At Ten Mile Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area, hun
opportunities literally go on for miles.

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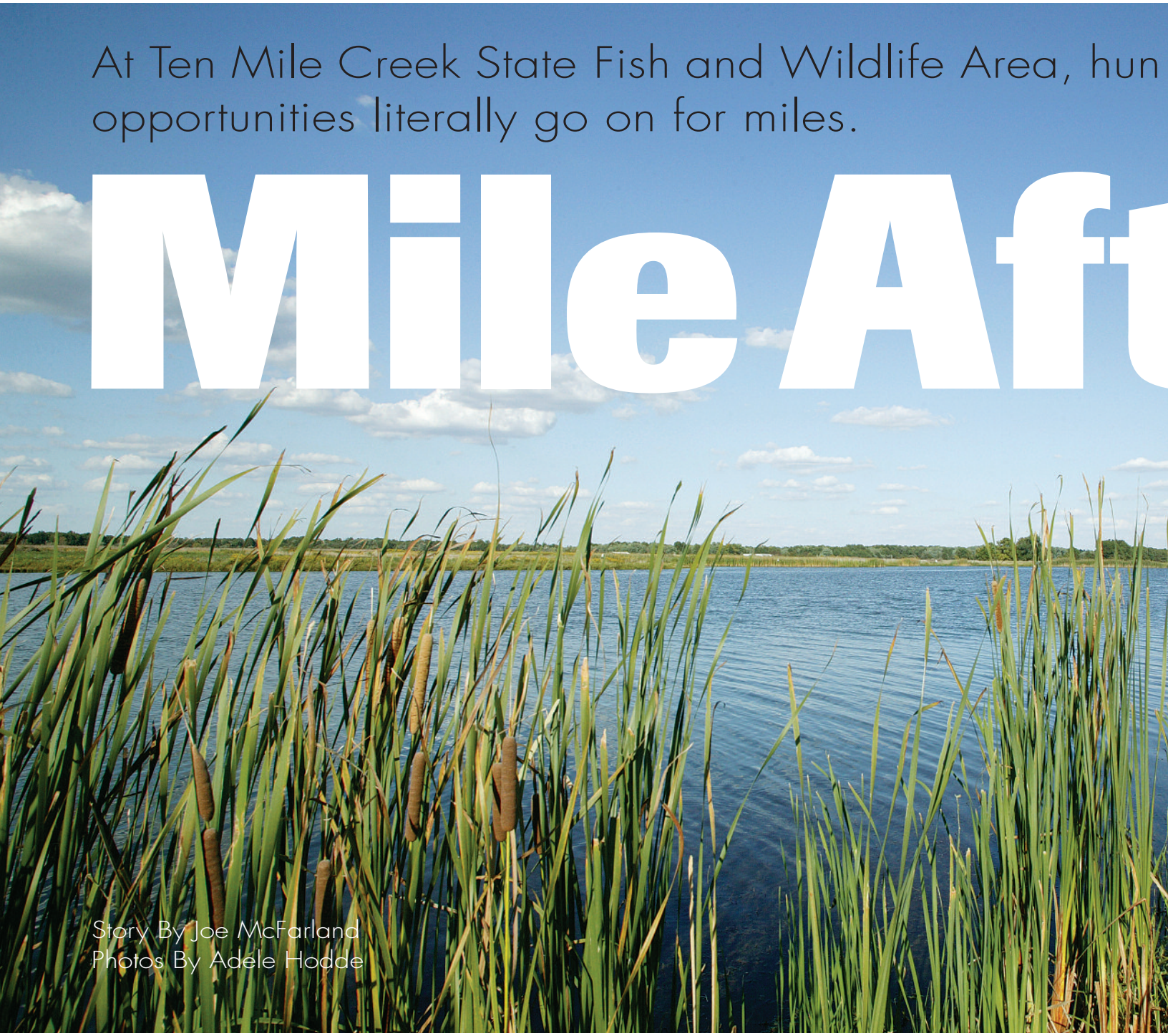

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Adele Hodde

Nostalgic sportsmen, wherever they gather, usually agree about one thing. The really good days are long gone, they always say. Fishing and hunting opportunities in Illinois used to be better. Testimonials such as "mile after mile," or "as far as you could see," and "all you had to do was knock on any farmer's door" trigger instant nods of recognition among those who've been there.

