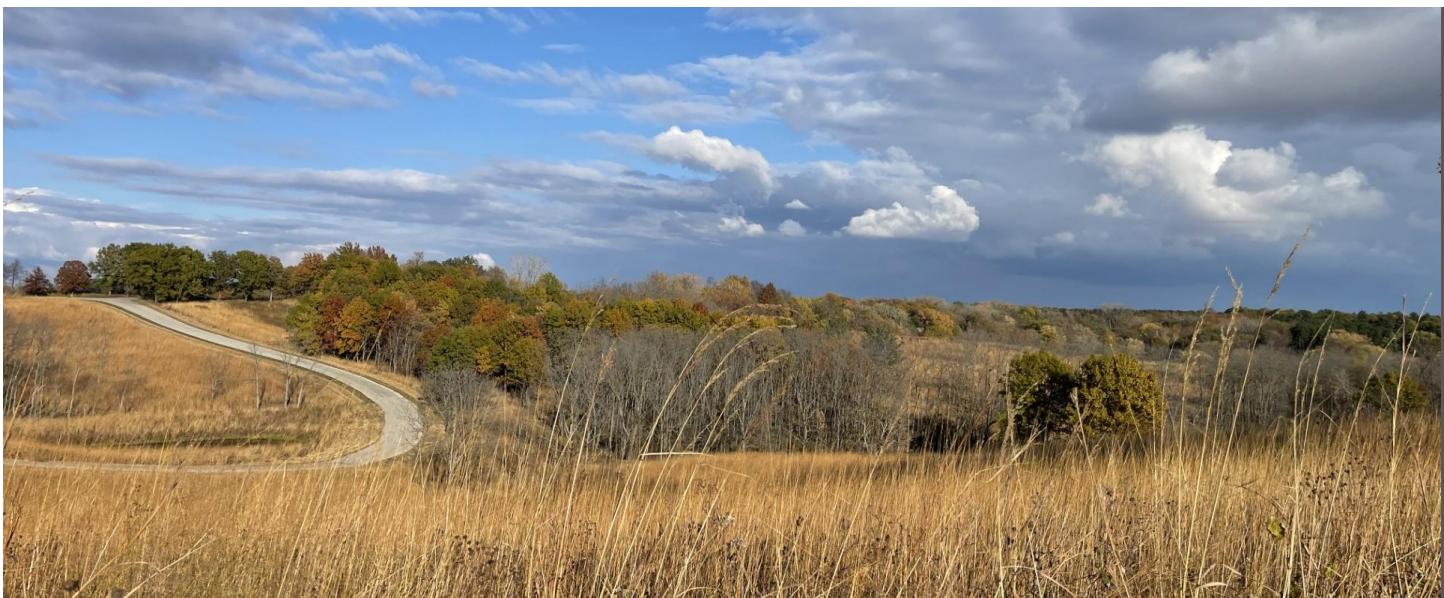


# Naturalists News

## INAUGURAL ISSUE



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#### ABOUT US

[Iowa Master Naturalists](#) (IMN) is a 501c3 nonprofit run entirely by volunteers. Our mission is to educate a corps of adult volunteers about Iowa's environment and natural history, thus empowering them to promote awareness, appreciation, and stewardship of the natural world in their communities.

# Welcome to the new Iowa Master Naturalists newsletter

Creating community and fostering Iowa's native ecosystems.  
By Iowa Master Naturalists and for Iowa Master Naturalists.



## WHY A NEWSLETTER?

GINNY PAULSON, NEWSLETTER COORDINATOR, FALL 2017 CLASS

After more than a decade of IMN accomplishments, the board and advisors are launching a biannual newsletter.

Each issue will educate readers about nature in Iowa and feature the achievements of IMN students, graduates, and volunteers. Contact us at [editor@iowamasternaturalists.org](mailto:editor@iowamasternaturalists.org) with story ideas for the spring/summer 2026 issue.

To give us your feedback or request future newsletters through snail mail instead of email, [take our short survey](#).

## YELLOW LADY SLIPPER

PAINTING BY DONNA HOFF-GRAMBAU, SPRING 2025 CLASS

The Yellow Lady Slipper ([Cypripedium parviflorum](#)) is one of the 30 orchid species native to Iowa. More than half are endangered or threatened.

You can learn more about Iowa's vanishing native orchids in a [Bleeding Heartland](#) blog article by Kara Grady.

