

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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We hope everyone enjoyed a fun and safe 4th of July! Perhaps you traveled over the holiday or have traveling plans for later this summer. Have you ever thought about how plants, deeply rooted in the earth, travel around the country? One group of plants, which my botany professor called early colonists but I call weeds, use epizoochory or seed dispersal via transportation on the outside of vertebrate animals. Today we'll take a closer look at five of these Iowa hitchhikers as presented by Dan Magneson in "Reach Out and Touch Someone" in the July/August 2017 edition of *Iowa Outdoors*.

Perhaps one of the best known, at least to area farmers, is the cocklebur, a native plant with deeply notched leaves and streaked stems that are rough to the touch. Cockleburs are wind pollinated, and their flowering and bur development are triggered by shorter daylight hours. Each bur contains a pair of pre-programmed seeds. One seed will germinate the following year while the second is delayed from germinating for at least two years. On top of all that, cockleburs are toxic to most wildlife. However, the now extinct Carolina parakeet, one of Iowa's most beautiful indigenous birds, favored cockleburs which made its flesh poisonous to other animals.

Another infamous hitchhiker is burdock, an Old World plant with leaves similar to rhubarb and blooms similar to thistle flowers. In late summer, in between the flush of clover and goldenrod, burdock provides honeybees with pollen and nectar. Peeled burdock roots are a common root vegetable in Asian cooking, while soft drinks made from burdock roots and dandelions are also said to be very tasty. Probably their biggest claim to fame today is as the forerunner and inspiration for Velcro.

Stickseed is another aptly named common Iowa hitchhiker with its seed-bearing branches that extend horizontally to increase their reach. If you look carefully, it appears these tiny burs are hanging upside down just like bats. As I'm sure many of you can attest, stickseed is drawn to laces and shoe-strings like steel to a magnet.

Tick-trefoil, the most esteemed of Iowa's bur-bearers, is a member of the pea family. It is the preferred plant food of white-tailed deer and rabbits while quail and bobwhite enjoy their seeds. Plus tick-trefoil fixes nitrogen in the soil and is easily the easiest of the Iowa burs to remove.

Devil's Pitchforks or Beggars Ticks, with their pronged seeds, are members of the sunflower family. Often found near water, the plants are eaten by muskrats and the seeds by ducks. In contrast, the sand bur, a member of the grass family, grows in sandy, disturbed areas. Sand burs will even draw blood and may be the meanest bur of the whole bunch.

Luckily, epizoochory is a rare phenomenon in the plant world with only five percent of plant species hitchhiking for a living. Nonetheless, these bur-producing travelers have circled the globe and now enjoy world-wide distribution—proof that hitch-hiking, at least in Jack Reacher novels and the plant world, will get you where you're going.



Do you recognize this common Iowa hitchhiker?