Community support for this popular Illinois state park is so strong, the public volunteers to maintain its trails.

On the Trail to Morrison-Rockwood

(Photos by Adele Hodde.)

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos by Steve Siefken

It's human nature to be curious, and Morrison-Rockwood State Park is one of those parks that intrigues the inquisitive. First and foremost—what's with the name?

Established in 1971, the 1,164-acre park was named for three prominent features. Most obvious is the portion of the title derived from the community of Morrison, located 3 miles south of the park. The second portion—Rockwood—is a combination of two landscape features: Rock Creek, which flows along the eastern park boundary to its mouth on the Mississippi River 15 miles to the west, and the fact that the park is heavily wooded.

Morrison-Rockwood State Park provides visitors recreational opportunities throughout the seasons.

Another well-known feature of this state park in Whiteside County is Lake Carlton, a stream-fed reservoir constructed in 1969, which not only provides a picturesque backdrop for picnics and hikes, it is claimed by scores of visitors as one of the best fishing spots in northern Illinois.

With 2.9 miles of shoreline, nine fishing piers and a two-lane concrete boat ramp, there is plenty of room for both bank and boat anglers. Since opening 40 years ago, the 77-acre Lake Carlton has been managed for a variety of fish, including largemouth bass, black crappie, rock bass, channel catfish, redear sunfish, bluegill, muskie and walleye. Boaters are advised that the lake has a 10 HP limit and the entire lake is a no-wake zone to protect the wooded shoreline.

Site superintendent Mike Challand and staff also manage a nearby fishery, which has attracted crowds of trout anglers annually for more than 50 years.

The serenity of a new-fallen snow envelopes Morrison-Rockwood State Park.

Located approximately 10 miles east of the park are the Coleta trout ponds. According to Ken Clodfelter, Department of Natural Resources district fisheries biologist, these are the oldest put-and-take trout ponds in Illinois.

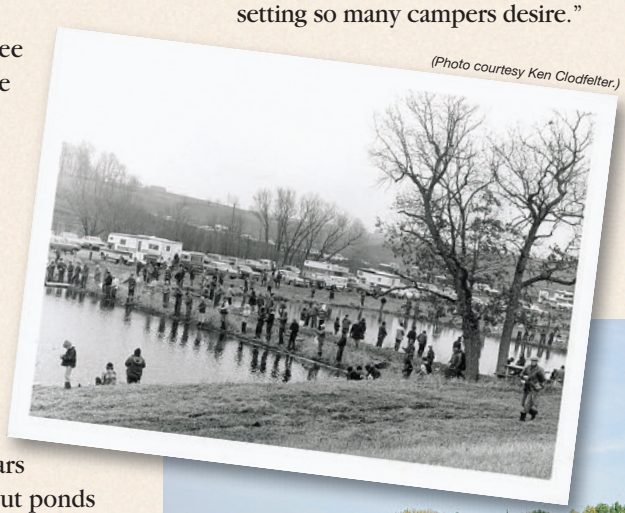
"From 1948 to 1954 the three ponds were used by the state as nursery ponds," Clodfelter explained. "In 1956 the ponds were exclusively used for trout fishing, and for many years these were the only trout ponds in Illinois. It wasn't unusual to see more than 500 people line the banks on opening day."

Today, like the other 36 bodies of water participating in the spring and fall trout-stocking programs, Coleta ponds receive a share of the 130,000 rainbow trout stocked annually in Illinois.

"The angling pressure and parking issues at Coleta have eased since the early years with the addition of other trout ponds in the area," Clodfelter noted. Today, opening day of spring trout season at Coleta draws an estimated 200 anglers.

According to Challand, it is the combination of angling opportunities and camping that draws people to the park every weekend, often from Chicago and beyond.

"Morrison-Rockwood offers a wide range of camping options," Challand explained. "We have 92 Class A (electricity, shower) and Class B equestrian sites located within a heavily wooded area, which provides the quiet, picturesque setting so many campers desire."



(Photo courtesy Ken Clodfelter.)

All campsites are equipped with a grill and table, and disabled-accessible campsites are available. The campground also has a shower building, which is open annually May 1-October 31. Organizations appreciate having access to a more remote camping site for youth-group outings—and use of the fishing equipment the park office maintains so youth may discover the joy of fishing. Each of the four, roomy youth campsites accommodates 25 campers.

Anglers, campers, picnickers and hikers well-versed with the park's offerings

Lake Carlton, and the nearby Coleta trout ponds (inset), have been popular fishing destinations for decades.

A rich mix of habitat types provides plentiful wildlife viewing opportunities.

ness Woods, Cedar Ridge and Horse Trail. Whether your choice is a view of Lake Carlton, a secluded woodland setting or a site with easy access to the 14 miles of equestrian trails, each picnic area has tables and outdoor stoves. The Lakeview and Cedar Ridge shelters are popular locations for group events, including weddings and family reunions.

Activities at Morrison-Rockwood range seasonally, from the popular model-plane airfield drawing crowds throughout the summer to ice fishing and skating on Lake Carlton when weather conditions permit. Fourteen miles of trails located through the rolling landscape provide invigorating excursions for the cross-country skier. In the spring, a 3.5 mile nature trail becomes a magnet for visitors tracking the onset of spring wildflowers, or for birders interested in locating some of the more than 150 species of birds occurring within the park. With squirrels and deer feeding heavily on mast produced by the 900-acre mature white and red oak hardwood timber, the park is a popular site with sportsmen (see sidebar for additional hunting information).