## STAY INVOLVED AND CONNECTED

Iowa Master Naturalists students and graduates tell IMN about their volunteer efforts and continuing education through our "Track it Forward" tool. It's easy to use. It's also an essential way to stay connected with IMN after completing your initial curriculum. Below are links to log your hours and find out about the latest volunteer and training opportunities.

- [Click here](#) to log your hours on IMN's Track it Forward tool.
- [Click here](#) to find volunteer opportunities.
- [Click here](#) to find advanced training opportunities.

Volunteer and advanced training opportunities are updated regularly with the latest opportunities. Thanks go to IMN volunteer, Reannah J, Spring 2023 Class, for compiling them!

**Read more** about the importance of volunteer hours on [page 7](#). Elisabeth Swain shares IMN success stories and tips for using IMN's online platform.



## IMN VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: MELISSA SERENDA

By Melissa Serenda, Summer 2016 Class

I'm an old-timer in IMN terms, having taken the course in the summer of 2016 (when Elisabeth came on board as director!).

I first came across Iowa Master Naturalists at Prairie Preview nearly a decade ago (there may have been a dead armadillo—an oddity to encounter this far north—on display outside the door to the venue as we filed in, and I thought to myself, these are my people). I signed up for the next available class.

I put what I was learning to use almost immediately as I began documenting the flora and fauna along my local trail, the [Sycamore Greenway](#) in Iowa City. It's a two-mile trail on the southern outskirts of town, as well as a stormwater management system for the surrounding neighborhoods: a series of one-acre cells planted with native forbs and grasses carry rain and snowmelt to a constructed wetland, allowing the water to infiltrate into the ground as it goes. My goal is to help people get to know their wild neighbors in the area and appreciate them as part of our neighborhood and our community.

What I particularly love about the Sycamore Greenway, and other suburban trails, is that it gives folks a chance to experience nature without having to get in a car and drive to a "premier" park or natural area. They can walk just a couple blocks from their house and be treated to bumble bees foraging on native plants, frogs and toads singing their noisy chorus, and the surreal calls of the resident sandhill crane family in the distance.

With the help and support of the City of Iowa City, I've picked up dozens of bags of litter from along the trail, and over the past several years we've been able to organize a small crew of volunteers to cut woody brush that crowds out the prairie grasses and flowers that grow. Much

of my volunteer time and my education hours for IMN are focused on work on the trail, researching and writing about the life found there, and helping keep trash out of the trail and surrounding area.

The neat thing about being a naturalist is that there is always something new to learn; my interests shifted from birds to native plants to insects on a macro level, with micro-shifts throughout the seasons as different flowers bloomed and different critters came and went. Even after ten years walking the length of the trail, I still discover new sights, such as a senna flowering along a busy part of the trail last year, or crayfish chimneys down in the cells after a wet spring. The connections made through IMN have built a foundation of curiosity and attention, opening a whole big world of things to learn.



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*Regular cleanups of the Greenway are one of the ways Melissa cares for the Sycamore Greenway trail. Learn more on her blog: <https://sycamoregreenway.blogspot.com/> (also on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)).*

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## BOOK REVIEW: SEA OF GRASS

CONNIE ALDRIDGE, FALL 2019 CLASS

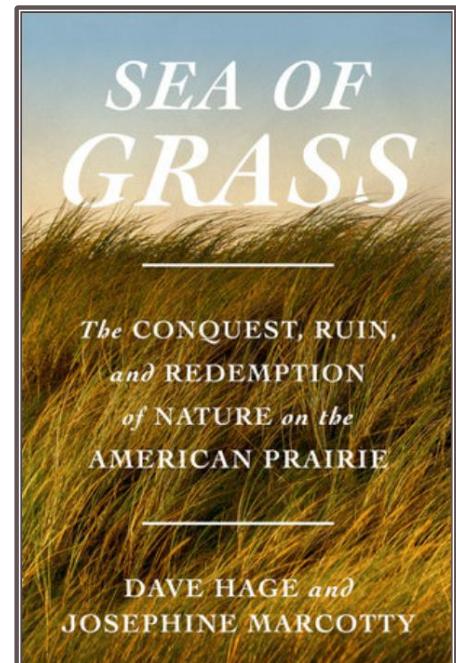
This book was proposed to the IMN book club by another IMN graduate, Jodie Theobald,\* and I am so happy to recommend it to the rest of the IMN society. It is a great book for anyone interested in Iowa and the history of its land - what has shaped its soils in the past and how we are continuing to shape its future.