Nobody laments the state of the outdoors better than a veteran sportsman. And who better to lament? The consensus among those who've spent decades outdoors is the fact there really was a time when a sportsman could wander for miles and never run out of new places to hunt or fish. Those good days, they also insist, are history.

The good news: History has a way of repeating itself. In south-central Illinois, a relatively recent addition to the inventory of state fish and wildlife areas is proving to sportsmen the good old days still exist in Illinois.

Ten Mile Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area in Hamilton and Jefferson counties didn't exist back in the days of so-called unlimited hunting and fishing opportunities in Illinois. It wasn't until 1988 when these 5,818 acres of individual habitats were acquired by the Department of Conservation (now DNR) from the Tennessee Valley Authority, then opened the following year for public hunting programs.

The bad news? Word of the bonanza for sportsmen hasn't spread very far. The other thing they're good at is keep-

A rolling landscape filled with seemingly endless wildlife habitat defines the nature of this southern Illinois sportsman's paradise.

Waterfowl habitat created by mine reclamation in the Eads Unit of Ten Mile Creek offers sportsmen everything from early season teal hunting to late-season goose opportunities. A 250-acre waterfowl rest area is included at the Eads Unit.

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ing a secret. Whenever sportsmen find a spot with plenty of fish and game—but relatively light competition—they mysteriously fall silent.

"It is something of a well-kept secret," acknowledged Site Superintendent Jim Eaton, who says these state lands are tucked into a region that might well be called a less-traveled portion of Illinois. "We're far enough away from the interstate (I-57) that a lot of guys never discover what's out here. They go as far as Rend Lake and stop."

That's just fine with those who've made the trip. As both an undiscovered treasure and a well-kept secret, Ten Mile Creek is actually four separately managed units, collectively representing 19 individual properties sprawling across more than 20 miles in two counties. The bonanza offers sportsmen everything from endless upland game hunting to choice bluegill fishing and quality deer and turkey hunting. The landscape is as varied as the names: The Belle Rive, Eads, Dahlgren and Goshen Trail units feature wetlands and lakes, deep forests and creek bottoms, wide-open grasslands and crop fields. Approximately one-third of the site was mined for coal decades ago, and those sites (all in the Jefferson County portions) have been reclaimed—or allowed to fill up as lakes and wetlands.

"It's kind of a different place," explained Paul Willms, manager of DNR's Statewide Public Lands Wildlife Habitat Development Project (commonly known as federal aid project W-76-D). The program is funded by sportsman's tax dollars: Excise taxes paid on firearms, ammunition and archery gear are collected to create everything from improved habitats and levee systems to hunter check stations and new trails.

"Ten Mile is one of 67 sites in the W-76-D program statewide," Willms said. "The program dates back to 1962, and the biggest emphasis is on providing wildlife habitat. That's what this site is all about."

Unlike mainstream recreation areas or family-style parks offering campgrounds and swimming pools, properties managed under W-76-D attract wildlife—and sportsmen. When it was

Wild turkey and deer hunters will find ample opportunities for success amid the nearly 5,000 huntable acres stretching across two counties.

created, Ten Mile Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area was the largest land purchase ever made by the Department of Conservation. Thanks to its seemingly endless collection of properties and well-kept-secret status, the site now stands as a perfect example of what veteran sportsmen say they remember about the good old days.

"Hunters don't need to check in or out when they come and go," according to Site Superintendent Jim Eaton. "At the start of the season, they contact the site to get a registration packet, and they'll get a card for their vehicle window. At the end of the season they report their harvest and that's pretty much it. You don't have to talk to anybody, you come and go as you please, and on any given trip out there you might not see another soul all day. If you're a die-hard, you can go every day of the season.

"It's a very liberal system."

And—just like the good old days—it's possible to visit this fish and wildlife area for years and never see it all.

"I've been here for more than 10 years and I don't know if I've been able to set foot on every piece of property at Ten Mile," reported John Bozett, DNR district wildlife biologist. "There's just so much of it, and from an outdoorsman's perspective, all of the sites have something to offer."

