At Sam Dale Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, the image of rural Illinois thrives today.

Destination: the Middle of Nowhere

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By John Muchow

"The middle of nowhere" conjures two different places in the American imagination. In movies, when a lost motorist sputters to a halt on some desolate stretch of rural highway, it's always described as the middle of nowhere. Vultures appear overhead. Hopeless drama ensues.

In real life, people aren't so pessimistic about the middle of nowhere. In fact, in today's nervous and crowded world, plenty of us secretly imagine finding a place few other people know about. The idea of rural comfort and tranquility beckons us like a childhood memory. But where to find it?

According to those who've been there, the middle of nowhere is called

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Wildlife food plots ensure quality habitat at the 1,302-acre state fish and wildlife area.

where

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Fragrant pine forests and uncrowded waters invite visitors to Sam Dale Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area.

Sam Dale Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, and it's located—figuratively speaking—just a stone's throw away from the edge of nowhere, straight ahead on the road to recovery.

The directions are easy to follow. Pull off the interstate and drive until you feel better. Drive at least 20 miles or more. When this 1,302-acre state fish and wildlife area in east-central southern Illinois comes into view, the rest of the world—that place you already forgot you left behind—doesn't seem to matter anymore.

"It's peaceful here," site superintendent Denny Massey agreed. "A lot of people do call it the middle of nowhere and that's exactly what they like about this site. It's not hard to find. But relatively few people know about it, and that makes it an undiscovered treasure."

The fact is, there are still a few areas of rural Illinois where wall-to-wall housing developments and shopping malls haven't consumed the landscape. Wayne County has a grand total of one city large enough to require a stoplight. With fewer than 7,000 residents, Fairfield is Wayne County's "big city." Yet people around this region prefer the country, along with the lifestyle implied by living in the middle of nowhere.

Pausing from a lawn-mowing session under a bluebird sky, Sam Dale Lake site technician Lawrence Ward recalled a typical example of the difference in Wayne County life.

"When I sold my house a few years ago, I had to apologize to the man who bought it," Ward explained. "When it came time to hand over the keys, I told him I never once locked the house and so I couldn't find the keys."

Such neighborly trustworthiness conjures nostalgic images of a bygone era.

And while Sam Dale Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area might be affectionately known as the middle of nowhere due to its unpopulated, solitudinous charms, the rural landscape surrounding the site holds much of the same appeal.

Site managers saw little reason to make dramatic alterations on certain fronts.

Reflect on nature in perfect solitude, or sit with companions while sharing natural comforts.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

The site concession business says it all. Visitors can find everything from camping supplies to fishing bait in season.

"Within the park we retained some of the old fence rows from what used to be small farm fields," explained Department of Natural Resources District Wildlife Biologist Steve Kern. "We just let things grow up wild, and that's why portions of the site have that old-farm feel to it; we saw no reason to tear out everything and start fresh."

As wildlife managers often point out, the patchwork of old farms were great habitat for Illinois wildlife, and today's management of those original parcels intensifies the benefits of such diversity. Wild turkeys reintroduced to the area within the past few decades now thrive in amazing numbers.

"It's not unusual to see 250, 300 wild turkeys in a single flock," Kern reported. "One day I tried to count a flock crossing at the dam and quit counting after 150 birds—and there were more turkeys I didn't count than ones I did."

The perfect wildlife habitat surrounding the 194-acre namesake lake, paired with relatively light hunting pressure, make the area a strong favorite among sportsmen as well as campers and other site visitors.

"One day when we were driving through the campground last winter, we saw hundreds of turkeys right here," explained nearby resident Betty Eddings, a regular camper at Sam Dale. "You should've seen them all. They were up on the picnic tables, strutting around everywhere…you never saw so many turkeys in one place."

Eddings and husband Kenneth regularly drive over from Iuka (pop. 598) to enjoy the lakeside camping experience, especially when the fishing opportunities are at their peak.

"When the bluegill spawn is going on, we might catch 150 in one day," Eddings said. "During the month of May, we're camping here about every other weekend."

