

Lost In Iowa

BY JENNIFER WILSON PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH AND JAKE ZWEIBOHMER



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Wide open water is good stuff for summertime studies on skipping rocks. The trail in the park is short and sweet, good for entry level explorers. Beachfront dining at PM Park: kids can kick off the flip-flops and build castles while the folks recap the day. The playground at McIntosh Woods State Park is a great place for kids to burn off energy.



PHOTO, UPPER LEFT, BY CLAY SMITH; REMAINING PHOTOS BY JAKE ZWEIBOHMER

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Ancient fossils, prairie remnant, natural lake, forward-thinking restoration:
Ventura's McIntosh Woods State Park on Clear Lake reads like pages of Iowa history, and a hopeful glance at the future.



It's Friday night, and you're settling in for a weekend at McIntosh Woods State Park, one of two state parks on the 3,684-acre natural body of water called Clear Lake.

You've taken a short trail walk from the campground to soak in the scenery. The sun is setting.

You note that the trail has risen to a mellow hill. Campfire smoke hangs on the air, tendrils like gray ghosts bending and stretching toward the water. Here, you tread on the same dirt as the Ioway, Meskwaki and Sioux peoples that shared this neutral ground, their scouts ducking low to scan the north central Iowa landscape from this same hill.

They too explored the nearby Winnebago River, its rocky outcrops bristling with ancient fossils. They hunted on the prairie that once covered most of the state, and you can still see rare remnants patching the dirt around here. Clear Lake's shallows trill with amphibious life as it did

back then, night noises that follow you back to your tent or your RV or one of McIntosh's two yurts.

This vibrancy—a hint of what once was—wouldn't have been possible without a recent decade-long lake renovation that should keep the area vital for years to come.

In a weekend, you can witness it yourself. Maybe catch a fish or two while you're at it.

A lake with a past

Just a few decades ago, the name "Clear Lake" seemed an ironic joke—a silted-in mud hole full of carp, the lake wasn't great for fishing, and tourists couldn't see more than a few inches into it. (See sidebar.)

But the people of these lake towns, residents and weekenders alike, wanted their Clear Lake back. The DNR wanted a healthy fishery again. A robust lake association wanted all those things.

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They banded together, worked in the watershed and lake and revived the water. Now Clear Lake is a deep forest green, clear for several feet down. Even a little kid with a cheapie rod can pull out a yellow bass on the first cast, or reel in bluegills while waiting for the boat to dock or dance with a big catfish on shore. The lake smells like fish, because it's full of them—walleye, muskie, panfish and catfish—like it was 100 years ago. Even a thousand.

The joint effort speaks to a tradition of moderate preservation in this corner of Cerro Gordo County. The people like their lake, and they've developed some of it. But lake pioneers also set out to preserve its natural beauty and its more nuanced details, such as its breeze.

"The pioneers of this area established Clear Lake State Park in 1941," says 18-year park manager Tammy Domonoske, pointing to McIntosh's popular sister park

along the southwest shore. "But it was on the wrong side of the lake."

Domonoske, an avid distance runner with a hands-in-pocket shyness about her, says the lake association (the same one that helped along the recent lake renovation) wanted a park on the northwest side, too—because it had the best breezes.

"There were about 60 acres on the northwest side of the lake, owned by a Rose McIntosh, part of a family who were pioneers to this area," says Domonoske.

Rose's land is now McIntosh Woods State Park. Domonoske says Gov. George Wilson dedicated it on Aug. 12, 1944, a petite woody refuge where gooseberry and raspberry bushes brush the short campground trail. Its marsh observation blind is popular with wood ducks, mallards and other migrators, as well as campers in



search of the perfect early-morning coffee perch.

“Governor Wilson called this park a ‘delightfully cool spot,’” Domonoske chuckles. “They got those southern breezes they wanted.”

A gentle wind kicks up, like the park is showing off a little.

Tiny worlds

It’s a mystery why Iowa’s parks don’t have more yurts like the two in McIntosh. Really it is. Soft-sided like a tent, roomy like a cabin, Iowa’s park yurts help modern travelers appreciate the wild side of Iowa’s protected areas (from the comfort of a decent bed). The sky dome, while covered, makes good bedtime stargazing. The windows zip open, so you can catch those coveted breezes and the hoot of owls. Bathhouses just a few feet away. Dock even closer.

Here in Ventura, the floors are made of reclaimed wood from a church in Des Moines: holy ground of sorts.

