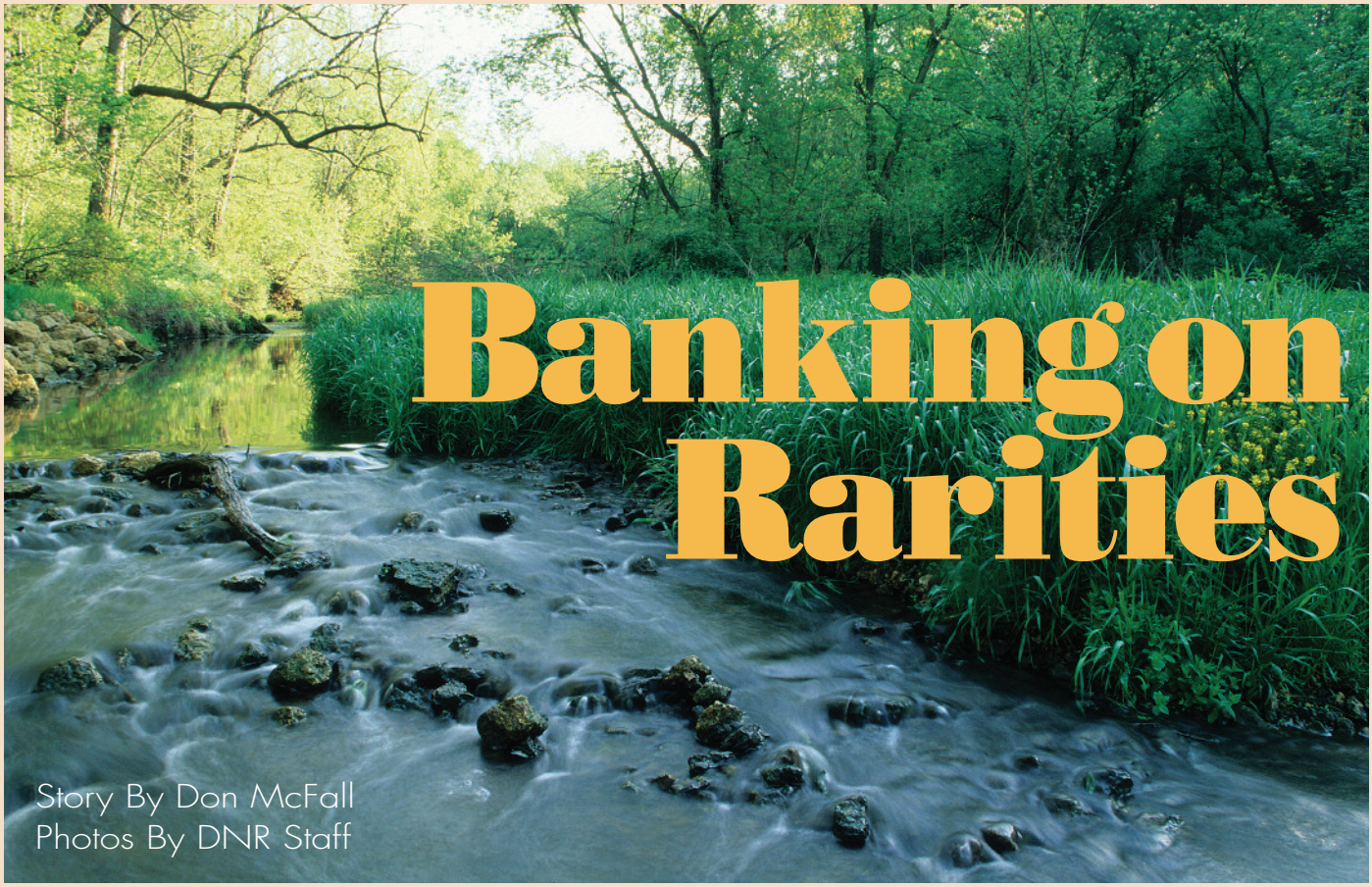
The Natural Areas Acquisition Fund is protecting Illinois' crowning habitat gems—and creating recreational opportunities.



Banking on Rarities

Story By Don McFall
Photos By DNR Staff

Necks crane to peer into the upper branches of gigantic oaks and sycamores in old growth forests. Ancient cypress swamps look, and feel, like something out of a ghost story. Wildflowers dot the tall-grass prairie with color as far as the eye can see. The noisy banter of primeval-sounding herons fills the air as they jockey with neighbors in crowded treetop rookeries. Thousands of acres of sloughs span the bottomland, a wondrous sight from high atop a limestone cliff.

