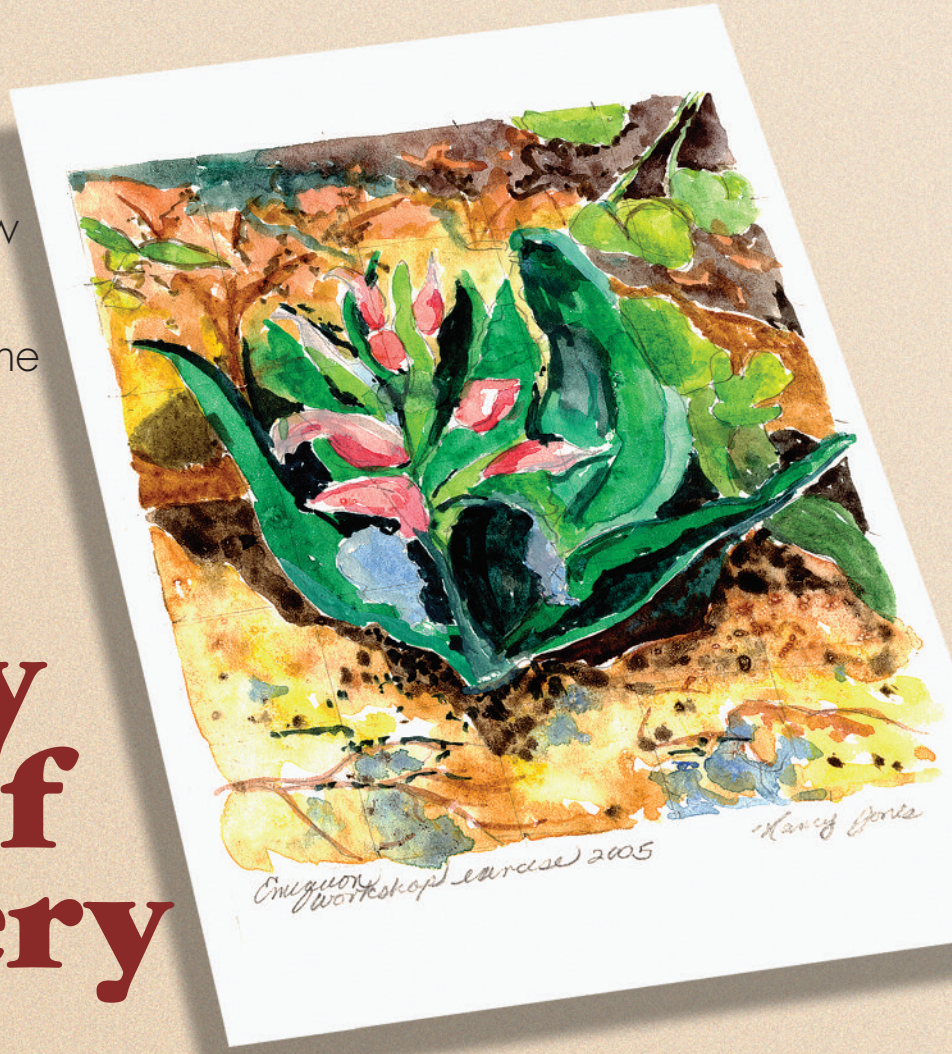
More than 200 years after Lewis and Clark documented the American wilderness, new teams of Illinois citizens are exploring and documenting the land beneath their feet.