I started it expecting a dry historical textbook about prairies. Instead of pedantic rhetoric, I was delighted to have a book that grabbed me and made me eager to keep reading. The authors start with a description of what our marvelous prairie was - how it developed over the years in coordination with bison and other animals that made it their home, and how indigenous tribes also shaped it. Then came the American settlers and their revolutionary inventions which "tamed" the prairie by being able to break that rich sod and drain those wet swamps.

The authors provided one of the most comprehensive stories of how midwestern and western farmers changed our landscape and, in turn, how their philosophies about the land developed. I could never fathom how anyone could be against putting aside land for parks and wildlife preserves. After reading this book - though I may not agree - I can at least understand such a point of view.

One chapter details the history of the use of fertilizers in farming and how that has changed agriculture throughout the world. Who knew how fascinating NH<sub>3</sub> could be and how important the nitrogen cycle is to us all. Other chapters tell of the history of pesticides and herbicides, what things have been tried in the past, what things are working now, and how insects manage to keep coming up with their own solutions to keep reproducing. The book also delves into water use, the problems of pollution in our lakes and rivers, and solutions we may use in the future.

We learn of the ways our local, state and federal governments have shaped how this incredible landscape has been developed. We also see how various organizations, such as [The Nature Conservancy](#) and [Practical Farmers of Iowa](#) can work with farmers and ranchers to both conserve prairie land for the future



and still make a profit when growing their crops more in tune with nature.

Overall, it is a sad story of what we have lost and are continuing to lose. The authors give us some hope for the future, but caution that to save what is left of our grasslands, we must work to change our political climate so that our government will make it important to help with that effort.

*Sea of Grass* is a good and important book. I hope that it helps change the future of Iowa prairies for the better.

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*"Sea of Grass," by David Hage and Josephine Marcotty, traces the environmental collapse of a crucial ecosystem and how its return could fight climate change.*

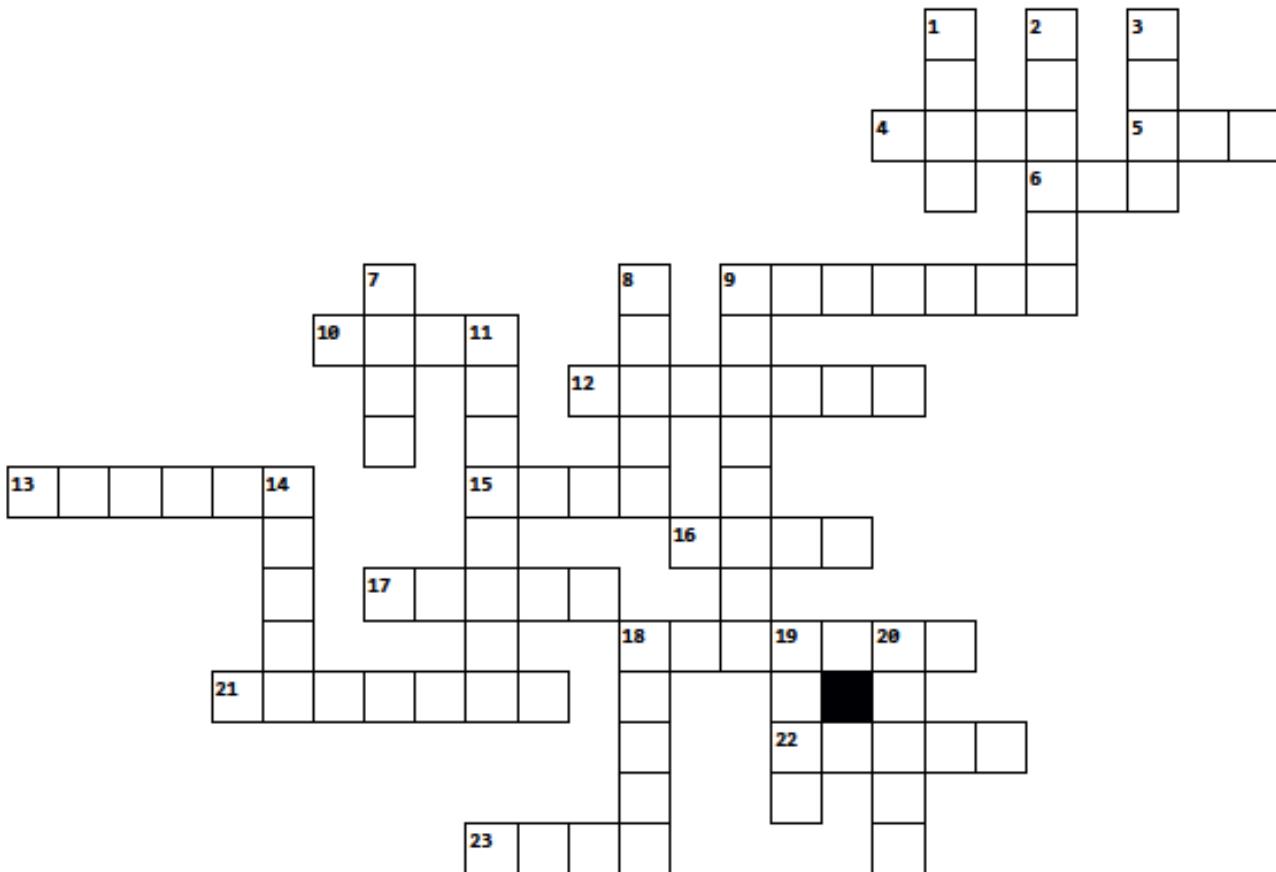
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\*If you are interested in the IMN book club, contact Jodie Theobald at [ictheobald@mchsi.com](mailto:ictheobald@mchsi.com).

