In one day each year, the Better Fishing Association reaches out to hook more than 700 children—and nearly as many adults—on fishing.

Fishing Volunteers

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Better Fishing Association and Buffalo Rock State Park Staff

Looking around the shoreline and at people out in the boats, it was clear that angler demographics were changing. Missing from the sport were youth.

In northern Illinois, one group of fishermen decided to take matters into their own hands, developing a program of instruction and becoming certified fishing instructors. Now, after 25 years of sponsoring youth fishing programs, the 5,000-plus members of the Better Fishing Association (BFA) still dedicate untold hours each year to helping youth get hooked on fishing—all for the simple reward of watching a child reel in their first fish.

Two events organized by the Better Fishing Association provide youth—and adults—opportunities to discover the sport of fishing.

Founded in 1957, the northern Illinois group was organized with the purpose of preventing the abandonment and dewatering of the Hennepin Canal. In addition to

A simulated fishing pond, complete with felt fish, helps new anglers perfect their casting skills.

youth fishing programs, members today also help clean up the Illinois River and I&M and Hennepin canals.

Today, BFA sponsors two youth fishing events—the annual Baker's Lake Kids Fishing Expo and the I&M Canal Lock 14 Fishing Tournament, events different in focus but complementary in nature.

The May Baker's Lake event is primarily a teaching situation. Participants attend eight 15-minute stations, including learning the basics of fishing safety and ethics, and the rules and regulations every angler must obey. Other stations include the types and advantages of different rods and reels; terminal tackle options, including lures, baits, sinkers and hooks; introduction to the aquatic environment and plant and fish identification; how to clean your catch; how to tie knots; and casting practice. And then, the highly anticipated moment of the day: participants move toward the water for what often is their first attempt at fishing.

In June, participants in the I&M Canal Lock 14 Fishing Tournament compete in two age groups (ages 4 to 12 and 13 to 15), with prizes awarded in numerous categories. Participants are encouraged to bring their own rod and reel, although a limited supply of loaner equipment is available. All participants receive free bait, and leave with a packet of information and basic tackle.

Tom Wall, a charter member and president of BFA since 1998, claims the key to the success of the two events is the number of organizations and volunteers that help out, many of whom return year after year.

"Nearly 150 volunteers turn out each year to assist with the Baker's Lake event," Wall explained. "Last year there were approximately 750 youth in attendance, and when you add in the accompanying adults and spectators nearly 1,600 people were present. At the I&M Canal tournament, 75-plus volunteers have the privilege each year of helping an average of 400 young anglers."

Mark McConnaughhay, site superintendent at Buffalo Rock State Park helps organize the canal event and claims that youth fishing tournaments are an excellent way to introduce children to fishing.

"You can't put a price on the reaction a child has when they catch a fish," McConnaughhay said. "It takes a lot of work to organize enough volunteers for an event of this magnitude, but BFA has years of practice and a formula in place to do a spectacular job. We are pleased to cooperate with them on this event."

Karen Rivera, a Department of Natural Resources streams biologist, claims there is no better way to turn a lot of children—and their parents—on to fishing in such a short period of time.

"The excitement is contagious," Rivera concluded. "Often it is the adults attending who learn the most. Experience proves that when parents witness how easy fishing can be, and what a great family activity it is, it becomes something they make time for."

Whether it is through an organized event or just loading the vehicle with the family and a few fishing basics, take time this summer and make fishing a family fun day.

Mark the dates

On May 20, Peru-area volunteers will conduct the 8th annual Baker's Lake Kids Fishing Expo. The 21st annual I&M Canal Lock 14 Kids Fishing Tournament will take place at LaSalle on June 10. For additional information, visit www.better-fishing-assoc.org.

For an informational packet on how your organization can create a similar youth fishing program, including a script for each learning station, list of visual aids and step-by-step descriptions on how to run an event, write Department of Natural Resources, *Outdoor*Illinois magazine, Youth Fishing Packet, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702-1271.

It takes a team

Coordinating events of the magnitude of the Baker's Lake Kids Fishing Expo and I&M Canal Fishing Tournament requires the input and services of many organizations and volunteers. In association with the cities of LaSalle and Peru and the Peru Rescue Squad, the primary sponsors of the events are the Better Fishing Association, Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Valley Sunrise Rotary Club, LaSalle Rotary Club and the I&M Canal Volunteers.

Prior to the event, DNR stocks the I&M Canal at Lock 14, increasing the chances participants can reel in what often is their first fish.