An ominous name doesn't deter sportsmen from seeking out Snakeden Hollow State Fish and Wildlife Area.

Visiting a Friendly Snakeden

Story By Joe McFarland
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Sometimes, having to travel far off the beaten path suits people just fine. Especially sportsmen, who eagerly hunt for those particularly wild places where relatively few people show up. The trouble is: How to keep that remote hunting and fishing hotspot a secret—especially when it's all public land available to anyone?

How about naming the site Snakeden Hollow? A menacing name might deter visitors. Think of it: Would anybody willingly visit a den full of snakes?

Rick Knisely is used to such questions. As site superintendent of a remote destination called Snakeden Hollow State Fish and Wildlife Area in Knox County, Knisely fields such phone calls from curious members of the public.

"People want to know why it's called Snakeden Hollow," Knisely explained. He always assures the public the name of this isolated sportsman's destination northwest of Peoria really is just a name and nothing more.

"Years ago, settlers in the area named this place Snakeden Hollow," Knisely said of the site's history. "I suppose, at one time, there might have been plenty of snakes—including timber rattlers—but there honestly aren't any more snakes here than anywhere else."

Still, being located off the beaten path in west-central Illinois does help to keep crowds to a minimum. There are no touristy bed and breakfasts here, no antique shops or wine-tasting rooms nearby. Even the sportsmen who arrive at Snakeden must pack their own supplies and spend the night somewhere else because there are no campgrounds or motels around the site. Forget about fast-food restaurants or traffic lights.

Acres of wetlands, lakes and moist-soil habitat—and the occasional snake—await sportsmen at Snakeden Hollow SFWA.

To reach Snakeden Hollow SFWA, one must drive until all memory of big cities is far behind. Yet all of this remoteness suits the dedicated sportsmen at this 2,740-acre fish and wildlife haven just fine. And there truly are benefits to hunting and fishing at a public site where 112 individual bodies of water mean a visitor might have exclusive sporting opportunities on any given day.

The fact is, this isolated sportsman's destination, located roughly midway

The 160-acre Lake McMaster is the largest body of water at the site and features a boat launch with excellent opportunities for muskie as well as other sportfish.

between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, doesn't deter anyone willing to make the trip. And plenty of sportsmen rate this state fish and wildlife area as worth even a long drive.

"A few years ago we did a survey and found out that 25 percent of our goose hunters drive 100 miles or more to get here," Knisely said. That's customer satisfaction. Waterfowlers, as well as the 80,000 to 90,000 other sportsmen who visit the site annually, know that this land is managed specifically for fish and wildlife.

Never heard of the place? Perhaps it's because Snakeden Hollow SFWA as we know it today did not always exist. Years ago, this sportsman's destination simply was not open to the public. Surface coal mining was the primary activity here, and it wasn't until 1987 the state acquired these thousands of acres from Midland Coal Company, then worked with the Soil Conservation Service to restore the habitat and correct any environmental issues.

Mining created deep, clear lakes and provided ample opportunity for stocking a range of sport fish species, including cold-water favorites such as rainbow and brown trout and smallmouth bass. Of the 100-plus bodies of water, the largest of the lakes by far is Lake McMaster, named for the late state representative Tom McMaster who helped secure the lands for the public. At roughly 160 acres, Lake McMaster is large enough to feature a boat launch (a 10 horsepower limit and no-wake zone applies for the lake) and includes a newly refurbished dam and spillway. Although the lake was drawn down many feet to accommodate the work done in 2008, a wet spring and summer this year has filled the lake completely.

"Lake McMaster has a very low ratio of land surface to water in the watershed," fisheries biologist Ken Russell pointed out, explaining how the lake does not rise quickly after rains. He also noted how the ecology of many of the lakes has shifted over the years, causing a shift in his stocking and management strategy. As the lakes mature and as the Canada geese that routinely nest here swim these waters, the once-crystal clarity of the lakes has decreased—but only slightly.

"It's still common to see down into the water 20 feet or more," Russell said. Yet that slight change in clarity altered what had once been a "two-story fishery," once supporting truly cold-water species such as trout in deep water and warm-water species above.

"The two-story fishery crashed in 1994, so now we've got a cool-water fishery and a warm-water fishery," he said. Nonetheless, angler favorites such as walleye and muskie do absolutely fine in the cool water, and bass, crappie and bluegill thrive in warmer waters. Other species found at Snakeden include smallmouth bass and redear sunfish, plus channel catfish.

With so many fishing opportunities at more than 100 lakes and ponds, site superintendent Knisely said the majority of visitors here arrive for the seemingly endless opportunities to find a private spot to fish.

"I'd estimate 80 percent or more of our annual visitors come here for the fishing," Knisely reported. "The lakes are known for great bluegill and redear sunfish."

In fact, so popular is the panfishing at the various lakes, fisheries officials established a size and creel limit for certain panfish, a restriction designed to maintain a quality fishing experience.

Managed as a nesting area for Canada geese during the spring and summer, Snakeden becomes a natural destination for waterfowlers during late fall and winter.

"When you've got a quality resource like this, you want to maintain it," Russell pointed out. "It's why the site has a 10-bluegill per day limit. For crappie, there's a five fish per day limit."

