

2019 IAN – ICEC Award Winners

“Ding” Darling Environmental Education Award – Clinton County’s Building Better Birders Cruises with Kelly J. McKay

Putting along the backwaters of the Upper Mississippi for the last three years you could find a huge pontoon with people pointing excitedly at what seemed to be just trees. Why was this pontoon crew so excited about trees?



Well, they weren’t looking at the trees, but the awesome birds perching on the trees! Kelly J. McKay from Bio Research and Monitoring Center has teamed up with Mark Roberts and Chuck Jacobsen from Clinton County Conservation to create a free program called, “Beginner Birder Cruises.” This program has been a huge success through the years, having four summer tours during the breeding season and four tours during the fall migration. Despite the horrible flooding in 2019 along the Mississippi, they still had 58 people attend these two and a half to four-hour programs and found a whopping 120 bird species! They found 15 species of waterfowl and other water birds, eight species of raptors, five shorebirds, and seven woodpecker species! After finding such cool birds on the tours, there were several participants that became active citizen scientists and helped with Christmas Bird Counts and even the Nahant Marsh BioBlitz Project.

Outstanding Volunteer Award

The 2019 Outstanding Volunteer Award goes to Kelly J. McKay. Besides being the lead birder for Clinton County’s “Beginner Birder Cruises,” Kelly has volunteered for numerous other organizations such as Nahant Marsh, Big Sand Mound, the Audubon Society, and several other wildlife advocacy groups. For several years Kelly has participated in all 23 days of the Audubon Society’s annual Christmas Bird Counts. That means spending 10 plus hours birding and then traversing the countryside from southern Illinois to northern Wisconsin to get to the next bird count location.



Speaking of location, Kelly is a member of an advisory board for a very special place called Big Sand Mound Preserve, south of the town of Muscatine, Iowa. This 510-acre paradise has sand prairies, wetlands, and woodlands that over 400 species of plants call home. Things such as the prickly pear cactus along with yellow mud turtles and eastern hognose snakes call Big Sand Mound Preserve home. Kelly helps preserve all these plants and animals for future generations.

Future generations will hopefully be able to see things such as yellow mud turtles and the federally listed Kirtland’s Warbler. Kelly found an immature female Kirtland’s Warbler at the Soaring Eagle Nature Center in 2019, which is the first state record for Iowa! Congratulations Kelly on your spectacular find! May all your hard

work and willingness to share your knowledge inspire the next generation.

Bohumil Shimek Environmental Educator Award - Michelle Helscher 5th grade teacher at Louisa Muscatine Elementary School

Mrs. Helscher has a strong interest in monarch butterflies and participating in Monarch Watch's monarch tagging citizen science project. Each year she and students, with help of Louisa County Conservation, tag butterflies and learn about monarch biology, habitat, and conservation.

She is a strong advocate for the outdoor classroom, pollinator garden, and small prairie that is located behind the school. Mrs. Helscher continually wants to improve this space for the students, so that it is a beneficial area for them to explore. She also utilizes this space and is occasionally able to take her students out to learn in this environment. Additionally, she recognizes that this space is important for monarchs and other pollinators and teaches her students about prairie habitat.

This year she expanded her monarch lessons by participating in the Journey North Symbolic Migration Project. Her students and the rest of the 5th grade created a classroom butterfly and sent it in. This project aims to unify students across North America while teaching youth about monarch migration and conservation. Each year classrooms across the US and Canada send one large classroom butterfly and many life-sized (one per student) on a symbolic migration to Mexico. During the same time monarchs are making their annual fall migration, the symbolic butterflies are making their way to Mexico. Once in Mexico, the butterflies get delivered to classrooms near the monarch sanctuaries. They will "overwinter" with students in Mexico and return to the US in the springtime when the real monarchs begin to migrate back north. The 5th graders at Louisa Muscatine Elementary school are one of two schools in Louisa County that have symbolic monarchs migrating! Mrs. Helscher helped her students create the butterflies and sent in all the information, so her students could partake in this unique project. In addition to monarch education, she also participates in other Louisa County Conservation field trips and classrooms programs throughout the year. Her support of environmental education and monarch conservation efforts have a lasting impact on her students. Thanks to her love of these butterflies and her participation in our programs, the 5th graders at Louisa Muscatine Elementary School get exposed to current environmental issues and get to experience some the wonders of nature.