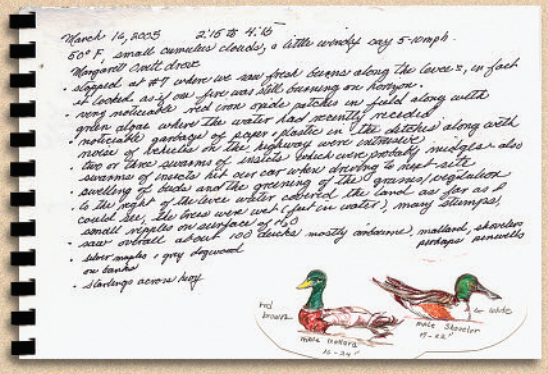


A 21st Century Corps of Discovery

Story and Photos by Michael R. Jeffords and Susan Post

Just over 200 years ago, Illinois served as the jumping-off point for perhaps the greatest exploration undertaken on the North American continent—the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Nicknamed the Corps of Discovery, this two-year journey across the American West generated some of the most famous nature journals ever compiled. For Lewis and Clark, the assignment from Thomas Jefferson in 1803 represented a wild foray into a universe of near-total mystery: At the dawn of the 19th century, America was scarcely 25 years old, the majority of its western lands virtually unknown. In fact, so little was documented about the natural world beyond the Illinois country, Jefferson believed woolly mammoths and mastodons might still roam this vast territory.



As the explorers pushed west, up the Mississippi and into the uncharted Missouri River, they experienced discovery in a very personal way, with each bend in the river unveiling new, unexpected impressions of an undocumented landscape.

Today, as one zips across the country on four-lane interstates, that original spirit of discovery is essentially lost. Nothing surprises us anymore, nothing lifts our heart with the sudden realization that the landscape before us is absolutely new and unknown. Travelers today fully know what to expect in Illinois. Motorists easily predict the flat or rolling farmland ahead, punctuated by the occasional city.

But, for many, this superficial intimacy with nature, where a hundred miles of discovery pass instantly beside the road, no longer is good enough. Surveys reveal that many people in the Prairie State once again want to discover and truly understand the land beneath their own feet. In fact, recent outreach efforts by the Illinois Natural History Survey show that many Illinois citizens now crave what Lewis and Clark experienced more than 200 years ago.

Now, two centuries after Lewis and Clark returned from the wilderness of America, a handful of modern-day pioneers are rediscovering what it means to witness nature by participating in a reincarnation of the Corps of Discovery—in Illinois.

Corps of Discovery participants document landscape changes through photography, descriptive writing and sketch journaling.

The Corps of Discovery project was initiated at Emiquon, where participants watch the transformation of agricultural fields to wetlands.

Corps of Discovery Concept

Today we understand more about the nature of Illinois than ever before, even as ongoing research continually adds new twists and revelations to our fundamental knowledge. Unfortunately, the tantalizing findings of researchers who explore these details of our natural world often languish out of the public eye, buried in seemingly obscure scientific literature. Scientists themselves need to recognize the ability of the general public to experience the thrill of natural discovery and to participate in a meaningful way.

Fortunately, groundbreaking change is under way as the scientific community works to close the divide between the privilege of discovery and ordinary citizens.

The idea began collectively. The basic premise for a new Corps of Discovery emerged from a meeting a few years ago between The Nature Conservancy, the Illinois Natural History Survey and Dickson Mounds State Museum staff. The INHS had recently developed a new course: "Communicating Nature," an effort to confront the problem that exists when scientists, restoration specialists and land managers share their research findings through scientific literature only, a venue not easily available to the public. Their formal writing style, although technically precise, also fails to engage the public in the ecology and biology of a landscape. The reality is, despite their often-amazing scientific revelations, scientific articles seldom succeed in conjuring the appeal of nature to a wide audience. Communicating scientific discovery requires different skills than those typically taught to scientists: skills more closely linked to the arts than to science.

Emiquon Opportunity

Just as the Lewis and Clark Expedition was targeted at a particular landscape—the western U.S.—this modern-day Corps of Discovery focused on a specific site. In central Illinois, the ongoing restoration of The Nature Conservancy's Emiquon Preserve over the next decade is providing a unique opportunity for dedicated citizens to participate in the documentation of the dramatic changes that will occur.

