From boating and backpacking to rugged camping in the wild forests, Kinkaid Lake is everybody's wild choice.

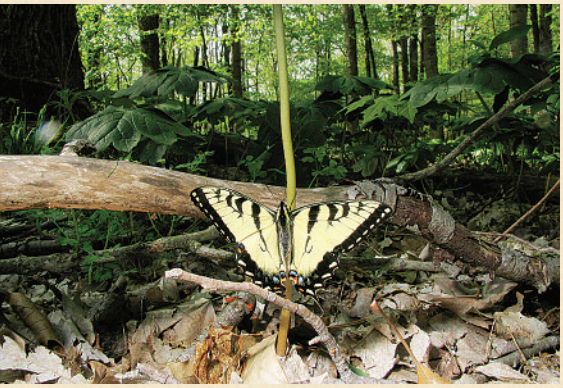
A Kinkaid for Everyone

Lunkers await fishermen on the more than 2,750 acres of water at Kinkaid Lake. Bass anglers occasionally get surprised by muskie strikes—or big walleye.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

The mention of "Kinkaid Lake" near Murphysboro in southwest Illinois conjures up so many different images—and so many wildly different opportunities for so many different people—it's almost as if a thousand different Kinkaid Lakes exist.

Mention Kinkaid to upland game hunters and smiling nods of recognition appear. For owners of fast boats and water skis, the word Kinkaid is always received with a quick grin. Naturalists pause, then smile, imagining that unique habitat where an endangered species can be found. Aboard large houseboats where summer parties include barbecue and music, smiles broaden.



And then there are the Kinkaid Lake anglers, whose understanding of Kinkaid might be a 10-pound walleye, or a 50-inch muskie, or a 3-pound crappie, or a 7-pound largemouth bass. Still others know Kinkaid as the essential aquatic resource for a thirsty business and residential community, as hundreds of millions of gallons of water get pumped out of Kinkaid's 2,750 acres annually to supply 25,000 locals in 10 nearby communities.

And then there are the waterfowlers who flock to the lake's peninsulas and bays and hunker down for ducks and geese during the fall and winter. Add to the list the campers. And the equestrians. And the mushroom hunters. And the nature photographers. And on and on.

Whatever the outdoor interest—and people have plenty of interest in the outdoors in this part of Illinois—there's something for everybody at Kinkaid Lake, located about three and a half hours south of Springfield near Murphysboro in southwest Illinois. And here's the best part: All of the lands surrounding the lake are public property, collectively managed by three agencies, including the Department of Natural Resources, the Shawnee National Forest and the Kinkaid-Reed's Creek Conservancy District.

"Kinkaid Lake represents a lot of different things to a lot of people," agreed Lou Strack, a local conservationist who's worked for years to improve and

Roughly 90 miles of rugged, forested shorelines limit bank-fishing opportunities while offering a scenic landscape.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

maintain the entire Kinkaid watershed. "Some see Kinkaid as a place to water ski or climb on the rocks around the spillway in the summer. Others see it as a local water supply or a place to go hiking or deer hunting. One thing everybody has in common is the understanding that this lake and the property around it belong to the people—and many people have worked hard and even fought to protect it."

Few have worked harder to keep this source of local pride in good condition. In 1995 Strack helped create Friends of Kinkaid, a citizen organization devoted to preserving and protecting the wild lands around the lake. A recent volunteer lake cleanup in April, sponsored by Friends of Kinkaid and another conservation-minded group, the Shawnee Muskie Hunters, netted 4 tons of trash from the waters and shores.

"People are willing to take care of land they own," Strack pointed out.

