At this secluded Conservation Area in southwest Illinois, campers, sportsmen and trail riders all have it made in the shade.

Randolph County Escape

Story By Joe McFarland
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Looking for a peaceful retreat in rural Illinois? Randolph County Conservation Area has a great supply of both.

Anglers find plenty of room to cast at Randolph County Lake. The popular site attracts visitors seeking great fishing—and solitude.

The angler seated in the small fishing boat on Randolph County Lake paused before making another cast. Until a moment earlier, he had the lake nearly to himself. Finally, he responded with a reluctant wave of his hand. Yet he seemed nervous about the inquiry.

"A few," the gray-haired man replied, the standard response of all fishermen. Then he looked away again, fearful, perhaps, he might be expected to tell the truth.

The truth is, fishing at this 65-acre lake in the forests of southern Illinois hill country really is no secret—not for the initiated regulars who come here. Randolph County Lake boasts a strong fishery, and not just for traditional southern species.

"Last week, a fisherman caught a 25-inch walleye that weighed almost 9 pounds," said Joan Bade, site superintendent for the secluded Randolph County Conservation Area. From her office at the end of a winding forest road, Bade described the rainbow trout anglers hook here throughout the year.

"Because the lake is deep, trout can survive in the cool water year-around," Bade explained. "They're stocked in the fall for the Catchable Trout program, but fishermen who come here for trout still manage to catch a few into the summer."

As she described the comparatively unique fishing opportunities at Randolph County Conservation Area, a mounted black crappie of distracting proportions hung from the wall beside the park office counter.

"That came from here," Bade acknowledged the massive panfish, then added as an update: "The crappie fishing has been pretty good."

Such pronouncements remain relative secrets in this part of rural Illinois, but not because of any conspiratorial code among fishermen. The forests prevent conversations from traveling very far.

Located five miles northeast of Chester, which overlooks the Mississippi River in southwest Illinois, Randolph County Conservation Area would seem a million miles from nowhere at times.

But for all of the right reasons. Peace and quiet are limitless commodities at this 1,101-acre retreat in the forest, where even the sound of a closing camper door dissolves within sight. No major highways or airports border the park. It's 5 miles of pleasant country driving before the city limits of historic Chester come into view. Beyond that, the shimmering Mississippi River passes below rocky bluffs.

This is a part of Illinois where man-made sound doesn't travel far, and there is no reason to want it otherwise.

"We almost never have a problem with rowdy campers or noise in the park," explained Conservation Officer Ralph Sievers, who patrols the site on a

With 610 acres of forest, 210 acres of open grassland and a 65-acre lake, visitors to Randolph County Conservation Area find exactly the nature they seek.

Boaters on Randolph County Lake take it easy with a 10 horsepower limit.

regular basis. “It really is a peaceful place where families can have picnics or camp out without much distraction.”

Of course, welcome distractions do await the outdoor recreationist at Randolph County Conservation Area. While fishermen haul in everything from walleye to rainbow trout in the deep, man-made impoundment in the woods, equestrian owners saddle up and ride along some 13 miles of horse trails. During the winter, cross-country skiers take advantage of the occasional snow cover to glide along the well-maintained equestrian trails.

“We have people compliment us on the quality of our horse trails,” Bade noted, explaining how the wide pathways are free from hat-knocking branches and deep potholes. And while there are some 2 miles of interconnecting, designated hiking trails throughout the upland habitats of this conservation area, “A lot of people hike on the equestrian trails, which you are allowed to do here,” Bade added.

Of the total acreage of this conservation area, more than half consists of oak-hickory forest on lazy, rolling hills. Paved roads connect the campgrounds to the boat launch, site office and nearly every other major site destination.

“We have 95 Class C camping sites here,” Bade said. “But there are no electric hookups.”

There is a dump station for campers, pit toilets and tables and grills. Yet camping here—$8 per night—is a more traditional experience, without shower facilities or electricity.