## NATURE CROSSWORD

JOHN DONNER, FALL 2019 CLASS, AUTHOR OF "WHAT'S THAT TREE" (IMN WEBSITE> [RESOURCES](#))

## Acorny Treetise



## Across

- 4. insect infestation response
- 5. oak family having pointed lobed leaves
- 6. quercus
- 9. growing layer just below phloem
- 10. oak killer
- 12. handy branching arrangement
- 13. groovy bark
- 15. \_\_\_\_ year: bumper crop of nuts
- 16. oak with fringed acorns
- 17. valley feature of some leaves
- 18. mnemonic for opposite branching species
- 21. stem-like leaf structure
- 22. below ground structure
- 23. protrusion feature of some leaves

## Down

- 1. leaf \_\_\_\_: mark left by a leaf after falling off a twig
- 2. tubelike transport layer of tree
- 3. outer protective layer of a tree
- 7. number of needles in white pine packet
- 8. leaf-like structure connected to seeds, e.g., linden
- 9. multiple leaflets on leaf
- 11. bud at branch's end
- 14. oak family having rounded lobed leaves
- 18. syruping tree
- 19. woody mass protruding from trunk
- 20. branches, leaves, and canopy

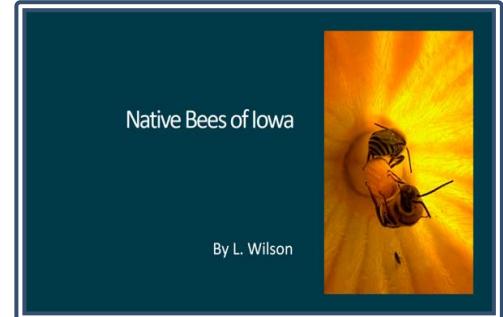
[Answers on Page 13](#)

## CAPSTONE CORNER

ELISABETH SWAIN, IMN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The variety of capstone projects that our grads complete is truly inspirational. Here is a small selection of ongoing or recently completed projects. Obviously, this is not a comprehensive catalogue, so if you don't see your own project here, stay tuned! It may be featured in a subsequent issue.

Most Iowans cannot name a single type of Iowa bee other than honey bees (which are not even native to the US) and bumble bees, but **Lisa Wilson** (IMN Spring 2024) is out to change that! When Lisa learned about the astonishing variety of native bee species found in Iowa, she became determined to share her wonder at the richness Iowa's bee diversity with others. The result is "Native Bees of Iowa," an educational flip book that Lisa created to support educational programming at local nature centers and in the IMN program. The booklet is in the process of being published and will be distributed to our spring 2026 IMN class.



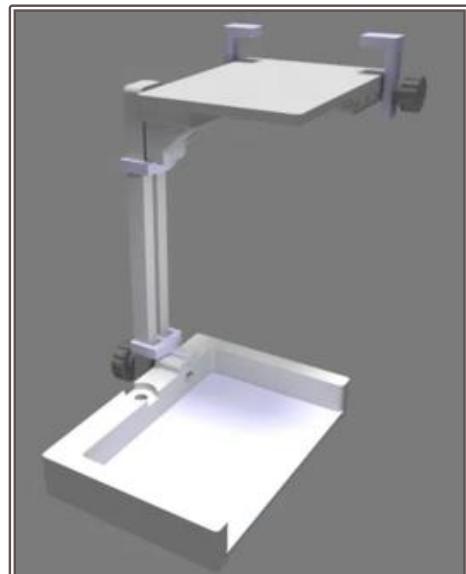
**Amanda Flaata** (IMN Spring 2024) is fascinated by fungi. She has taught classes on the subject, led forays, and helped inventory Iowa's fungal riches. As a board member for the Prairie States Mushroom Club (PSMC), she helps promote fungal appreciation across the state. As a mother and an artist, she is expanding that educational net to include children.

