

WALNUT WOODS STATE PARK RECREATION USE PLAN

In advance of the 100th anniversary of Iowa state parks in 2020, the Department of Natural Resources is developing plans for future recreation opportunities that are compatible with the resources of each state park.

WALNUT WOODS STATE PARK - A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In 1917, the State Park Act was passed by the Legislature empowering the new Iowa Board of Conservation to create a state park system encompassing some of Iowa’s most outstanding and, in some cases, most threatened natural, scenic, and historic places. The Board soon became aware of a tract of wooded bottom land on the Raccoon River near the Valley Junction area in present day West Des Moines.

A 1923 Board of Conservation Bulletin indicated that the area had been “under consideration of the Board for some time and that the area:

“Contains some fine sandy bathing beaches, some magnificent black walnuts, red elm, white elm, bur oaks and hackberry. The red elms are some of the largest trees of this kind in the state.”

There was strong local support for acquiring the 261 acre tract. On June 12, 1925, the Board agreed to acquire the land with the assistance of a significant donation from the Greater Des Moines Committee.. In 1933, the area was formally named Walnut Woods State Park, in recognition of its impressive stand of black walnuts.

The Great Depression of 1929 and the Roosevelt “New Deal” of 1933 brought a great expansion of the Iowa State Park system in the 1930’s with a major boost from the new Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA).

At Walnut Woods, two CCC companies constructed an artificial lagoon, provided needed river bank stabilization, and built a shelter and two restrooms in 1935-36. Between March, 1936 and the end of 1938, the WPA constructed restrooms, entry portals, a vehicle bridge, four footbridges, rip-rapped the lagoon, and, most significantly, built the beautiful limestone lodge, which remains the most popular in the state park system. After the “Flood of ‘93,” the lodge underwent renovation to repair damage as well as modernize its kitchen and restroom facilities, heating and air conditioning systems, as well as meet Americans With Disabilities Act standards.

In the last decade, major campground improvements have been made, including upgraded restrooms, surfaced roads and camp pads. There are now 13 electric and 8 full hook-up campsites. The main park road was concrete surfaced in 2014. Improved restroom facilities have also been provided in the picnic areas. The 2.5 mi. of trail continue to offer experiences to hikers, cross-country skiers, and equestrians.

Walnut Woods has undergone continual refinement in its nearly 90 years and remains a small, but very viable element of the Iowa State Park System, located in Iowa’s major metropolitan area.

WALNUT WOODS STATE PARK - EXISTING FACILITIES

Existing Facilities	Quantity	Existing Facilities	Quantity
Observation Blind	1	Restrooms	
Lodge	1	Seasonal (Flush)	1
Playground	1	Year-round	3
Canoe Access	1	Campground	
Boat Ramp	1	Total Sites	22
Trails	2.5 miles	Electric	13
		Full Hook-up	8
		Youth Group	1

Table (above): Walnut Woods State Park’s Existing Facilities

A ROADMAP FOR THE FUTURE OF WALNUT WOODS STATE PARK

The over-riding goal of the recreation use plan is to enhance visitor outdoor recreation and educational experiences by improving the recreation facilities and trails at Walnut Woods State Park. This will promote visitor mental and physical health; encourage family time and making memories; protect natural resources for the future; create awareness and appreciation of the park's unique resources; and, generate economic activity in the region.

OBJECTIVES, ISSUES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

OBJECTIVES -

PARK INTERPRETATION AND ORIENTATION- INCREASE WAY-FINDING AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

There is currently a strong emphasis for park interpretive programs, but this can only occur as limited staff schedules allow.

ISSUE:

- Locations are available where interpretation and orientation signage would provide additional opportunities outside of limited staff-run programs.

PROPOSALS:

- Construct 4-sided interpretive kiosks at bird blind and campground entrance (west of road).
- Add small shelter near Bird Blind area to provide staging area for interpretive programs.
- Add park orientation panels at trailheads near the east entrance and along the river.



Image (above): Lodge at Walnut Woods State Park

CAMPGROUND - UPGRADE THE EXISTING CAMPGROUND TO MEET THE NEEDS OF MODERN CAMPERS

The existing campground was upgraded in 2007 and in conjunction with flood repair efforts in 2009.

ISSUES:

- Not all existing campsites meet the electric needs of modern-day campers.
- Flooding from the Raccoon River impacts the campground.

PROPOSALS:

- Upgrade (8) 30-amp electric campsites to 50-amp electric service.
- Upgrade (5) existing 50-amp campsites to full hook-up services.
- Add a campground check-in station with park orientation/trail map.
- Pave campsites to reduce future flood impacts.



Image (above): Existing Walnut Woods State Park entrance portal

HISTORIC STRUCTURES - MAINTAIN THE INTEGRITY OF THE PARK'S HISTORIC STRUCTURES

Built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and other federal Depression era programs, these structures are a legacy to be treasured and enrich the park visitor experience.

ISSUE:

- Historically significant structures and trails require ongoing maintenance and periodic restoration efforts to preserve their integrity.

PROPOSALS:

- Tuck-point the west stone entrance portal.
- Construct new stone/timber entrance portal at the east entrance, to complement the west entrance portal.
- Continually monitor historic structures to identify necessary restoration efforts such as log rot replacement and tuck pointing.

FLOOD PREVENTION - STRATEGIC PLANNING TO REDUCE FUTURE FLOOD DAMAGE

ISSUE:

- Walnut Woods State Park is adjacent to the Raccoon River and is prone to periodic flooding and consequent park closures.

PROPOSALS:

- Plan proactively to minimize flood damage - pave remaining unpaved camp pads to minimize the future impact of flood damage.



Image (above): Scenic view of Raccoon River from Walnut Woods State Park

RECREATION USE PLAN

Implementation of the Walnut Woods Recreation Use Plan will help ensure that this classic Iowa state park remains a premier outdoor destination in the future. The draft plan was prepared with the input of park staff and will have review and input of current proposed park improvements from park visitors/regional stakeholders. It will be a detailed and practical blueprint for future action. All improvements will be completed with due regard for Walnut Woods State Park's unique natural resources and great scenic qualities.

The completion of a recreation use plan for each park will help determine the most effective allocation of funds on a project-by-project basis for the Iowa state park system as a whole. Walnut Woods's plan recommendations will be accomplished as necessary funding becomes available from ongoing sources as well as through partnering opportunities which may arise.

WALNUT WOODS STATE PARK PROJECT PRIORITY LIST

High Priority (1)	Cost Estimate
Add small shelter - Bird Blind Area	\$80,000
New check-in station - Campground	\$30,000
Add 4-sided interpretive kiosk - Bird Blind Area	\$30,000
Add (4) orientation panels - Trailhead Area	\$16,000
Replace orientation map - Boat Ramp	\$4000
High Priority Total:	\$160,000
Medium Priority (2)	
Upgrade (8) campsites to 50-amp and (5) to full hook-up	\$77,500
Add 4-sided interpretive kiosk - Campground	\$30,000
Medium Priority Total:	\$107,500
Low Priority (3)	
Add East Entrance Portal and restore West Entrance Portal	\$80,000
Low Priority Total:	\$80,000

Table (above): Walnut Woods State Park's Project Priorities



Image (above): Bird watching is very popular at Walnut Woods State Park



Image (above): Kayaking at Walnut Woods State Park

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WALNUT WOODS

