Hills water resource team brings together local producers, landowners, conservation entities, and local governments to improve water quality, increase flood resiliency, and protect local infrastructure. The East and West Nishnabotna River Watershed Management Coalitions were formed in 2017 through 28E agreements between nine counties, nine soil and water conservation districts, and fourteen communities in southwest Iowa. Together with partners throughout Iowa and beyond, the Golden Hills water resource team coordinates programs that address specific local environmental challenges and work collaboratively towards implementing sustainable solutions.





# WATER RESOURCES



2023 has been a big year for our Water programs, including moving into more regenerative agricultural practices. We worked with numerous Soil & Water Conservation Districts in southern and western Iowa to develop 5-year plans to guide their work in the next few years.

We started a new Regional Conservation Partnership Program called "West Nishnabotna Water Quality and Infrastructure Partnership." This project aims to improve water quality, increase flood resiliency, and protect local infrastructure across a 681,000-acre project area in southwestern Iowa.

We were awarded an Underserved Farmer grant to help historically underserved producers, including beginning & veteran farmers, to incorporate regenerative practices into their operations. We also launched the first-in-the-nation Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) program, which helps farmers implement regenerative practices.

The goal of our Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) project is to find, scan, organize, name, and upload to DamWatch all files for PL-566, PL-534, Pilot, and RC&D watershed structures throughout the state of Iowa to make these files easily accessible. We will also be doing trainings about the purpose of watershed structures, the responsibilities of sponsors, how to perform watershed structure inspections, and how to use DamWatch. The Hamburg project involves developing a property bought by the city of Hamburg into a wetland complex and reconstructed prairie to protect the city's wellheads on the east side of the property. That was also established to provide outdoor recreation opportunities for both city residents and visitors as another source of tourism for the city.

We continue coordinating quarterly meetings for both the East and West Nishnabotna River Watershed Coalitions.



PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS





# LOCAL FOODS

Iowans are surrounded by fertile farmland, yet most of the food consumed in the state travels an average of 1,500 miles before landing on a dinner plate. Golden Hills strives to improve the southwest Iowa foodshed by building and maintaining alliances between regional producers and consumers. These alliances are further supported by raising awareness among southwest Iowans about the food that is available in this region.

Golden Hills convenes the Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative (SWIFFI), a multi-county coalition of individuals and organizations within the local food system. Golden Hills provides training, assists in navigating regulations, helps with grant writing, and offers other forms of support. The assistance provided by Golden Hills helps make local food more accessible to those living in southwest Iowa. The benefits of an active and local foodshed are felt by all involved. Revitalization of rural communities by boosting local economic development and improving the health of its citizens are just a few examples of the benefits of an active local foods system.



PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS







# LOCAL FOODS

In January we sponsored and attend Practical Farmers of Iowa's Annual Conference. In February we cohosted a Local Food Workshop in Atlantic with Cass County ISU Extension & Outreach and Cass County Food Policy Council. Local Foods Coordinator Jamie Fowler led a Local Food Workshop with the Clarinda Lied Public Library's Culinary Club in April. In summer and fall we hosted a series of "Preserve the Harvest" and "Seasonal Cookery" classes in partnership with Milk & Honey in Harlan. We had a vendor booth at the One Farm Market Co-Grand Opening Celebration in August to celebrate their new location and expansion, as well as booths at local farmers markets. We sponsored the [Avoca Main Street Longest Table dinner](#) in September.

Throughout the year we hosted farmer meetups in Red Oak, Crescent, Malvern, Honey Creek, and McClelland in partnership with local producers. We wrote a series of 17 Featured Farm posts highlighting local growers throughout the region.

In November we partnered with Center for Rural Affairs to host the first-ever [Southwest Iowa Local Foods Summit](#). Nearly 80 people, including farmers, school teachers, and other supporters, showed up in Avoca to learn about how we can collaboratively build a sustainable regional food system.

For the first time in more than a decade we hosted the popular [Dream to Farm](#) program in partnership with Iowa Western. Thirteen aspiring and beginning farmers are learning about crops, soils, livestock, business planning, and more.

We continued to regularly update the [Southwest Iowa Local Food Guide](#), and for the first time offered a Spanish version of the guide.

We are working with several communities on local food accessibility and expansion, including working with producers and small business owners to create extended hours and indoor accommodations for rural farmers markets.





# OUTDOOR RECREATION & TOURISM

Our region is an outdoor destination for people from across Iowa, Nebraska, and beyond. The unique Loess Hills offer parks and wildlife areas unlike anything else on the continent for hiking, birding, wildlife viewing, and hunting. Rivers, streams, and lakes also offer incredible opportunities for fishing and paddling. Golden Hills has worked for decades to expand and improve upon all of these activities in western Iowa.

