Pyramid State

The largest state park in Illinois was once filled with coal. Today, Pyramid State Park is full of wildlife and sportsmen.

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Adele Hodde

Dozens of lakes and ponds are tucked within the old, unreclaimed portion of Pyramid State Park. Some of these hard-to-reach bodies of water hide excellent fishing opportunities.

Outdoorsmen have known for years that old, inactive mine property can offer some pretty worthwhile sporting opportunities. Those old gravel pits down the road, for example, might be loaded with lunker bass and bluegill the size of dinner plates. Every angler knows the secret. But specific details are whispered only among friends. Or that marshy, pothole-filled quarry out by the river might become a duck-hunting paradise each November. Hunters, like anglers, discuss these choice, overgrown hotspots with quiet reverence.

The fact is, for as long as there have been old mines that feature water and upland habitat, sportsmen have sought access to these magnets for fish and wildlife. Those who've been there know what it's like to enter into a sportsman's paradise.

If a single, old mine that's overgrown can offer legendary hunting and fishing, what happens when thousands of acres of former mine land—some of it rough and rugged abandoned mine dating back to the 1920s, some of it smoothed-over recent surface mine—becomes available to sportsmen? And what if all of the lands were free and open to the public and were included within Illinois' largest state park? The opportunities could be endless.

That site can only be Pyramid State Park in southwest Illinois.

"With all of the different kinds of habitat, it really offers something for everybody," said Art Rice, a grant administrator and mining historian for the Department of Natural Resources'

Park

Outboard motors up to 10 h.p. are permitted at the 24 different lakes with boat launches. Elsewhere, portable boats are permitted.

Office of Mines and Minerals. Rice explained the different kinds of habitat at Pyramid State Park (named for the old Pyramid Coal Co. which began a surface mine operation there in 1926) are the result of the evolving mine reclamation laws.

"Our first reclamation law began in 1962," Rice noted. "Since Pyramid Coal went out of business in 1959, all of the original 3,000-plus acres of the state park are unreclaimed mine land."

The story of Pyramid State Park begins with coal mining and continues to be influenced by mining today. The park originally was created as a state recreation area in 1968 when 924 acres were transferred from Southern Illinois University, which had ongoing research at the old Pyramid mine. Additional lands were soon added and a total of 3,200 acres of mostly mined, unreclaimed land represented Pyramid State Park throughout the 1970s and 80s. A small portion of 20 acres of hardwood forest, never mined, remained on the west edge of the new park. As trees grew up around the gravelly hills and lakes where mining had been active, wildlife found a new home. Deer and turkeys flocked in. Some of the mine ponds and lakes had been stocked even while mining was still active in the 1940s and 50s, and anglers began to make some remarkable catches of largemouth bass and panfish.

The rugged, sometimes dense vegetation not only provided great cover for wildlife, it made hunting and fishing a sporting challenge for outdoorsmen. Access to "secret" ponds and lakes within the seemingly endless rows of mine hills required a bit of tenacity to be reached. But that's the beauty of a secret spot—access is never easy. A few gravel roads and primitive trails offered access to some of the old mine hills and boat launches on larger lakes. But Pyramid remained a rough landscape of hidden treasure for years.

And then the state park added something new. In 2001, roughly 16,245 acres of reclaimed mine land adjacent to the park were acquired by the Department of Natural Resources, then linked to the old portion of the site. That acquisition created the largest state park in Illinois.

Covering nearly 20,000 acres in the heart of Illinois coal country, this former mine-turned mega state park would appear to be nearly as large as a small county. Wherever one stands

Designated as an Important Bird Area by the Audubon Society, thousands of acres of shrub and grassland at the reclaimed portion of Pyramid provides habitat for nesting and migratory bird stops.

(Photo by Brian Tang, www.hardrain1.com.)

within the site, it appears the entire landscape, from horizon to horizon, is nothing but Pyramid State Park as far as the eye can see.

What's more, this sportsman's jewel is being managed with a specific emphasis on providing quality hunting and fishing experiences. For anglers, that means stocked lakes and ponds provide everything from trophy large-mouth bass to bruiser-size catfish. With the acquisition of scores of little ponds and lakes that already existed on the newer, reclaimed portion (a 16,245-acre behemoth divided for management purposes into three defined areas), DNR District Fisheries Biologist Shawn Hirst decided to mix things up.

"With so many separate bodies of water, I proposed stocking more than the usual mix of bass, catfish, red ear sunfish and bluegill in all of the lakes," Hirst explained. Realizing some of the mine lakes were quite deep—filled with cool water—Hirst decided to offer an unexpected variety of sport fish found only in cooler waters up north. Some bodies of water at Pyramid feature smallmouth bass, while others have muskie, northern pike and walleye.

"I call it golf-course fishing," Hirst said. "Go to one fishing hole for one species, move on to the next hole for a different species. It struck me as a great opportunity to offer a unique fishing experience."

And there is no shortage of opportunities. One could fish a different pond or lake every day for weeks at Pyramid and still not have fished all of the bodies of water located at Illinois' largest state park. The site office provides maps of all of the lakes with a list of the species present in 23 different bodies of water. Know that some of the man-made lakes within the old portion of Pyramid are hard to reach, and some of the bodies of water you'll encounter are little more than steep-sided ditches in the gravel.