The property signs might look a little different, depending on the location. But the land is all public property. At Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, 3,685 acres of state-managed lands await visitors. A popular, multi-lane boat launch maintained by DNR is the primary access and starting point for many visitors to the lake. And once afloat, boaters will discover the waters spread out for miles of shoreline where rugged sandstone cliffs and wild forests offer endless opportunities for recreation. Adjacent to the main boat launch off Illinois Route 149 (at the southeast end of Kinkaid) is a busy restaurant and marina concession operated through the Kinkaid-Reed's Creek Conservancy District. The District maintains nearly 500 acres around Kinkaid, including the Glenn Schlimpert Recreation Area where picnickers can enjoy a pavilion with picnic tables, grills, playground equipment and a nearby boat dock.

Conservancy President David Fligor said anyone can reserve the pavilion for family picnics and other gatherings for a simple $20 deposit.

"The best part is, you get your $20 back if you take care of the place," Fligor said.

Adjoining the Conservancy District's water plant facilities is DNR's Paul Ice Recreation Area, which also features pavilions and grills and picnic tables for day use. Elsewhere, at Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, hunters can participate in the state's upland game, deer and turkey seasons as well as waterfowling.

"The hunting regulations match the statewide regulations," explained Site Superintendent Robert Catt. "The only difference is that there's a hunter check-in box at the parking areas. And I want to emphasize the importance for hunters to check in and out when they visit the state fish and wildlife area because our federal funding is directly tied to the hunter participation."

The Shawnee National Forest offers thousands of acres of public land around Kinkaid. In fact, the federal Shawnee property—all public and open for visitors—represents the largest amount of public land around the lake.

"You can camp anywhere in the Shawnee around Kinkaid," pointed out DNR Conservation Police Officer Chris Mohrman, who regularly patrols the lake and its surrounding forests. "But you have to camp a minimum of 150 feet away from the shore."

Camping in the forests managed by DNR and the Conservancy District is not allowed, yet nearby private camp-

Summer recreation aboard houseboats includes everything from live music and swimming to barbecue cook-offs.

grounds, such as Sharp Rock Falls, or the nearby Lake Murphysboro State Park, provide full-service camping facilities.

"The great thing about Kinkaid that I tell people is that you can climb into a boat, go anywhere on the lake, put the boat ashore almost anywhere you want, get out and do almost anything," Mohrman added. "The speed limit on the lake is 50 miles per hour during the day and 25 miles per hour at night—and the no-wake areas are clearly marked."

The tremendously popular spillway area, which includes a natural, rocky waterfall, offers visitors cool relief from the midsummer heat of southern Illinois. Nearby students from Southern Illinois University often crowd the spillway for summer recreation. Yet the spillway remains a family-friendly spot, thanks to a recent regulation change.

"The entire spillway area is alcohol-free," Mohrman noted. "But it's still open to the public for swimming and other recreation."

A popular summer retreat during warm afternoons, the spillway at Kinkaid Lake remains one of the favorite local destinations.

A male eastern box turtle—a frequent sight in the forests surrounding Kinkaid—marches toward fall hibernation.

But watch your step.

"The Kinkaid Lake basin is home to two of the four venomous snakes known to occur in Illinois," advised DNR Natural Heritage Biologist Scott Ballard. "So be careful when hiking. But also know that all snakes are protected on state property."