Some travel to the four corners of the United States in search of these magical places, but each year more people discover that there's some place new to explore closer to home—Illinois' natural areas. Those willing to find and hike Illinois' natural areas aren't disappointed, and first-time visitors are amazed after discovering the natural wonders of our home state.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has a plan and a funding source to protect these natural areas, to buffer them from incompatible development, restore them where necessary and open them up to the public so visitors can enjoy them for years to come. Thanks to a 1989 Illinois General Assembly initiative creating the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF), to date more than 21,000 acres of woods, prairies and wetlands—scattered around the state at 64 different natural areas in 43 of Illinois' 102 counties—have been acquired and maintained.

Since January 2003, the NAAF has been used to acquire—from landowners on a willing seller basis—33 tracts of land at 27 of the finest remaining natural areas in Illinois. Totaling 4,140 acres, these tracts include everything from marshes in northeastern Illinois to cypress swamps in southern Illinois.

There aren't too many natural areas left in Illinois, and the ones we have tend to be on the small side, so a significant amount of the land acquired with NAAF is for the purpose of enlarging and buffering natural areas already in DNR ownership. These buffer lands, often marginal farmland or former pasture, are reforested, planted to prairie grasses or restored to wetland. With time, the buffer lands will develop into good habitat and improve the likelihood that the natural area will survive unimpaired well into the future.

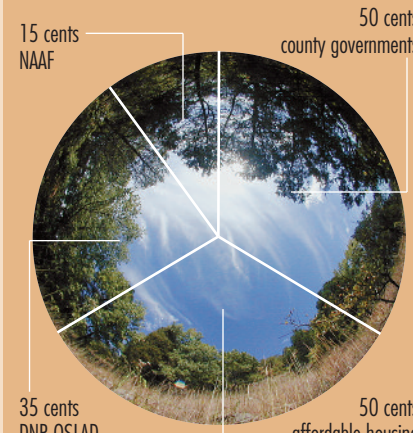
DNR has acquired more than 1,200 acres at Apple River Canyon State Park using the NAAF. Apple River Canyon, located in the state's northwestern driftless area, is a deep, narrow, bedrock canyon and the namesake river is a high-quality stream. The dolomite cliffs of the canyon provide habitat for 12 endangered or threatened species of plants.

Where Does the Money for NAAF Come From?

The NAAF comes from a fee on the transfer of real estate in Illinois. When a person or corporation buys real estate in

Redwing Slough, in northeastern Illinois, is one of the largest wetlands remaining in the six-county Chicago metropolitan area. This marsh provides habitat for six species of endangered or threatened wetland-dependent birds. DNR has acquired more than 930 acres at Redwing Slough using the NAAF.

Allocation of the Real Estate Transfer Fee



Illinois, they pay a fee of $1.50 per $1,000 paid for the property. For example, the buyer of a $100,000 house pays a one-time real estate transfer fee of $150. Money generated by this fee is divided four ways: 50 cents to county governments, 50 cents for affordable housing assistance, 35 cents for the DNR Open Space Land Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) grant program and 15 cents for the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund. The NAAF is used for "the acquisition, preservation and stewardship of natural areas, including habitat for endangered and threatened species, high quality natural communities, wetlands and other areas with unique or unusual natural heritage qualities."

DNR's Division of Realty is responsible for all aspects of acquiring the land. The Division has a professional staff of land appraisers, surveyors and negotiators who work with landowners to acquire natural areas, as well as state parks, hunting areas and bike trails. All acquisitions are on a willing-seller basis and at fair-market value. The Division is working on acquiring 10 natural area tracts this year, totaling about 900 acres.

Stewardship of Natural Areas

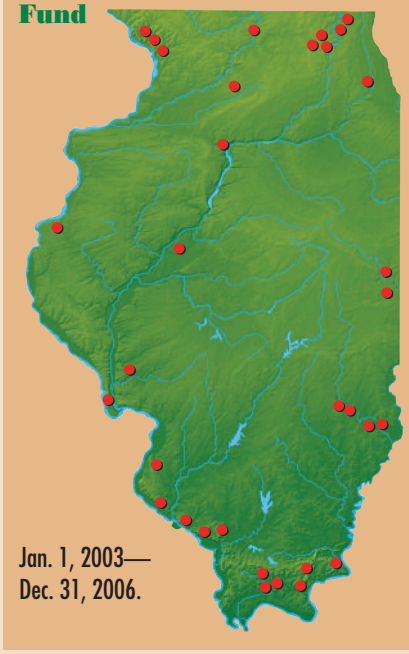
Recognizing that it doesn't make sense to buy a piece of land if you can't take care of it, 10 percent of the NAAF is set aside each year for stewardship projects on natural areas and nature preserves. Typical stewardship projects are exotic species removal, prescribed burning in prairies and woods, and hydrologic restoration in wetlands and streams. This year, 49 projects benefiting natural areas throughout the state were funded with NAAF.