Deer hunters often beg Bozett for tips about the best places to find that dream buck at Ten Mile. And while one of the four management units—the 1,460-acre Belle Rive Unit—is operated as a Quality Deer Management Area, Bozett points out quality deer can be found anywhere at Ten Mile.

"There are no bad sites," Bozett tells anyone who inquires. "In each of the four units you can find deer. The same thing for turkeys; turkeys are everywhere."

As if history hadn't already repeated itself, turkey hunters who've discovered this sportsman's gem are beginning to fall into the same habits and mistakes we all make. Hunter densities are needlessly high in just a few areas among the huge resource, not because turkeys exist only in those places, but because the first hunters to harvest turkeys when it opened return to the same spots every year—along with the watchful newcomers.

Flocks of turkeys elsewhere never see a hunter, despite miles of opportunity.

"Within the site there are 4,995 huntable acres," added Bozett.

Those lucky enough to live nearby can make quick day trips for hunting and fishing. For long-distance sportsmen, there is no camping or lodging available at the site. Yet campgrounds to the west and east (Rend Lake and Hamilton County State Fish and Wildlife Area) are within 30 minutes, and private lodging is available as close as across the street from the site office.

Ten Mile Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area cannot be appreciated completely during one trip. Quail hunters will find quail populations big enough to merit a quality hunt with a good bird

Sportsmen and target shooters can utilize the site's various ranges, which include accommodations for archery, trap and rifle.

dog. Waterfowl hunters can expect strong mallard and wood duck opportunities, along with early season teal—plus Canada and snow geese later. Fishermen can visit one of the seemingly endless pothole lakes and deeper mine lakes for great channel catfishing (night fishing is allowed), largemouth bass or feisty panfish action.

"After doing a little homework and getting to know the area, anglers will find that Ten Mile Creek has a reputation for some of the best angling in southern Illinois," Kurt Daine, district fisheries biologist noted. Boaters are welcome, too (a 10-horsepower limit applies for all waters) and gravel boat launches and parking lots are maintained at many of the accessible lakes. Other boating restrictions apply, such as seasonally restricted access in the waterfowl refuge in the Eads Unit. But basic common sense for sportsmen rules much of the water (no fishing within 250 yards of an occupied waterfowl blind, standard size and creel limits, etc.)

From fishing to fowling, Ten Mile Creek SFWA is managed for year-around sporting opportunities. A free, annual site permit is required for hunters.

The opportunities literally go on for miles. And while the site is commonly touted as a well-kept secret, dove hunters do converge in a blast upon the several fields of sunflowers annually.

"Last year hunters bagged more than 4,000 doves," Bozett said. "It always ranks as one of the better sites for dove hunting in the state."

For practice or sport—or both—shotgunners can bust clay targets at the Hand Trap Range in the Goshen Trail Unit. The Archery Range located nearby serves sharp-eyed bowhunters, while the Rifle Range (annual permit required) accommodates marksmen seeking that perfect grouping.

The opportunities go on and on, just like the old-timers say they recall. But there's one adjustment to make. While the opportunities at Ten Mile Creek stir a nostalgic sense of freedom, continued successful management of these diverse habitats depends heavily on the end-of-season harvest reports all sportsmen must submit.

"It's absolutely imperative that we get good data back from hunters," Bozett said. Unfortunately, compliance on that front was just 68 percent last year.

"A lot of people in Illinois don't realize how fortunate they are," Eaton pointed out. "Here's a site where you can basically come and go as you please, hunt and fish all year, and all you have to do, really, is put a registration card on your dashboard and send in a harvest report at the end of the season."

Simple enough? All sportsmen should agree.

Dog training amid thousands of acres gives handlers broad opportunities to train without distraction.

Facts at glance

Address: Ten Mile Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area, RR 1, Box 179, McCleansboro, IL 62859.
Telephone: (618) 643-2862.
Directions: Ten Mile Creek State Fish & Wildlife Area is located on Illinois Route 14 east of Benton. From I-57, take exit 71 and travel east on Illinois Route 14 18 miles to the site office.