# Mowing and Native Vegetation

Native plant restoration is an important part of IRVM, which is used by the Iowa DOT and many Iowa counties. IRVM includes the planting of native plants in the right-of-way, judicious use of herbicides, selective mowing, mechanical tree and brush removal, and the prevention and treatment of erosion.

Because Iowa Code 318.3 prohibits the destruction of plants placed within the right-of-way, it is illegal for landowners to mow plants that have been planted by the state or county as part of an IRVM program. The state or county is responsible for mowing and managing these native plants.

**Because of their deep root systems, established native prairie grasses and wildflowers are very effective for stabilizing steep roadside slopes.**

Photo credit: Cerro Gordo Co. Conservation Board

# What You Can Do

- Before July 15, only mow roadsides as needed for safety, spot weed control, and removing competition for native prairie seedlings.
- Delay haying and mowing for brush control until after July 15.
- Delay mowing until after July 15 to promote game bird and songbird nesting habitat and reduce soil erosion from spring rains.
- To best help monarch butterflies, delay blanket mowing until after Oct. 1.
- If you wish to harvest hay on state roadsides, contact the Iowa DOT maintenance garage or contact listed on the DOT website: iowadot.gov/maintenance/mowing.html
- Along county roadsides, contact your county engineer or county roadside manager to learn more about Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management, which uses selective mowing and Iowa's native plants in county roadsides. A list of county contacts can be found on the IRVM webpage listed below.

## IOWA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Phone: 515-233-7729 or 515-239-1628

## UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA ROADSIDE OFFICE

Tallgrass Prairie Center
University of Northern Iowa
2412 W. 27th Street
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0294

Phone: 319-273-2813
tallgrassprariecenter.org/roadsides
tallgrassprairiecenter
Iowaroadsides

UNI University of Northern Iowa

IOWA ROADSIDE MANAGEMENT
ENHANCING OUR PUBLIC ROADSIDES

# Iowa Mowing Law

Iowa Code 314.17 prohibits mowing of roadside vegetation on the rights-of-way or medians on any primary highway, interstate highway or secondary road prior to July 15. Exceptions to the law are as follows:

1. Within 200 yards of an inhabited dwelling.
2. On rights-of-way within one mile of the corporate limits of a city.
3. To promote native species of vegetation or other long-lived and adaptable vegetation.
4. To establish control of damaging insect populations, noxious weeds and invasive plant species.
5. For visibility and safety reasons.
6. Within rest areas, weigh stations and wayside parks.
7. Within 50 feet of a drainage tile or tile intake.
8. For access to a mailbox or for other accessibility purposes.
9. On rights-of-way adjacent to agricultural demonstration or research plots.

On state roadsides, all persons, including adjacent landowners, must obtain a simple permit before harvesting hay. The Iowa DOT requires these permits to make sure safety stipulations, cutting restrictions and adjacent property owners' wishes are respected. Please contact your local DOT maintenance garage or office for a permit. For county roadsides, check with your county engineer or roadside manager to see if a permit is required.

Photo credit: Iowa DNR Wildlife

## Mowing and Birds

Songbirds and game birds often nest in roadsides during May or June. If the first nesting attempt fails because of weather, predation or mowing, all upland game bird species and most songbird species will re-nest.

The first two weeks in July are critical in game bird reproduction because this is when young chicks from the second nest hatch. Delaying mowing until after July 15 allows 20 percent more nests to hatch versus a July 1 mowing (Iowa DNR). Leaving roadsides unmowed also provides a safe corridor for birds to move around the landscape.

## Mowing and Monarch Butterflies

Monarchs typically have four generations each year, with the final generation migrating south to their overwintering habitat in Mexico. Breeding generations require milkweed to reproduce, and the migratory generation requires abundant nectar to fuel their migration. This essential habitat can be found in some roadsides.

Because adult monarchs feed on nectar from a variety of flowering plants, not just milkweed, leaving blooming plants preserves valuable food sources for adults. Delaying mowing until after July 15 leaves habitat for early generations of monarchs in Iowa. If possible, delay mowing until after Oct. 1 to help all breeding and migratory monarchs (Monarch Joint Venture).

## What About the Deer?

Because deer prefer to eat tender new plant growth over tougher, older vegetation, reduced mowing may discourage deer from foraging in roadsides.

A study conducted for the Federal Highway Administration found that deer-vehicle collision rates were not related to how often the Departments of Transportation in Maryland and New York mowed (Normandeau Associates, Inc. 2012). According to research conducted by the Indiana DOT, mammal and bird road kill was not significantly different between roadsides with short vegetation and roadsides planted with tall shrubs (Roach and Kirkpatrick 1985). These studies suggest that letting roadside vegetation grow tall doesn't increase deer-vehicle collisions, although further research is needed.

## Mowing and Weeds

Because some noxious weeds and invasive plant species are best controlled by mowing early in the growing season, one of the mowing law exceptions allows targeted mowing of noxious weeds and invasive plant species before July 15. For example, one effective technique for controlling invasive wild parsnip is to mow around the bolting stage in mid-May to early June. However, mowing after weedy or invasive plants have gone to seed (after mid-June for wild parsnip, for example) can actually spread the plants and do more harm than good. Contact your county weed commissioner for more information on weed identification and appropriate methods to control noxious weeds and invasive plants. Also contact your county engineer or roadside manager to ensure you are not mowing native plants that have been planted as part of an Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management (IRVM) program.

Photo credit: Iowa State University