Recreational trails are consistently near the top of the list of amenities that people are seeking in local communities. Golden Hills has played a role in most of the bicycling, paddling, and multi-use trails in rural western Iowa. We coordinate the Frontier Iowa Trails network, which includes more than a dozen groups working across county lines to link our communities and parks. Golden Hills has also created an online Loess Hills Hiking Guide for outdoor enthusiasts to reference.

Outdoor recreation and tourism are inextricably linked and our rural communities benefit from visitors to the region's three scenic byways, which are scenic driving routes connecting small towns, parks, attractions, and other amenities.



PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS





# OUTDOOR RECREATION & TOURISM

We kicked off the year with a First Day Hike at Loess Hills State Forest, led a bicycle ride during the Loess Hills Prairie Seminar in the spring, and updated the 20-year-old Siouxland Birding Guide.

In May, we hosted the third annual **LoHi Trek**, a multi-day hike through the Loess Hills in Plymouth and Monona counties with 40 participants from across Iowa, Nebraska, and beyond.

Our **Loess Hills Hiking Guide** recently surpassed 100,000 views, and is a great resource for anyone looking to take a hike!

We continue to coordinate three beautiful scenic byways in western Iowa: **Loess Hills National Scenic Byway**, **Western Skies Scenic Byway**, and **Glacial Trail Scenic Byway**.

We nominated the Sidney Iowa Championship Rodeo for **Travel Iowa's Outstanding Rural Event** award, which they received. We received a large grant from Gilchrist Foundation grant to implement the Loess Hills National Scenic Byway Interpretive Master Plan. We co-hosted the statewide **Iowa Trails Summit** in October.

We continue to assist numerous communities and organizations with grant-writing support for trail and recreation projects.

