Something for Everyone

An hour from St. Louis, Carlyle Lake's recreation complex is attractive to all outdoor enthusiasts.

STORY BY KATHY ANDREWS AND P.J. PEREA

Did you know that watching colorful regattas and billowing sails in the sunset, camping in the wild, experiencing life in a cozy cabin and learning about natural resources are all options at one Illinois state park?

In fact, Eldon Hazlet State Park on Carlyle Lake has the distinction of being the premier sailing location in the Midwest. National regattas are held there each year, as well as a local regatta nearly every week from May through October. A special claim to fame occurred in 1994 when the Carlyle Sailing Association, a not-for-profit organization based within the park, hosted the St. Louis Metropolitan area sailing event for the 1994 Olympic Festival Games.

Site Superintendent Gary Tatham notes the other principal activities at Eldon Hazlet are camping, boating and education. The site's numerous cottages are another prime attraction and are nestled in a beautiful natural setting.

"We love the way the park looks—and how it changes from season to season," Tatham remarked. "We have reintroduced hundreds of acres of native prairie grasses and wildflowers, and our nearly 1 million visitors a year really seem to enjoy viewing the native vegetation."

Tatham went on to explain that Eldon Hazlet features the state's largest campground, with 327 Class A sites, 35 Class C sites, a walk-in tent camping area and two rent-a-cabins on the bluff overlooking the lake. At least one-third of the campsites are either on the water or have a view of the lake.

The recently completed Carlyle

Homer Guthrie Pond is a popular fishing and bird watching site. (Photo by John Bunnell.)

Carlyle Lake is the Midwest's premier sailing location. (Photo by Chas. J. Dees.)

Nestled against the bank of Carlyle Lake, the new cottages offer splendid views and comfortable accommodations. (Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Lakefront Cottages offer million-dollar views of the lake. The 14 duplex and six single-unit cottages are available year-round. Accommodations include a bedroom, living room, full-sized bathroom and kitchenette equipped with a microwave, stove, refrigerator and coffee-maker. Tableware, cookware, utensils, towels and linens are provided.

The family-friendly cottages include access to a private dock in the Casey-Dempsey Cove, satellite TV, barbecue grills and a covered porch for watching a beautiful sunset or children playing on the new playground equipment.

"Most families that visit us want to do more than just stare at the sky and look at the water," Tatham said. "For that reason, we gear ourselves to families with children. We have found that if the children are happy and content, then the parents are as well."

Education is an important activity at the park. A full-time interpreter conducts on-site and school-based education programs and organizes children's fishing derbies, youth hunts and weekly campground programs during the prime camping season. More than 800 school children participate in programs each year at the Wetland Education Center.

The swimming pool opened during the summer of 2002, drawing nice crowds from the adjacent campgrounds until it closed just after Labor Day. The pool will reopen Memorial Day.

If all that isn't enough for you, consider touring the more than eight miles of guided hiking trails, including two wheelchair-accessible trails. Along the Cherokee Trail, visit Burnside Cemetery, a restored cemetery containing pre-Civil War tombstones.

The park also has a series of rearing ponds that produce the more than 800,000 fish stocked in Carlyle Lake annually. These ponds provide a great opportunity to learn about resource stewardship and attract birders for viewing ducks, cormorants, herons and egrets.

A new attraction in the park is Homer Guthrie Pond, situated

Information you can use:

Address: Eldon Hazlet State Park, 20100 Hazlet Park Road, Carlyle, IL 62231.
Telephone: (618) 594-3015.
Directions: The park is easily accessible from either I-70 or I-64. Follow Illinois 27 to the park entrance road, three miles north of Carlyle.
Website: http://dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/PARKS/R4/eldon.htm.
Carlyle Lakefront Cottages: For reservations, call toll-free 1-877-342-8862 or email cottages@midwest.net. Two-night minimum stay, three-night minimum on holiday weekends. Deposit required. No pets allowed.
Nearby attractions: Carlyle Lake Project Office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (618) 594-2484; Visitor Center (618) 594-5253; West Access Marina (618) 594-2461; Boulder Marina (618) 226-3223; Keyesport Marina (618) 749-5222; Carlyle Sailing Association Marina (618) 594-3622; and Governor's Run Golf Course (618) 594-4585.

The Eastern massasauga rattlesnake, an Illinois endangered species, is found at Carlyle Lake. This shy, retreating snake is, at an average length of less than 30 inches, the smallest of Illinois' venomous snakes. Massasauga's live in old fields, marshes, bogs and floodplain forests where they feed on small rodents. Few massasauga's remain in Illinois, due to the loss of prairie marshes, their preferred habitat.

The DNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have initiated studies to learn about the home range and habitat requirements of this snake. Researchers from the Illinois Natural History Survey have placed tags and transmitters on several snakes to monitor their movements. Park staff are working to identify winter hibernacula of the snakes and conduct prescribed burns of prairie restorations to occur while the reptiles still are underground.

Have you seen television shows of whale identification using photos? We've got the same process going on in an Illinois State Park! Photographs are taken of all massasaugas and kept in a three-ring binder. Captured snakes are compared with the photographs to determine if it is a recapture or a new snake.