It would seem this conservation area was created specifically with visitor’s peace in mind. The isolated acreage is bordered by pastoral properties where livestock and farm equipment outnumber actual residents. Lands which would become Randolph County Conservation Area were purchased by the state in 1958, and after construction of a dam and spillway along Little Mary’s Creek, the 65-acre Randolph County Lake was completed in 1961.

Today the site attracts 266,000 visitors annually, many of whom come for a day of fishing, to picnic, stroll the trails or observe wildlife. There are six shady picnic areas, complete with shelters, water fountains, fire grills and picnic tables. Some of the picnic shelters can be reserved for groups.

Channel catfish are plentiful in the 65-acre lake, which also is stocked with rainbow trout, largemouth bass, walleye, bluegill and crappie.

Hunters find a bonanza of squirrels in the oak-hickory forests, as well as wild turkeys and white-tailed deer. Dove, rabbit and quail also attract upland

Kids just want to play outdoors? Randolph County Conservation Area offers that option.

game hunters. All hunters must check in at the park office before heading afield. Although there are wildlife food plots here, rolling hills of agricultural fields beyond the site boundaries offer up classic Illinois bucks that visit the conservation area. Deer hunting is limited to archery. Shotgun hunting is permitted for other species in season. Trapping is allowed during the winter season, with water sets and box traps only. Site permits, issued through a Springfield drawing, are required for spring turkey hunting as well as for winter trapping.

A concession stand near the lake's northern boat launch awaits reopening, which means anglers seeking bait should make alternate plans ahead. Live bait is available in Chester 5 miles away. So are other essential supplies for the outdoor recreationist, including a scoop of ice cream, groceries, fine dining and—for those drawn to such quirks—don't forget to visit the Popeye Museum on State Street, a hometown salute to the Chester native who created the spinach-powered cartoon hero in 1929.

Two nearby sites managed by Randolph County Conservation Area include Turkey Bluffs State Fish and Wildlife Area (a favorite of spring gobbler hunters, as well as whitetail enthusiasts), along with the prehistoric treasure known as Piney Creek Nature Preserve, listed on the National Register of Historic Places and featuring the state's largest known collection of aboriginal rock art in Illinois, in addition to the namesake shortleaf pine forest. Both sites are located off Illinois Route 3, south of the conservation area, but still within Randolph County.

An equestrian Class C campground at the 13-mile trail head offers eight stalls for horses, available on a first-come, first-served basis. There is no additional charge for the use of stalls, but owners must clean up before they leave.

There are 95 Class C camping sites available without electricity for a peace-and-quiet experience in the hills of southern Illinois.

To sharpen wingshooting skills, a bring-your-own-supplies trap field is located at the conservation area. There is no archery range.

On the lake, boaters are limited to 10 horsepower engines, and anglers are allowed to use no more than two poles. There is a creel limit of six fish daily for channel catfish. A 14-inch minimum length limit is in effect for largemouth and smallmouth bass, with a limit of no more than three per day. There's no limit for crappie or bluegill. The limit on walleye/saugeye is 14 inches, with a daily limit of six.

The forest hills and nearby Kaskaskia River bottoms attract morel mushroom hunters during April. Following summer thunderstorms between June and August, yellow-orange chanterelles—a popular but rarely collected edible wild mushroom—appear scattered across the forest floor near oak trees.

Those who visit Randolph County Conservation Area seem to forget whatever worldly troubles they left behind. But they always remember their visit.

"Most of our visitors are repeat visitors," site superintendent Bade observed. "And not just from nearby Chester. We draw a lot of people from the Belleville area as well as St. Louis."

Facts at a glance

Randolph County State Conservation Area, 4301 S. Lake Drive, Chester, IL 62233.
Telephone: (618) 826-2706.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R4/RAND.HTM.
Directions: Randolph County SCA is located off Illinois Route 150, 5 miles northeast of Chester, which is located on Illinois Route 3.