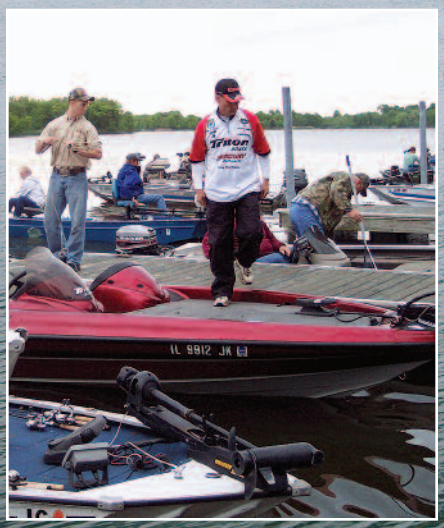
Ameren's Newton Lake power plant provides secondary service as a fish and wildlife area.

A Powerful Partnership



(Photo courtesy Jasper County Chamber of Commerce.)

(Photo courtesy Newton High School.)

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

Whether or not anglers stretch the truth is a matter of contention, but sometimes actions speak louder than words.

Granted, Newton resident Dave Schafer has to commute only a few miles to launch his boat at Newton Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, but the fact that he does so an estimated four times a week, 52 weeks of the year, speaks volumes for the Jasper County fisheries.

Schafer has been making the trip since shortly after Newton Lake opened in 1980, and he continues to witness changes to the lake.

"Throughout the winter you'll see trees that have fallen in, which only helps enhance the habitat for the bass," Schafer explained. "These days I see a lot more eagles on the lake. They're such a pretty bird and I like to watch them fish. Sometimes I think they catch more fish than I do."

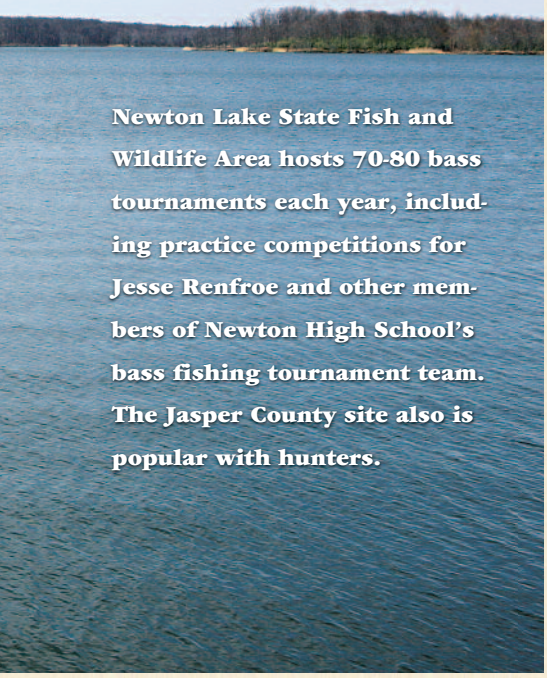
Schafer is an avid bass angler, and the 8-pound largemouth bass he took from Newton Lake 12 years ago is proudly displayed in his home. While he catches at least a few fish every trip, today he practices catch-and-release unless he's fishing with his grandson.

"Like many his age, he has a busy schedule, but we make the time to fish together several days throughout the summer," Schafer said of his 12-year-old grandson. Their fish of choice on those outings is channel catfish, which end up on the dinner plate.

Normally Schafer will see several other boats on the lake, especially in the spring when the bass are spawning.

"Newton Lake has quite a reputation with anglers, and it isn't uncommon to see cars from Missouri, Ohio, Iowa, Michigan and Indiana in the parking lot," he said. "They'll want to know what the fish are hitting on and

Anglers can access Newton Lake from boat ramps at the south and west access areas.



Newton Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area hosts 70-80 bass tournaments each year, including practice competitions for Jesse Renfroe and other members of Newton High School's bass fishing tournament team. The Jasper County site also is popular with hunters.

I'll give them some tips…but I don't tell all my secrets."

According to Department of Natural Resources District Fisheries Biologist Mike Hooe, Newton Lake's bass population—the lake produces some of the largest bass in Illinois—is a result of a comprehensive stocking program that was initiated shortly after the lake was impounded in 1976.

"The high quality largemouth bass population is due to several factors," Hooe explained "First, heated water from the power plant keeps the lake warm in the winter and this allows the bass to feed aggressively and grow year-round. The lake also contains very few other predator fish and this gives the bass almost exclusive access to the tremendous shad population with very little competition. The 18-inch minimum length limit combined with a daily creel limit of three bass per angler also is important to maintaining the exceptional size structure of the population and preventing over harvest."

Newton Lake's reputation as a bass spot has reached the tournament cycle, with 70-80 bass fishing tournaments occurring between October and the middle of May each year, including practice runs for participants in the new Illinois High School Association bass tournament.

Access to the lake is provided from a two-lane boat ramp at the south access area and a ramp on the west side where playground equipment and two shelters, available on a first-come, first-served basis, provide for a family-friendly atmosphere.

Newton Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area came about in 1979 as a result of a 25-year lease agreement—recently extended for another 25 years—between the DNR and Central Illinois Public Service Company—the former owner of the power plant that is now a merchant generating plant owned by Ameren Energy Resources. The electric power plant is a coal-fired generating plant equipped with a number of advanced environmental controls. The plant soon will have an advanced sulfur dioxide removal system. Ameren has installed five of these scrubber systems,

Picnic shelters overlooking Newton Lake are popular locations for picnics, family reunions and weddings.

