From floodplain to farming to coal mining to freshwater marsh—B
and Wildlife Area has transformed into a unique wildlife area alo

Metamorphosis of the Landscape

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

(Photo courtesy of DNR Office of Mines & Minerals.)

Frank Bellrose was not known for having idle time.

This world-renowned biologist, who died earlier this year at 88, studied the habits and habitats of Illinois River valley waterfowl since 1938, and spent hours driving the reaches of the valley between Havana and Peoria.

That travel time gave him time to watch the biologically rich valley change. Where backwater lakes and bottomland timber once stood, supporting hundreds of hunt clubs and an abundant commercial fisheries, miles of levees were constructed and field tiles placed, allowing a blanket of corn and soybeans to cover the land.

One particular area caught his eye, as within the leveed area an active coal mining operation developed.

Passing the miles and days driving Route 24, an idea began to form. Consulting with George Arthur, a waterfowl biologist with the then Department of Conservation, and Gene Filer, the agency's supervisor of land reclamation, the trio approached Director Bill Lodge with an idea—restore the mined land to a fish and wildlife area.

"The communities of Peoria and Pekin

anner Marsh State Fish
ng the Illinois River.

Thirty years after the area was surface-mined for coal, Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area has developed into a premier wetland, drawing a variety of birds, including killdeer, great blue herons and ring-billed gulls.

were growing steadily," Bellrose explained in January. "Illinois leaders accepted the fact that this proposal would be good for wildlife and provide a valuable, nearby recreational area for citizens."

Mined from 1959 to 1974 by United Electric Coal Company (now Freeman United Coal Mining Company), purchase of the Fulton County property that became Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area began in 1978.

"There were no, or very limited, reclamation laws in place prior to the mid 1970s," explained Dean Spindler, soil scientist with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Office of Mines and Minerals. "Fortunately, the bucket-wheel excavator technique allowed the softer soil materials to be placed on the surface, creating a system of water bodies and a substrate suitable for quick revegetation once mining ceased."

Rob Hilsabeck, DNR district fisheries biologist based in Pekin, recognizes the value the mining technique had on creation of the freshwater marsh.

"With each passing year, Banner Marsh continues to evolve into the type of wetland complex that was once present in the Illinois River valley," Hilsabeck said. "With 5,524 acres of fish and wildlife habitat, this has become an excellent location for outdoor enthusiasts to visit and enjoy."

Bill Douglass, superintendent of the site for nearly 15 years, has watched the maturation of the freshwater marsh ecosystem.

"When the state acquired the property there were 454 different bodies of water present," Douglass said. "In 1994 the hydrology was intentionally—and drastically—changed when the levee district pumps were shut off, allowing the water levels to rise 6 to 8 feet."

That process increased the acreage under water from 534 acres to more than 2,000 acres, and created a large littoral, or shallow, zone of water with emergent vegetation.

Banner Marsh is a popular site for introducing young anglers to the sport of fishing.

Douglass attributes the richness of the habitat to the quality of the water: "A levee system protects the marsh from the direct influences of the river and is a primary factor in these waters being cited in a study in the 1990s as some of the highest quality in the state.

"The primary purpose of the site is for wildlife habitat," Douglass continued, "and the waters support an incredible sport fishery and haven for waterfowl, shorebirds and grassland birds."

The combination of final cut lakes, reaching depths up to 66 feet, and

During a retriever hunt test, Jim Campbell simulated calling ducks while his dog, Rocky, marked the fall of the retriever bumper off the gun barrel.

Three boat ramps provide anglers access to more than 2,000 acres of water at the Fulton County facility.

Banner Marsh has a unique mix of deep- and shallow-water habitats, suitable for fishing from a boat, knee-deep in the water or from the bank. A covered dock adds to the angling options.

shallow ponds provides abundant fish habitats—and angler opportunities 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Anglers may fish from miles of shoreline or by boat, putting in at one of three boat ramps. Adventurous persons with a canoe or kayak can paddle and fish from one end of the marsh to the other—nearly 6 miles with only three narrow portages across gravel roads. A 25 horsepower limit is in place and boat fishing is prohibited during waterfowl season.

Good populations of largemouth bass exist, with weedless lures recommended for catching a lunker within the dense summer shoreline vegetation. A muskie stocking program initiated in 1996 now yields fish in excess of 43 inches.

Anglers find good densities of 12- to 14-inch black and white crappie in the flooded brush, with concentrations present in the spring months around the many beaver lodges. Stocked since 1987, walleye upwards of 18 inches may be reeled in by the skillful angler. Channel catfish are present in the three major lakes, with fish in the 1- to 6-pound range common, and ones in excess of 8 pounds available.

