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Iowa Transplant

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Iowa Transplant

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Mark Myers "Iowa Transplant"

1. As a professor in the Biology Department at UNI, one of my primary jobs is to teach young Iowans about ecology and the conservation of biodiversity. When I first encounter students in my classes, many view "nature" or "biodiversity" as unfamiliar and distant, perhaps something to be visited or experienced on vacation. I aim to teach these students about the historic transformation of Iowa's landscape, the ways in which human activities alter the state's ecosystems, and what ecologists and conservation biologists are doing to promote the conservation and restoration of biodiversity in Iowa. But learning is a two-way street. A handful of students enter my classes with a strong appreciation for nature and a deep desire to work for improved environmental quality. These students have taught me a great deal about making a home and working for conservation in Iowa.

2. I moved to Iowa in 2006. Though a native Midwesterner, I'd spent the better part of 10 years seeking out the biggest, most exceptional forested landscapes for wildlife conservation in Minnesota, where I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, and in Costa Rica, where I conducted my Ph.D research in exceptionally biodiverse tropical forests. Thus, my move to Iowa—one of the world's most dramatically transformed ecosystems with comparatively modest levels of biodiversity and lands devoted to conservation—required a bit of ecological recalibration. To be frank, at first this transition was not easy for me.

3. I vividly recall one weekend shortly after arriving in Cedar Falls, searching for nearby natural areas or parks that I might use in my research and teaching. I was surprised to learn a place called "Wildlife Paradise" was located just a few miles out of town. I drove northward, intently looking for an expanse of prairie or forest, expecting a gate or sign to indicate my arrival. Unsuccessful, I remember pulling off the road by a cornfield, looking at a map, and thinking, "It's supposed to be right here!" Only after driving past it about five times did I realize that "Wildlife Paradise" was an acre or two of low-diversity prairie grasses surrounding a highway detention pond. Clearly I was no longer in Costa Rica, or even Minnesota for that matter. My ecological recalibration was going to be more significant than I had imagined.

4. Ultimately, it has been my Iowan students who have educated me and helped me come to terms with what it means to be an ecologist and conservation biologist in Iowa. I vividly recall a day on the way to our local research site with my student Ben Hoksch. Unexpectedly, Ben excitedly ordered me to pull over, sprang out of the truck, and sprinted out to intercept a crew of county employees spraying a roadside ditch for weeds. Ben had been intently observing the

plants in the ditch over the course of the summer, and he knew that there were some uncommon prairie species growing there. To this day, I'm not sure what he said to the county crew, but after a brief and animated conversation they amiably moved along several hundred yards before resuming their activities. Ben shook his head and mumbled something about "my ditch" as he got back in the car. In a state where "wild nature" has been relegated to the margins, it was inspiring to see a young Iowan care so deeply about such a tiny tract of public land.

5. Another student, Jarrett Pfrimmer, took a class assignment to develop a hypothetical management plan for a site on campus and turned it into a real-world restoration project. In the course of semester, Jarrett engaged a local landowner adjacent to the University, wrote a site management plan, sought funding from local conservation agencies, and recruited students to hand-collect some 50 species of prairie seed. By semester's end, Jarrett had my entire class on a tractor drilling 20 acres of prairie seed to provide wildlife habitat and buffer a local stream from agricultural run-off. Jarrett went on to complete a M.S. degree at UNI and Ph.D. at South Dakota State before returning to Iowa to continue a career devoted to ecological restoration and conservation in his home state.

6. Over the years, other dedicated students have repeatedly reminded me that I needn't look around the world for opportunities to appreciate and conserve biodiversity. There is important work to be done right here in Iowa too.

7. In biology, the success of a transplant is measured by the passing of its genes to the next generation. By this measure, my wife and I are now successful transplants. Like Ben and Jarrett, our young children clearly view Iowa as home and care deeply about its ecosystems, right down to the smallest insect in our back yard or prairie plant in a roadside ditch. Ten years later, thanks to some instruction and inspiration from my students, my Iowa roots have spread, and I hope, through my research and teaching, to contribute in some small way to the conservation of biodiversity to in our home state.