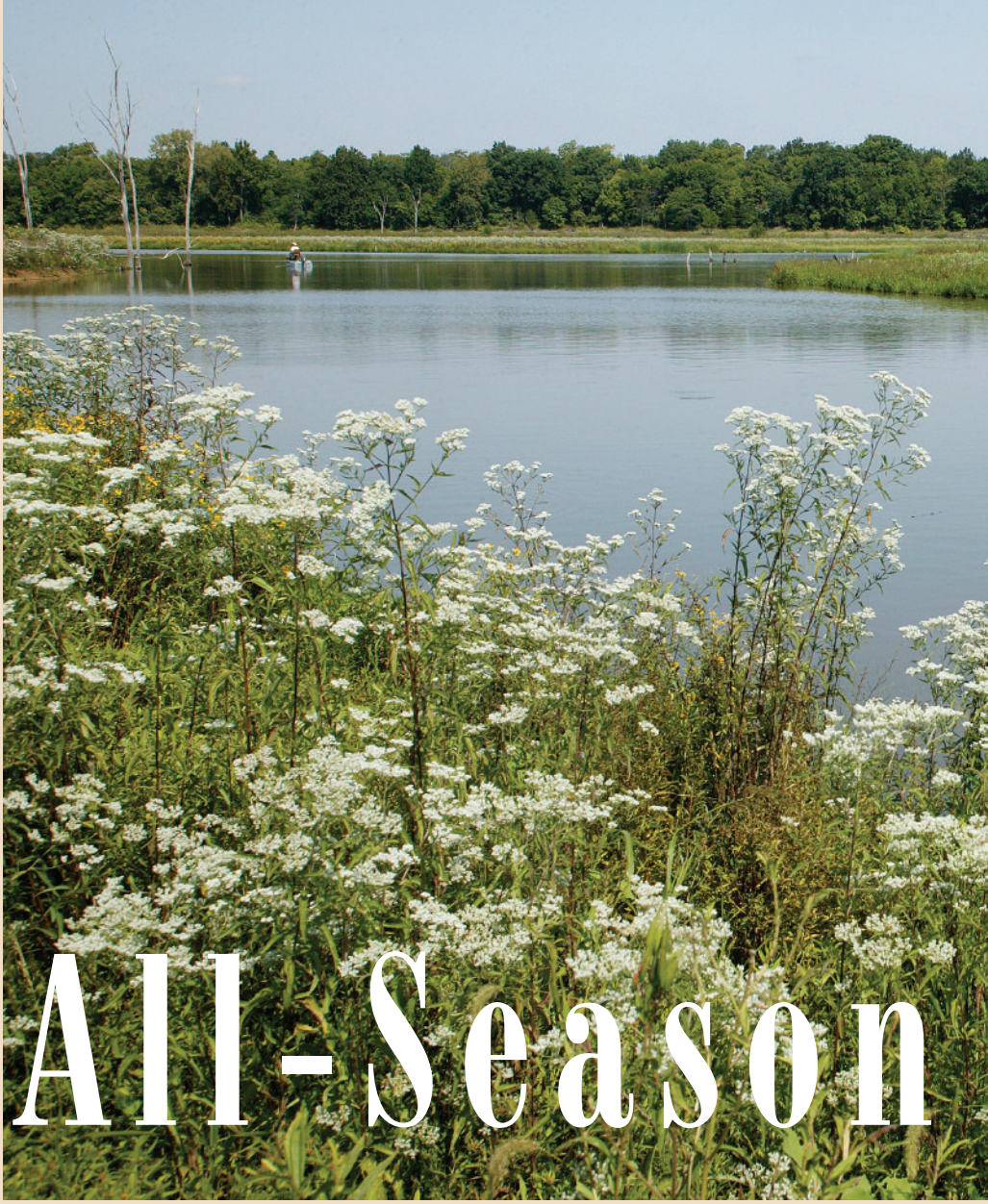
From summer angling to winter waterfowling, Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area, offers sportsmen thousands of acres of opportunity.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde



All-Season

The stories Timothy "T.W." Houk can tell about Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area are enough to make any wildlife enthusiast pack up the car and head toward the central Illinois site.

From his waterfowl blind Houk watched a cormorant land on a goose decoy, spreading its wings in typical fashion to dry. Another day, a 10-point buck swam through his duck decoys, pausing among them to shake his rack and look around. There was the day he saw snow geese drop from the sky the instant two storm fronts collided. Hearing an eruption from the adjacent woodland, he looked up one morning to see a doe drop off a 20-foot cliff, performing a perfect cannonball as she hit the water. After shooting a dove, a stunned Houk observed a Cooper's hawk swoop in, catch the bird mid-air and fly off.

