



IOWA'S Driftless Area

Photo by Larry Stone

The upper corner of northeastern Iowa is like a window to the past. The glaciers of the last ice age left this region untouched. Cliffs and escarpments formed of ancient limestone are riddled with sinkholes, caverns, groundwater springs and algific talus slopes. These slopes are small ice caves tucked into steep limestone slopes scattered with loose rock. When intercepted by the steep slopes, cold-air discharges from the caves and behaves like a spring, bathing lower slopes in a flow of cool, moist air. During spring and summer, air in the ice caves is colder than the outside air, and in winter, air in the ice caves is warmer. This makes for a variety of microclimates that support diverse and sometimes extremely rare plant and animal communities.

In 1980, Terry Frest, a geology graduate from the University of Iowa, rediscovered the federally endangered Iowa Pleistocene Snail, thought to have been extinct for 10,000 years, on an algific talus slope. Besides the Iowa Pleistocene snail, many other land snails make their homes on these slopes, including eight additional species that have been proposed for endangered species status. Thick layers of mosses, ferns and liverworts can be found on the coldest portions of the slopes, along with yellow and paper birch, mountain maple, yew and balsam fir. About 96 percent of the entire population of the federally threatened Northern monkshood occurs in the Driftless area. Due to the ruggedness of the landscape, which has made agriculture and development difficult, this region also has some of Iowa's highest quality forest remnants.



SAVING THE LAST GREAT PLACES ON EARTH

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To save this last great place in Iowa, the Conservancy is working the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, county conservation boards and private landowners to protect the rare slopes. In 1989, the Conservancy worked with the USFWS to establish the Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge to permanently protect sufficient habitat for the federally endangered Iowa Pleistocene snail and Northern monkshood. Out of 36 known Pleistocene snail populations, all but nine have been protected. The Conservancy currently owns six preserves in the driftless area.



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