An insiders view of growing up amid 18,000 acres of wild Illinois.

Home on the ...State Fish and Wildlife Area

Story By Rachel Mahan
Photos By Adele Hodde

If you'd asked me as a kid about the Kaskaskia River State Fish and Wildlife Area—if you'd asked me to show you where the minnows pool like water itself or where the fireflies blink like Christmas lights in summer—I would have said: "You're too late," stamping my 5-year-old (or 8-year-old or 12-year-old) foot possessively.

We lived next to Baldwin Lake, my younger sister, Emily, and I. We had already staked our claim on the area. We explored it, mapped it and even named it ourselves. Never mind this land already had been named and certainly mapped and explored.

Accessible fishing areas provide hours of family fun throughout the year.

Our names included "Bone Island," which wasn't even an island; "The Creek," which was too ubiquitous to necessitate another name; and "The Lake" whose presence, if not seen, was always known because of tell-tale seagulls adrift on air currents.

Now, if you'd twist my arm, I'd have to admit that you're really not too late. After all, the site is far too big to have been mapped by a couple of kids. So read carefully, take notes: Here's an

A full complement of habitats are present at Kaskaskia River State Fish and Wildlife Area.

Thousands of snow geese can be found each winter on the site's designated waterfowl rest area.

insider's view of Kaskaskia River State Fish and Wildlife Area.

Roughly 35 miles southeast of St. Louis, the sprawling site contains 36 miles of Kaskaskia River and the land on either side from Fayetteville in the north to the Kaskaskia River Lock and Dam in the south, near the confluence with the Mississippi River. The State of Illinois began piecing together the site's impressive expanse—18,000 acres of land and water—in the late 1960s.

Contained within its thousands of acres is a spectrum of habitats. The Department of Natural Resources, which manages much of the site, describes the area in more than a few words as "a complex of channelized river, oxbows, sloughs, backwater lakes, bottomland timber, cultivated fields, native grass patches, brushy areas and fallow fields" in one of its brochures.

Cultivated fields? To manage one of the largest state-owned sites in Illinois takes much collaboration and that includes renting land to tenant farmers. Farmers grow corn, wheat, soybeans, and other crops in the drier regions on site, said site superintendent Mic Middleton.

"You have to have a mixture of habitat," Middleton said, in order to manage wildlife populations.

In return, the farmers leave part of their crops as food for wildlife, giving the fields an endearing Mohawk "haircut," in the form of unharvested swaths, in the fall. Deer, turkeys, doves, quail, rabbits and waterfowl all benefit from this method. If a hard spring freeze dam-

Baldwin Power Plant is responsible for the longer growing season that is producing record-sized fish.

Deer and wild turkey are commonly seen along roadsides. Observant wildlife- watchers may be rewarded with a bobcat or river otter sighting.

ages the nut crop, these swaths provide a back-up source of food.

Corn makes up one-fourth of all crops planted, providing a stable food supply for Canada geese that winter in southern Illinois. But because of changes in migration patterns, fewer of these geese migrate to the area than in the past. Instead, a resident population helps maintain area goose-hunting and viewing traditions.

A great place to see some of the resident Canada geese close-up is the Baldwin Lake Waterfowl Rest Area, located at the boat ramp on the northwest corner of Baldwin Lake.

Because it's a waterfowl rest area, during peak times in the winter, as many as 10,000 snow geese can congregate on shore. Unlike the Canada geese, they fly up at each disturbance as a furiously honking white cloud.

Across the main road from the boat ramp, be sure to look in the winter for rabbit tracks disappearing into the frozen grasses of the restored tall-grass prairie, a relic of ancient Illinois habitat.

While driving south through the park past Baldwin Lake, watch for coots or other waterfowl swimming in the shallow coves along the shoreline. In the spring, pull over and listen for songbirds, and in the summer, take a break from air conditioning to hear the symphony—thousands of insects strong—and to breathe in the heavy scent of the growing season in full- swing.

The drive ends at a wildlife-viewing area overlooking a slender field and seemingly endless woods. This is a favorite spot for white-tailed deer and the occasional wild turkey to wander.

On other areas of the site, bobcats have been spotted by both workers and visitors; there have been reports of river otters; and a pair of bald eagles has nested in a live cottonwood on the banks of one of the numerous oxbows close to the river. Osprey are not uncommon and can be seen catching fish from Baldwin Lake.

Burr and pin oaks, silver maples, and other bottomland trees make up the woods, along with upland hardwoods species, such as black cherry and white and red oaks. Many of the bottomland trees were killed in the floods of 1993 and 1995 and in some areas, the Kaskaskia River claimed 90 percent of the trees, according to local DNR personnel.