One of the most popular campground education programs at the park is about reptiles. Contact the park office for scheduling information on these summer programs.

Enjoy the wildlife you encounter in the park. Don't handle or disturb any wildlife, regardless if it is a baby bird, raccoon, bat or snake. It is highly unlikely, but should you happen to sight a massasauga rattlesnake at the park, please aid researchers by reporting the sighting to the park office.

(Photos by Adele Hodde.)

The newly completed swimming pool enhances the family orientation of the park. (Photo by John Bunnell.)

across from the campground store. This five-acre water feature is stocked with bluegill, catfish and largemouth bass, and has proven popular for youth fishing derbies and tournaments.

Eldon Hazlet State Park is not only a beautiful park, it's one that provides something for everyone—all while maintaining that welcoming family-centered orientation.

Bird Mecca

To many waterfowl enthusiasts, Carlyle Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area is synonymous with the thousands of migrants that annually flock to this aquatic bird haven—ducks. But there is a lot more going on there than just quacking.

The site, which spans more than 9,500 acres of bottomland hardwood forest, wetlands, grasslands, woodlands and croplands, is home to many other popular game species, such as white-tailed deer, turkeys, squirrels, northern bobwhite, rabbits, geese, ducks and mourning doves. Hundreds of acres of shallow-water wetlands attract a multitude of shorebirds, including common snipe, the state-threatened least bittern, short-billed dowitcher, sora, solitary sandpiper and lesser and greater yellowlegs. Members of local Audubon clubs are regular visitors to the site to view the diversity of songbirds and shorebirds that come there year-round.

"Besides great waterfowl hunting, the site offers tremendous opportunities for bird watching, wildlife viewing, photography or just taking a hike," Site Superintendent Bob Hammel explained. "We have an active pair of nesting bald eagles, and we're one of the few sites that has bald eagles visiting on a regular basis."

With 25 miles of rock-topped levees encompassing four water-controlled subimpoundments, hikers and bikers should have no trouble finding something interesting to see at Carlyle Lake. A recent hike revealed wood ducks and teal lounging around a flooded timber backwater area, double-crested cormorants and great blue herons fishing

Founding Father

Eldon Hazlet was a Carlyle attorney who chaired an effort from March 1955 to May 1965 to create a lake on the Kaskaskia River for flood protection and recreational opportunities. He was recognized by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for "his wholehearted, enthusiastic and untiring support for water resources development in the State of Illinois."

Today, the U.S. Corps of Engineers and the Department of Natural Resources jointly manage 26,000 acres of water and 11,000 acres of public land. In addition to the 3,000-acre Eldon Hazlet State Park and its sister facility, South Shore State Park, DNR manages the Carlyle Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area at the north end of Carlyle Lake.

(Photo by John Bunnell.)

The Burnside Family Cemetery (left) contains 17 headstones dating to 1832. (Below) More than a third of the campsites have a view of the lake.

(Photo by Paul Willms.)

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

An aerial view of the food strips (above) planted for migrating waterfowl. (Right) The diverse habitat attracts more than just ducks and geese.

for a meal along the edges of emergent vegetation, water snakes sunning themselves on the levee path, deer browsing on the abundant greens, frogs and toads snacking on buzzing insects and schools of tiny bullheads waiting for the spring floods to wash them back into the Kaskaskia River.

Much of the site is dedicated to waterfowl management, with approximately 1,000 acres of land providing food plots for migratory ducks and geese.

"We typically plant corn, Japanese millet, milo and buckwheat," Hammel said. "And we also manage, through water-level control, to create several hundred acres of moist-soil food plants, such as smartweed, barnyard grass and sedges."

Hammel said he always encourages school groups, educators and clubs to come out for a tour of this unique mosaic of habitats.

The site is one of the premier waterfowl sites in the state, regularly ranking first or second in harvest each season. Last year's 14,000 bird harvest broke the previous record of 11,700 ducks. This was despite the mediocre 2001 duck season brought on by the unusually mild fall and winter.

Ducks Unlimited is a staunch supporter of the site's waterfowl program, and its national organization and local chapters take an active role. Groups such as Carlyle Lake Waterfowlers, Migratory Waterfowlers and Mississippi Valley Waterfowl help enhance the site's habitat and assist with the repair of levees, planting of food plots and erection of wood duck boxes.

Trapping is allowed on the site with a permit from the site manager, and there also are hunting opportunities for deer and upland game.

Whether you're into hunting birds or just watching them, Carlyle Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area is one place you should definitely visit. For more information, including regulations, call (618) 425-3533.

Hundreds of acres of wetlands offer ample opportunities for duck hunters. (Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Information you can use

Address: Carlyle Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, R.R. 2, Box 233, Vandalia, IL 62471.
Telephone: (618) 425-3533.

Related websites

Department of Natural Resources: dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/PARKS/R4/CARLYLE.HTM.
Tourism: www.carlylelake.com.
Birdwatcher's Checklist (compiled by local grade school students): www.monroe.k12.il.us/websites/dkassebaum/checklist.htm.
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: www.mvs.usace.army.mil/Carlyle.