DNR fisheries biologist Steve Jenkins, who oversees the lake's management, said Sam Dale Lake has plenty of bluegill in the small-to-medium size range, and that presents prolific opportunities for anglers of all ages. Muskies stocked a couple of years ago should trim the bluegill population and increase the average size of those pan fish. But other species present heftier opportunities.

"It has a really good channel catfish population," Jenkins pointed out. "We stock 7,000 nonvulnerable-size channel cats in the lake every year, and it's become a very popular lake for catfish. A lot of 7- and 8-pounders come out of there."

With bank-fishing opportunities present along nearly all of the gently sloping shoreline, owning a boat isn't essential for a visit to the lake. But a public boat launch is conveniently located midway along the south shore. Rental boats are available and a 10 horsepower limit is in effect for all boats.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Class D "primitive" tent camping opportunities provide visitors with a back-to-basics experience for $6 per night.

Facts at a glance

Address: Sam Dale Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, R.R. 1, Johnsonville, IL 62850.
Telephone: (618) 835-2292.
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R5/SAMDALE.HTM.
Directions: Sam Dale Lake is located in northwestern Wayne County. Traveling north or south on I-57, take exit 109, turn East on Route 161 and proceed approximately 22 miles. The park entrance sign is on the left.

Class BE camp sites offer electric hookups for trailers at $13 per night.

Anglers also will find remnants of walleye populations stocked several years ago, with fish in excess of 20 inches reported. There also are quality populations of white crappie and red ear sunfish.

"I've seen pound-and-a-half, pound and three-quarter crappie come out of the lake—and those are nice fish," Jenkins said. Another sport fishing opportunity he strongly encourages is bow fishing for the hefty European carp inhabiting the waters. "There are some big ones in there."

Largemouth bass anglers can expect opportunities for quality bass action.

"There are bass of all sizes in the lake," Jenkins said. "I've seen 7-pounders almost every year and have heard of an 8."

Also popular among anglers are the catchable-size rainbow trout stocked into a pond near the park entrance. Trout are stocked in the spring and fall, and the 10-12-inch fish provide alternative action for anglers.

For hikers interested in seeing the park's backwoods and natural features, a 3.2-mile nature trail, plus a 1.6-mile campground trail wander the pine-shaded lakeshore.

"The equestrian trail gets used a lot," site superintendent Massey noted. "It's about 8.5 miles and about a 2 hour and 15 minute ride."

A concession stand is located near the boat docks (a sign proclaims it's the middle of nowhere) where campers can fetch forgotten supplies. Campers will find two Class B/E campgrounds among the oak-hickory forests, plus a tent and group camping area. An accessible site for the disabled is available.

Hunting programs include bow hunting for white-tailed deer on 930 posted acres, plus a late-winter antlerless-only firearm deer hunt initiated this year. Wild turkey hunters (eight per season) enjoy the amazing spring turkey opportunities at Sam Dale, and dove hunters during late summer and autumn arrive for one of the best dove options in the region.

"The dove program during the past five years has ranked right up there," biologist Kern reported.

While the state fish and wildlife area receives relatively few visitors (128,000 in 2006, compared with the millions reported at sites elsewhere), the low-traffic, rural nature of Sam Dale is precisely what sets it apart.

"I hope they don't put shower buildings in the campground," Betty Eddings suggested with a grin while lounging by her trailer. "It'll bring in too many people."

While the showerless facilities might deter some from extended camp-outs, swimming is allowed in buoyed areas of the lake, and a beach is nearby for spreading out a towel.

As it turns out, the middle of nowhere isn't particularly hard to find. A leisurely, 20-plus mile drive straight east of Interstate 57 on Illinois Route 161 will lead to the south entrance of the site. Along the way, a couple of stop signs exist; but there's little else in the way of a hectic modern world to disturb the senses.

It's like no place, only better.

Like other anglers, Frank Daughtry, Flora, enjoys wetting a line for the catchable-size rainbow trout stocked twice annually at site's trout pond.