

Reichelt Unit of Rock Creek State Park



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Reichelt Unit of Rock Creek State Park is a 444-acre preserve located eight miles west of Grinnell on the south side of U.S. Highway 6. It is owned by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and was until recently administratively attached to Stephens State Forest, headquartered in Chariton, Iowa. In October 2007, management was transferred to the staff of Rock Creek State Park.

To get to Reichelt from the east, go west out of Grinnell on Highway 6 about eight miles, passing by Oakland Acres on the north and continuing about two more miles. From the west, go east on Highway 6 two miles from its intersection with Highway 224. (To get to this intersection from Interstate 80, take the Kellogg exit 173 and go north on Highway 224 one and one-half miles.) A wooden sign marks the wide entrance driveway on the south side of the road. The parking lot is in 50 yards and to the left.

Much of the land is covered with brome grass. Trees and shrubs that were planted in the late 1980s are expanding aggressively into some areas. The most notable natural feature at Reichelt is a high-quality native prairie remnant, the largest and best in our area, just west of the old driveway. There is also a bur oak woodland of about 20 acres in the southeast corner. An approximately three-mile trail loops around the central part of the property, with a spur leading into this woods. It is usually

mowed only a couple times a year. There are no facilities. No hunting, horses, or motorized vehicles are allowed.

History

The Reichelt Unit is an unusual natural area, to say the least, and a classic case of unfortunate decisions. Its oddness lies in how a large, gently rolling farm became a state “forest.” The last private owner was Sherman Reichelt (pronounced with a “sh” sound for the middle consonant), whose family had



owned the land since 1907. Reichelt raised grain and livestock and operated a fish hatchery in ponds that he constructed around the property. In the early 1980s, Reichelt, then elderly and a widower with no living children, wanted his property to become a wildlife refuge and offered to donate it to the state. He apparently felt that his open land needed trees to be a more natural area. In 1986, the Iowa Natural Resource Commission accepted the donation with his conditions.¹ Among them,

The Department of Natural Resources agrees to establish (plant) hardwood tree species such as walnut, butternut, hickory, oak, etc. at the rate of 10 percent of the acreage donated per year. Soil unsuited for hardwood species will be planted to evergreen-conifers. The Iowa DNR agrees to reserve approximately 20 percent of the acreage donated for native prairie species, ponds, and nesting cover for wildlife.

The Iowa DNR agrees to maintain the property in a forestry rotation in perpetuity, except the 20 percent mentioned above.

The Iowa DNR agrees to maintain said property as a wildlife refuge—no hunting or trapping except that muskrats will be allowed to be trapped in compliance with all applicable statutes. This stipulation is intended to be in perpetuity; except the donor agrees to the following stipulation: “If determined by the director of the Department of Natural Resources in Iowa, the control of deer may be allowed to reduce depredation damages from an indigenous herd.”

But where to put the property in the DNR bureaucratic structure? Since the agreement required a lot of tree planting and since the DNR’s Bureau of Forestry operates a forest nursery and administers several state forests, the decision was made to attach the Reichelt farm to Stephens State Forest. That entity is comprised of more than 8,000 acres in several units in southern Iowa, primarily in Clarke, Lucas, and Monroe counties, with administrative headquarters in Chariton. No DNR staff was ever assigned solely to Reichelt; any management activity required personnel and equipment to be transported 70 miles each way daily. Finally recognizing the impossibility of this arrangement, in October 2007, DNR transferred management of Reichelt to the staff of Rock Creek State Park.

Except for the initial tree planting (see below), there has been little management of the Reichelt Unit. Internal farm fences are still in place. In 2001, the present entrance road and parking lot were constructed. In 2004, the farmstead buildings at the top of the hill at the end of the blacktop drive were razed.

“Forest”

With funding help from Pheasants Forever and other organizations, trees were planted in the late 1980s. As directed in the donation agreement, several hardwood species, among them oak, walnut, and maple, were placed in straight rows in various areas around the property. However, the resident deer herd has browsed them heavily, especially the oaks, resulting in many misshapen or continually chewed-back trees.

