

The Friends' Flyer

An Update from the Friends of Blackburn State Park



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This is the latest edition of the *Friends' Flyer*, a newsletter update from the Friends of Blackburn State Park (BSP). The Friends is an Iowa nonprofit 501c3 tax-exempt corporation that includes a board of directors and over 50 members like you who are dedicated to promoting and supporting the park and surrounding wildlife management areas. The park, which is maintained by personnel from Waubonsie State Park, is Iowa's newest state park, located in the Loess Hills at 1291 Cemetery Road northeast of Thurman, Iowa, a few miles north of the town's cemetery. The Blackburn Wildlife Management Area next to the park, is managed by Department Natural Resources (DNR) personnel at the Nishnabotna Wildlife Unit. Altogether, the park, the WMA and other WMAs there offer nearly 1000 acres of publicly accessible DNR grounds at that location. See [Blackburn State Park - GOLDEN HILLS RC&D \(goldenhillsrcd.org\)](http://goldenhillsrcd.org)

If you want to know more about the Friends of Blackburn State Park, contact vice presidents Ken Forney (712.313.0315, reforney@hotmail.com) or Mike Younts (402.209.7292, myounts@fmtabor.org). Being a Friend of the Park is also a good way to stay informed of unique opportunities and activities being offered there.

Here's the latest park news:

1. Year-end, Tax-deductible Donations

Don't forget your year-end tax-deductible donations to the Friends group to support initiatives like those mentioned below. Just go to the Donations page of the website [Blackburn State Park - GOLDEN HILLS RC&D \(goldenhillsrcd.org\)](http://goldenhillsrcd.org).

2. Volunteer Weekend

Taking a cue from Iowa State Parks, which set Saturday, September 24, as its annual statewide Volunteer Day, The Friends of Blackburn State Park collaborated with local DNR to host Volunteer Weekend at the park September 24-25.

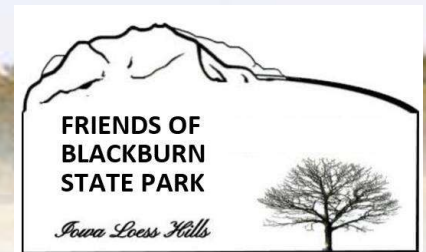
Volunteers collected and hauled away the debris from DNR's recent demolition of the old handicapped-accessible observation deck to clear the area for the upcoming



construction of the new one (see below). The volunteers also painted the gazebo skirt, railing and metal braces, a few wooden picnic tables, and the new pipe fencing on the north side of the park.

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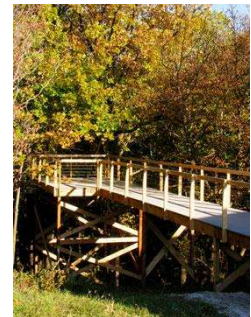
Altogether 14 volunteers joined the effort, guided by park manager Matt Moles and aided by his assistants, Sarah Lammers and Luke Calfee. A hot-dog roast followed Saturday's efforts. Special thanks goes



to volunteers Ken Forney, Mike Younts, Glenn Pollock, Cheryl Jones, Zack Jones, Gary Jones, Valeri Albertsen, Beth Blackburn, John and Mary Howery, Greg and Bonnie Pierce, and Bill Blackburn. We hope to make this an annual affair, so please let us know if you're interested.

3. Observation Deck Replacement

The Friends received a \$40,000 grant from the Gilchrist Foundation for rebuilding the popular handicapped-accessible observation walkway and deck adjacent to the park's gazebo-pavilion. The remaining \$15,000 required for the project is being supplied by William Blackburn Consulting and other sources. A professional engineer was retained to design the upgrade to meet Iowa code and DNR safety criteria. The changes include heavier support columns and joists, and new decking and railings. Madison Construction of Thurman, IA has been contracted to build the new structure and has already ordered the materials, squeezing in the purchases before the expected price hikes due to the repairs of the Florida hurricane damage. Construction is expected to begin over the next month or two. We hope to have the formal dedication of the new deck at our Earth Day event next April (see below).

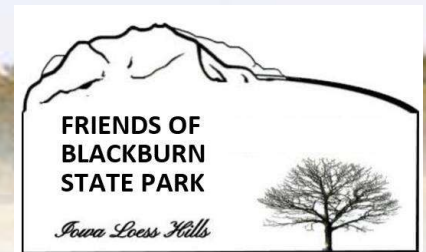


4. High School Earth Day Event

Friends vice president and Fremont-Mills teacher Mike Younts will be exploring the prospect of an Earth Day event for high school students at the park sometime around next Earth Day (April 22), with a day selected between April 17-28 that accommodates the schedules of the students and volunteers who will help. Mike will be checking with Fremont-Mills, Sidney and other regional schools to assess their interest. The Friends board will hold a planning meeting next January to hear Mike's assessment and to plan the event if there is sufficient interest. Preliminary thinking is the event may involve a tour, some park improvement by students, a scavenger hunt, and a cookout. If you would like to help Mike and with this event, please contact him at ph., 402.209.7292, email myounts@fntabor.org.

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5. Access Road Repair

The 1 ¼-mile Class B portion of Cemetery Road leading to the park now has a new coat of gravel. Increased traffic to the parklands (over 5,000 people counted between spring and fall) and past flooding caused the gravel on that stretch of the road to become very thin and even muddy with ruts at times. It declined to the point that regular park visitors told us they would no longer come up that road after significant rain. The County Engineering Department has a policy requiring sources outside the department to fund half of any gravel work on Class B roads. The County said additional gravel could be applied there for \$11,000. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources, along with other property owners, originally contributed funds when that Class B roadway was originally graveled, but the agency declined to do so this time. The Friends group along with William Blackburn Consulting, funded the 50% match amount of \$5500.

As previously reported, the Fremont County Engineering Department commissioned engineering firm HGM to design repairs for the two 50-foot ravines cutting into the road bed of Cemetery Road, the only access road now leading to the park. Because the County Engineering Department is focused on two large FEMA road-repair projects this year, it has said the remedial work will begin next year.

The donation of Blackburn State Park and Wildlife Management Area was made to the DNR with the understanding that the agency would work with the county to eventually find a sustainable long-term solution to the problematic Cemetery Road access to the parklands. The most likely solution was to upgrade the 1 ¼-mile Class B portion of the road to Class A standards, like the rest of the road, which would mean the county would accept full gravel, maintenance and repair responsibility for it year round. The County said it was too busy to pursue the complicated upgrade process now but would allow the DNR to do so, as is allowed under the [RAISE Discretionary Grants | US Department of Transportation](#)) program. Unfortunately, DNR said it wasn't willing to pursue that.

The Friends then appealed to Marcus Branstad, the chairman of the Iowa Conservation Commission that originally accepted and approved the donation of the park grounds. Marcus discussed this with top DNR leadership in Des Moines then wrote us:

"... the goal is to encourage visitor attendance to the area, which includes providing access. To achieve the access goal, the Department has and will continue to work with Fremont County to make road improvements and continue to provide safe public access in perpetuity."

The Friends followed up with Marcus indicating that we do not believe a road with stretches of muddy ruts is "safe public access" and are seeking a commitment from DNR that it won't let the road degrade to that level again, especially when more gravel can be easily added with a small cost-sharing contribution to the county. We are awaiting his reply.