

# Prairie Rapids Audubon Society

## General Meeting Minutes

February 10, 2026

The February 10, 2026 meeting of the Prairie Rapids Audubon Society was called to order at 7:05 p.m. by President Tom Schilke. Thirty-seven individuals were present in person while nine others watched from their homes near and far.

Treasurer, Francis Moore, reported that our PRAS accounts contain a total of \$40,479.00. The Bird Feed Fund sits at \$1,059.33. If you are not familiar with our endowment funds with the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa proceed to the [gopras.org](http://gopras.org) website and click on the Making a Difference link. Some contributors are choosing to direct their RMD's (Required Minimum Distributions) into the funds. If you are scratching your head and saying, "Huh?" you are still too young.

Ideas for grants in line with PRAS's mission are gladly considered. If you know of a project that the board should discuss, let a board member know. Charlene Heiar told them about a program at the Cedar Valley Preschool and Day Care Center. Former director, Linda Jacoby, was present to relate what they did with their \$1,000 grant. The knowledgeable staff takes the kids outdoors to use binoculars and watch their bird feeders. They are making their own bird blind and participated in the Great Backyard Bird Count. Bird related puzzles and projects are part of the curriculum. Charlene has presented her Budding Birders program there, as well. This is a wonderful example of an investment into the young people that care about the natural world around them.

Speaking of the natural world, hopefully you were able to participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count in your area. Always happening in February this year's dates were February 13-16. At no cost to you it is a fun way to contribute to the ongoing study of bird health around the world. Collectively, every little bit helps.

Some of us are also participating in a climate watch study involving bluebirds from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Our winter routes were completed between the dates of January 15-February 15. Some routes had bluebird sightings, others did not. While the route that Craig and I track had no bluebirds during this particular survey we have been fortunate to observe to up to a dozen bluebirds coming to our heated bird bath for daily hydration.

There are many Citizen Science projects available for you to take part in depending on your interest. Google a curiosity or fascination you may have and see what's out there.

Iowa's wild places have found an exceptional champion in tonight's speaker, Dan Cohen. He demonstrated his care for the outdoors every day in his job as director of Buchanan County conservation but now in retirement continues that objective. This night's presentation, "Paddling with Iowa Wildlife-Explorations along Hwy. 20" took us along for Dan's adventures.

Though he has traveled down 500 miles of Iowa's 18,000 miles of navigable streams he chose to focus on rivers along the Hwy. 20 corridor from Dubuque to the Cedar Valley. Dan gave us some background information to his explorations including the fact that 28% of the earth's surface is land mass. Those various land surfaces also have 80% of the plant and animal species currently known to humans. The riparian strips along the rivers

are a magnet for much of the wildlife that Dan points his camera toward while he is simultaneously paddling his canoe.

Beginning on the eastern side of Iowa where Hwy. 20 meets the Mississippi Dan outlined the birds often found there. Gulls and white pelicans often hunt for food in places such as John Deere marsh and near the Mines of Spain where Catfish Creek flows. Spring migration is a good time to observe species like Nashville, Tennessee and prothonotary warblers. Tufted titmice, wood thrush and American redstarts among others were subjects of Dan's photos. Beaver, once extirpated from Iowa, are active along the stream.

If biking or hiking are your strength, the Heritage Trail follows the Little Maquoketa River from Dubuque to Farley for 26 miles. In addition to birds and small mammals the presence of algal talus slopes (a cold-producing ecosystem) brings about its own variety of flora and fauna. You may be able to see various ferns, columbines or salamanders if you're observant.

Although Iowa doesn't have any designated Wild and Scenic Rivers Dan feels that the North Fork of the Maquoketa is a good stretch to experience "wilderness" in our state. For 11 miles the water is clear enough to see the river bottom and submerged plants and fish darting by. No roads, power lines or agricultural fields interrupt the riparian zone along the river. Bluffs rise from the banks and even a small cave (Searles Cave, writer's note) can be explored. Great blue herons, sandpipers and kingfishers lead you down the through cottonwoods, oaks and maples lining the riverside. Dan quizzed us to see how good our bird ID skills were with his excellent photos.

Traveling on to one of our favorite state parks we stopped at Backbone and the Maquoketa River. Photos of two new birds, the pileated woodpecker and the northern waterthrush, were displayed. Dan continued on down to the Lake Delhi dam. The current below the dam increases in speed while also producing more riffles and clearer water. Dan observed cliff, barn and rough-winged swallows along with butterflies and damselflies.

Proceeding west on Hwy. 20 brought us to Dan's most-paddled river, the Wapsipinicon. The Wapsi has a narrow corridor with oxbows, a broad floodplain, backwater areas, lowland and upland forests and connected ponds.

Because of these numerous features it has many state designations including Wapsipinicon River Water Trail (Buchanan County), Protected Water Areas and a Bird Conservation Area. PRAS is fortunate to have protected areas of the Wapsi flowing through two counties in our service area, Bremer and Buchanan. We have witnessed sandpipers, dunlins, killdeer, yellowlegs, plovers, red-shouldered hawks and sandhill cranes. Mussels are reproducing in its waters and the state threatened Blanding's turtle calls this area home. Is it any wonder we come to bird here on a World Migratory Bird Day? (May 9, 2026 this year)

Commercial Break: Our speaker, Dan Cohen, was instrumental in writing a constitutional amendment known as Iowa's Water and Land Legacy or IWILL for short. A 63% majority of Iowa's voters approved this in 2010 to create the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. Fifteen years later the fund remains empty. It requires an increase in the state sales tax of 3/8 of a cent for funding. If funded the Trust would generate at least \$171 million annually. Funds would be used for soil and water quality improvement, watershed protection, local conservation, trails and outdoor recreation, REAP and so much more.

We encourage you to dig deeper. Go to: [iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org](http://iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org) or [inhf.org](http://inhf.org) It's past time! Now back to our regularly scheduled program.

The last river on our Hwy. 20 route tonight was the Cedar. Compared to the Wapsi it has a wide corridor and flows through many of our larger towns and cities in eastern Iowa. It provides for some leisurely paddles often interrupted by dams. Parks and reserves long the route familiar to us are George Wyth and Hartman Reserve. Geo. Wyth itself provides a Paddler's Loop with portages from lake to river. Plants including button bush and water lilies can be found inhabiting Fisher Lake along with multiple bird and insect species.

Also navigable in Grundy and Black Hawk counties is Black Hawk Creek. You may find it especially enjoyable if you like to mix portaging in with your paddle.

We'd like to thank Dan for taking us with him virtually on a few of his river adventures. Perhaps we can go along elsewhere at another time.

Check out the [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov) water trails page for a listing of water trails and maps around the state.