Middleton described the phenomenon as like a 500-year flood that happened twice.

"As long as it doesn't happen again," he said, "the woods are starting to heal themselves." The wildlife has long since returned, thanks to the hoards of herbaceous plants and young trees that have sprouted in the vacant sunny patches along the river.

DNR also restores habitat that has been eliminated not by floods but by modern life. Most recently, DNR collaborated with Ducks Unlimited and used Duck Stamp Fund monies to restore wetlands near the southern tip of the site. Many species of waterfowl benefit, including mallards, teal, pintails, gadwall and other puddle ducks. Occasionally, Middleton said, so-called diver ducks make an appearance in the 45-acre wetland area, which is due to be completed this waterfowl hunting season.

Waterfowl aren't the only wildlife species that can be hunted there. Most of the site, a full 14,000 acres, is huntable and much of it during statewide hours and seasons. Hunters can take anything from rabbits to squirrels and woodcocks to skunks. Trapping by permit with water sets also is allowed.

While hunters can enjoy the normal firearm and archery deer seasons, special deer hunts take place during three of the four seasons—firearm, youth and late-winter—on a small part of the Baldwin Lake Waterfowl Rest Area. The number and location of hunters is assigned in advance in order to monitor the safety and quality of the hunt.

The same logic is used on the public waterfowl hunting area, Doza Creek Waterfowl Management Area, which

Prairie grasses provide dramatic backdrops for winter tourists.

Facts at a glance

Address: 10981 Conservation Road, Baldwin, IL 62217.
Phone: (618) 785-2555.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/PARKS/R4/kaskas.htm.
Directions to Baldwin Lake Area: The site is located 4 miles north of Baldwin on Route 154 or 6 miles south of New Athens on Route 13.
Baldwin Lake Area Hours: Nov. 1 to Feb. 15, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; Feb. 16 to April 15, 6 a.m.-7 p.m.; April 16 to Oct. 31, 6 a.m.- 9 p.m.

consists of the land and water south of Doza Creek and east of the Kaskaskia River. For the "Duck Draw," hunters' locations during the first four days of the waterfowl season are determined by a drawing to prevent overcrowding, while locations throughout the rest of the season are on a first-come, first-served basis.

The miles of river and oxbows contained within the site provide space for recreational boating and fishing. Boat ramps are available at Fayetteville, New Athens, the Baldwin area on Highway 154 and Evansville. Horse Creek, a tributary of the Kaskaskia, has canoe access via Prairie Road off of Highway 154, and the site contains 8 miles of equestrian trails and 12 miles of hiking and birding trails.

A two-lane launching ramp, boat docks and parking lot provide access to the 2,000-acre Baldwin Lake.

Baldwin Lake, which is fed by the river, has a reputation for great fishing: The state record channel catfish, weighing more than 45 pounds, was caught there in 1987, and its cousin, the blue catfish, attains even larger sizes. Although straightened for navigation some 35 years ago, the river is still connected to more than two dozen remnant meander bends, or oxbow lakes. In this complex of riverine and backwater habitat, trophy catfish abound, along with a bass fishery that is enjoying a recent rebirth due to DNR stocking efforts. Fishing from shore and motorboats of 50 horsepower or less are both popular.

Good catches may be due to a longer growing season since January water temperatures can reach into the 60s in portions of the 2,000-acre cooling lake because of the Baldwin Power Plant, perched on its southeastern shore.

A fishing tip from the site superintendent: In the winter, walk down to the end of the north levee, near the hot-water discharge. As the weather warms, follow the migration of the fish to cooler water closer to the parking lot.

However, if the wind just isn't from the west some day, as the saying goes, you can simply enjoy the different habitats and wildlife to be seen right there, even from the parking lot.

Some 20 years after my first acquaintance with the site, as I pondered what to write, I sat near the lake with my truck windows rolled down.

In addition to Baldwin Lake, miles of the Kaskaskia River await anglers and boaters.

Everything I could see was either green or slate blue. The cornfields, the cattails…the lake, the sky.

It was summer, so even in the morning, in the rising heat, the adjacent field glowed a deep, living, palpable green. Insects droned. Flowers called Queen Anne's lace bowed their heads in the breeze. A pair of Canada geese waddled past, pecking seemingly indiscriminately.

I realized that the landscape had not changed.

I thought back to my youth spent playfully stalking coots and bullfrogs, enduring mosquito bites to explore and map and name.

I understood how I could be torn between wanting to keep it to myself —and yet wanting to share it all.

Rachel Mahan is a graduate student in New York University's Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program. She thanks her lucky stars, and a few favorite climbing trees, for her former childhood home in the woods by Baldwin Lake.