Dual anniversaries—silver and gold—occur in 2008 for North America's southernmost open-water quaking bog.

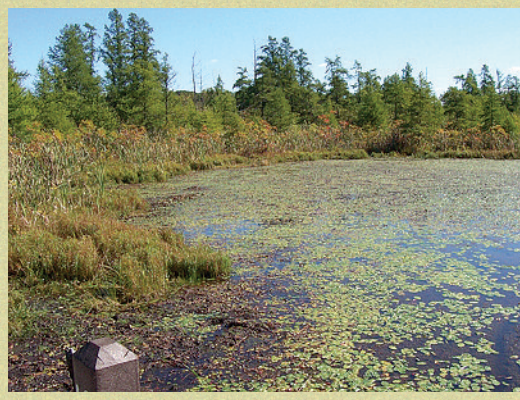
Volo Bog State Natural Area Celebrates Long History

Story By Stacy Iwanicki
Photos By Adele Hodde

More than 11,000 years ago, ice buried in debris left by retreating glaciers melted, forming depressions. Over time, these basins developed into lakes, marshes and bogs, including the southernmost bog in North America, Volo Bog.

Lake County's Volo Bog is filled with dead plants (peat)—from the bottom up and from the top down. The floating peat mat supports plant rarities—carnivorous pitcher plants, starflowers and deciduous tamaracks. Pollens preserved in the peat indicate spruce and birch

Outside the open center of Volo Bog (below), a floating mat of peat supports rare plants, including pitcher plants (above), starflowers and tamaracks.



(Photo courtesy Fred Beach.)

"I remember it was the hawk that led me to the Bog so long ago. A skinny kid on a racer bike scouring Fox Lake back-roads for some remnant of wilderness.... I did not at once see what lay in the valley below, having eyes only for the hawk.... Then I stood stunned. There... springing out of a flat, round sedge marsh, were the green spires of conifers.... I knew this must be a tamarack bog...a secret place, a wilderness of rare birds and orchids. I could not have imagined...one day I would be fighting for its life in a court battle. I saw only the bog—wild and untouched, still mist shrouded in the early-morning sunlight."

Dr. William Beecher,
"The Battle to Save Volo,"
Chicago Tribune Magazine,
Nov. 15, 1970

Volo Bog landmark dates

1957
Volo Bog owner Claude Garland indicated willingness to sell 47 acres to the University of Illinois

1957
TNC prepared a dissertation about Volo and other bogs, citing the need for a comprehensive study of bogs in Illinois, northern Indiana and southern Wisconsin

1957
TNC fund-raising campaign—mostly from teachers and students—netted $40,000 for land acquisition

1958
TNC purchased Volo and Wauconda bogs

Sept. 1968
Lake Co. Zoning Board of Appeals requested to rezone 655 acres for a $94 million development; initially denied by one vote, the request was approved by Lake Co. Board of Supervisors

April 1970
Illinois Attorney General filed suit asking for proof construction would not harm the bog; developer drained 4 feet of water from Sullivan Lake (to which Volo Bog is connected); Lake Co. Building and Zoning ordered a stop to the project; circuit court judge granted permission to continue as long as construction did not affect the bog's water levels

briefly dominated the surrounding uplands, but were replaced by oaks within 200 years.

Arrow points discovered in the area indicate Native Americans hunted around Volo Bog where they also likely gathered blueberries and cranberries. The coming of European-American settlers in the mid 1800s had a continuing effect upon the surrounding land—oaks declined and ragweed increased—but the bog persisted.

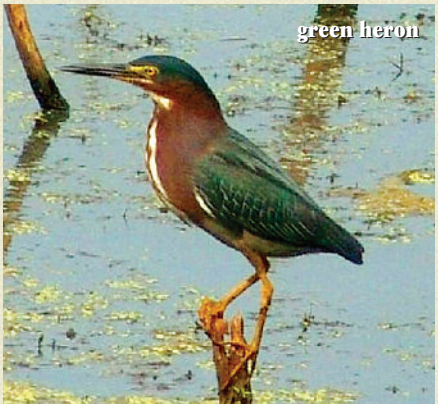
W. G. Waterman, of Northwestern University, first described Volo Bog to the scientific community in 1926 when he wrote: "Old inhabitants say the pond occupied the whole of the open area within the tamarack forest when first visited about 50 years ago...."

