Waterfowl enthusiasts band together to create a 40-acre moist-soil management area in Dewitt County.

Partners Pool Resources on Habitat Restoration Project

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

Sometimes, great ideas become reality in a matter of seconds. Yet other ideas might take years to develop…especially when money is involved. An idea that was sparked in the late 1970s near Clinton Lake—build a 60-acre wetland for migratory waterfowl and shorebirds—not only has survived decades of wishful thinking, it's finally become a reality, thanks to the diligent efforts of volunteers, private organizations and Department of Natural Resources staff.

Local and migratory waterfowl and shorebirds now flock to a 60-acre moist-soil management area adjacent to Clinton Lake, a 5,000-acre deep-water nuclear power plant cooling lake in central Illinois' DeWitt County.

Why would an idea that eventually became a relatively simple construction project take 25 years to complete?

"It took several years to line up the necessary funds for the project," explained Jim Capel, Department of Natural Resources Region 3 Land Manager. "An initial grant from the Lumpkin Family Foundation, along with matching grants from the Illinois Duck Stamp Fund and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act fund got things rolling, and allowed Ducks Unlimited to prepare a topographic study, design plan and cost estimates. With a plan in place, and interest in the wetland building, additional partners [see sidebar] were recruited, bringing with them the necessary in-kind and financial resources, and, in some instances, volunteer labor, to start construction."

When the construction equipment pulled away from the new Salt Creek Waterfowl Management Area—a unit within Clinton Lake State Recreation Area, managed by DNR in cooperation with Exelon Generation Corporation—the partners had invested more than $300,000 of federal and non-federal funds toward the project.

Seasonal wetlands provide migratory habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl.

Pooling time, talent and financial resources, partners created a 40-acre moist-soil wetland in DeWitt County.

Birders and school groups utilize Salt Creek's 20-foot observation tower for a panoramic view of the wetland.

Historically, east-central Illinois contained some of the richest shallow-water wetlands in the state. Like much of that area, DeWitt County has lost 90-99 percent of its pre-settlement wetlands, and continued drainage projects are decreasing the acreage of ephemeral wetlands—areas that provide refuge and feeding for migratory wetland birds—at a rapid pace.

According to Carl Handel, DNR district wildlife manager, creation of such shallow-water areas not only provides habitat for waterfowl and other wetland wildlife to nest, feed, loaf, spawn and roost, it also serves to capture storm-water runoff from adjoining farmland, and then will help to remove nutrients and sediments from the water entering Clinton Lake.

"Having saturated soils that can hold water made this an ideal location for a wetland," Handel continued. "From a fish and wildlife standpoint the site was poor quality, but we viewed this as an opportunity to transform it to an area with exceptional value for wetland wildlife."

Construction was simple enough. In October 2007, a little more than a year after ground was broke, a permanent water zone existed where soil was removed for construction of the 4,100-foot low levee. The remainder of the Salt Creek unit is managed for moist-soil plants, emphasizing emergent and submerged natural vegetation for feeding, spawning, nesting and protective cover for many wetland wildlife species.

Moist-soil units are managed by seasonal manipulation of water levels timed to coincide with the spring migration of shorebirds and waterfowl, providing quality foraging habitat during these high-energy flights.

In the spring, water levels are drawn down to expose mudflats where moist-soil plants, such as beggar's tick, sprangle top, wild millet, smartweed, arrowhead and a variety of sedges, may grow. Lower spring water levels provide suitable habitat for waterfowl, such as wood ducks and Canada geese, to rear their broods before the drawdown is completed in late May.

The process of re-flooding the wetland begins in August, with water pumped (courtesy of a portable pump and power unit purchased by Exelon) from Salt Creek to supplement natural increases in the water level once the 5-foot tall stop-log riser is closed. With a maximum depth of 2 feet throughout most of the wetland, the shallow waters provide excellent habitat for migrating teal and shorebirds. The wetland reaches its full capacity in September, and remains full until the drawdown begins again in April.

Prior to construction, the former agricultural land was left fallow for years, allowing the natural course of succession to re-vegetate the fields. Unfortunately, some undesirable herbaceous species, such as cattails and reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), became firmly rooted on the property, and physical manipulation will be necessary to eliminate these pests from the landscape.

