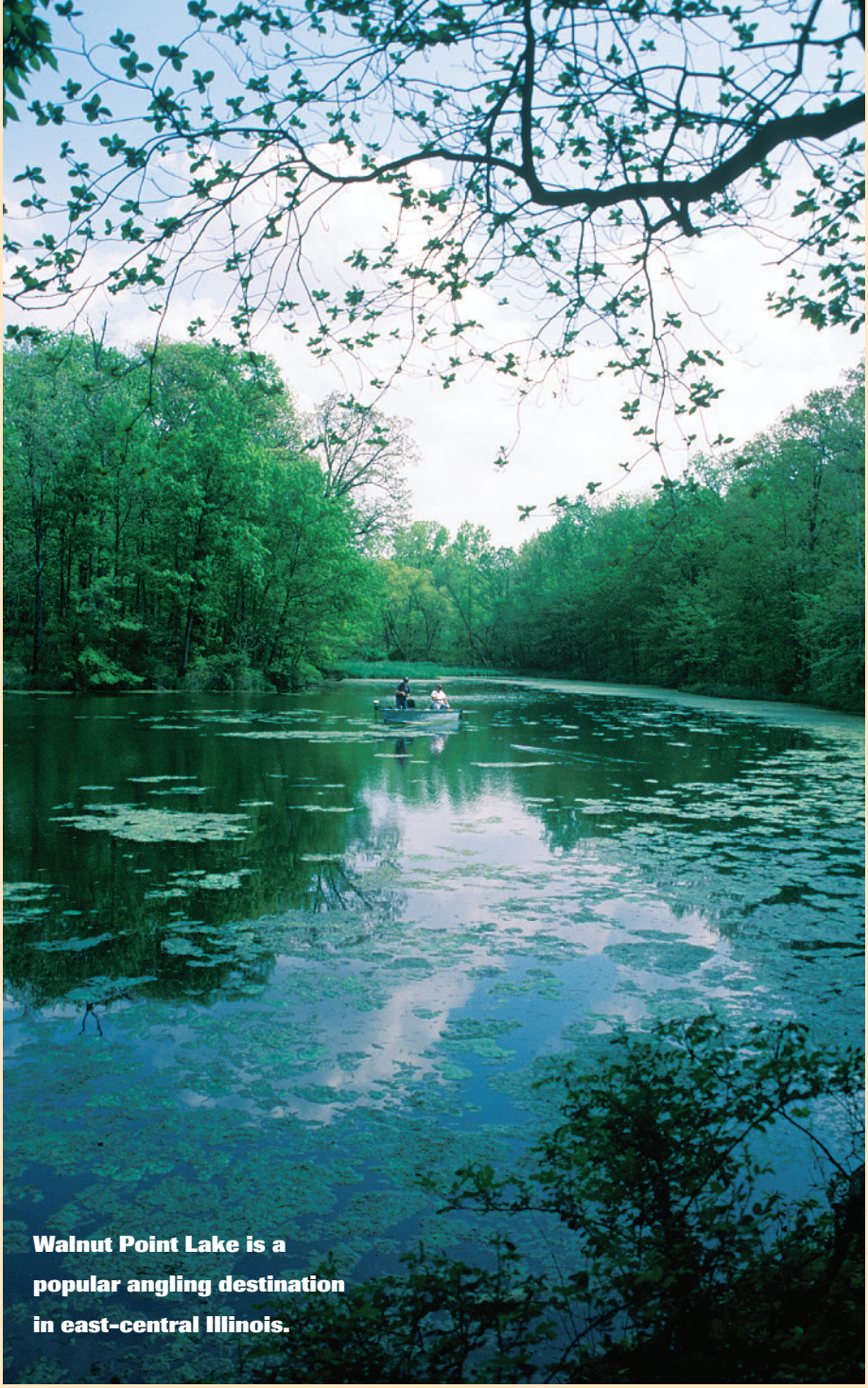
Picturesque Walnut Point State Park offers visitors diverse recreational programs.

Gateway to the Embarras

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde



Walnut Point Lake is a popular angling destination in east-central Illinois.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Descriptive names along the forested drive foretell of the flora and fauna awaiting visitors to Walnut Point State Park: Cardinal and Whippoorwill drives, Gray Squirrel and Fox Squirrel campgrounds and Hickory Grove picnic area. Plus the quiet, scenic settings—Breezy Point, Pleasant View and Twin Points.

