For decades, Illinois students, organizations and individuals have answered the call of the wild.

Volunteers and Wildlife

Story By Marty Kemper

Doug DesPain examined the fruits of his labor with a sense of satisfaction…and relief. Three years ago this 100 acres grew corn and soybeans. Now, after much planning and labor, dreams had become reality—a reality that included 20 acres of new prairie, 30 acres of young trees and 50 acres of restored wetlands. Like thousands of other Illinois landowners, DesPain was a volunteer of "very high calling," at least as wildlife is concerned, but a calling perhaps not fully appreciated.

Cadres of volunteers have, for decades, assisted the DNR Division of Wildlife with multitudes of vital and perhaps more familiar services for wildlife. Examples include assistance with monitoring wildlife populations; reintroducing extirpated species such as deer, otters and turkeys; training new hunters and trappers in safety and the traditions of their sports; and organizing many hunting programs for persons with disabilities.

In addition, wildlife organizations of local, statewide and even national scope have assisted DNR with wildlife protection and enhancement, law enforcement and the securing of public lands for wildlife and related recreation. These organizations are supported and staffed largely by volunteers. Without volunteers, many outdoor experiences of Illinois' citizens would be less enjoyable or even impossible.

Yet, one simple fact casts another sort of volunteer—private landowners—in a role supporting wildlife's very existence. While the public owns and therefore can protect wildlife and regulate its uses through state and federal law, the vast majority of habitat—the living area upon which wildlife depends—is privately owned.

Illinois possesses some of the earth's richest soils and yet is one of the most densely populated and economically developed states. Almost all land in Illinois can be used for commercial, industrial, agricultural or residential purposes. While precise data is not available, it is clear that landowners like DesPain voluntarily provide millions of acres of habitat for Illinois wildlife— often at considerable personal sacrifice.

Without this voluntary provision of habitat, Illinois' wildlife resources would be immeasurably poorer. In some places, and for some species, it is even the difference between viability and extinction. For all species, collectively, its monetary worth would far exceed 10 figures.

Volunteerism, in all its forms, has a rich history of benefit to Illinois wildlife. Understanding, appreciating and nurturing volunteerism—particularly as it relates to habitat—will be especially important to wildlife's future.

(Photo by Marty Kemper.)

Volunteers pitch in to help with habitat management projects, such as prescribed fire (left), and wildlife monitoring projects, such as the annual giant Canada goose round-ups.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)