A hardy and aggressive plant that quickly reaches heights approaching 6 feet, reed canary grass is a major threat to natural wetlands and can out-compete native plants within a few years.

"Reed canary grass is difficult to eliminate and will require employing a variety of management techniques for several years," Handel said. "The combination of flooding, drying, mowing, discing and burning will be our primari-

Trees will eventually shade out the invasive reed canary grass (top). A portable pump donated by Exelon was installed in August to supplement the wetland's water level.

At a glance

Clinton Lake State Recreation Area, 7251 Ranger Road, DeWitt, Ill. 61735
Telephone: (217) 935-8722
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r3/clinton.htm
Directions: The Salt Creek Waterfowl Management Area is located 4 miles southwest of Farmer City in east-central DeWitt County. Parking is directly off Route 54.

ly techniques, with chemical treatments used sparingly."

And, although a slower process, the shade produced by 300 bottomland hardwood trees planted by volunteers will eventually contribute to the demise of the shade-intolerant reed canary grass. Two-thirds of the 60-acre site is open water, with trees planted on the remaining 20 acres.

Although the primary purpose of the site is to provide waterfowl habitat and hunting opportunities, limiting the hunting program to two days a week (Wednesday and Saturday) minimizes disturbances to migrating waterfowl. Preparation of the site for the annual season is undertaken by the Clinton Lake Waterfowl Association, whose members prepare the blinds.

A simple, low levee is all that separates Salt Creek WMA from the heavily utilized Clinton Lake State Recreation Area. And yet, they seem a world apart.

A short two years after construction wrapped up, the wetland contains the resources to support muskrats, beaver, waterfowl and shorebirds.

Not only is the area attracting the attention of waterfowl hunters, school groups and birdwatchers climb the 20-foot observation tower for a birds' eye view of the wetland. Bow anglers make a seasonal migration to harvest fish as water levels decrease. Landowners explore the site, seeking ideas on how to renovate their lands to benefit wildlife and water quality.

"All of this was made possible because of the tireless dedication of a whole bunch of folks," Capel concluded. "This is one of those rare instances where we didn't have to wait decades to see the results of our work. Everyone involved can proudly stand on the site and experience the fruits of their labor."

"The Salt Creek wetland restoration project is an excellent example of what can be accomplished through conservation partnerships," said Ducks Unlimited Regional Biologist Eric Schenck. "Ducks Unlimited is committed to working with farmers, industry and other landowners to demonstrate the value of wetlands in addressing habitat and water quality concerns."

The tireless dedication of many partners created a new resource for waterfowl hunters.

Making Salt Creek possible

Development of the Salt Creek Waterfowl Management Area was made possible through contributions and funding from the following individuals and organizations.

Adventure Sports Outdoors TV
Clinton Lake State Recreation Area staff
Clinton Lake Waterfowl Association
Dept. of Natural Resources
DeWitt County Pheasants Forever
Ducks Unlimited
Evergreen FS Wapella
Exelon Generation Company, LLC
Good Pasture Construction
Illinois Duck Stamp Fund
Illinois Waterfowlers Alliance
Lumpkin Family Foundation, Mattoon
Midwest Marine and Tackle, Inc.
Monsanto
Natural Resources Conservation Service
North American Wetland Conservation Act
DU Life Sponsors Jim West and Randy DeHaan Family
War Eagle Boats

Waterfowl hunting at Salt Creek

1. The application form is available on (see Web site in 'At a glance') and is due annually in early October. Another drawing is held each hunting day at the site in order to allocate each of the two available blinds. Once assigned a blind, hunters may come and go as desired.
2. Hunting is allowed every Wednesday and Saturday of the regular duck and goose season, and the same season length and hunting hours will be observed.
3. No person shall hunt or attempt to hunt except from/within their assigned blind.
4. No more than four persons (the person that drew the blind and three guests) shall occupy a blind.
5. All hunting parties shall hunt over a minimum of 12 decoys during duck and Canada goose seasons.
6. Only walk-in hunting is allowed. No watercraft allowed.
7. Deep water around the outside edges along the levees is marked with reflective stakes. These areas are too deep to wade and will require use of the provided boat to retrieve downed waterfowl (only allowed use of the boat).

For more on DU's restoration work in Illinois, visit http://il.ducks.org.