For her capstone project, Amanda drew exquisite and scientifically accurate images of some of Iowa's common mushrooms which are now being used for programming by the PSMC and local nature centers. Twelve pages, such as the one pictured (left), will be assembled into a coloring book for use by both children and adults. Can you identify the three fungal species shown? (Answers on next page.)

**Steve Ryan** (IMN Spring 2025) is an ambassador for Iowa's "small creatures." A polymath with interests in biology, engineering, and photography, Steve designed a 3D printable cellphone holder for taking photos and videos of tiny life forms in petri dishes or on microscope slides. Adjustment knobs permit a phone to be moved both horizontally and vertically relative to the subject, then held stably in the optimal position for a photo.

This stand gives folks who don't own a microscope an economical way to enter the strange and wonderful world of hydras, planaria, and tardigrades, and the ability to more fully appreciate the details of lichens, fungi, and insects.

Experienced photographers will appreciate its potential for use in timelapse photography and focus stacking. Connie Aldridge, an IMN board member and participant in the [Bumble Bee Atlas Project](#), immediately realized the usefulness of such a stand for photographing cold-tranquillized bees in her survey work.



*(Continued on the next page)*

*(Continued)*

Steve is working with Connie to tweak his stand design to accommodate that specific use (among others). If you want to print your own cell phone holder, Steve's design can be downloaded for free at:

<https://www.printables.com/model/1455758-magnifier-and-macrophotography-phone-stand>.

## VOLUNTEER HOURS

Congratulations to all for your faithful volunteer work. In 2025 you collectively flung us over the 20,000 volunteer-hour mark and that momentum is continuing into 2026.

**Phil Schaff** (IMN Fall 2018) and **Don Ohde** (IMN Fall 2018) continue to lead the pack, with both logging hours most weeks of the year, totaling over 1,000 hours apiece. However, no matter how many hours you volunteer, every single hour is important. Volunteer hours provide one of the few numerical measurements of the impact of our organization--a huge deal when we apply for grants. Irrationally, some folks view logging

hours as a sort of “bragging”. Please disabuse yourself of that notion — we really do need those hours!

Here's a refresher on how to log your hours:

1. Go to the IMN website, [iowamasternaturalists.org](https://iowamasternaturalists.org).
2. Click on “Log Hours” in the top menu.
3. This will bring up a link to our hour-tracking platform and instructions.
  - ✓ If you haven't logged in for a while, you may need to set or reset your password.
4. If you have trouble with any aspect of the process, email me at: [info@iowamasternaturalists.org](mailto:info@iowamasternaturalists.org).

*Thank you!*

## ANSWERS: FUNGI SHOWN ON PAGE 6

Fungi pictured in Amanda's coloring book page, are, from top: *Helvella crispa* (elfin saddle), *Cordyceps tenuipes*, and *Hypomyces lactifluorum* (Lobster Mushroom).



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*Elisabeth Swain has been IMN's director, a volunteer position, since 2015. On why she enjoys her role at IMN, Elisabeth says, “I love people who love nature, learning about the amazing creatures with whom we share this planet, and doing my modest bit to help make Iowa a more nature-friendly place.”*

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*Elisabeth has a PhD in botany and became IMN's executive director after retiring from her career as a University of Iowa biochemistry visiting professor and lecturer. Besides directing IMN in her retirement, she studied art at the University of Iowa, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in spring 2025. Her degree focus was sculpture.*

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## MEET THE IMN BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND ACTIVE ADVISORS

Learn about their tenure, nature interests, and inspiration for staying involved with IMN.



**Anita Hutton**, spring 2017 class, board member since 2018, and board Treasurer since 2019. Anita's nature focus is woodlands and forests.

"I've always enjoyed the outdoors and wanted, through IMN, a deeper appreciation and knowledge of Iowa's natural inheritance."



