The biggest day of the year at this state hunting sit isn't opening day—it's the mid-summer party to

Blind Date at R

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

What happens when you've got just 30 waterfowl hunting blinds available to the public but thousands of waterfowling enthusiasts show up to claim them—all on the same day?

At Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area in west-central Illinois, they throw a party. And not just any party. It's a community-wide celebration lasting more than a day where tailgate cook-offs, amplified music, camp-outs, gun raffles and party cheer bring together as many as 2,000 rural folks to toast friendships and wait for their name to be called.

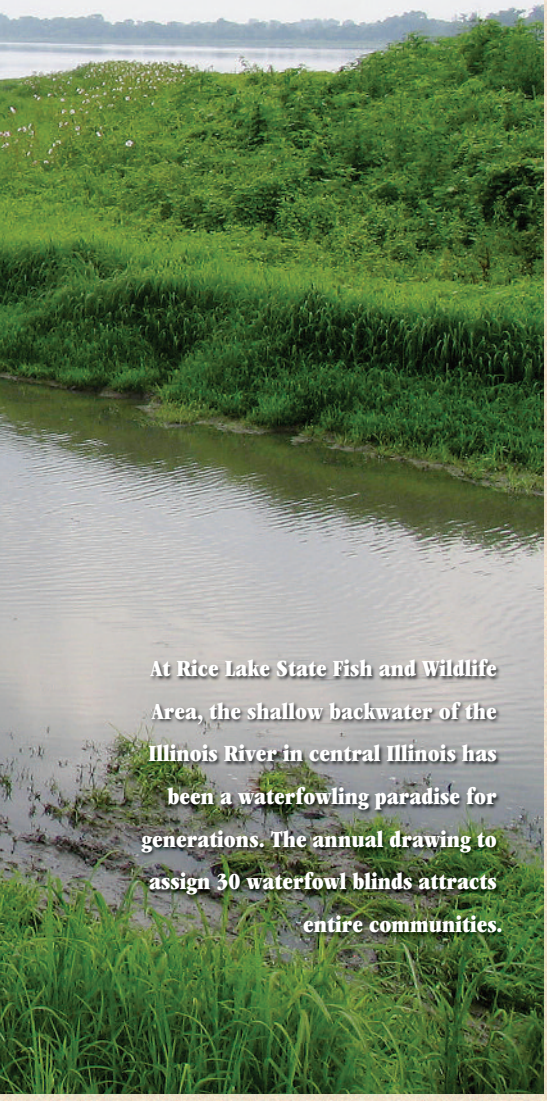
And it all happens months before hunting season even starts.

Bill Douglass, site superintendent at this waterfowling epicenter located in Fulton County near the Illinois River, serves as the microphone-waving master of ceremonies, official greeter and hand-shaker, and logistical overseer of one of the biggest annual events in the region.

It all began decades ago as a simple, lottery-style drawing to offer seasonal rights to the few dozen, state-managed

e near the Illinois River
award hunting blinds.

ice Lake



At Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, the shallow backwater of the Illinois River in central Illinois has been a waterfowling paradise for generations. The annual drawing to assign 30 waterfowl blinds attracts entire communities.

waterfowl blinds at Rice Lake. Thirty blind sites were available. Each year, a summer drawing was held to allocate them to the public.

But since nearly everyone in the community wanted a coveted waterfowl blind at Rice Lake, the annual lottery quickly turned into a mass meeting of the community. Even non-waterfowlers show up now and throw their name in the hat.

At the front of a 100-yard waiting line, attendees register for the annual waterfowl blind drawing.

"Backwater" here is a literal term. Rice Lake is actually a huge, shallow backwater of the Illinois River and sits amid miles of rural countryside with farms and woodlots and vast, marshy bottomland. One glance at the crowd on this midsummer afternoon reveals a local fact of life. Everybody in this part of Illinois hunts and fishes.

And, once a year, everybody from nearby towns such as Buzzville and Goofy Ridge jam this state fish and wildlife area..all for the wild chance their name will pop up. The prize: exclusive, seasonal rights to hunt waterfowl from a state-managed blind on Rice Lake.

