



January 2021
Issue 118



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@ORC is a monthly publication by the IL Department of Natural Resources Office of Resource Conservation about exciting and wonderful things ORC staff are doing throughout Illinois.

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Growing Illinois' Public Access Program

By Tammy Miller, IRAP Manager



A few decades ago, it was fairly easy to find a place to hunt. A hunter just had to ask a few farmers for permission to hunt and one had access to hunt a variety of game. Today, not so much; those days are long gone. Unless one grows up in a hunting family or even better, one that owns property, he or she is going to have a hard time finding a place to shoot their first deer and continue a hunting tradition that is handed down from generation to generation.

Lack of access is one of the biggest issues facing sportsmen and women today, and it is the number one reason lapsed hunters give when asked why they no longer hunt. Sometimes a successful hunt isn't about what you know, but who you know. Good hunting property is either already leased or owned for hunting to outfitters and private groups and individuals, which can bring big dollars to landowners. While going out to ask for permission can sometimes open a few doors, the success rate has become so low these days that it's often not even worth trying in many areas.

Illinois has public-hunting land scattered throughout the state that has many users but it is limited. Nearly 97 percent of the land in Illinois is privately owned. Many private landowners are either transplants from suburban areas who have little or no background in the outdoor lifestyle, making them less receptive to someone who comes knocking for permission to hunt, or they are farmers who already have family and friends hunting their land and may not want a “stranger” on their property.

According to data provided by the 2009 Illinois Conservation Congress, two-thirds of all hunters rely on private land to pursue game, and access to that private land was getting more difficult. One of the top suggestions from this Congress was to develop a public access program on private land. Fortunately, in 2010, a new federal access grant in the USDA’s farm bill called the Voluntary Public Access Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) was announced. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) applied for this new VPA-HIP grant and was successful in receiving a grant in 2011, which led to the development of the Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP). Since that first award, IDNR has received three additional VPA-HIP grants to continue and expand IRAP.

In the beginning of building the IRAP, there was a lot of skepticism as to whether private landowners would allow strangers on their property mostly due to liability and safety concerns. IRAP decided to offset those fears by introducing semi-controlled public access (where participants had to apply for access and be awarded a specific site) and to provide liability insurance for landowners during IRAP activities. This was key, and several landowners decided to



First-time turkey hunter, Amy Smith, with a gobbler she harvested on IRAP property



A successful upland game hunt in Whiteside County

give IRAP a try. In addition, IRAP provided landowners with a habitat management plan and funded up to seventy-five percent cost-share to implement habitat management practices in the plan. This was an attractive incentive to landowners, and within the first couple of years, IRAP had over 10,000 acres leased for hunting and fishing.

IRAP’s game plan was to start small in the beginning by only allowing youth turkey hunting, fishing and hiking. Once it became established and successful, IRAP added first-time adult turkey hunting. As the demand for IRAP has grown and landowners have become more comfortable with the success of IRAP, more hunting activities have been introduced. Over the past decade, IRAP has grown from just a few outdoor activities on 10,000 acres to what it is today, with multiple activities on more than 25,000 leased acres.

IRAP Outdoor Activities Include:

- Youth Turkey hunting
- Season 3 & 4 Turkey hunting
- Pond/River Fishing
- Rabbit and squirrel hunting
- Waterfowl hunting
- Youth shotgun deer hunting
- Archery deer hunting
- Upland game hunting

Habitat management has been a big part of the IRAP's success. In 2014, IRAP partnered with Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever and the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center to create two habitat strike teams to work on IRAP leased private land. The habitat strike teams assist private landowners with a variety of management practices, including prescribed burning, tree planting, timber stand improvements and much more. IRAP has seen more game animals and birds on acres previously unmanaged, and hunters comment on how "nice" the properties are and the abundance of wildlife they see. In addition to assisting landowners with implementing conservation projects, IRAP has been able to educate landowners about various habitat practices so they can continue with the management. Within the last six years, IRAP has implemented numerous habitat projects on more than 16,000 acres of leased private land.



2nd year prairie planting on IRAP leased property in St. Clair County

Landowners have a lot to gain by allowing hunters on their land. Not only do they receive an annual lease payment, they also receive valuable habitat management assistance and may get the added benefit of reduced crop depredation by deer. Additionally, some property owners like the thought that a responsible hunter is keeping an eye on the place for them (by reporting any trespassers), and others like the fact that a youth or first-time adult hunter is getting an opportunity to take part in the age-old tradition of harvesting his or her first deer, turkey, or other game.

And therein lies one of the biggest advantages of all for both hunters and anglers and landowners - IRAP builds strong communities and allow neighbors to be neighborly. It gives the outdoor enthusiast a chance to put on their best behavior and cast hunting and fishing in a positive light to a world that has mostly lost touch with our hunting and fishing heritage. With a little luck, IRAP will continue to expand and make available more hunting and fishing opportunities for hunters and anglers as well as make conservation improvements on the private land its leases for outdoor activities. IRAP is a win, win, win for the landowner, participant and habitat.



Sophia with her "first" catch

To learn more about IRAP, go to <https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/conservation/IRAP>

"Without this program we will not have been able to hunt. Through the IRAP program I got the opportunity to introduce my 11 year old daughter to turkey hunting and my wife tagged along with us for photo shoot. Given that we were the only people hunting on track of land made them feel secure and courageous enough to try this out. They would have never ventured out had I told them we are going to public land with possibility of other hunters around us.

Both the Lee County and Bureau County properties are beautiful and very well maintained and within driving distance for us so we could go there multiple times. For the youth season as we were allowed to scout; we went there multiple times and that added a whole new dimension to our experience. Even though it was not a successful hunt for us this year we learned a lot and gave us time to bond together & make memories and hopefully I got them interested enough that we will keep doing it for years to come.

I think IRAP is very important to us given that Illinois has very less public land and the program provides us the opportunity to these outdoor activities that would not have been possible otherwise. Over the years I have knocked at so many landlords doors but without success so IRAP is really special and important for folks like us who do not have access to private land. This provides us the opportunity to keep the tradition alive and pass it on to future generations.

I really appreciate the effort you guys put into this program and looking forward to keep leveraging it. I hope with more people leverage the program so the program can grow faster and provide even more opportunities. Please let me know if I can help in any way."

Thanks G.P, first time IRAP participant

"I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you for the many years of wonderful experiences that my family and friends have enjoyed through the Illinois Recreational Access Program.

The IRAP program has provided us with access to property to enjoy the outdoors, where I've been able to teach my kids about hunting, sportsmanship and respect for the land. The kids have grown to love bird hunting because of the permits provided by IRAP. My youngest son, Raymond, harvested his first gobbler during an IRAP youth turkey hunting opportunity and has gone on to be a champion competitive shotgun sports athlete and now even gives me shooting pointers! I guess what I'm trying to say is that we feel that the Illinois Recreational Access Program has become a part of family tradition over the years.

Please accept this brief note of my gratitude for the many years of outstanding customer service that IRAP has provided to my family and friends. You are always providing excellent properties, a choice of dates, and excellent communication throughout the process. We do not have much public access for hunting in Northern Illinois, so each IRAP permit we receive is truly a gift that is treasured. This is an important program to us, and without IRAP, we would not be able to continue our fall traditions of spending time together in the outdoors."

From my family to the whole IRAP program, we thank you.

S.N. multi-year IRAP participant.