

CONARD ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH AREA (CERA)



The Conard Environmental Research Area (CERA), named in honor of Grinnell College faculty member and botanist Henry S. Conard, is a 365-acre field station used for teaching, research, and quiet enjoyment by the Grinnell College community and the public.

MISSION

CERA preserves and, through ecological restoration, recreates a part of Iowa's vanishing natural heritage, providing a resource for the entire College, local schools, environmental groups, and the general public.

HOURS

- CERA is open to the public for quiet enjoyment during daylight hours.
- The Environmental Education Center (EEC) is open to the public 9 a.m.–5 p.m. on weekdays.

REGULATIONS

- Motorized vehicles such as ATVs are allowed only on gravel roads, not trails. Please park in designated areas.
- Bicycles may be on roads and mowed firebreaks but not on the woodland trails. Horses are prohibited.
- Dogs on leashes may accompany hikers.
- CERA encourages hikers to use the marked trails or mowed firebreaks. Hikers may leave the trails, but may not enter the experimental plots. Please do not disturb any research equipment, flags, stakes, or markers.
- Fishing, hunting, shed collecting, and foraging are prohibited.

FACILITIES, STRUCTURES, AND ART

Graham Lab provides easy access to field and lab equipment for aquatic studies and serves as a guest house for College faculty and visiting scholars.

Environmental Education Center (EEC) was established in 2005 and constructed using environmentally friendly systems and materials, including geothermal heating and cooling, gray water recycling, and renewable local building materials. It comprises two classrooms, a restoration lab, office, kitchen, potting room, and greenhouse.

Solar Array (which produces 193 kilowatt hours a year) was built in 2023 and meets all of the electricity needs of the EEC, making it a net-zero building that consumes only as much energy as it generates on-site through renewable energy sources.

Prairie Cairn, a sculpture by Andy Goldsworthy, was created in 2001 as part of a larger cairn series, with additional installations on the East and West coasts.

Met Tower, installed in 2025, monitors temperature, humidity, wind speed, and other climate variables at various elevations on the 10-meter tower.

PRAIRIES

Prairie is found on variable topography and supports a wide range of species. Little bluestem, side-oats grama, and leadplant thrive in the less fertile clay soil along the western edge, while tall grasses, sunflowers, and blazing star are abundant along moist seeps.*

A Fall Burn Prairie is burned each fall to demonstrate the effect that the winter weather has on bare soil, and the effect that the warming of the soil in the spring has on the growth of plants.

B Deaner Prairie is the most diverse prairie reconstruction at CERA, with over 80 species of plants. It is burned every 2–3 years.

C Perley Prairie has variable topography that typically supports mesic tallgrass prairie plants: thimbleweed, compass plant, pale purple coneflower, black-eyed susans, and false boneset are abundant.

D No-Burn Prairie has not been burned since 1992. All organic material accumulates and decays naturally. The grasses are much less vigorous here, making forbs more visible throughout the summer.

** See A, B, C, and D on map (opposite side)*

Experimental prairie plots are burned each spring, summer, or fall, or left unburned. Some are mowed as well, allowing students to study the effects of both fire and grazing on prairie organisms.

Experimental forest plots are burned or unburned, allowing students to study the effects of fire on forest organisms.

WOODLANDS

Oak Savannas once formed the boundary between prairie and forest and are now one of Iowa's rarest plant communities. Ongoing savanna restoration at CERA supports populations of prairie violet, bead grass, purple oxalis, New Jersey tea, cream gentian, and other plants that thrive in partial sunlight.

Oak Woodlands develop more diverse groundcover when fire-intolerant trees are removed, fire is prescribed, and sunlight penetrates the canopy. Bottle-brush grass, Virginia wild rye, bent grass, Pennsylvania and other sedges, and numerous forbs carpet the ground.

Oak-Hickory Forest was probably forestland for 1,000 years until a railroad company logged it in the 1860s. Over the last 160 years, an upland forest canopy of white oak, shagbark hickory, red oak, basswood, and ironwood naturally reestablished itself. This area now harbors a rich understory of spring ephemerals as well as an abundance of migratory songbirds.

Riparian Forests on alluvial soil along the North Skunk River comprise walnut, silver maple, cottonwood, box elder, and standing dead green ash. Ephemeral ponds where the Skunk River once meandered provide springtime breeding grounds for amphibians. Black walnuts and white pines, planted in 1970, also occur east of the river along with reed canary grass and a number of wet prairie plant species, including meadowsweet and blue flag iris.

WATER BODIES

Perry Pond was constructed in 1972 to provide a site for the study of aquatic habitat. The 14-acre pond, which averages a depth of only six feet, supports largemouth bass, bluegill, golden shiner, amphibians, and invertebrates. It is fed by three intermittent streams, including Willow Creek.

North Skunk River (a channelized portion) runs through the northeast part of the property.

TRAIL ACCESSIBILITY

We maintain all trails for foot traffic and as fire breaks.

Difficult: Trails are moderately to extremely inclined with frequent difficult terrain (red dotted line on map).

Moderate: Trails are moderately inclined with occasional difficult terrain (orange dotted line on map).

Easy: Trails are mostly level with mild inclines and even terrain (yellow dotted line on map).

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

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Campus Safety, 641-269-4600