When visitors take pride in a site the volunteer spirit can't be far behind.

Three groups—the Fulton Saddle Club, Tri-City Saddle Club and Whiteside Mounted Patrol—contribute annually to enhancing equestrian services, from installing hitching posts, tether lines and hand sanitizers to clearing the

often make it a priority to visit Rockwood Restaurant and Marina, a lakeside concession facility. Open from April 15-October 31 annually, both the restaurant and the bait/boat rental businesses open at 7 a.m. daily. The restaurant closes at 7 p.m., while the marina facility hours fluctuate seasonally with the setting of the sun. For further information on the marina or restaurant, call (815) 772-3613.

Titles also say it all when it comes to the park's picnic areas: Lakeview, Wilder-

Area hunting

See the site Web site or call the park headquarters for additional details on hunting regulations.

Morrison-Rockwood State Park is comprised of timber woodlots, brushy draws and fence lines interspersed with open grasslands and food patches. Ten acres are open to dove hunting (maximum 30 hunters; drawing and sign out at the check station) from noon-5 p.m. throughout September. Squirrel hunters may access 900 acres of woodlands from Nov. 1 through the Thursday before the first firearm deer season. Firearm deer hunting (daily hunter quota of 25 with special permit) is permitted during the first segment of the firearm season on 1,152 acres of the park; archery deer hunting follows from the day after the close of the first firearm deer season through the end of the season.

Located in Carroll County, 1 mile south of Chadwick on School Road, **Little Rock Creek State Habitat Area** contains 148 huntable acres of cropland, native grasses, hardwoods and wildlife food plots. Purchased in 2002 with Habitat Stamp Funds, a small wetland has since been constructed in the southwest corner of the property. This farm was purchased, and is managed, cooperatively between the Carroll County chapter of Pheasants Forever, the Carroll County Soil and Water Conservation District and DNR. Allowable are small game (free permit through Springfield lottery conducted Sept. 1-30 for rabbit, pheasant, quail and Hungarian partridge sign in/out at site parking lot) and archery deer hunting, and trapping (one permit issued/year for raccoon, opossum, skunk, weasel, mink, muskrat). Upland hunters must complete and return to DNR by February 15th a harvest survey report. Failure to submit the report will result in the loss of hunting privileges on pheasant habitat areas next year. Contact the site or visit the Web site for additional details.

At a glance

Morrison-Rockwood State Park, 18750 Lake Road, Morrison, IL 61270
Telephone: (815) 772-4708
Web site: www.dnr.illinois.gov/parks
Directions: Morrison Rockwood State Park can be reached from Chicago by taking the East-West Tollway (I-88) west to Illinois Route 78. Proceed through Morrison and follow the signs to Damen Road, turning left after 2 miles onto Crosby Road. The park entrance will be about 1.5 miles down Crosby Road.

trails of debris each spring and fall. All proceeds from their Memorial Day poker ride are dedicated toward improving horseback trails at the park.

Their efforts don't go unnoticed.

"A few years ago we worked with a Boy Scout to construct an equestrian sign-in booth," explained Deb Deboer, Tri-City club secretary and member of the Fulton group. "Riders from throughout the Midwest take a few minutes to jot down their reactions, and we're pleased to be able to contribute to an experience that draws wonderful remarks."

Volunteers also banded together to form Friends of Parks, Inc. and have worked tirelessly for several years to develop a bike trail to connect Morrison to the park. Their efforts have resulted in the development of grant applications for monies from the DNR/IDOT-administered federal Recreational Trails Program and DNR's Local Government Snowmobile programs to permit development of an .8 mile 10-foot-wide aggregate walking/biking/snowmobiling trail from the north edge of town.

On your way to or from the park, take a short drive west to experience a drastic landscape change, when the rolling landscape erupts with sand dunes, blowouts and a remnant of the short-grass prairie that once covered this portion of the Mississippi River valley. Deposited by glacial meltwaters, widespread areas along the eastern banks of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers received extensive deposits of wind-blown sand. In some instances the dunes may have reached heights of 20 to 40 feet.

"Settlers quickly realized that the shifting, sandy soils weren't suitable for cultivation," said Ed Anderson, DNR district heritage biologist. "Now a dedicated nature preserve, the Thomson-Fulton Sand Prairie is a rare remnant of the habitat that once occurred within the bottomlands of these major river systems."

A second satellite site provides visitors with the opportunity to put their binoculars to good use viewing wildlife inhabiting a 30-acre wet meadow.

"In conjunction with Waterfowl U.S.A, and utilizing Illinois Duck Stamp monies, a waterfowl refuge was created at Mill Road Marsh," Challand explained. "We've been extremely fortunate to have strong relationships with a number of local groups who have contributed to the biodiversity and recreational opportunities in the area."

Since its creation 40 years ago, public support for the popular state park located on the banks of Rock Creek has been strong—and all signs indicate that trend won't be changing anytime in the near future.

(Photo courtesy Deb DeBoer.)

(Photos by Adele Hodde.)

(DNR staff photo.)

While the focus of an outing may change with the seasons, Morrison-Rockwood State Park offers something for everyone.

A trio of trail-riding groups contributes annually to enhancing the park's equestrian trails and campground.

(Photos courtesy Deb DeBoer.)