**Ben Rowold**, summer 2016 class, and board member since 2017. Ben's nature focus is bluebirds, and he has been a nestbox monitor since 2015. "I want to help restore and conserve Iowa's natural world — its wildlife, plants, and landscapes — and I enjoy learning and working with others who feel the same way."



**Connie Aldridge**, fall 2019 class, and new board member in 2025. Connie's nature focus areas are frogs, toads, prairies, forests, and trees.

"I have always been interested in nature and conservation. When I was 8 years old, my grandmother let me use four square feet of her garden to construct a nature park. IMN was one of the most enjoyable and meaningful courses I've ever taken, and it continues to shape what I am doing with my life, from growing a prairie, to planting my own forest, to helping others know the beauty of nature."



**Dylan Nielsen**, spring 2023 class, and board member since 2024. Dylan's nature focus is exploring Iowa's ecosystems and learning about their deep history. He is particularly fascinated by river and woodland ecology, and he always has his eyes peeled for new or treasured wild edibles. "My inspiration to be a part of IMN stems from my love of learning from the incredible scientists, professionals, volunteers, and enthusiasts that have made Iowa their home. The opportunity to welcome that knowledge into the lives of my fellow Iowans is what I treasure most about working with IMN."



**Ginny Paulson**, fall 2017 class, board member since 2019, and current board Chair. Ginny's nature focus areas are prairies, butterflies, and bluebird nestbox monitoring. She has been a nestbox monitor since 2018.

"I grew up in northern MN on the edge of a state-protected wetland (a fen). I had the luxury of being a free-range child, and I developed a kinship with nature. Being part of IMN has helped foster my adult kinship with Iowa's land, teaching me how to nurture and protect our local ecosystems."



**Jean Prior**, IMN geology presenter, 2015 – 2020, and IMN advisor since 2016. Jean's Iowa nature focus areas are geology, Iowa landforms, groundwater, state preserves and natural areas.

"I was inspired to be an advisor to the IMN Board by the IMN goals, their success in other states, their multifaceted curriculum bringing many elements of natural history together (biology, ecology, geology, ornithology, for example), showing students how different aspects of the natural world are interrelated - and how they can apply this knowledge to advantage in their own communities."



**John Donner**, fall 2018 class, and board member since 2024. John's nature focus areas are forestry and nature education.

"I am inspired to be part of IMN because the people are wonderful, the cause is noble, and I feel my contributions have value."



**Justin Voss**. Fall 2015 class, board member since 2016, and current board Vice Chair. Justin's nature focus areas are plants and fungi. He volunteers for special events, especially at Indian Creek Nature Center, and prairie burns.

Justin is the longest serving current IMN board member and dedicated to the IMN mission. Before his current board role as Vice Chair, he served as board Chair for many years. He said, "Maya [founding IMN Executive Director] asked me to join the board and I have been here ever since."



**Lynette Seigley** has been an IMN advisor since 2019. Her Iowa nature focus areas are geology and water quality.

"Before retiring from the Iowa DNR, I was involved with IOWATER and Iowa Project AWARE. Through these programs, I witnessed the importance of engaging people in our natural resources. Being an advisor to Iowa Master Naturalists allows me to support a new generation of stewards of our natural resources. Through our actions, we all can have an impact for the better."



**Steve Keane**. Fall 2019 class, board member since 2022, and current board Secretary. Steve's nature focus areas are prairie restoration, trail development, and outdoor education.

"The important mission of IMN and talented leadership inspire me. Also, the more that can be learned of our natural environment, the greater our appreciation, and the greater the need to build a community of advocates."

Find IMN Board of Directors meeting minutes online at <https://iowamasternaturalists.org/Board-Minutes/>

## IOWA'S TREES: INTERVIEW WITH MARK VITOSH, DISTRICT FORESTER

INTERVIEWER: GINNY PAULSON, FALL 2017 CLASS



*Mark Vitosha is originally from Iowa City, and he has a B.S. and M.S. degree in forestry from Iowa State University. Mark has been a professional forester since the fall of 1988 and has worked in Oklahoma and Iowa (including at Iowa State University). He has been a District Forester with the Iowa DNR Wildlife Bureau since 2000. He assists private landowners in managing their forest resources in Benton, Iowa, Jasper, Johnson, Linn, Muscatine and Poweshiek counties. He loves to hunt morel mushrooms in the spring.*

*[Editor's note: You may have heard Mark speak for IMN or even on Iowa Public Radio. He's a regular guest on Charity Nebbe's horticulture podcast,*