As spring arrives, a kaleidoscope of colors brighten the Douglas County park. A riot of colorful wildflowers burst from the warming forest floor, redbuds cast a lavender haze in the understory and high overhead, vibrant migratory songbirds provide a contrasting splash of yellows, reds, blues and oranges against newly emerging leaves.

According to Randy Shafer, 22-year veteran site superintendent of the 670-acre east-central Illinois park, Walnut Point has gained renown for its natural beauty and peaceful presence.

"In the early 1800s, a considerable portion of the area was owned by cattle farmers Snowden Sargent and Andrew Gwinn, and the park stands as a memorial to the settlement Walnut Point, which in the 1830s stood within 3 miles of the park," Shafer explained. "While the park actually was established with acquisition of 464 acres in 1961, and dedicated in 1968 as the Douglas County Conservation Area, the value early landowners placed on the oak-hickory forest adjacent to the Embarras River is evident in the quality of the habitat that remains today."

Two levels of protection have been provided sections of the park—an Illinois designated nature preserve and a land and water reserve.

On the bluffs of the river, the 65-acre Upper Embarras Woods Nature Preserve is one of the best, and largest, remaining tracts of streamside forest along the upper Embarras River. Within the dry-mesic forest, several of the white, black and red oaks are in excess of 40 inches in diameter. The Upper Embarras Woods Land and Water Reserve, a 100-acre mature, old second-growth forest, adjoins the nature preserve.

Together, the preserve and reserve provide high-quality forest habitat for forest-interior bird species that require large blocks of forest to breed. Protecting these lands also has reduced runoff and sediments entering the Embarras, a river recognized by the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory as biologically significant and providing important habitat for at least five species of state-threatened or endangered mussels.

The woodland supports an exceptionally rich spring woodland wildflower assemblage—trilliums, spring beauty, orchids, baneberry, Dutchman's breeches, bloodroot, toothwort, maidenhair fern, sensitive fern, grape fern and others—and draws photographers and visitors anxious to soak in the new year.

Don't forget to pack your binoculars and a bird guide when preparing for a park visit. While on the 0.5-mile Woodpecker Nature Trail, 1.75-mile Whispering Pines Nature Trail or the 0.5-mile trail connecting Gray Squirrel campground and Twin Points picnic area,

As temperatures rise and soils warm, Walnut Point State Park woodlands attract wildflower photographers, and those simply looking for signs of spring.

look overhead and listen for the songs of migratory and resident birds—pileated woodpecker, red-eyed vireo, Acadian flycatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo, ovenbird, scarlet tanager, Baltimore oriole, rose-breasted grosbeak, hooded warbler, veery, blue-gray gnatcatcher, wood duck and many other species. Woodpecker Trail is barrier-free, with three rest benches along the loop.

While you're at it, pack a picnic basket and enjoy one of the eight wooded picnic areas bordering the lake. Four large group shelters are available (Pleasant View and Twin Points by reservation and Breezy Point and Hickory Grove on a first-come, first-served basis) as well as eight covered tables. Outdoor grills, picnic tables and drinking

Bluebells

Toothwort

Yellow Violet

Low-lying areas fill with spring rains, creating rich feeding areas for a variety of wildlife.

water are present, and playground equipment and horseshoe pits at some sites make for fun-filled family outings.

But then again, feel free to make Walnut Point an impromptu outing and stop by the lakeside concession. Open daily from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. from mid-April through mid-October, Walnut Point Café offers visitors indoor and outdoor seating for breakfast, lunch and dinner, or a quiet spot to enjoy an ice cream treat or one of their specialty desserts. Other services available include rental of boats and pontoon paddle boats, or purchase of bait, ice or firewood. Call (217) 346-3281 for further information and a schedule of the live musical entertainment offered on some weekends from May through September.

With 6.3 miles of shoreline, the many-fingered, 59-acre Walnut Point Lake is a prominent park feature. Not only is the lake popular with anglers, for the last 5 years it has been the location of a fisheries research project.

The lake is stocked annually with channel catfish, and supports naturally sustaining populations of bass, redear sunfish, crappie and green sunfish. But it is the bluegill that biologists have been focusing on.

"The Division of Fisheries and the Illinois Natural History Survey have been interested in learning if the excessive harvest of large male bluegill by anglers can result in smaller male bluegill initiating spawning activities sooner, slowing growth rates of these smaller fish," explained Mike Mounce, Department of Natural Resources district fisheries manager. "The population responded quickly after a regulation allowing harvest of 10 bluegill 8 inches or larger was established. Although the study is just wrapping up, preliminary analysis indicates that bluegill may be too numerous just below the length limit and a change in the current regulation will be needed to provide for faster growth rates and a higher quality bluegill fishery."

