



Marlene Ehresman

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation continues to help lead protection of the globally significant Loess Hills landscape, seen here from the Sylvan Runkel State Preserve in Plymouth County.

Exploring a national treasure: The Loess Hills

When people say Iowa’s Loess Hills are “globally significant,” they mean it: this landform is one of the two best examples of loess formations in the world. The only other location where the layers of loess are as deep and extensive lies 11,000 miles away in China.

The dramatic angles and bluffs of the Loess Hills stretch over 650,000 acres along the Missouri River, tracing Iowa’s western border before gently leveling out in northern Missouri. Windblown loess from receding glaciers created the hills in prehistoric times. Over millennia, weathering has created signature “catstep” hills and valleys where the fragile soil has eroded.

It’s easy to see why this landscape — home to over 49 rare native plant and animal species — is a high priority for conservation.

Over 30,000 acres in the region have been permanently protected. The highest priorities are

within Special Landscape Areas established by the National Park Service in 2002. The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation turned its attention to the hills soon after its founding in 1979. Since then, INHF has helped lead efforts to protect more than 8,000 acres in the Loess Hills. INHF’s work, in partnership with the Loess Hills Alliance and other private and public entities, was recently recognized by the Department of the Interior when the Loess Hills were included in the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative. (See page 8 for more information.)

Three of INHF’s land protection projects in the northern Loess Hills are just opening for public exploration — and enjoyment: the Lloyd addition to Five Ridge Prairie State Preserve, the Chytka addition to Stone State Park and the Reese Homestead addition to the Loess Hills Wildlife Management Area.

By Olivia Young, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation Robert R. Buckmaster Communications Intern.





Brian Fankhauser

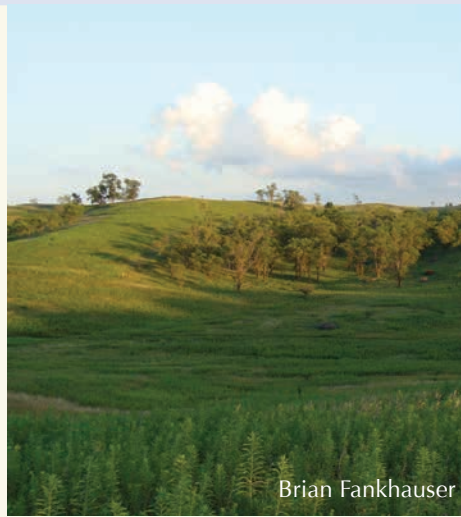
Five Ridge Prairie State Preserve grows

Picture a place where visitors can hike through woodlands, oak savannas and prairies, passing streams and beaver dams along the way. That vision describes the 156-acre Lloyd addition to Five Ridge Prairie State Preserve in Plymouth County, a natural area that's home to more than 300 plant species, 89 birds and 20 types of mammals.

Such great diversity is rare, even in the Loess Hills. The new addition links land protected by The Nature Conservancy in Iowa to the north and west, making this area a significant, unified habitat so crucial for wildlife species that require larger, unbroken tracts of grassland to survive. The property includes a large area of remnant prairie, and partners have already started returning cropland to prairie.

"We are excited about saving and restoring this property as an example of our native landscape for future generations to enjoy and study," said Dennis Sohl, Director of the Plymouth County Conservation Board (PCCB).

The PCCB now owns and manages the property. A public-private collaboration worked to acquire the land, including INHF and its members, Donna Lloyd, the Loess Hills Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, LeMars Sportsman's Club and Plymouth County Pheasants Forever. Funding sources included a state Wildlife Habitat Stamp grant, a federal Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act grant, and bequests from Millie Acklin and Theodore Fariss.



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Stone State Park expands

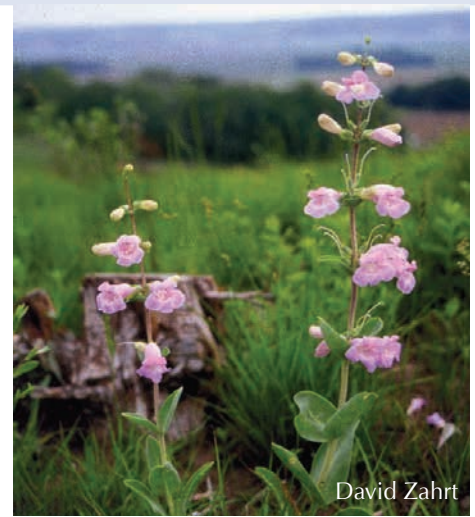
Stone State Park is known for its rugged landscape, interactive nature center and breathtaking views of the Loess Hills. The Chytka property, INHF's eighth addition to the park, expands this haven for nature lovers at the north edge of Sioux City. The 70-acre parcel will enhance the park's existing facilities, which include campgrounds and miles of trails for hiking, biking, horseback riding and snowmobiling.

In addition to a place to play, Stone State Park's new land includes critical grassland habitat that will be restored to prairie, benefiting at least seven bird species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Kevin Pape, Stone State Park Ranger, said goals for the property include ecological restoration and the expansion of a bluebird trail to encourage the species to nest in the park. Visitors should also watch for increasingly rare grassland birds like the grasshopper sparrow and dickcissel.

The site's hillside native prairie remnants also host a number of notable plant species, including silky aster, groundplum and white prairie clover.

Support for the project included INHF members, the prior landowners, private grants from the Loess Hills Alliance and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and a state Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP) private-public Open Spaces Acquisition grant.



David Zahrt

Reese Homestead saved

Locals know the Reese Homestead north of Turin as both an idyllic bed-and-breakfast and a focal point for area conservation activities. The Monona County site boasts a National Natural Landmark designation because of its high quality prairie and distinctive Missouri River valley wetland. Its farmstead, established in 1856, is also a National Historic Landmark. Now this special place will be open to the public to hike, hunt and enjoy, as an expansion of the Loess Hills Wildlife Management Area.

INHF helped acquire the property's 280 acres and served as interim owner for the Iowa DNR and the Monona County Conservation Board. The MCCB will own and manage the property's historic homestead and cabin. The county plans to develop an environmental education center at the spot along the Loess Hills Scenic Byway. The partners are planning a project dedication in Spring 2012.

"We're glad to help ensure that this bit of Loess Hills beauty and history will remain an attraction to the community and visitors," said Craig Hartman, MCCB chair.

Special thanks go to the former landowners, descendants of Dan and Luella Reese. Major sources of support include INHF members, the Tom Richardson Family, Pheasants Forever, the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Loess Hills Alliance, as well as federal Pittman-Robertson funds and state Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) Open Spaces funds.