

# STUDENTS LIVING **CARDINAL**, **GOLD** AND **GREEN**

## Season of Change

As campus settles into the new semester, the leaves are changing with the season in an explosion of color. Fall is a season of change with new classes, schedules, habits and goals. This change can bring about opportunities for growth and inspiration. What better way to embrace this season of change than getting outside, breathing in the fresh air, listening to a trickling creek or watching birds in the changing trees.

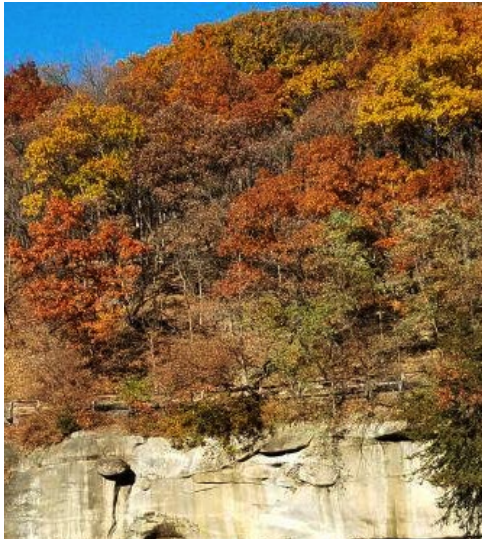


Photo Courtesy of the DNR

Just southeast of Ames is one of Iowa's 71 beautiful state parks. Ledges State Park, located in Boone County, is a great resource to take advantage of during the changing seasons. Ledges is a popular spot for hiking, fishing, camping, gathering, and other recreational activities.

In times of change, Ledges remains constant, preserved as it was when it was established over 100 years ago. Its special place in our community is still as important as ever.

One of the main factors that make this park special is the care and determination that goes into the conservation of the land, which includes commitment by four Iowa State University students.



Photo Courtesy of the DNR

Emily Kucera, Mikayla Reimann, Ava Stephens and Robin Wingate serve in roles of seasonal patrol officers, seasonal parks employees and naturalists. These ISU students play a key role in the conservation and upkeep of this beautiful state park.

Whether it is helping clear a trail, removing invasive species or educating visitors about conservation in the park, these students lead by example and inspire new connections while creating impacts both in and beyond the park boundaries.

Andy Bartlett, Park Manager at Ledges State Park, acknowledged the impact of student involvement at Ledges, especially students from ISU, "I know what I'm getting out of Iowa State students when I hire them and it's always worked out well, not only for us here at

the park, but for the students too," he shared. "The experience that they get while they work out here prepares them really well for a career in parks..." Bartlett said.

Live Green had the opportunity to speak with two of the Ledges student crew and gain additional understanding of their experiences and highlights in serving as nature ambassadors, as well as change agents, in their respective roles.

Mikayla Reimann, a junior animal ecology major, got her start working at state parks this past May and joined the Ledges team in August. Reimann has always been drawn to nature. Growing up in Clear Lake, Iowa, she often explored the lake and forests surrounding it.

Originally an animal sciences major, Reimann switched to animal ecology because she "wanted to work with people and help others enjoy nature." It is her goal to help maintain Ledges as a place of comfort to its visitors, as state parks have been for her.



Photo Courtesy of Ava Haynes

Robin Wingate, a junior animal ecology and chemistry major, has worked for Ledges State Park for the past two years and has been a visitor since she was young. She recalls fond memories of camping and hiking in the park with family friends and said it was always a positive place.

Wingate said she has always been passionate about nature and loves to be “outside in nature where I can just kind of look around and I feel at ease.” Wingate hopes that Ledges positively changes people’s view of state parks and their importance. She works alongside the public, helping educate visitors towards this goal.



Photo Courtesy of Robin Wingate

**Importance of Parks**

Thomas W. Morse, [South Carolina’s first Secretary of State Parks](#), noted that parks bring “people into close contact with the beauties and the mysteries of the natural world. They help develop increased appreciation of

man’s place in nature.” Throughout decades of changing landscapes, parks give us the ability to connect with nature as it once was. This is especially important at a time when natural landscapes are becoming more scarce.