Improving Water Quality with NAAF

Every site that is selected for acquisition using NAAF contains a high-quality natural area listed on the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory. It's rare, however, that a tract of land acquired with NAAF

Wolf Road Prairie, a nominated National Natural Landmark, is located in the western suburbs of Chicago and represents a rare remnant of the original Illinois tallgrass prairie. The prairie provides habitat for three endangered species.

Natural Areas Acquired with the Natural Areas Acquistion Fund



Fults Hill Prairie, a designated National Natural Landmark, is a large, diverse natural area in the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River in southwestern Illinois. With high limestone cliffs, marshes, springs, sinkholes, and loess hill prairies and glades, the natural area supports 13 endangered or threatened species.

doesn't provide other conservation and public benefits. Advancing the state's clean water goals is a good example of a NAAF "two-fer." Thousands of acres of wetlands have been protected and enhanced through NAAF. These wetlands improve water quality by filtering wastes from runoff. They reduce the severity of floods by storing and gradually releasing flood waters, and they recharge groundwater. Acquisition of large wetlands, such as Cache River and Black Crown Marsh, assures important wetland functions will continue indefinitely. Many acres of marginal farmland and farmed wetlands have been acquired to buffer and enlarge high-quality wetlands. The stewardship portion of NAAF allows DNR to restore wetlands on marginal lands by filling in ditches, breaking field tiles and restoring wetland vegetation.

Protected but Open for Recreation

More than 17,000 acres of land acquired through the NAAF are open for public hunting, fishing and hiking. Acquisition also provides river access points, protection for archaeological resources, connects bike trail, and creates study sites for college and high school biology classes. Protecting a natural area and providing a range of public uses are rarely incompatible goals. The key is a sound land management plan, and DNR prepares one for each acquired tract.

DNR is committed to maintaining the significant natural features on the land acquired with NAAF. Most of the land acquired with the fund has been registered as a Land and Water Reserve with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC). INPC and DNR are working in concert to protect and maintain the outstanding natural features for which these areas were acquired, and making them available for wildlife observation, hunting, fishing and development of a trail system as permitted by the Land and Water Reserves system.

Exploring the Natural Areas

A quick and easy way to become acquainted with newly acquired areas is to visit the DNR Web site at www.dnr.state.il.us/INPC/NPdir.htm. Click on a part of the state you'd like to explore for a detailed description of the area and driving directions. Prairie Ridge State Natural Area has an excellent Web site at www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/prairieridge.

After your virtual tour, a visit to the actual site is in order. Cache River State Natural Area has an outstanding visitor's center, including a boardwalk through a cypress swamp and several miles of trails. A call ahead is always wise, especially to visit newly purchased lands, such as those at Moraine Hills State Park in McHenry or Redwing Slough (associated with Chain O'Lakes State Park in Spring Grove).

Although the visitor's facilities at many natural areas are minimal (usually just a small parking lot and a trail system), a few minutes after leaving your car you'll be richly rewarded as you explore some of Illinois' rarest and most pristine lands.

Don McFall is the Natural Areas Acquisition program manager with the DNR Office of Realty and Environmental Planning.

Protecting Endangered Species Habitat with NAAF

The key to ensuring Illinois endangered species don't become extinct and that they begin to recover is habitat protection. DNR is using the NAAF to acquire critical habitat for a number of endangered species. Sandhill crane, black tern, yellow-headed blackbird and king rail are being protected at Redwing Slough (Lake County) and Black Crown Marsh (McHenry County). Greater prairie-chicken, upland sandpiper, short-eared owl and loggerhead shrike nest at Prairie Ridge State Natural Area (Jasper and Marion counties). Snowy egret and black-crowned night heron can be seen at the Alorton Heron Rookery (St. Clair County). Bird-voiced tree frog, big-eared bat and Mississippi kite thrive at sites along the Cache River (Johnson and Pulaski counties).

Alorton Heron Rookery

Endangered species often require a very specific habitat type to survive, such as a tamarack bog or sand prairie. When the habitat type, or natural community, is itself extremely rare, the animals and plants dependant on it decline. DNR uses the NAAF money to target acquisition of rare habitat types seldom present in the state parks or county forest preserves.