Chris Holt Youth Environmental Education Award—Jefferson County Conservation's Camp Kyle

Kyle Longerbeam was a 25-year-old man from Fairfield, Iowa, and had a love for all things outdoors. As he was growing up, his family lived in town and their hobbies did not include spending time outdoors. He had to work to create opportunities to be outside and pursue his passions. In his younger years, he met many local mentors who encouraged him in his journey. After high school, he chased his dreams by moving to Alaska in 2011 in hopes of becoming a hunting guide, own some land, build a home, and to obtain his license as a pilot. He achieved all of that and more in just five years. In December 2016, the plane he was piloting never arrived in Anchorage and after a day of extensive searching, debris was found in a lake located just miles from the runway. There were no survivors. The Longerbeam family and friends paired up with Jefferson County Conservation to create an opportunity for youth, just like Kyle, who may not have parents, grandparents, or extended family to take them hunting, fishing, trapping, and on other outdoor adventures. This





one-day event was on Saturday, June 22nd - Kyle's birthday. The event was open to youth entering 5th-7th grade. Participants first were able to shoot .22 rifles with the local Hunter Education Instructors and participate in a team building activity. Then they were given a compass and map which marked the location of their lunch pack hidden somewhere along the park's trails. After finding lunch in Kyle's backpack and eating trailside, they hiked to the archery range. They were able to learn about archery and shoot several rounds with instructors. Next, participants helped tear down the archery gear and got ready for the next activity: paddling. Participants were able to canoe and kayak at Bonfield Lake. After working on different strokes, having a few races, and playing paddling games, participants learned how to do a T-Rescue. Next on the agenda was a presentation prepared by Kyle's family talking more about his journey to Alaska and what life was like for him. After the presentation, participants learned some fire building skills and wrapped up the day with s'mores. Camp Kyle's 16 participants gathered with the volunteers for

a group picture.

The largest surprise for Jefferson County Conservation staff, Camp Kyle volunteers, and Kyle's family was the honor that the campers held for Kyle. During the hike after they found Kyle's pack, one of the participants asked if they could wear Kyle's pack. They looked at a friend and asked, 'Do I look like Kyle?' During the presentation, participants were interested and engaged with the details of Kyle's life in Alaska and the simple tasks that needed to be done to survive. After the presentation, questions went on for nearly thirty minutes before we had to interrupt and move on to the next activity. After reflecting on the day, we realized that Kyle became a legend to those participants. Kyle had a love and passion for the outdoors that he fueled throughout his life. This camp hopefully refueled that fire and passed it along to the next generation. This was the first of many Camp Kyles which will be held in the future.

Sylvan Runkel Environmental Education Award – Sacred Heart Catholic School

Kay Rose, a former Sacred Heart cook, was instrumental in conceptualizing the project and securing funding. After receiving financial support and curriculum guides from the Bee Cause Project, Sacred Heart installed the observation hive which allows the bees to gather, deposit pollen and nectar in the hive, and be viewed safely by the public within the Sacred Heart complex. This is the only bee observatory in Clay County.



Sacred Heart is a Pre-K through sixth grade school. Every teacher is using the beehive observatory throughout their respective curricula. Within the science curriculum, sixth graders are studying the colony and what is required by bees to maintain a hive. Fifth graders are learning where the bees come from and how far they must travel to the flowers as it aligns with the social studies curriculum. The fourth grade used the beehive to examine characteristics of teamwork required by bees. Every bee has a job and if they don't do their job the hive could collapse. The fourth

grade utilizes these concepts in their classroom as the class must work together and everyone has a job to do. Second and third graders are studying what native flowers the bees visit and if we have any native flowers around the Spencer community. Both classes went on a field trip with the Clay County Conservation Board naturalist to two different wildlife areas. While there, they observed native plants that the bees may visit. The kindergarten and first grade classes explore the biology of insects and their benefits to the environment. These

students use the observatory to study insect anatomy through firsthand observation of the parts of an insect. The observatory is benefiting each one of the classes at Sacred Heart. The teachers are embracing the opportunity to use this hands-on direct learning in their classrooms.

This may be Sacred Hearts first year of having bees in their school, but that doesn't stop them from using the opportunity to explore with the students in every class. It was a group effort to get the beehive into the school and they have certainly embraced it through stewardship and learning by doing.

Outstanding Interpretative Print Media – Story County Conservation

This year's Outstanding Interpretative Print Media Award goes to Erica Place, the Outreach Coordinator for Story County Conservation. As many of us know, putting together a newsletter is no easy task. From the content, design, and graphics to making everything flow smoothly is not easy. In the summer of 2017, Story County Conservation gave their newsletter a facelift and started printing it in full color. Erica has changed the styling, graphics, and content and that has increased the number of newsletters disseminated to the public. Newsletters were sent out to 1,871 households, 535 businesses, and 581 electronic versions in 2017. In 2019, newsletters went to 1,958 homes, 535 business, and over 1000 electronic versions. Nancy Franz (a Story County Conservation Board Member) said she liked the new newsletter because it "detailed updates on county conservation projects to help funders and other stakeholders see the impact of their support." A Story County Supervisor, Lauris Olson, even sent in a letter of recommendation for Erica. In that letter, Lauris said, "The graphics anchoring articles and regular sections compliment, rather than compete, with the primary content. And the written content itself shares just enough commonality in tone to create smooth transitions between sections without smothering the style of individual writers." Quite the compliment coming from Lauris, since she was a professional journalist for over two decades that specialized in print and on-line publications.