Fishing information

Anglers will enjoy fishing Walnut Point Lake from a boat or along its banks. Only pole-and-line fishing is allowed.

Largemouth bass: slot length limit from 12 to 15 inches and a daily creel limit of 6.

Channel catfish: 6 fish daily creel limit.

Bluegill: 8-inch minimum length limit and a combined 10 fish daily creel limit.

Hunting information

Squirrel, raccoon and archery deer hunting is permitted at the park. Check with the park office for specific details.

Pheasant, rabbit and quail hunting is allowed through a free permit issued via statewide lottery for the 87-acre Willow Creek Habitat Area west of Illinois Route 1 near Horace and the 90-acre Hindsboro Habitat Area 3 miles east of Hindsboro off Illinois Route 133. Detailed hunter fact sheets may be found at www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R3/WALNUTPT.HTM.

Carolyn Snyder (middle) and her husband Bill have served as Walnut Point campground hosts for nine years.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

To help improve the water quality and stabilize the sport fish quality, a variety of native aquatic plants have been introduced to the lake. Water willow and wild iris are stabilizing portions of the shoreline and reducing erosion. American pondweed and wild celery provide fish habitat and compete for nutrients, reducing algae blooms.

In addition to fishing from the bank, two single-lane boat ramps, floating disabled access docks and fishing piers provide lake access. Only electric motors are allowed.

Easy boat access is one of the features that draws overnight visitors to Walnut Point campgrounds. Deep within the woodlands and adjacent to the lake are 34 Class A sites, 20 Class C (walk-in tent) sites and a group site accommodating 40 people. A shower building with flush toilets is open on a seasonal basis. Reservations are accepted by mail or in person.

Carolyn and Bill Snyder have served as Walnut Point campground hosts for nine years.

"We raised our family in Arcola and were familiar with the park," Carolyn said. "After we retired and signed up for the host program, Walnut Point became our home-away-from-home for about 8 months each year. We've come to love the park's beautiful setting and the friendly, helpful folks who visit on a regular basis."

Many campers visit several times each year, with the purpose of their visit shifting with the seasons—searching for morels in the spring, catching a limit of fish for dinner or enjoying the crisp days of autumn while hunting squirrel or deer. Squirrel, raccoon and archery deer hunting is permitted at the park, and two nearby satellite sites offer the opportunity to walk restored prairies and grassy fields in hopes of kicking up a limit of pheasant, rabbit or quail (see sidebar for details).

Besides drawing wildlife, prairie restorations are a core component of annual school outreach programs coordinated by park staff and the local Women's Farm Bureau Committee. Sixth-grade students from area schools rotate between hands-on learning stations sponsored by different natural resource organizations.

Facts at a glance

Walnut Point State Park, 2331 E. County Road 370 N., Oakland, IL 61943.
Telephone: (217) 346-3336.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R3/WALNUTPT.HTM.
Directions: Walnut Point State Park is located 20 miles northeast of Charleston and 3 miles north of Oakland. Interstate 57, US Route 36 and Illinois Route 133 are three major access highways in close proximity to the park.
Embarras Volunteer Stewards: To learn more about this organization, call (217) 345-6476 or visit www.angelfire.com/on2/EVS/index.html.

Blossoming red buds stand against a greening spring woodland.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Steve Garner has been camping at Walnut Point for years, and finds the park an ideal setting for spending time with his children, Eric and Kelly.

"We are extremely pleased with the number of volunteers who reach out to help in the park throughout the year," Shafer said. "Like they do at parks throughout east-central Illinois, the Embarras Volunteer Stewards play a critical role in helping remove exotic species. At Walnut Point they focus each winter on pulling multiflora rose from the nature preserve."

Whether your interest is a day trip to enjoy the onset of spring, an overnight in one of Illinois' magnificent campgrounds or a chance to contribute to the efforts of a volunteer organization, you're sure to find a visit to Walnut Point State Park rewarding.

Nature Preserve or Land and Water Reserve?

What is the difference? By dedicating property as a nature preserve or registering it as a land and water reserve, a landowner agrees voluntarily to restrict future uses of the land and to ensure that it remains in its natural state. Access to the property is at the discretion of the landowner.

Parcels dedicated as nature preserves may be used for wildlife viewing, nature photography, hiking and approved scientific research.

Areas registered as land and water reserves may be used for those activities, as well as fishing, hunting and other approved activities that do not have negative impacts on the natural features of the protected areas.