“I like the seclusion,” says Kim Gibbs, who lives in Mason City but takes the short drive with her husband Joe. “It’s sheltered from wind and rain, but not as sheltered as a hotel.”

It’s that slightly wild feeling in a tame setting that makes McIntosh a good weekend escape from the usual wheel ruts. Just southwest of nearby Nora Springs, Bird Hill State Preserve and Claybanks Forest State Preserve provide some of the best fossil collecting in the United States, where anyone can pick up 375-million-year-old remnants of Iowa’s history as an ancient tropical sea. Just about a mile north of the park lies Hoffman Prairie, a Nature Conservancy-owned pothole marsh and a tall grass prairie remnant.

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Zadie Hoff, 7, reels in her first big catch—a mighty catfish she learned to catch and release herself.

Dick and Jean Bruner's 1955 Century wooden boat recalls Clear Lake history.



Two public fishing jetties in Ventura make for easy angling for the family, with little to snag on, plenty of room and lots-o-fish.



DNR biologist John Pearson teaches Ries Wilson and Sam and Zadie Hoff about prairie pothole landscape.



PHOTO, LOWER LEFT, BY JAKE ZWIBOHMER; REMAINING PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH



At McIntosh Woods State Park, yurt camping has all the perks of tent living without the assembly, and the benefit of a bed.



The marsh observation blind at McIntosh, where wood ducks and mallards and other migrators pass through in spring and fall, makes it a favorite early-morning coffee hangout for birders and campers.

The DNR’s state biologist, John Pearson, drifts slowly through long grasses brushing his legs like flames. He points out rare prairie plants to a group of children. They’ve moved no further than 10 steps in 20 minutes, yet they’re rapt.

The prairie plant names sound so untamed. Yarrow, lead plant, hoary puccoon that flowers yellow in early spring. Prairie dropseed, which looks like someone dropped a wig on the ground each fall. Yellow parsnip. Rattlesnake master, its leaves like yucca, only dwelling on natural prairie like this. Mountain mint, wild rose, sawtooth sunflower, covered in ants. Wild iris. Prairie sagewort. Prairie coreopsis. Compass plant. Golden Alexander.

“Why does it shiver?” asks a little girl, pointing to a meadow rue’s fuzzy pink flowers.

Pearson brushes his fingertips over it. “That’s the wind blowing the anthers—the pollen-bearing part of the flower.”

A pothole marsh is rife with plant life, waterfowl and migrators. These depressions in the land left by glaciers—with high spots called hummocks and massive divots from the wake of ancient ice floes—have mostly been drained or farmed over. Few remain, so they’re worth noting when you find one.

“It’s a rumpled landscape,” explains Pearson.

The group still has barely moved. “It’s common for a tallgrass prairie like this one to have 25 different species in a square meter.”

He points out a gall in goldenrod. “That’s a little baby fly in there,” he shows around the swollen gorge in the tall plant, the result of a fly inserting an egg into the stem. “It’ll spend its summer and winter in there and come out next spring. That’s unless a wasp comes along.” Tiny parasitic wasps often lay eggs in the same gall, and their hatchlings then attack the fly’s larva.

He holds up a baby katydid. “All these critters in here are just millimeters in size.”

A modern history

In 1909, Bayside Amusement Park opened, establishing Clear Lake as one of Iowa’s good-time destinations. Then 1933 positioned it as a place of legend with the opening of the Surf Ballroom, a rock’n’roll danceatorium that became the site of the last concert given by Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper, before their fatal plane crash on Feb. 3, 1959 outside Clear Lake. It was the Day the Music Died, and The Surf is still a pilgrimage for rock fans everywhere.

Back in those days, large commercial wooden tourist

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A Lake Revival

Beginning with a reduction in water quality, Clear Lake experienced heavy algae blooms that gobbled up its nutrients in the 1980s, followed by beach advisories for swimming and poor clarity. The lake's filters (a marsh and a smaller portion of the lake in Ventura, locally known as the "Little Lake") had become so muddy that the water turned from clear to turbid.

Many things can kick a lake out of balance, and Clear Lake had been slowly silting in since the glaciers. But Scott Grummer, DNR fisheries biologist, theorizes that the clincher here happened in the late 70s, when a massive winter fish kill gave the carp population the upper hand. "The desirable fish anglers like are always the first to go," says Grummer. Heavy snowfall, and a drought that year, all contributed.

Soon Clear Lake was far from clear.

According to Grummer, there are two different tactics for lake management:

- **LAKE RESTORATION**, which restores and preserves water quality, including a lake's drainage area.