And the conservative management strategy appears to be working. During his annual surveys, fisheries biologists often find bluegill upwards of three quarters of a pound, and even larger redear sunfish. And while the bluegill in Lake McMaster are medium-size fish measuring up to 8 inches, the black crappie fishery in that largest of impoundments is quite respectable.

"At Lake McMaster, fishermen can expect crappie in the 10, 11-inch range," Russell added.

Channel catfishing is strong as well. Unlike many lakes which depend upon annual stocking to support the catfish population, natural reproduction is keeping up with angler pressure. The only unremarkable fishery at the site might be the largemouth bass population. Despite—or perhaps because of—the impressive statistics for panfish, bass anglers can expect to find plenty of bass, yet many fish will be in the 12-14 inch range. The site has a 3-bass daily limit collectively, including the occasional smallmouth that turns up, but only one of those bass can exceed 15 inches.

Since many of the old mine lakes are steep-sided and a challenge for bank fishermen, one of the great attractions for anglers is the fact small, portable boats are allowed on all of the waters.

"If you can drag it in, you can put it in any of the ponds and lakes," Russell encouraged. Electric trolling motors are the only motors allowed on the smaller impoundments (Lake McMaster, as mentioned previously, allows outboards up to 10 horsepower).

A wooden barn, a relic from the last century, is located behind the site superintendent's residence at Spoon River State Forest.

But bank fishermen sometimes defy the odds and prove that it doesn't take a boat to catch a great fish. In 2008, a muskie fisherman casting from the shore of Lake McMaster brought ashore an astonishing catch: a 52-inch behemoth muskie that flirted with record status. Russell noted that a former state record muskie was recorded at this very lake.

Walleye anglers will find the site's walleye a bit difficult to figure out. Yet a few experienced anglers seem to know the secret.

"I'd say 5 percent of the fishermen catch 95 percent of the walleye," Russell laughed. "Of course, they never say how."

The Flying Attraction

For other sportsmen, Snakeden Hollow SFWA is worth the drive for its migratory bird hunting in the late summer, fall and winter—specifically for doves and Canada geese, but also pheasants in a nearby quality pheasant hunting area. Four fields featuring sunflowers attract doves at Snakeden, as well as the satellite property known as Victoria Pheasant Habitat Area a couple of miles away.

Due to cool, wet weather, planting of sunflowers was a washout this year, and dove hunting suffered. But in the last three years, nearly 4,500 doves have been harvested at the site. Hundreds of

During hunting season, as many as 3,000 Canada geese linger around the site until severe weather—if it arrives—pushes geese south.

At a glance

Address: Snakeden Hollow State Fish and Wildlife Area, 1936 State Route 167. P.O. Box 295, Victoria, IL 61485
Telephone: (309) 879-2607
Web site: Hunter fact sheets for Snakeden Hollow SFWA, including Victoria Pheasant Habitat Area and Spoon River State Forest can be downloaded at: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r1/snake.htm
Directions: The site is located 1 mile southeast of Victoria in Knox County, midway between Peoria and the Quad Cities. Take Route 167 east from Victoria to find the site office and hunter check station.

Canada geese are bagged annually, despite hunting being offered only four days a week. Canada goose hunting opportunities in the late fall and winter are available through a permit lottery system which guarantees permit holders one of 15 waterfowl blinds (including a disabled-access blind) on days when the site is open for goose hunting. (Hunting days are Thursday through Sunday.) Of course, standby hunters can show up and try their luck if permit holders don't show on that day.

Wildlife biologist Byron Paulsen said the site is managed as a nesting area for Canada geese but also holds a fair amount of birds during the winter. And on some days, the flocks can be impressive.

"I've seen more than 3,000 geese on the site in the winter," Paulsen said, adding that flocks averaging in the hundreds are common. And, while bowhunting for deer is offered for a few weeks in October until goose season arrives—and some hunters take advantage of the early teal season in September—the main attraction at Snakeden when cold weather arrives is the goose hunting.

"The farm leases on the property are required to leave 5 percent of the grain standing, and that, plus the waste grain left after harvest, provides a lot of food for the geese," he said.

Due to its large areas of grassland, wild turkey hunting in the spring is not a primary attraction. Yet the satellite Spoon River State Forest site nearby, with its mature woodlands, offers turkey hunters enough opportunity that hunters there bagged five gobblers last spring.

Agricultural leases at Snakeden require a portion of the crop to remain standing for the benefit of wildlife.

Nearby Spoon River State Forest is managed as a satellite facility. The mature upland forests offer hunters seasonal opportunities, including spring turkey hunting.

Back at the main site, with its unusual topography of post-mining habitat on much—but not all—of its landscape, Snakeden Hollow SFWA would seem to be a museum of mine reclamation history.

"Most of the property is pre-reclamation law," site superintendent Knisely said. "But you can literally see where the law changed as the mining progressed here."

He added that, due to the ongoing tweaks to improve the structure of the post-mining landscape, more than one visitor has eyed with suspicion a recently sculpted pile of earth and rocks.

"People have asked me if we're creating new habitat for rattlesnakes," Knisely laughed. "Or if we're releasing rattlesnakes. I assure them we're not. But rumors are hard to overcome."

Of course there is no such program in Illinois, and there never was. Still, at this distant, out-of-the-way place called Snakeden Hollow State Fish and Wildlife Area, it's easy to see how such covert biology could be imagined.

"It really is out in the middle of nowhere," biologist Paulsen agreed. "But in a good way."