*"Garden Variety," airing live every Friday. This interview took place in mid-January and has been condensed and edited to accommodate a print format. Part two will appear in our next issue.]*

**Ginny: What do you think is the most important issue for Iowa's native trees today?**

**Mark:** I think it is the health of our oak. All trees are important, but oaks are a keystone species for wildlife habitat and other things. There are many wildlife species that depend on oaks. Over 500 species of moths and butterflies benefit from oak species as a habitat. Iowa birds also benefit. Birds eat larvae that utilize oak (and other species), and if we don't have those species of larvae, that impacts the birds trying to get established and their hatchlings. So, there's a key cycle there. Over the last 35 years, we've seen a significant decline in oak habitat in Iowa. The number of oak trees has declined significantly. In those 35 years, bur oak declined by 18%, red oak by 50%, and white oak by 49%. (This data is about trees at least 5 inches in diameter.) To put that in terms of actual numbers, in 2024, it was estimated we lost over 224,000 white oak trees.

**Ginny: What are the causes of oak decline?**

**Mark:** There are multiple causes. Over the last probably 5 to 10 years, we've had multiple diseases and conditions impacting our trees. For oak species, besides oak wilt, we've also had a mystery condition that we call "rapid white oak mortality." We've lost a lot of white

oak, and we don't know exactly what is causing this condition.

There's also a successional trend of oaks being replaced by other species, old oaks dying off, and lack of management of our oak resource. Historically, we had a lot of fire that created disturbance and openings, and that's what oak wants. It wants full sunlight. Iowa's indigenous people used fire to manage the land, but after European settlement, we stopped allowing fire to burn in our woodlands. We weren't creating those disturbances anymore, so the oak wasn't getting a chance. That promoted shade-loving species, like hackberry, sugar maple, basswood, bitternut hickory, and elm.

**Ginny: Is there a prevention for oak wilt?**

**Mark:** The best prevention for oak wilt is to not prune -- or wound -- oak trees in the summer. One way the disease moves is through an open wound on the tree. The period of highest susceptibility for transmission in Iowa is March 15 through August 1. Oaks are still somewhat susceptible from August 2 through October 31. I generally tell people, if they're going to prune their oak trees, to wait until after they get a couple hard frosts, which is usually November.

*(Continued on the next page)*

*(Continued)*

The DNR monitors the picnic (*nitidulid*) beetle that could carry the fungus that causes oak wilt. They monitor what they call “degree days” for that insect, and once degree days hit a concerning number, the DNR sends out a news release that says stop pruning oaks. That's usually around March 1. ([3/5/2025 DNR news release](#))

**Ginny: How do you detect oak wilt?**

**Mark: You see browning of the leaves, usually in July and August.** A lot of times it will start at the top of the tree and kind of work its way down. The leaves won't necessarily be shiny. They'll almost look like they were sitting in water. We use the term “water soaked” for this. They're not fall-color brown. They're a bronzish brown. Those leaves will start to fall off at the wrong time. Oak wilt is a vascular disease that goes to the entire system. It's systemic.

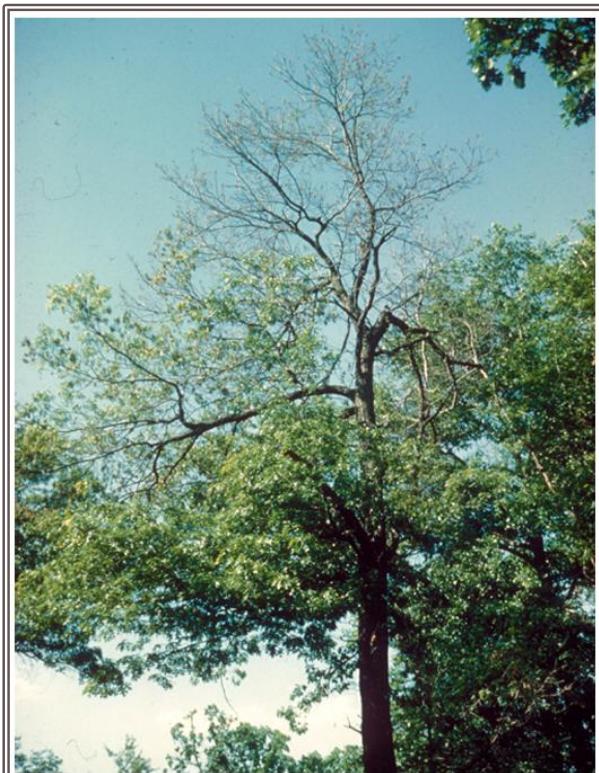


Figure 1. A red oak dying from oak wilt.