Also present at Banner Marsh are smallmouth bass, bluegill, northern pike, white bass, green and redear sunfish, yellow perch and several species in the catfish family.

"The fisheries at Banner Marsh has reached levels where it is recognized as an ideal setting for organized events," Douglass remarked. "We host tournaments throughout the year, and the youth fishing pond is booked by many organizations conducting programs to introduce children 12 years and younger to fishing."

Adjacent to the youth pond is a picnic shelter, available on a first-come, first-serve basis. Shaded picnic tables and restrooms are available at the three public access areas adjacent to the boat ramps.

Those ramps provide waterfowl hunters access to hundreds of acres where ducks and geese find choice plant and invertebrate foods.

Banner Marsh is one of the few state sites offering permit waterfowl hunting. Late each summer, interested hunters apply for a Banner Marsh waterfowl permit, specifying the dates they would like to hunt from one of 26 designated blinds (including one handicapped-accessible blind donated by Tri-County Ducks and Geese Forever).

"We can accommodate up to four people per blind and will provide a boat and two dozen decoys for each blind—quite a deal for the $10 per person permit fee," Douglass explained. "And if someone doesn't make the permit deadline, if they're willing to show up at 5 a.m. for the daily drawing, the odds are fairly good they will get a blind."

According to Terry Musser, DNR field trial/dog training program manager, the array of habitat and water conditions on the fish and wildlife area also provides excellent conditions for training and field trialing retrievers.

"With the exception of the period just before and during the waterfowl season, training opportunities are available

White pelicans, with a 9-foot wingspan, are an impressive sight and during migration are commonly observed in shallow water areas along the Illinois River, scooping up fish in their large bills.

throughout the year," Musser said. "The site is best suited to enhancing the retrieving ability of sporting dogs, but it also is great for training other sporting breeds."

A dog-training permit must be obtained from the park office. Upland dogs may not be trained during the nesting season.

The Mid-Illinois Retriever and Illinois River Hunting Retriever clubs sponsor retriever hunt tests in the spring at Banner Marsh. Retriever enthusiasts are welcome to attend these events and observe the field work of these very well-trained retrievers.

Facts at a glance

Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area, 19721 N. U.S. 24, Canton, IL 61520.
Telephone: (309) 647-9184.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R1/banner.htm.
Directions: Accessible by U.S. Route 24, running along the west side of the Illinois River, approximately 25 miles southwest of Peoria.
Hunter Fact Sheet: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/hunter_fact_sheet/R1hfs/bnm.htm.
Area facilities: Camping is available at Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, immediately south of Banner Marsh on Route 24.

Hunting programs include upland game hunting, allowed after the close of the Central Zone waterfowl season, and archery deer.

Douglass advised that the grassland and shrub-brush habitats provide a different type of deer hunting than most people are accustomed to, and that archers are restricted to hunting after 1 p.m. during the waterfowl season.

All hunters must sign in and out at the park headquarters.

Like many years ago, the skies over this central Illinois river reach are again filled with flocks of ducks and geese. Herons and egrets stand motionless in the emergent vegetation, eyes trained on fish swimming at their feet. Bald eagles perch in tall cottonwoods along the levee, surveying the wetland for their next meal. The state-endangered osprey has discovered the expansive marsh, building a nest in 2004 but rearing no young—a fact biologists hope is altered in the near future.

All this from an idea that emerged as the odometer ticked off the miles.

Frank Bellrose accomplished much in his 67 years as an internationally recognized, Illinois-based biologist, but he counted among his greatest joys the fact that Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area exists today.

"I get a better feeling about acquisitions like Banner Marsh than I do about any of the research I've conducted," Bellrose said. "It is a great feeling to know you have helped the state develop an area that will be here for generations of people—and for fish and wildlife."

Expanses of shallow water serve as nurseries for Banner Marsh's varied fisheries, and in turn, a food supply for herons, egrets and other fish-eating wildlife.

Banner Marsh fishing regulations and limits

All fish: two pole and line fishing only.
Largemouth or smallmouth bass: 12- to 18-inch protected slot and three fish per day.
Muskie: 42-inch minimum and limit one fish per day.
Northern pike: 24-inch minimum and limit one fish per day.
Channel catfish: no minimum length and limit six fish per day.
Walleye: 14-inch minimum and limit six fish per day.
White and black crappie: 9-inch minimum and limit 25 fish per day.