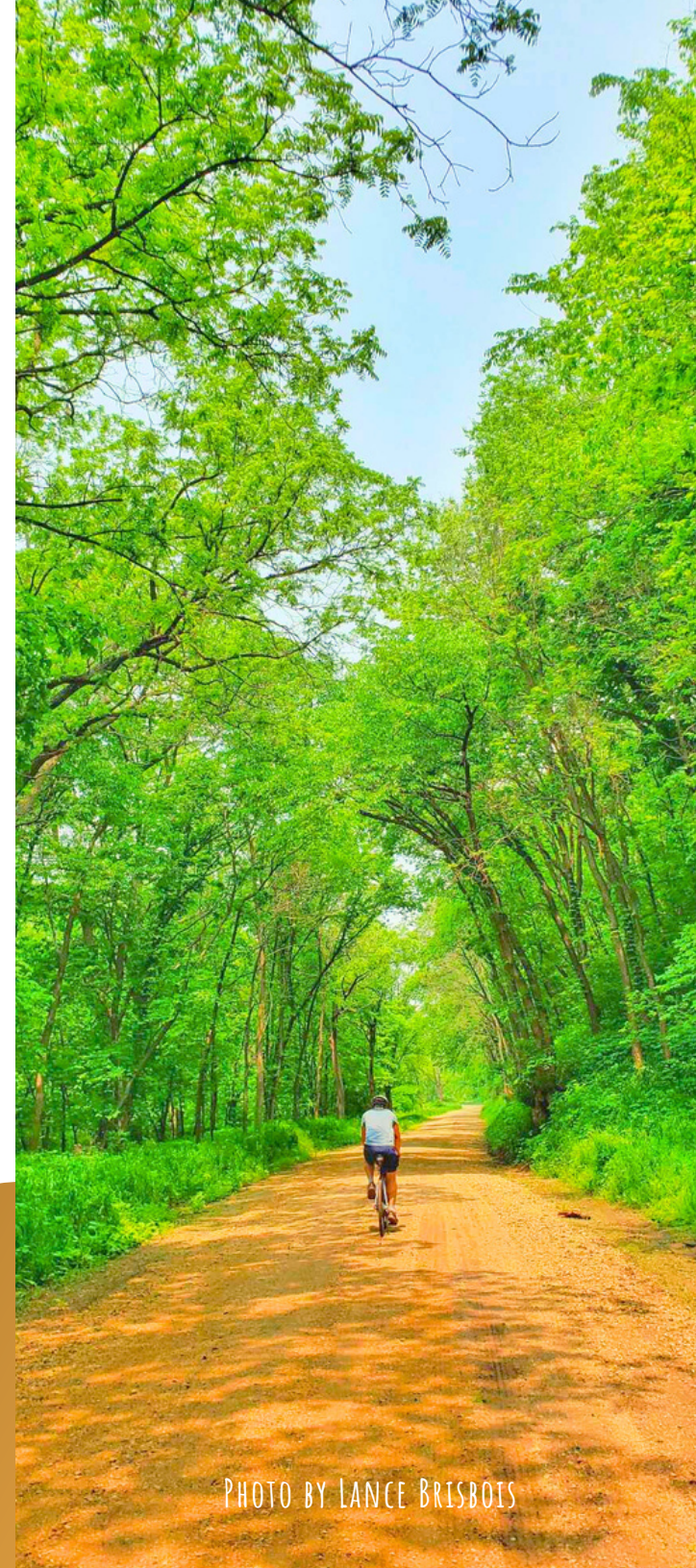


PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS





# LAND STEWARDSHIP



At one time the vast majority of western Iowa was blanketed in tallgrass prairies. Today, more than 99.9% of Iowa's prairies have been removed from the landscape. The Loess Hills and upper Little Sioux River valley include the majority of the remaining prairies, including the largest intact prairies in Iowa. Our work helps restore and reconstruct these prairies, which provides uncountable benefits such as wildlife habitat, water quality improvement, erosion reduction, and improved scenery.

The deep loess soils provide unique challenges with gully and streambank erosion, which Hungry Canyons Alliance has helped reduce for more than 20 years. Education is a core value of Golden Hills, and informing the public about stewarding our precious soils, waterways, and wildlife is an integral part of our work.

PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS







PHOTO BY LANCE BRISBOIS

# LAND STEWARDSHIP



Last winter, our virtual botany and ecology classes with Dr. Tom Rosburg continued to be popular in their third year. Our annual Loess Hills Pasque Flower Walk drew nearly 40 people to see the first-blooming wildflowers. Staff attended part of Loess Hills Cooperative Burn Week and continued to educate the public about the benefits of prescribed fire for our native landscapes.

We grew native plants in a greenhouse partnering with Iowa Western, and hosted a native plant class and plant sale at Iowa Western in the spring. Golden Hills had another successful season of prairie seed harvesting thanks to more than 100 volunteers who joined us throughout the Loess Hills. We hosted at least one volunteer opportunity in each of the seven Loess Hills counties from Akron to Hamburg. Seed will be used for restoration projects throughout the Loess Hills by partners such as county conservation boards and Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Some of the seed will be used for packets of native seed mixes, and some will be used for to propagate native plants this winter for our spring native plant sale. In November we hosted a prairie seed processing event with [Mullein Hill Farm](#) and [Center for Rural Affairs](#), where more than 20 volunteers helped us sort and clean seed. We also coordinated a tour of Custom Seed Services' native-seed-cleaning facilities.

Other special events included a Dinesen Prairie Walk + Dinner with Milk & Honey, tabling at the Milkweed & Cookies event hosted by Pollinator Alliance of the Heartland, attending the Iowa Nature Summit, and sponsoring Bison Fest at Botna Bend Park.

As always we are continuing general education & promotion of conservation and stewardship in western Iowa.





# ARTS & CULTURE



Golden Hills understands the value that arts and culture bring to southwest Iowa, from both a quality of life perspective and a tourism perspective. Golden Hills also helps with a variety of public art projects and offers grant writing assistance and capacity support for organizations and individual artists.

In 2023 We partnered with Friends of Loess Hills State Forest & Preparation Canyon State Park to host a “Loess Hills Native American History” program, led by staff from the Office of the State Archaeologist (OSA). OSA also led an Archaeology Roadshow at Botna Bend Park, where local residents brought artifacts to share and learn from the archaeologists.

We supported the Southwest Iowa Art Tour in multiple communities throughout the region in September. Local artists Anna Stoysich and Jorge Colorado stayed in a cabin and produced art Waubonsie State Park as part of our Artist in Residence program there. We helped the Painted Camel gallery in Macedonia get a grant to hire their first Gallery Manager. We continue to promote artists and art events in the region.