Houk isn't alone in his tales. Given an opening, Site Superintendent Stan Duzan can tell equally amazing experiences.

Walking along the shoreline, Duzan respectfully admired the details of a bald eagle's talons as he slowly passed under the low-perched bird. For several mornings while working on a water control structure, five otter pups scrambled for fish within 10 feet of him, with the more cautious mother growling a short distance away. One fall day, Duzan stopped the truck on the road to watch 40 turkeys feeding in a frost-covered sunflower field.

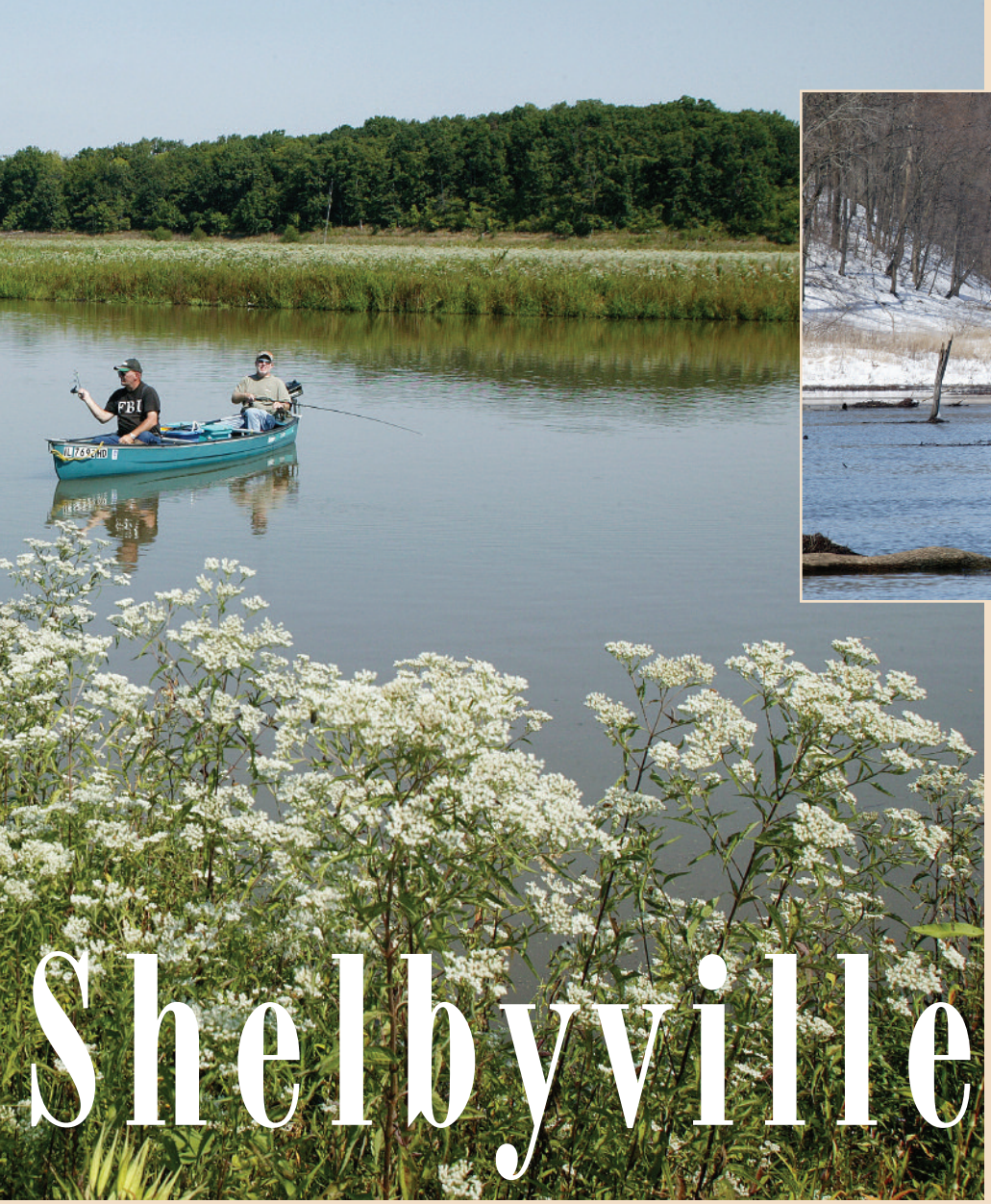
These experiences all lead to one conclusion: The wildlife restoration projects taking place at Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area are working.