The preserve, once a massive wetland complex (consisting largely of the former bed of Thompson Lake), was levied and drained in the early part of the 20th century and had been farmed ever since. The nearly 8,000 acres purchased in 2000 are now in the early stages of restoration. To document the evolution of Emiquon, an "Emiquon Corps of Discovery" was developed, made up of individuals trained in the skills of photography, descriptive writing and sketch journaling. These were citizens who could create a total aesthetic picture of Emiquon, not merely a scientific data sheet.

Despite the title, the 2005 Corps of Discovery at Emiquon differed from the Lewis and Clark expedition in a fundamental way. The first Corps of Discovery crew traveled thousands of miles to record the landscape and its organisms. At Emiquon, those who document its evolving landscape will stay put.

Members of the Emiquon Corps, 45 strong, were trained in a series of workshops that taught everything from photography and descriptive writing to sketching and drawing. But the new Corps didn't ignore science altogether. Science (despite its starchy reputation) is the foundation of understanding. To provide a systematic approach to the Emiquon documentation, a series of

Exhibits of Corps member creations provide museum visitors a chance to experience evolving habitats.

Corp members attend workshops to develop a solid foundation in scientific observation and artistic expression.

"Aesthetic Points and Pathways," analogous to scientific sampling points and transects, were developed. Thus, over time, Corps members will be able to show systematic change at Emiquon, but filtered through their own creativity. The only "rules" governing the observations are that the time, date and direction of the observations be noted.

The Emiquon Corps of Discovery is a long-term project with additional opportunities for members to experience further creative growth following the completion of formal training in the form of advanced classes in the various disciplines. To showcase the changes that occur, the Corps will have a yearly exhibit of their works on display at the Dickson Mounds Museum and other venues in the region.

The Beat Goes On

Cache Corps of Discovery, Lost Mound Corps of Discovery, Allerton Corps of Discovery

In 2006, a Cache Corps of Discovery was developed for this unique wetland complex in far southern Illinois. The Cache wetlands are of international importance and remain the focus of major restoration and preservation efforts spearheaded by many organizations and agencies, including the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge, Cache River State Natural Area, TNC, Ducks Unlimited and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The Lost Mound Corps of Discovery in northwest Illinois was developed in 2007. Their site is the Lost Mound Unit Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge (former Savanna Army Depot), a 13,000 acres wetland, sand prairie and forest complex.

In 2008, the Allerton Corps of Discovery in central Illinois began. This corps is a partnership between the Illinois Natural History Survey and the University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalist Program.

Aside from site-specific training materials, all of the discovery processes used by the various new corps are nearly identical to those started at Emiquon.

The goal of the Corps of Discovery across today's Illinois landscape is simple: Engage citizens to add a creative, aesthetic dimension to their local natural world. In short, we want citizens to develop the ability to capture an observation that gives individuals the power to depict, and, ultimately, to contribute to the total picture of the evolving, diverse landscape that is Illinois.

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Projects of the Corps of Discovery

Emiquon Corps of Discovery
- Exhibit at Dixon Mounds Museum Gallery, 2006
- Exhibit a Western Illinois University Gallery, 2007

Cache Corps of Discovery
- Exhibit at Henry N. Barkhausen Wetlands Center, 2007
- Interpretive trail at wetlands center
- Creation of illuminated map for wetlands center
- Creation of note cards for sale for wetland restoration through Michael Wolff Foundation, Inc.

Lost Mound Corps of Discovery
- Creation of interpretive trail with blooming dates for wildflowers

For updated information on Corps of Discovery services and exhibits, contact each site.

Emiquon Corps of Discovery— Dickson Mounds Musuem, Lewistown, (309) 547-3721 or www.museum.state.il.us/ismsites/dickson

Cache Corps of Discovery—Henry Barkhausen Cache River Wetlands Center, Cypress, (618) 657-2064 or www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/cachervr.htm#bark

Lost Mound Corps of Discovery— Lost Mound Unit, Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/lostmound/index.html

Allerton Corps of Discovery—Allerton Park, Monticello, (217) 333-3287, www.continuinged.uiuc.edu/allerton