- **LAKE RENOVATION** uses a toxicant (poison) to remove fish and start with a clean slate.

The Clear Lake Enhancement and Restoration Project (CLEAR) began in 1995, and mobilized a full and impressive restoration. The CLEAR Project consists of a dozen-plus partners, all working together to improve lake water quality. Lead sponsors include the DNR, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the EPA, as well as local partners such as the Association for the Preservation of Clear Lake, the Hancock and Cerro Gordo soil & water conservation districts and the cities of Clear Lake and Ventura.

Everyone wanted their recreation and tourism back, which meant a lake in its healthiest state.

Together, in this public-private partnership, they launched a \$20 million restoration project of scope and scale that's "pretty much unprecedented in the state," says Grummer.

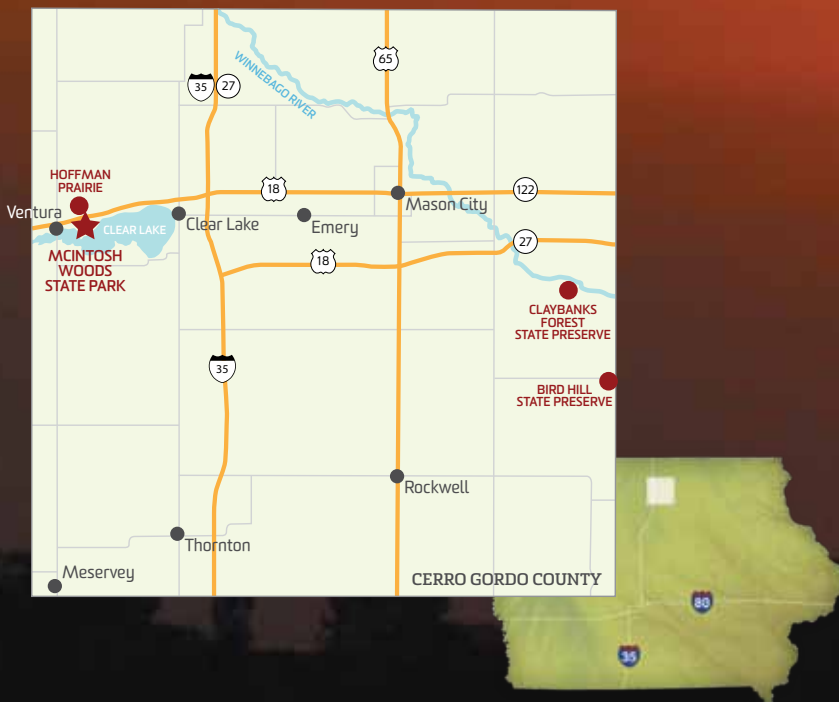
Initial water quality testing identified

ways to improve the lake. CLEAR has been implementing those changes in the past 10 years, including agricultural and urban watershed improvements, Ventura Marsh restoration and lake dredging. Lands are better managed to reduce and filter runoff that enters the lake. Dredging increased the depth of Little Lake from an average of 4 feet to between 10 and 30 feet deep now.

Grummer and the DNR worked to bring back fish species that were historically present: largemouth bass, crappies, bluegills. Part of that meant habitat grooming, and CLEAR successfully upped aquatic vegetation from the less than 5 percent that existed in the Little Lake in the 1980s. Historically, this portion of Clear Lake had 80 percent coverage with aquatic plants. Water clarity, now reaching 4 to 8 feet, is aiding the vegetation recovery.

Walleye fishing bustles in winter and summer. Shoreline fishing should be robust by spring 2013.

And that enjoyment of a clear natural lake? From the looks of things on a late spring day: maximum success.





Public access is a primary feature of McIntosh Woods State Park, says Park Manager Tammy Domonoske.

- Ventura has two large wildlife areas: McIntosh Wildlife Area (219 acres for hiking, birding and hunting) and Ventura Marsh Wildlife Area (west of the lake, encompassing 782 acres for hunting, kayaking and canoeing).
- The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation protects Ventura Cove on the lake's southwest corner (20 acres of timber with a paved bike trail that eventually leads to the Sisters' Prairie Bike Trail), Woodford-Ashland Lone Tree Point just across the channel south of McIntosh Peninsula (101 acres and 4,300 feet of undeveloped shoreline for picnicking, hiking, fishing, snowshoeing, all along a 1.5 mile loop trail).
- The Nature Conservancy has a tract called Clausen's Cove that runs right up to the Lone Tree Point Tract (250 acres with 2,750 feet of shoreline for hiking and fishing).