Parks are established because of the natural beauty or uniqueness of their landscapes and features. In the case of ledges, according to the [Friends of the Ledges website](#) over 10,000 years ago, glacier meltwater carved its way through Iowa to become what we now know as the Des Moines River. Along its way, the water shaped the rock formations for which Ledges is now known.

These landscapes provided shelter and gathering space for native Americans in the area long before it was established as a state park. It took those who recognized the land’s beauty to fight for its preservation in the 1920s. Ledges State Park officially established in 1924. Just over one hundred years later, Ledges is still preserved and enjoyed by thousands of visitors.

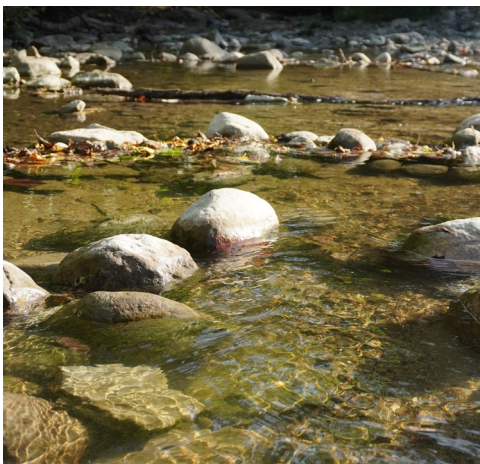


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Bartlett and his team believe they have seen positive change over the years in visitors. “We get a lot more people now that will stop and compliment us on how well the park looks, how much they enjoy coming here,” Bartlett said. People are grateful to have a beautiful park near them and recognize more often how parks serve them as a resource, environmentally, economically and socially.

**Environmental**

By preserving a natural area, the land and the surrounding communities (plants, people and animals) experience many environmental benefits. The trees filter carbon out of the air and landscapes, redirect rain runoff that naturally filters water and replenishes aquifers.

These benefits are also thanks to the upkeep and recognized importance of native plants in the park that act as a form of [green infrastructure](#) (urban and natural based planning and application that benefits the ecological function of an area).

As noted by the EPA, this infrastructure improves soil erosion and aids overall in incorporating tools and practices better built for the environment. “Nature is beautiful, and we should be better at conserving it,”

Wingate said, emphasizing the shared responsibility of taking care of these natural spaces that in turn are taking care of their surrounding communities.

**Economic**

Parks also draw tourism through public interest in enjoying and recreating in nature. Reimann said she is impressed to see that people come from all over to visit the park, from hours and even states away.

This interest in turn provides an economic boost to surrounding communities and businesses. These funds assist in ensuring the continued preservation of parks as well as the amenities that serve their visitors.

**Social**

As the [National Recreation and Parks Association](#) (NRPA) puts it “parks are a tangible reflection of the quality of life in a community.” By providing a safe and accessible place to connect to nature as a community, parks create stability in communities. The parks are a social place to visit, hosting groups of all sizes.

Reimann said holidays are always popular for friend and family gatherings while the weather is good. “It definitely makes my day to see the park bring people together,” said Reimann. In times of change it is nice to connect to community and Ledges puts a lot of effort into supporting its communities through opportunities like workshops, group hikes and seasonal social events.



Photo Courtesy of Friends of the Ledges

**Maintaining the Park**

Students like Kucera, Reimann, Stevens and Wingate work diligently through seasonal change and challenges to keep the park beautiful and desirable to visit. They are the ones keeping trails accessible, removing invasive species, keeping trash picked up, aiding visitors, sparking curiosity, as well as keeping amenities in functioning order.

Reimann said it can be a tough job, but it is worth it. She said one of her favorite things to see at the park is families enjoying time together. “It’s just really nice to see people happy because of the parks,” she said.

Change can be unexpected, sometimes bringing challenges with it. These park employees work hard to not only anticipate changes like the changing seasons but also unexpected change that needs to be responded to and dealt with quickly.

For example, this summer Boone County experienced a lot of heavy rainfall. The oversaturated soil caused several trees to topple over. According to Bartlett,

sometimes two big trees a day. In turn, the staff had to get down in the dirt to chop up and remove these downed trees every week.