The fish and wildlife area is leased from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and divided into two management units, each surrounding one of the two rivers feeding the 11,000-acre Lake Shelbyville.

Situated just west of Bethany, the 2,500-acre West Okaw River Fish and Wildlife Management Unit is composed

(Photo courtesy Joe McFarland.)

A sunny Sunday afternoon in April brought morel mushroom hunters Tammy and Kyle Bryant to the Fish Hook area of Lake Shelbyville, while Alyssa Lawson, 6, hangs on for the ride.



Shelbyville

Whether the day brings sunshine or snow, central Illinois' Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area attracts wildlife, and those who enjoy a day outdoors.

primarily of fencerows, farmland and prairie restorations, and a hotspot for pheasants, quail and rabbits. Travel Route 121 a few miles east of Sullivan to discover the rolling woodlands of the 3,700-acre Kaskaskia River Fish and Wildlife Management Unit, where wild turkeys, squirrels and whitetails are more common.

"The management goal for these areas is to promote diverse habitats that support a variety of wildlife species, and to provide quality hunting, fishing and wildlife watching opportunities for the public," explained Duzan. "With the Inn at Eagle Creek nearby, and camping and picnicking opportunities available at Eagle Creek and Wolf Creek state parks and COE facilities around the lake, the emphasis of the fish and wildlife area remains on the habitat and supporting recreation."

Management of these Moultrie County lands involves planting wildlife food plots, creating prairie restorations, mowing and chemical applications to stem the spread of exotic species, seasonal draw downs and shallow flooding of lands to create habitats for waterfowl and shorebirds, and more—all in the name of habitat.

"Upland and waterfowl hunting are big here," Duzan said. "We draw sportsmen from Decatur, Champaign, Mattoon and Charleston, and from as far away as Indiana and southern Illinois."

Nearly 600 acres of the site are managed for ducks.

"By controlling the depth and duration water covers five waterfowl subimpoundments we are able to produce an abundance of moist-soil plants," said Duzan. "It is this mid-migration food supply that attracts seasonal flocks of

Former agricultural fields, fencerows and restored prairies make ideal grounds for hunting rabbits, pheasants and quail.

Deptford Pink
Dianthus armeria

Sneezeweed
Helenium autumnale

Agrimony, *Agrimony* sp.

Located on a steep hillside over looking Lake Shelbyville, the Fish Hook Waterfowl Area hill prairie provides spectacular summertime vistas.

ducks, geese, shorebirds, rails, snipe and other wetland-dependant birds."

With a dozen decoys, a gun and waders, hunters can quickly set up at the walk-in sites available at the Dunn, McGee and Johnson Creek waterfowl areas. Two blinds (covered with brush by volunteers during the summer months) are available at each site, with some set up on a pivot system to accommodate changing wind conditions.

Additionally, a drawing is held the first two days of duck season for hunting 38 staked sites (six have floating blinds), after which they are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Contributing to the continuation of the sport is the site's youth waterfowl hunt, a program growing in popularity each year. Participants must obtain a free site permit and hunt with an adult.

Elsewhere on the site, sunflower fields draw thousands of mourning doves each fall. Opening day will find nearly 300 hunters waiting patiently for a chance at one of the 200 spots. Testament to the site management practices is the fact dove harvest records show Shelbyville SFWA consistently within the top three dove sites managed by the state.

Ample opportunities exist for pursuit of other game. Blaze-orange wearing hunters focus on fencerows and brushy areas during rabbit, pheasant and quail season, while camo-covered sportsmen watch silently within woodlands for movement of gray and fox squirrels.

Spring turkey, fall archery turkey and shotgun and archery deer hunting also are available to those successful in obtaining a site specific permit issued through the statewide draw.

Furbearer hunting—raccoon, opossum, fox and badger—follows statewide seasons and regulations, with the exception of coyote and skunk which are open only during fox season. All require a free site permit.

On the first Saturday in October, the site staff conduct a drawing for the 20 available trapping permits. Trapping can take place only in designated furbearer management areas.

Additional hunting and trapping information is available on the Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Web site (see sidebar) or the annual *Hunting and Trapping Digest*.

As popular as the site is during hunting season, it is the ample fishing opportunities that draw visitors 365 days a year.