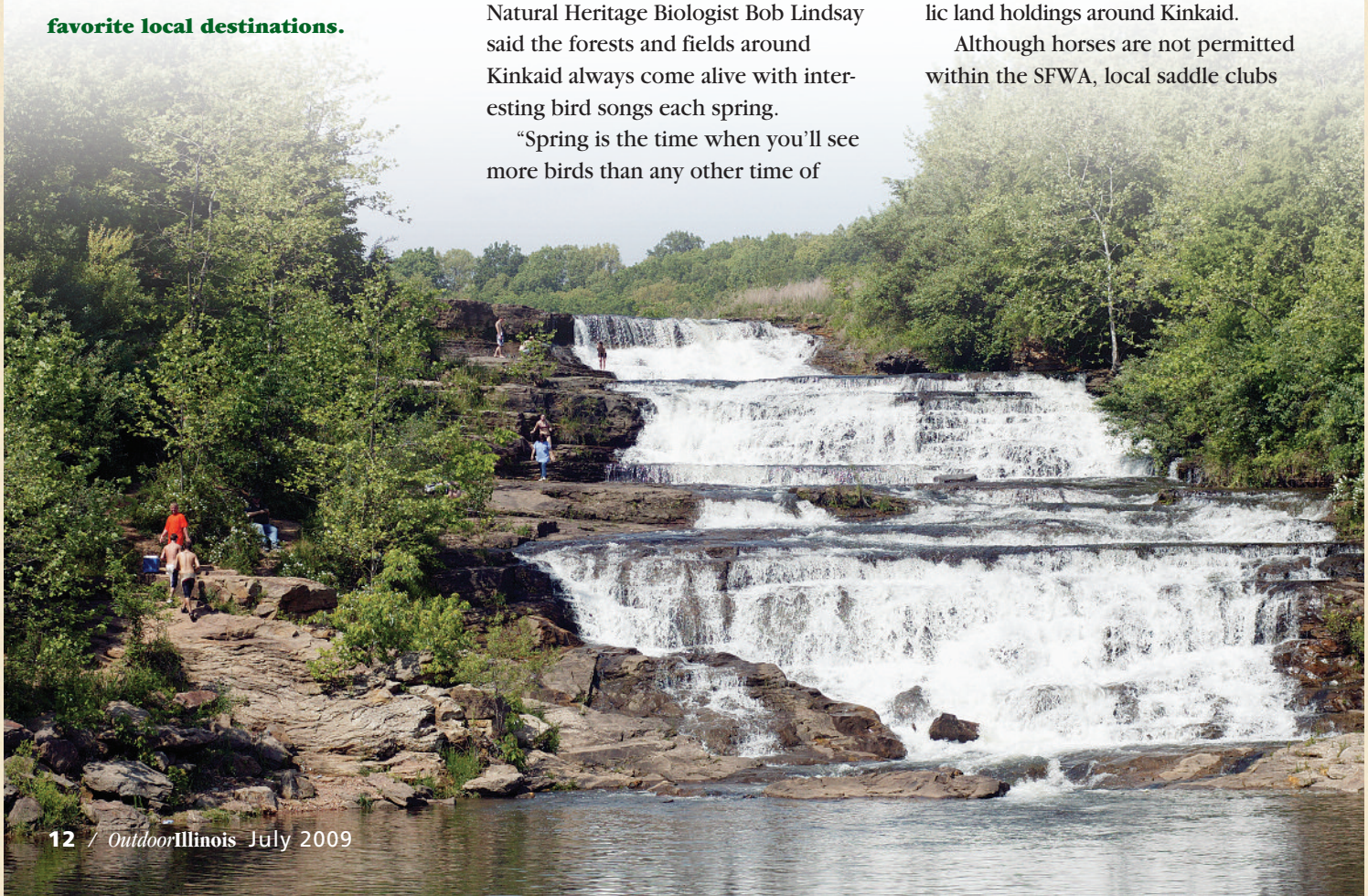
Visitors to the forests and trails around Kinkaid have plenty else to admire. Spring bird migration brings everything from scarlet tanagers to the rose-breasted grosbeak and a slew of warblers—plus year-around opportunities to see bald eagles and osprey. DNR Natural Heritage Biologist Bob Lindsay said the forests and fields around Kinkaid always come alive with interesting bird songs each spring.

"Spring is the time when you'll see more birds than any other time of year," Lindsay said. "You'll hear ovenbirds and worm-eating warblers, bobolinks, and of course wood thrushes. But the fields and forests aren't the only places to visit. One of the overlooked habitats is the transitional shrublands between fields and forest around Kinkaid where Bell's vireo and Henslow's sparrows and prairie warblers occur."