Along with the trees, Bartlett noted additional responsibilities the students had to tackle. “We had railings broken and we had trail sections torn off and so we had to respond and help fix a lot of those trails,” Bartlett said, adding that he was proud of his staff for their determination and hard work during this time.

With the fall season bringing more hikers to Ledges, Bartlett said the students are out on the trails more often to accommodate. Both Reimann and Wingate agree walking trails to help hikers, “roving,” is one of their favorite parts of the job.

Roving requires the students to go on the trails to intentionally interact with visitors. Students ask visitors questions about things like their favorite view or favorite memory, to encourage a deeper connection between visitors and the park — with the ultimate goal of encouraging visitors to let themselves be curious and “to get lost in the beauty of nature,” Wingate said.



Photo Courtesy of Ava Haynes

Bartlett encourages students and employees to bring about positive change to the parks, and noted their biggest impact on the park is the innovation they bring. “They’re constantly learning new things in their classes and then they can have a setting here where they have a little bit of freedom to apply some of that learning.” Bartlett is excited to see the new knowledge and skills students bring to the park to enact positive change.

**Empowering Connection**

Hosting the opportunity for visitors to “get lost in nature” also inspires the desire to get more involved in preserving nature. Opportunities like joining [Friends of the Ledges](#) offer deeper engagement and volunteer connections for the community.

Reimann said it is encouraging to see the community get involved with Ledges, as a result of visiting the park — boosting their motivation to benefit the park alongside staff.

For example, this summer over a hundred picnic tables around the park had flaking paint that needed to be updated. Normally the fix would be putting another coat of paint on; but with the help of volunteers, they were able to redesign the tables to be more sustainable with stained planks that are easier to upkeep.

By being active participants in conservation and sustainable actions, volunteers are acting as stewards of nature at Ledges. Stewards take care of the

environment in everyday actions that “are inspiring – and evidence of an emerging societal commitment to [environmental stewardship](#),” as defined by the Environmental Protection Agency. Bartlett referred to the Steps of Stewardship, a model referenced by the DNR that aims to connect the public as stewards of nature.



Image Courtesy of The Visitor Experience

As explained by [thevisitorexperience.org](#), these steps range from those who may feel they are ‘dragged to the park’ almost against their will, to those who actively participate in the protection and conservation of the park – whether through picking up trash left behind by others or signing up as a park volunteer.

Collectively, a goal for all DNR park employees is to assist visitors in moving up the steps of stewardship. Collaborating together toward ongoing preservation for generations.

**Change for the Future**

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The students share similar excitement. Reimann said she enjoys being part of the change that she is seeing in visitors’ dedication to preserving the park and being mindful of natural resources. She plans to continue working with the DNR and continue to be an advocate for the parks and our state’s natural land.

Reimann adds that she hopes to inspire change in others by sharing the beauty of nature. She also looks forward to seeing innovation through technology and how it could impact sustainability as well as the interpretation of the park’s impact.

Wingate said she feels like her generation is “moving in the direction where people are realizing more, how important the world is and I’m hoping that continues to happen during my life so that I can be like, wow, I’m a part of that.” She feels like she sees a change in visitors in their increased open-mindedness.

Wingate believes people are becoming more considerate of nature and its impact and she’s proud of her generation for that fact. She hopes to continue working with the parks or with conservation in order to keep enacting positive changes in

attitudes and actions toward nature into the future.



Photo Courtesy of Friends of the Ledges

Ledges State Park is a special place, with an impact greater than what meets the eye. The care and consideration given by these students helps work toward ensuring a future filled with spaces like Ledges for the generations that follow them.

Their stewardship supports the park, and inspires the public, through seasons of change and opportunities in leaving a sustainable difference.

Those who have not visited are encouraged to check out Ledges State Park during its colorful transition and keep an eye out for these Iowa State University students living cardinal, gold and green. Find out more about Ledges events and other ways to get involved on the Iowa Department of Natural Resources [Iowa Department of Natural Resources website](#) and the [Friends of the Ledges Facebook Page](#).