DNR apparently felt it had latitude in interpreting the requirement “hardwood trees such as...” for it also planted shrubby species at Reichelt. One of them is the native shrub common ninebark. Unfortunately, at the time of the Reichelt planting, state forestry officials were still promoting several nonnative woody species as wildlife cover, and two of the most invasive ones were planted at Reichelt: autumn olive, native to east Asia, and Tartarian honeysuckle, native to Eurasia. Both species produce heavy crops of small reddish fruits that stay on the plants into winter and are seemingly irresistible to birds. The seeds are then distributed in droppings and germinate easily. That is what is happening now at Reichelt.



Tartarian honeysuckle

Tartarian honeysuckle thrives in both open and wooded habitat, including the oak woodland in the southeast part of Reichelt. Autumn olive likes open areas and forest edge. It is spreading aggressively in the northeastern part of Reichelt and in several other areas, forming dense monocultures that shade out other plants. It is also appearing in the native prairie remnant and invading neighboring property to the east of Reichelt. In transferring management in 2007, State Forester Paul Tauke promised to implement an aggressive control program of cutting and chemically treating the stumps of these two species. Controlling these invasives will be a challenge.

¹ Reichelt died April 22, 1991.



autumn olive



black locust



tree-of-heaven

Two other introduced invasive tree species, which were apparently established at Reichelt through natural spread, are threatening to overtake areas in the remnant prairie on the northwest side. One is black locust, which is native to the Adirondack and Ozark regions, but not to Iowa. It colonizes areas through aggressive suckering. A thick stand is spreading out of a ravine in the southwest part of the prairie remnant.

Another invasive, which has established a small, dense stand on the west-most slope of the remnant prairie, is tree-of-heaven, originally from Asia. It seeds prolifically, also spreads by suckers, grows rapidly, and can overrun native vegetation. It produces toxins that prevent the establishment of other plant species.

Control of black locust and tree-of-heaven is very difficult.

Prairie

The high-quality prairie remnant (A on the map) is located just west of the old asphalt drive on three sloping ridges divided by two north-south ravines. There are no marked trails, but it is relatively easy to wander in it. To access it, cross the entrance road onto the east-west farm lane and immediately climb the low bank to the left onto the prairie. Another option is to walk west down the farm lane approximately 500 yards to the point where it bends south, and then leave the path and walk southeast up the hill.

The approximately 20-acre area was used by Reichelt for pasturing sheep, but apparently not very intensively, for more than 100 prairie species occur. The predominant grass is little bluestem. The tall grasses are big bluestem and Indian grass. Especially on the west slope of the west ridge, there are many clumps of a fountain-like grass with wispy blades called prairie dropseed (see photo in Introduction). Among the forbs in the Reichelt prairie are a number that are conservative species; that is, they are sensitive to disturbance and the first to disappear. Their presence in a remnant indicates that it is of higher quality

and has been relatively less impacted. One such species at Reichelt is Hill's thistle. Another is cream wild indigo.

On the middle and west ridges are thick stands of lead plant (see picture in Introduction). Visitors to the remnant enjoying the russet colors of October will be pleasantly surprised by the splash of deep blue of the late-blooming downy gentian.



cream wild indigo

This prairie remnant is special and deserves to be actively managed to keep it from being overrun by woody species, both native and alien. However, since 1993, there have been only four full or partial burns and only a small amount of handcutting of brush and trees by volunteers. The threat is becoming even more severe with the recent explosive spread of autumn olive elsewhere on the preserve. Its seeds are being carried to the prairie, and young shrubs are beginning to appear. Unless measures are taken soon to control this invasive exotic throughout the property and to defend the remnant from it, this wonderful swatch of prairie will be lost.

Woodland

In the southeast part of the Reichelt property, there is an approximately 20-acre woodland of mature bur oaks (**B** on map). The area was probably grazed fairly heavily. However, some spring ephemerals have survived, including nice stands of bluebells and May apples. Unfortunately, the exotic shrub multiflora rose, introduced to the Midwest decades ago as “living fence,” grows thickly in parts of this woods, its vicious thorns making passage through these areas difficult. And Tartarian honeysuckle, spreading from the state’s plantings, is invading and will become a serious problem.