But many of the fisheries, including the 23 listed on the site map, are clearly worth the effort to seek them out.

Mike Brand, a site technician at Pyramid, said he sees many devoted anglers slip off into secret fishing holes within the park—and it's obvious they're on to something good.

Spring wild turkey hunters have until 1 p.m. daily to bag a gobbler at Pyramid. After 1 p.m., morel mushroom hunters flock to this popular morel destination.

Pyramid offers 10,000 acres of archery-only deer hunting on the Captain and Denmark Units. It's the only state site that provides such a large acreage dedicated to archery-only deer hunting. Firearm deer hunters can hunt during the late winter antlerless-only season on these units to harvest female deer.

"Fishermen are tight-lipped about their secrets," Brand says. "But the fact they get out there even in cold weather, long before the spring spawning season, shows they're more than just die-hards."

For boaters, the park has boat launches on 24 different lakes. A 10 horsepower limit applies on all lakes. Even at ponds and lakes where there is no boat launch, portable boats such as canoes or kayaks are permitted. Note site-specific regulations posted at each pond or lake.

And while fishing is offered throughout most of the year somewhere within Pyramid, certain bodies of water are closed to anglers during waterfowl hunting season. There's a good reason: Pyramid has become a major waterfowling site in the region.

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

As Illinois' largest state park, Pyramid provides vast, panoramic views of a wild landscape that, until recent decades, was actually an active coal mine.

"Hunters are taking about 3,500 ducks on the site each year," said DNR District Biologist Rich Whitton, who manages the upland habitat and wildlife programs at Pyramid. "That's even more than the traditional, top waterfowl sites such as Union County Conservation Area."

While fishing is allowed year-around within the older, unreclaimed portion of Pyramid (no waterfowl hunting is allowed there), the newer, 16,000-plus acres are devoted to migratory bird hunting in season. Divided into three separate management units known as Galum, Captain and Denmark (named for former mine operations there), the newer, reclaimed mine land features 48 staked areas for waterfowlers, with daily blind drawings on-site. A hunter fact sheet listing the site-specific rules for all areas can be picked up at the site office, or accessed online (see At a Glance).

Yet waterfowling isn't the only migratory bird attraction.

"Last year Pyramid was the No. 1 site in Illinois for dove harvest," Whitton pointed out. "It even beat out Horseshoe Lake near St. Louis, which had been the top spot for years." With vast, open grasslands and crop fields, there's plenty of room for hunters to share. "I've seen as many as 400 hunters on opening day," Whitton added.

For upland game hunters, quail populations are doing quite well amid the rolling grasslands. Whitton reports spotting coveys of more than 20 birds—an attractive statistic for both hunters and field-trial competitions that dog owners and equestrians engage in between Sept. 1 and April 15. Deer and turkey hunting also are major draws for sportsmen.

Managed as a quality hunting site, Pyramid limits the number of deer and turkey hunters onsite. Archery as well as firearm deer hunting are offered, and bucks must have at least four points on one side to be legal.

"We've tried to provide a high-quality hunting experience, whether it be dove, quail, duck, deer or turkey," Whitton said. "We don't want it to be over-hunted."

At the foundation of great hunting opportunity is great habitat, and Pyramid offers wildlife plenty of habitat not found elsewhere. Whitton said a number of rare grassland species—species that require large, open areas of grassland—have adopted the reclaimed mine land at Pyramid.

"It's a mecca for threatened and endangered grassland birds," the biologist noted. "The northern harrier, short-eared owl, you name it." Even the state-endangered greater prairie-chicken might do well here, which is why some have proposed releasing a population of prairie-chickens here to increase the number of Illinois sites where the rare bird exists.

So remarkable are the birds that utilize Pyramid, it has been identified as an Important Bird Area by the Audubon Society. Trumpeter swans can be spotted there during the winter.

When spring arrives, Pyramid heats up for both anglers and hikers, especially those seeking wild turkeys and morel mushrooms. Turkey hunting ends at 1 p.m. daily during the spring season (mushroom hunting is prohibited before 1 p.m.), and some 16 miles of hiking and equestrian trails provide access to hotspots.

Campers will find primitive sites (no water or electric) at three different campgrounds within Pyramid. Construction of a rent-a-cabin is under development.

As hunting season kicks into high gear, this massive state park with its diversity of habitats—everything from rolling grasslands and lakes, hardwood and pine forests and dense, wildlife-rich unreclaimed mine land—will be a magnet for sportsmen and wildlife watchers. Not only is Pyramid State Park the largest state park in Illinois, when it comes to a sportsman's paradise, it really is the biggest thing out there.

At a Glance

Pyramid State Park, 1562 Pyramid Park Road, Pinckneyville, IL 62274
Telephone: (618) 357-2574
Web site: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/pyramid.htm
Directions: Located in southwest Illinois in Perry County, Pyramid State Park is 4 miles south of Pinckneyville. The main park entrance is on Illinois Route 152, 1 mile west of Illinois Route 127.