LEFT: The lakeside outdoor dining and tiki bar at PM Park make it a popular stop for visitors. ABOVE: After a day of fishing or boating, the downtown Clear Lake antique stores, eateries and specialty shops are a must-visit.

boats with names like *The Princess* and *The Zephyr* crisscrossed Clear Lake. (A sternwheeler ferry called *The Lady of the Lake* gives scenic cruises now.)

You can almost hear echoes of those heydays when Dick and Jean Bruner rev up their 1955 Century wooden boat called *Happy Days*.

“Most people up here have their first lake memory on a wooden boat,” says Dick. He brought Jean on dates in the *Happy Days*, which belonged to a friend who sold it to him in 1977. They married and had five sons, and, like many boating families on Clear Lake, *Happy Days* has seen more birthdays and rowdy cousins than Dick and Jean can keep track of.

“We had six votes for a boat and one for carpeting,” winks Jean as Dick rockets from a lakeside dock.

They like to stop at one of two lake restaurants—Rich’s Muskie Lounge in Ventura, or PM Park just outside of Clear Lake, a former amusement park and summer camp run by a branch of the Odd Fellows whose history-loving owner hangs wooden boat photos on the walls.

Jean points out the Iowa National Heritage Foundation land along the lake’s south side. Natural wedges of shoreline make boating here such a pleasure, she says. (See Sidebar Two).

The abundance of public lands may be why Clear Lake is a mellower vacation than its harder-partying counterpart,

Okoboji. Plus, there’s always some family-friendly fun going on, from a Fourth of July fireworks-and-parade extravaganza to Christmas by the Lake. The renewed interest in water quality only adds to the sense of vitality.

“Small town America still exists here,” says Jean. As Dick slices through the water with the bow of *Happy Days*, an American flag waves from the stern.

They motor past that hillside trail in McIntosh Woods State Park, bending bulrushes and cattails in their wake, healthy waters churning quietly with life, stirring up traces of Iowa history.

When you go

Food

PM PARK. For the best lake ambiance, and a pretty sand beach to go with the history. Good eats. 15297 Raney Dr. May through Sept. call **641-357-1991**; Off season call **641-529-2222**. pmpark.net

GE-JO’S BY THE LAKE. In Clear Lake, an Italian restaurant overlooking the bandshell park, with an Astroturf dining area out front. 12 N. Third St. **641-357-8288**.

STARBOARD MARKET. A 13-year-old family-owned joint on



Rich's Muskie Lounge is just steps away from the campground and yurts. Sam and Zodie Hoff and Ries Wilson play in the water at PM Park. The restaurant features lake-view seating.



Clear Lake's Main Street, serving tasty sandwiches and soups, plus inventive sides such as cornbread salad with creamy sage dressing, or a simple strawberries and cream. Most things are house-made, and served on Fiestaware. 310 Main. [641-357-0660](tel:641-357-0660); starboardmarket.net

RICH'S MUSKIE LOUNGE. 702 E. Lake St., Ventura. [641-829-3850](tel:641-829-3850).

Activities

HOFFMAN PRAIRIE. Thirty-seven acres, off the shoulder of Balsam Avenue, two miles west of Clear Lake. Nature.org

BIRD HILL STATE PRESERVE AND CLAYBANKS FOREST STATE PRESERVE. A 56-acre forest with one acre of internationally known Devonian fossils in the soft limestone and shale along the Winnebago River. Some of the nation's best fossil collecting beds, and you keep what you pick. www.co.cerro-gordo.ia.us

WINNEBAGO RIVER PADDLING. Pretty paddling past ledges and limestone cliffs—some of which are right inside Mason City. In his book *Paddling Iowa*, waterways expert Nate Hoogeveen suggests paddling both the Winnebago and Shell Rock together in one weekend.

co.cerro-gordo.ia.us/Conservation/Conservation_recreational_FLYER_canoes_winnebago.pdf

RIVER CITY TOURS AND TAXI. Owner and U.S. Army Veteran James Kleven's pedal cab service offers an open-air ride through Mason City, highlighting Frank Lloyd Wright and Meredith Willson's "Music Man" history. A great way to see the area's hidden pleasures. \$20 per hour. [641-530-2067](tel:641-530-2067); facebook.com/RiverCityTourAndTaxi.

THE LADY OF THE LAKE. cruiseclearlake.com 🐘