A farm lane branches off from the main trail east through the center of the timber and across the dam of a pond to a hillside where, sadly, native prairie was planted to woody species, including rapidly spreading autumn olive. The only management of the woods has been a controlled burn in the west half in 2003.

Aquatic

There are no streams on the Reichelt Unit. The aquatic resources consist of ponds that Reichelt constructed in low areas and drainages. In aerial photos from the 1980s, 13 ponds are visible. Most of them are very small, but there is one of about three acres in the southwest corner adjacent to the railroad track (**C** on the map). Although this pond and several others no longer retain much water except after periods of heavy rain or snowmelt, they support wetland plants and associated wildlife. The far western part of the Reichelt Unit is part of the historic floodplain of the North Skunk River, which flows just to the west.



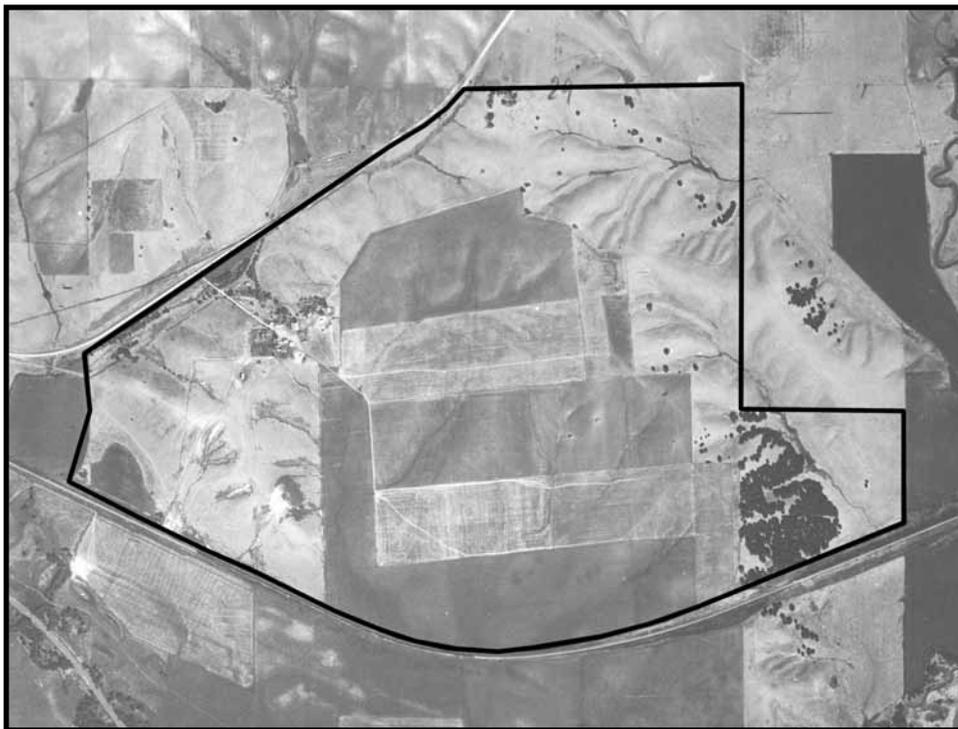
skipper on purple coneflower

Contact Information

As of October 2007, the Reichelt Unit is managed by the staff of Rock Creek State Park. The headquarters is located on the road along the east side of the north arm of the lake. The Park Manager can be reached at 641-236-3722, by email at Rock_Creek@dnr.iowa.gov, or by mail at Rock Creek State Park, 5627 Rock Creek East, Kellogg, IA 50135.

Aerial Photographs of Reichelt Unit of Rock Creek State Park

Please note that the preserve boundaries indicated on these aerial photographs are approximate. When visiting this preserve, please note signage and respect preserve and private property lines.



1930s



1940

Aerial Photographs of Reichelt Unit of Rock Creek State Park



1967



1994

Aerial Photographs of Reichelt Unit of Rock Creek State Park



2007