

Skunk River Paddlers Spring Festival 2013

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Every spring Story County Conservation and their partners invite the families of central Iowa to McFarland Park to celebrate the long awaited demise of winter and life in the out-of-doors. The Spring Festival this year was held on Sunday May 5. Our best guess is that a hundred families showed up to learn about snakes, turtles, and frogs, do a few craft projects, learn about feeding birds, and fish for elusive bluegills. For nearly a decade the Skunk River Paddlers have loaded children, families, teens and even a few adults into the county's collection of old beat up aluminum boats and launched them on a death-defying floating adventure around the park's little lake.

By early Sunday afternoon, the canoes are unloaded and stacked in place. Paddles are sorted by size and stylish orange horse collar life jackets are piled for small, medium, and large paddlers. The grass on the bank was still wet from the morning rains (not to mention six inches of snow earlier in the week) but drying quickly. The safety boaters were loaded and launched including one SUP volunteer that paddled among the canoes giving encouragement and a few simple paddling instructions while pointing out where a couple of turtles were sunning on a log.



And then the families started arriving. SRP members held the boats along the shoreline and helped the next generations of paddlers climb aboard – biggest person in the back, next biggest in front and one to three kids sitting on life jackets in the middle. Show them how to hold a paddle, tell them to keep their weight low and centered, and off they go.



Sometimes the instructions worked better than other times – or maybe we just forgot to tell a family or two that canoe paddles work better with two hands. Clearly for many families, this was the first time they had ever been in a small boat. A number of the groups started out very nervous but most of them returned laughing – some from having survived the ordeal and some from the simple joy of being on the water.

Occasionally a particularly enthusiastic young paddler was more than ready to go but needed a more seasoned river veteran to hold down the other end of the boat. Sometimes there was a little disagreement about which direction to face or maybe which direction the boat should go. Obviously they are pointed on both ends for a reason. One little blond enthusiast refused to come back to shore and wanted to keep taking just one more lap. According to her dad her mom, who was not present, is an enthusiastic paddler and it looks like he now has two on his hands.



All in all it was a wonderful success. A few adults that had not been in canoes since they were kids got to show future Olympic-class competitors just how much fun it is to fool around in boats. Once again the day ended with all boats back on shore and not a single swimmer in the group. Who knows maybe we even will have a few more folks show up for our Wednesday evening paddles at Ada Hayden.



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