"I've never had my name drawn, and I've been coming to the duck blind drawing since I was a teenager," smiles 50-year-old waterfowler Bob Harper of Lewiston. Harper said he arrived two days early to claim a coveted camp site with his trusty hunting lab Corky. Showing up early doesn't improve the lottery odds, he acknowledged. But it does improve the fun.

Harper certainly isn't alone. Some hunters spend an entire lifetime without hearing their name called. Yet others report incredible luck—the kind reserved for beginners.

"The very first time I was here I got drawn," proclaims Mike French of Brimfield. For French and his wife Ann, along with nearly 2,000 other waterfowl fans, participating in the Rice Lake blind drawing is as much a culinary event as it is a social outing. Both Frenches register separately for the afternoon drawing (everybody who registers, even if they intend to "share" the blind with a spouse or pal, must have a valid hunting license and Firearm Owner's Identification card).

Camper Nate Ramsey cooks up late breakfast with pals David Jones, Derrick Dawson and Nick Ramsey (above). Scott Bailey of Bartonville presents the perfect cheeseburgers.

Site Superintendent Bill Douglass serves as master of ceremonies for raffles and the official blind drawing. With eyes closed, Dekota Ashwood, 10, draws the first winner.

But there is a string attached in this husband-and-wife contest, Ann French points out.

"The deal is—and I tell him this every year—if I get drawn, he has to buy me a new diamond," she laughs. "Maybe that's why he's glad I never get drawn."

For many, the near-celebrity status of being a lucky winner takes a back seat to the equal-opportunity offerings of food. There's freshly grilled, tailgate delicacies such as marinated mallard and bacon-wrapped venison. In the morning, it's eggs and sausage, biscuits and gravy—and gallons of coffee served on tailgates. By late morning, as crowds increase and midday nears, a cold beer sounds good to many, and the real cooking begins. Coolers are opened, bags of game lifted out and cold meat hits the grill.

"You hungry? Want some?" strangers offer strangers strolling around the celebration. It's the best-of-the-best sportsman's life being offered here, with favorite recipes showcased for the masses.

Music is playing constantly somewhere. More people stream in. Cars and pickups line the county road for a mile as late arrivals hike in, some pushing strollers. At the registration tent, site superintendent Douglass recites protocol.

"Have your FOID, your license ready," he calls out as he greets each hopeful. The registration line builds by the minute and eventually stretches out of the tent, across the lawn and around a barn. An hour passes.

Suddenly the music is cut. Douglass hops onto a portable stage and announces the first of a series of raffle drawings.

To participate in the blind drawing, a person must be at least 16 and have a Illinois hunting license and Illinois waterfowl stamp from the current or previous year, and a valid FOID card.

This year's drawing for waterfowl blinds at Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area is scheduled for Sunday, July 27. Register from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at the area check station, 3 miles south of Banner on Rt. 24.

"Fulton County D.U." he begins, glancing at a card he was just handed. "OK, you guys are giving away a..." Somebody produces a brand-new shotgun, tags dangling, and hands it up to Douglass.

And so the drawings begin. With each name announced by Douglass over the booming loudspeakers, individual shouts arise from the sea of faces. Someone—always unbelievably happy—waves a ticket. Everybody shouts, cheering. One by one, guns and related hunting gear and all brands of services are awarded to the community until, with an electrifying declaration, the biggest of all moments arrives. Registration for 30 waterfowl blinds at Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, plus five alternates, has ceased. It is time to select winners.

Children crowd forward to be chosen as the official hand to reach into the box of registration cards.

"OK. Here we go," Douglass calls out to the crowd. The official box of registration cards—transparent for fairness—is cranked around several times. More than 1,000 names swirl.

A card is removed. A name is called. Someone screams.

All heads turn but one.

The late Ed Stevenson was nearly 89 when he attended his final Rice Lake blind drawing last summer. "I started hunting when I was 10," Stevenson explained. He managed to hunt one last time in November.