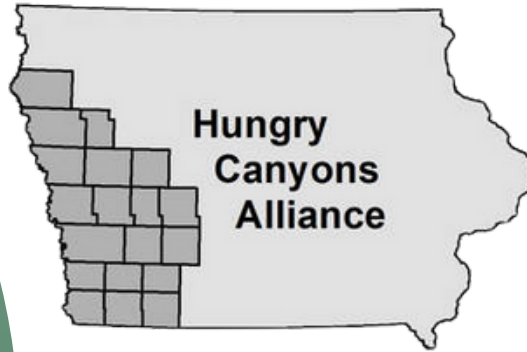
# COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Our talented staff can offer a wide variety of services on a contractual, fee-for-service basis as it fits within our mission. Contact us for support with any of the activities listed below. In 2023 we hosted a virtual grant-writing workshop with Iowa State University Extension & Outreach. We provide assistance to communities and organizations including:

- Grant writing
- Grant administration
- Fiscal management
- Mission-related event planning
- Meeting Facilitation
- Capacity Building
- Visioning
- Strategic Planning
- Printing brochures, maps, etc.

If you have questions about how we might be able to help your project or community, let us know.





Left: A typical gully in western Iowa. Right: To replace an erosive gully, a gabion basket chute was built with cost share from the HCA's landowners structure program

## THE PROBLEM

The Hungry Canyons Alliance (HCA) was formed locally to research and implement solutions to the problem of stream channel erosion and degradation in a 23 county area of the deep loess soils region of western Iowa. Channelization of streams and land use changes during the first half of the 1900's caused stream channels to erode, causing an estimated \$1.1 billion in damages to public and private infrastructure (bridges, culverts, utility lines, etc.), loss of farmland, and increased sediment loads.

A survey of western Iowa bridges in 2000 revealed that 404 were endangered due to stream channel degradation. Golden Hills RC&D in Oakland, Iowa helped to form and currently provides office space and administrative assistance to the Hungry Canyons Alliance.

## THE SOLUTION

An affordable solution to this problem is to build grade control structures in streams. Streambed stabilization is the key to preventing further erosion and protecting infrastructure. Grade control structures at regular intervals will help streams stabilize by changing their profile from an erosive steep incline to a stable stair-step pattern. Structures, which normally have a raised weir section and are constructed with steel sheet pile, riprap, and concrete grout, allow the stream elevation to drop in a controlled setting, while preventing further degradation, and create a calm backwater condition that allows silt to settle out upstream, decreasing sediment loads and turbidity, and increasing water quality.



## JOHN THOMAS

HUNGRY CANYONS PROGRAM DIRECTOR

[JOHN.THOMAS@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG](mailto:JOHN.THOMAS@GOLDENHILLSRCD.ORG)

John has led the Hungry Canyons Alliance since 2000. His work revolves around stream channel instability, gully erosion, and grade control. He has a B.S. in geology and environmental sciences from Cornell College, a master's degree in geology and water resources from Iowa State University, and a master's degree in civil engineering (hydraulics) from the University of Iowa. In his spare time, he is very active in his church and coaches his kids in their sports (soccer and wrestling). John lives in Council Bluffs and enjoys time with his wife Angie and their four children.



# OUR PROJECTS



## WATER RESOURCES

PRAIRIE SEED HARVEST SMALL TOWNS

## LOCAL FOODS NATIVE PLANTS

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE PRAIRIE WALKS WESTERN SKIES SCENIC BYWAY

TRAILS RURAL LOESS HILLS MISSOURI RIVER REGION RESILIENCE

## LAND STEWARDSHIP WATERSHED HISTORY

FRONTIER IOWA TRAILS NETWORK EDUCATION LOHI TREK

WATER QUALITY SOUTHWEST IOWA ART TOUR LOCAL FOOD GUIDE

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

HUNGRY CANYONS ALLIANCE GRANT WRITING LOESS HILLS HIKING GUIDE

LOESS HILLS NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

QUALITY OF LIFE

## ARTS & CULTURE

WANDERLOESS BOTANY & ECOLOGY CLASSES BIKE ROUTES & RIDES

## OUTDOOR RECREATION COLLABORATION

SOUTHWEST IOWA FOOD & FARM INITIATIVE CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

TOURISM ARCHAEOLOGY GLACIAL TRAIL SCENIC BYWAY

IMPROVING WESTERN IOWA... #GOLDENHILLSDOESTHAT!

## 2023 FUNDERS INCLUDE:

- Alternative Land Use Services
- Builders Initiative
- Ceres Trust
- Fund for Siouxland
- Gilchrist Foundation
- Harrison County Community Foundation
- Iowa DNR REAP Conservation Education Program
- Iowa Department of Transportation
- Iowa Audubon
- Iowa West Foundation
- Loess Hills Audubon Society
- Pottawattamie County
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program
- Russell Kurth Foundation
- Specialty Crop Block Grant
- Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations
- Many private donors
- and more!