The photo above of a red oak dying of oak wilt is from the ISU Extension oak wilt identification and management publication [SUL 0015](#).

Even in the winter, if I see 2 - 5 dead red oaks, most likely that's a pocket of oak wilt. If someone suspects oak wilt, the first thing to do is to get it correctly diagnosed by a professional.

**Ginny: What are the most impactful actions IMN volunteers can take to help Iowa trees?**

**Mark: Volunteer for your local organizations that manage forests.** Work with agencies or groups that have forests that advertise for assistance, and then it's really organized. It's helping them meet their mission. That's the best way to help promote stability and health.

The other thing people can do, if they know people who have woodlands, is to have them call a forester to look at their woods. You can spread the word that just “letting it be” is not always the best management practice. With some input, they might be able to reduce the negative impacts we've talked about.

**Ginny: Do you have a favorite Iowa tree?**

**Mark: My personal favorite has always been the [white oak](#).** I think it's just a beautiful, historic, important tree. My second favorite is the [chinkapin oak](#).

#### Resources:

- Iowa Woodland Owner's Association newsletter, [Timber Talk](#).
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources, [Forest and Trees Health webpage](#).
- Iowa State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach, [Contacts for Forestry webpage](#) and [diagnosing problem trees webpage](#).
- Email [mark.vitosh@dnr.iow.gov](mailto:mark.vitosh@dnr.iow.gov) with questions.

#### Interview topics coming in the next issue:

- Invasive plants and insects
- Managing urban trees
- Importance of diversity

# Foraged Food Recipe

From Alan Bergo, a James Beard Award-winning Chef, Author, Show Host, and Forager. Visit [foragerchef.com](http://foragerchef.com).



## SAUTEED MORREL SALAD

From: <https://foragerchef.com/sauteed-wild-mushroom-and-chickweed-salad/#recipe>.

### INGREDIENTS

- 3-4 oz freshest possible morel mushrooms
- Blended oil for sautéing (half olive oil and half grapeseed, or use your favorite oil)
- Kosher salt and fresh ground black pepper
- 4 oz fresh greens (sturdy ones, such as watercress and chickweed)
- 1 large clove garlic finely minced
- Grated high quality parmesan
- Lemon wedges for serving

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Clean and wash the greens; put them into a mixing bowl and reserve.
2. Cut the mushrooms into large pieces.
3. Heat a tablespoon or so of oil, add the mushrooms, and cook without seasoning for a couple minutes, or until their water has started to release and the mushrooms are beginning to brown.
4. Add a good pinch of salt and pepper (and a little more oil if the mushrooms have soaked it all up). Increase the heat a bit, if needed, and cook until they're lightly browned.
5. Add the garlic and cook another minute.
6. Toss the hot mushrooms with the fresh greens, mix well, and season with a squeeze of fresh lemon. Adjust seasonings as needed until it tastes good to you.
7. Divide the greens and mushrooms between two plates, top with grated parmesan, and serve.

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*Before you eat or serve foraged food, be very sure you have accurately identified your species! For this recipe, you can download the ISU Extension Safe Mushroom Foraging Guide at: <https://shop.iastate.edu/extension/farm-environment/natural-resources-and-environment/foraging/pidc48.html>.*

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## NATURE CROSSWORD ANSWERS

FROM ACORNY TREATISE, PAGE 5

**ACROSS:** 4. gall; 5. red; 6. oak; 9. cambium; 10. wilt; 12. palmate; 13. furrow; 15. mast; 16. burr; 17. sinus; 18. madbuck; 21. petiole; 22. roots; 23. lobe.

**DOWN:** 1. scar; 2. phloem; 3. bark; 7. five; 8. bract; 9. compound; 11. terminal; 14. white; 18. maple; 19. burl; 20. crown.

## IMN GALLERY

PAINTING BY DONNA DONNA HOFF-GRAMBAU, SPRING 2025 CLASS; PHOTO BY MELISSA SERENDA, SUMMER 2016 CLASS



rose



camouflaged looper  
(*Synchlora aerata*)

## LEARN MORE

Find this newsletter and related files or links in the Newsletter menu on our website:  
<https://iowamasternaturalists.org/newsletters/>

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Contact us: [info@iowamasternaturalists.org](mailto:info@iowamasternaturalists.org)

On the cover: F.W. Kent Park, Johnson County

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