(Photos courtesy John Cassady.)

which remove almost all a plant's sulfur dioxide emissions and materially reduce nitrogen oxide, over the past two years. The lease encompasses 780 acres that are managed year-round, and an additional 6,500 acres of land managed during hunting season and 1,775 acres of water for fishing and waterfowl hunting.

Jim Williams, who started at the plant in 1986, minus a 9-year stint at the power plant at Coffeen in central Illinois, now manages the facility and appreciates the unique opportunity to provide an immediate service for customers while maximizing the potential for the lake and surrounding habitats to be utilized for recreational purposes.

A patchwork of grassland, aquatic and forest habitats maximizes wildlife-viewing opportunities.

"Working closely with DNR we have been able to merge our interests and common goals to create a tremendous resource for the community, and one that this and future generations can enjoy," Williams said. "The lake continues to serve the purpose for which it was designed, and as a secondary benefit has evolved into a fisheries attracting interest from throughout the Midwest, due in part to the positive press received from several outdoor channels."

According to Site Superintendent Dave Miller, while Newton Lake offers a variety of services, people tend to come to Newton Lake for two reasons—for the phenomenal fishing or to hunt.

With a total of 7,600 acres open to hunting and a variety of habitats, sportsmen have the opportunity to pursue dove, rabbit, pheasant, quail and squirrel, but it's the waterfowl, deer and turkey that draw the greatest interest.

Newton Lake offers 21 waterfowl blind sites on the cold water, or east arm of the lake, which is closed to fishing during waterfowl season. Blind sites may be accessed only by boat.

"Typically, the best waterfowl hunting is late in the season, and the colder the weather gets, the better the hunting is," explained Miller. "When all other water bodies freeze up, Newton Lake

(Photo Ameren Energy Resources.)

Because of the hot water lake arm, Newton Lake provides excellent late-season waterfowl hunting.

At a glance

Newton Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, 3490 E. 500th Ave., Newton, IL 62448
Telephone: (618) 783-3478
Web site: www.dnr.illinois.gov/parks
Directions: From I-57 and I-70 take exit #160 at Effingham, proceed east on Route 33 to Dieterich and turn right at the stop light. Go south approximately 12 miles, turn left at the site sign.

(Photo courtesy Jamie Johnson.)

In addition to a successful harvest, Jaime Johnson enjoys the spring turkey season for the wildlife-watching opportunities.

continues to hold birds because the hot water lake arm keeps the action going."

Waterfowl hunters also have the option of hunting in the agricultural fields using a portable or layout-blind. Those opting to hunt the more than 3,100 acres of cropland simply need to pick up a hunter's packet from the site office; to hunt from a blind, hunters need to be at the east boat ramp for a 4 a.m. sign-up and 4:30 a.m. departure.

Come spring and fall, it is the 2,240 acres of timber, and resultant deer and turkey populations, attracting all the attention.

"Newton Lake first opened to firearm deer hunting in 1991, with archers taking to the field the following season," said Tom Micetich, DNR forest wildlife biologist. "The site has been managed under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson W-76-D project for more than 25 years. Years of habitat management practices have made this a quality site for deer and turkey, with more than 110 deer and 15 turkeys harvested in 2009.

Firearm deer hunters must possess a paid Jasper County permit and participate in a drawing conducted each morning. At the beginning of the season, archery deer and turkey hunters are required to sign up for a packet containing a record sheet, parking card, and site rules and regulations that apply for the entire season.

Jaime Johnson applies to turkey hunt at Newton Lake each year, and has been successful twice in the five years she has hunted Illinois' largest game bird.

"Two of the three birds I have harvested were taken at the fish and wildlife area," she said. "I really enjoy spending time in the woods during the spring turkey season because of the variety of wildlife present. I also find it amazing to watch how the vegetation greens up in a matter of days."

Johnson also cited the appeal of the site as an ideal location for picnics, cookouts and family reunions, and can claim to have attended at least one of the lakeside weddings celebrated there each year.

A small day-use area at the north access area contains a large pavilion, available on a first-come, first-served basis, and provides access to the 22-mile trail system that skirts the lake shoreline. This trail is open to hiking, cross-country skiing and equestrian use. Mountain bicyclists make good use of the additional 5-mile trail set aside for that purpose.

While on the trail, the fortunate, quiet visitor may be rewarded with a glimpse of a family of river otters sliding into the water on muddy shoreline chutes. Newton Lake was one of the first two sites where this large, aquatic carnivore was reintroduced to Illinois in 1994 through the Wildlife Preservation Fund.

Williams remarked that the opportunity to work at Newton Lake is a huge draw for prospective Ameren Energy Resources' employees because of the additional benefits of having a phenomenal bass fisheries and diverse hunting opportunities literally at the back door.

"This fish and wildlife area provides a win-win opportunity for us to attract talented people to join our staff," Williams said. "Whether a hunter, angler or trail rider, having the chance to be a partner in creating and managing a quality fish and wildlife management area—one that is literally in our backyard—is considered a true privilege."

(Photo courtesy David W. Brewer.)

River otters are a frequent sight on the lake. Newton Lake was one of the locations for the 1994 reintroduction of river otters to Illinois.