While scientists analyzed Volo Bog, local residents carved a living from the

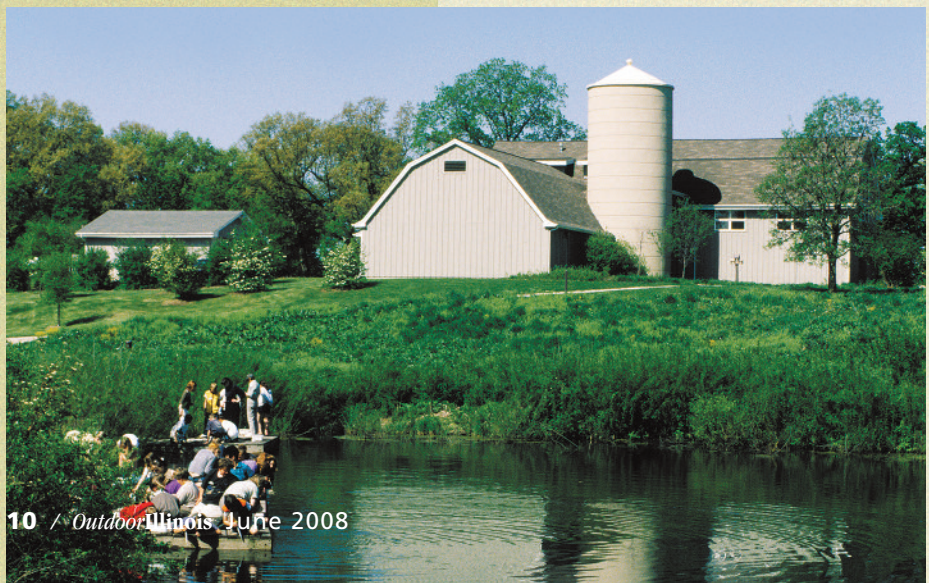
Located in a restored dairy barn (lower left), displays in the Volo Bog nature center provide an overview of bog communities. For total immersion, take a stroll on the boardwalk (above).

(Photo courtesy Arlene Kaziol.)

(Photo courtesy Tom Lowden.)



(Photo courtesy Tom Lowden.)



dragonfly

(Photo courtesy Dale Sanford.)

winterberry holly

(Photo courtesy Tom Lowden.)

sandhill crane

(Photo courtesy Dale Sanford.)

surrounding land. Farmer Sayer's dairy barn was built in the late 1800s, probably from tamaracks—the hallmark tree of bogs. Local residents collected blueberries, skated on the winter pond and treaded carefully on a quaking summer pond. Owner Claude Garland allowed a boardwalk—a single plank—to be constructed into the middle of the bog.

The 1950s saw inklings of environmental awakening and in 1951, The Nature Conservancy initiated a movement to protect and manage Volo Bog.

After TNC acquired the bog in 1958, it was turned over to the University of Illinois for management. At the time, botany class assignments included plant collection, and busloads of students from the U of I and elsewhere collected rare orchids and other unique bog plants. Meanwhile, the private hunt-club had added a go-cart track to expand on member activities of fishing, hunting and trap-shooting. It wasn't apparent at the time, but "scientists" were having more impact upon the ecosystem than sportsmen.

In the late 1960s, the bog that had persisted for 11,000 years was threatened by a multimillion dollar development project, resulting in a two-year court battle for preservation of a buffer zone.

Instrumental in the battle to save Volo Bog were local residents who formed a Save the Bog committee. In 1983, volunteers established the Friends of Volo Bog, which has funded educational programs, helped to facilitate many site projects and helped fight a proposed highway that would have bisected the natural area.

This is a year of celebration at Volo Bog—50 years ago The Nature Conservancy stepped forward to acquire this precious resource, and 25 years ago the Friends of Volo Bog was organized. Volo Bog is a treasure owned by the people of Illinois, and the beneficiary of generations of enlightened and forwarding thinking individuals from the public and private community.

And its secrets remain to be rediscovered with each new generation.

Stacy Iwanicki is the natural resources coordinator at Volo Bog State Natural Area and Moraine Hills State Park in northeastern Illinois.

Once a treasure trove for botanists and plant collectors, today the Lake County bog community provides scientists of all ages a unique research opportunity. And, the artistically inclined find inspiration in the bog's picturesque backdrop and rare plants and animals.

June 1970
U of I turned wetland over to the Department of Conservation (now DNR); dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve

Jan. 1971
state made final offer to purchase land as buffer to Volo Bog

1973
after two years in court, DOC acquired 153 acres bordering Volo Bog for approximately $339,000

Feb. 1973
National Park Service registered wetland as a National Natural Landmark

1977
first Site Superintendent assigned

1979
Volo Bog designated a State Natural Area by the Department of Conservation

1980
old dairy barn/sportsman clubhouse renovated and opened as a visitor center