Other bird fans have different interests. Wild turkey hunters enjoy flocks of opportunities in the rich forest habitat around Kinkaid—and so do wild mushroom hunters. Each spring morel fanatics prowl Buttermilk Hill, which rises a few hundred feet above the lake, in search of the popular fungi.

The state continues to acquire new lands around Kinkaid when they become available. Last summer, DNR added the 80-acre Ticer property to Kinkaid Lake SFWA. The rocky habitat, located near the lake's spillway, adds to the vast public land holdings around Kinkaid.

Although horses are not permitted within the SFWA, local saddle clubs



(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Secluded lakeside grilling retreats on Kinkaid-Reeds Creek Conservancy District property include picnic tables and a perfect lake view.

At a glance

Address: Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, 52 CinderHill Drive, Murphysboro, IL 62966
Telephone: (618) 684-2867
Web site: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/kinkaid.htm
Directions: Located in Jackson County about 5 miles northwest of Murphysboro, Kinkaid Lake is accessed from Illinois Route 149 directly west of Murphysboro. From Route 3, follow Route 149 east approximately 5 miles to the entrance to Kinkaid and Lake Murphysboro State Park.

access the Shawnee trails which are well-marked. Off-road vehicles are generally prohibited, although deer hunters are allowed limited access to retrieve deer on certain primitive roads within the SFWA.

For thousands of visitors to Kinkaid, legendary fishing opportunities are the primary attraction. It's a big lake, and big fish are part of the big reputation. DNR Fisheries Biologist Shawn Hirst said the fantastic reputation for monster muskies there keeps getting better. During the spring 2009 lake sampling, Hirst beat his previous records for muskies as well as other game fish. The muskies can top 50 inches, he added.

"One of our trap nets had 24 muskies in it," Hirst reported. "In one day we caught and released 93 muskies in 12 trap nets. This marked the second year in a row we set a new record."

Walleye fishermen have similar, eye-popping possibilities, with many fish reaching 7 pounds or more.

"I've had one walleye that was 10 pounds," Hirst said. Additionally, the crappie fishing can be astonishingly good. With a 9-inch size limit and a 25 fish creel limit, the crappie opportunities include the potential for real monsters.

"I'm aware of two crappie more than 3 pounds that came out of Kinkaid in 2008," he said. Bass fishermen will be pleased to know largemouths are now plentiful and bass clubs last year reported the highest catch rates ever, with healthy fish in excess of 6 pounds regularly reported. There's a 16-inch minimum size limit with no more than three bass (including smallmouth). Those recently stocked smallmouth bass are growing well, Hirst observed.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Kinkaid bass angler Rick Byrnes, Tamaroa, hefts a nice catch. The lake offers both largemouth bass and newly stocked smallmouth bass.

"The rocky shoreline that's been added to check erosion is tremendous habitat for smallmouth," Hirst added. "And I expect the first legal smallmouth (16 inches) to be caught within a year."

Channel catfish up to 10 pounds are pulled from the lake as well. Perhaps the only mediocre aspect to the fishery is the bluegill fishing, which occasionally produces keeper-size fish up to 8 inches, but relatively few monsters.

Bank fishermen might find the lake a bit of a challenge, with just a limited amount of manicured shoreline and fishing piers. Despite the lake's monster size (and reputation for monster fish) access points with parking lots are relatively limited.

"I tell people the best way to get around the lake is by boat," superintendent Catt observed.

Yet the majority of people seem to prefer it this way. The wild lands Strack and others helped preserve for future generations offer thousands of acres of recreational opportunities for everyone. Simply put: If you enjoy the outdoors—whatever your interest—there's plenty to enjoy around Kinkaid Lake.

May storm damage

A severe storm May 8, 2009 caused widespread damage throughout much of southern Illinois, including the Kinkaid Lake area. As this magazine was being sent to press, Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area and nearby Lake Murphysboro State Park were closed due to fallen trees and other potential hazards. Cleanup crews were making progress to restore services to the area. Visitors are advised to call ahead before visiting these sites.