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## Preparing for flight

By: Luke Jennett

Before her ride took off from Ankeny on Wednesday, Iowa State University graduate student Ashley Wendt said she wasn't nervous about her first helicopter flight.

"Not really, as long as I don't get motion sickness," she said.

Wendt, a second-year grad student with the Natural Resource Ecology and Management department, took a flight along a 150-mile stretch of Squaw Creek and its tributaries as part of her master's thesis project.

The project, which is being run by the soil and water conservation districts of Story, Boone and Hamilton counties, brings a novel approach to the task of doing a watershed assessment along Squaw Creek: The scenery below the helicopter was recorded on video that is linked to the Global Positioning System, allowing researchers to compress the normally lengthy process of examining the river bed in search of possible resource concerns.

In this case, the cameraman was an old hand at observation via helicopter. For the project, the group hired KCCI meteorologist John McLaughlin's company, Iowa Helicopter, to provide the transportation, and McLaughlin himself shot the footage.

In a way, the timing of the expedition was perfect, said Tom Isenhardt, professor with the Natural Resources Ecology and Management department at ISU, who acted as technical adviser on the project.

"It'll be interesting to see after these floods," he said. "We'll really be able to see where there are areas of unstable stream bank."

However, Wendt said, the project also was under time constraints: They'd wanted to get into the air before the trees went into bloom and created a canopy that obscures their view of the creek.

"It was today, do or die," she said.

Jim Cooper, coordinator of the Prairie Rivers of Iowa Regional Conservation and Development Office, said using the helicopter and GPS system would reduce the time spent on a process that can often require months of physical inspection and knocking on doors. Cooper's organization acted as a coordinator between the various involved city and county agencies. Funding for the project was largely arranged by the Boone County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Wendt, in the helicopter, looked for areas of interest and noted the time they passed over them. The GPS allowed researchers to pinpoint these locations and to study them at more depth.

"I'll just be looking at stream banks and channel conditions, looking for areas we'd be more interested in examining," Wendt said before the flight. "Just get a general idea of what's going on in the stream channel."

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By Luke Jennett/The Tribune

KCCI Meteorologist John McLaughlin and ISU graduate student Ashley Wendt flew over 150 miles of Squaw Creek and its tributaries Wednesday to search for potential resource concerns. The time of the flight was optimum; the recent flooding had made areas with unstable stream banks more visible to the team.