Bank fishing is popular along both rivers, and boat fishing conditions are best in the spring when river levels are ideal. In the fall and spring, many anglers target the spectacular crappie population, and from April though June the emphasis shifts to white bass and walleye. Catfish are in high demand throughout the year.

(Photo courtesy of Kevin Wright.)

(Photo courtesy of John Muchow.)

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(Photo courtesy of John Muchow.)

Like scores of other sportsmen, T.W. Houk enjoys the diversity of hunting opportunities available at Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area.

Six small boat ramps and numerous walk-in parking lots make it easy to access 7 miles of each river. A disabled-accessible fishing pier and a loading dock are located on the Kaskaskia River. No barrier exists between the rivers and Lake Shelbyville, providing visitors the opportunity to travel down river and explore the 250 miles of wooded shoreline the lake offers.

"The shallow nature of the two rivers makes bank fishing a great family experience," Duzan claimed. " All you need for a great day of fishing is to pull on a pair of boots and bring your fishing license, a bucket, fishing pole and bait."

Additional angling opportunities can be found at two small ponds on the Kaskaskia unit and three on the West Okaw unit where anglers can catch their limit of largemouth bass, bluegill, redear and channel catfish.

No matter the season or purpose you have for exploring the woods and waters of Shelbyville SFWA, little effort is required to find hidden habitat jewels and wildlife-watching opportunities.

Both birders and waterfowl hunters utilize the 5.5-mile Fish Hook Trail (Kaskaskia unit), where they can view waterfowl, shorebirds and bald eagles using the area, and can take a peek into the adjacent wildlife refuge. An accessible observation deck is located along this

Wildlife management practices include planting sunflower fields to enhance the dove-hunting program.

Facts at a glance

Address: Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area, R.R. 1 Box 42-A, Bethany, IL 61914.
Telephone: (217) 665-3112.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R3/SHELBY.HTM.
Directions: Located between Decatur and Mattoon, the site can be accessed via Route 121.
Nearby Facilities: Eagle Creek State Park: (217) 756-8260 or www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R3/EAGLECRK.HTM; Wolf Creek State Park: (217) 459-2831 or www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R3/WOLFCREK.HTM; and, U. S. Army Corps of Engineers: (217) 774-3951 or www.mvs.usace.army.mil/Shelbyville.
Additional Site Features: Dog training is allowed from September through March. Horses and bicycles are not allowed on the trails. A disabled access trap range is located at the West Okaw unit and open April through January. An archery range is located south of the site office, across Route 121, and open year-round. Off-highway vehicle use is prohibited.

trail, with a second deck overlooking the McGee Waterfowl Area (West Okaw unit).

A visit to the Fish Hook Waterfowl Area in June will delight the eyes when more than 50 species of prairie plants reach their prime blooming period. Tucked between the access road and lake, the steep slopes of this hill prairie, now a designated natural area, helped protect it from development.

Equally spectacular and much larger, six shallow wetlands within the Margaret Guzy Pothole Wetlands Land and Water Reserve attract tens of thousands of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds, and the surrounding grasslands support area-sensitive grassland birds.

"Guzy is a perfect example of the saying 'If you build it they will come'," Houk said of the transformation once water control practices were put in place, the natural potholes filled and wetland species not seen for more than 100 years returned.

Located 2 miles north of Findlay, this area is used for bird watching, education tours and research. Seeds harvested from the 159-acre prairie are now used to restore prairies throughout the fish and wildlife area.

T.W. Houk has seen a lot in the years he has traversed Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area.

"Not knowing what amazing sights await me, I find I can't sleep the night before opening day," Houk said. "I just stay awake, recalling previous years and anticipating the upcoming season."

His visit might include watching a family of river otters, a buck scenting the wind for a doe or a flock of pelicans soar the overhead thermals. He could hear the hushed call of a secretive grassland sparrow or the cackle of a pheasant flushed from its brushy retreat. He could sit silently, taking in the wonder of a spring woodland colored with warblers or an adult bald eagle sitting on a stark wintery branch.

Views from observation decks at Shelbyville State Fish and Wildlife Area change with the seasons.

"Even though they are alike in many regards, each Illinois fish and wildlife area is a little different," Duzan said. "It is that uniqueness that makes visiting the various Illinois facilities—and visiting them throughout the year—so interesting."

A barn once surrounded by agricultural fields now marks the location of the restored shallow wetlands at Guzy Pothole Wetlands Land and Water Reserves.