A secluded southwestern Illinois retreat owes its popularity to a lake created hundreds of years ago by beavers.

Beavers Started this State Park

(Photo property of Beaver Dam State Park.)

Some things change—the trees in the background of this early 1900s photo have matured and now shade the lakeshore trail—but other things, like spending a day at the park with a group of friends, stand the test of time.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

The traffic on the road was heavy.

Bicyclists from the campground cruised along at a leisurely pace. A steady stream of power walkers passed by. The chatter of groups of children hung in the air as they moved from activity stations set up at the lake, in the prairie and on the observation deck overlooking the marsh. A family group called out their discoveries as they headed off for a hike through the forest.

It was like every other day at Beaver Dam State Park, a secluded 750-acre site south of Carlinville.

"We are a popular destination for church and youth groups and a site for many day-camp outings," commented Site Superintendent Dan Challans. "The park has so much to offer—from the Beaver Dam Café and Bait Shop to incredible fishing and a first-rate campground—that we've become a popular day-trip destination as well as a site for extended visits."

But the activities don't stop there. Unbeknownst to most visitors, Beaver Dam is the location of a research project on the oak ecosystem.

Vegetation has grown up along the Beaver Dam Lake shoreline, providing a shaded backdrop for hikers and bank anglers.

Just inside the woodland, two researchers from the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS) knelt around a one-quarter square meter quadrant plot, one calling out the names and abundances of plants within the boundary, the other recording the information for analysis in the office.

Dr. John Taft, an INHS research scientist specializing in plant ecology and an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois, has received a grant from the Wildlife Preservation Fund to study the potential for restoring oak forests to pre-settlement conditions.

"The Beaver Dam forest contains scattered 150-year-old oaks and more than 500 species of vascular plants," Taft explained. "But the absence of fire for more than 200 years, tangles of thorn-bearing plants resulting from years of grazing and thick forest canopy has prohibited new oaks from reaching the sapling stage and curtailed the diversity of plants in the understory.

"While we will never be able to fully replicate the original conditions, because some parts of the puzzle are missing, understanding the composition of the forest may someday help us learn how to restore the area to nearly original conditions," Taft concluded.

The scenic Macoupin Creek Valley where the park now sits has attracted humans for thousands of years. Native American hunting parties found plentiful wild game—deer, turkey, elk, bison, waterfowl—in the valley and several prehistoric camp sites and grave sites have been found along the waterway. Along the stream they also found bountiful, edible plants, like the roots of arrow arum, called by one tribe "ma-cou-pin-a" and the source of many place names in the area. A large, red, carved sandstone ceremonial pipe found in the area documents trading with Mayans during the mid-Mississippian culture.

As dead, diseased and hazardous trees are removed, Beaver Dam State Park staff replace them with native oaks.

When European settlers entered the area in the early 1800s, they found "Dry Beaver Lake," a shallow lake created when beavers dammed the small stream.

In 1890, several Carlinville businessmen created the Beaver Dam Lake Club, enhancing the beaver's creation and raising the lake level considerably. That private recreational facility became a popular site for fishing and camping.

Dr. John Taft and research assistant Valerie Sivicek found woodland brome, black snakeroot, agrimony, Virginia creeper and a number of species of sedges in one random quadrant plot.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Surrounded by timber and a restored prairie, the Beaver Dam State Park picnic area includes four pavilions, restrooms, a baseball field and playground.

Eventually, a 16-room resort was constructed, with guests arriving by train met at the Macoupin Station and taken by horse-drawn coach to the hotel. For $1 a day they could fish, and an overnight of lodging cost $2. No matter their position on the lake or surrounding grounds, anglers and lodgers knew that meals were ready when a fox horn sounded. The facility closed in the 1930s, with the resort property purchased by the state about a decade later. All that remains of that early business is the ice house.

Today, Beaver Dam Lake remains a family friendly site to wet a line. The release of rainbow trout the third Saturday in October provides fishing fun throughout much of the year. Channel catfish, bullhead, bluegill, crappie and bass also are highly sought in the 59-acre lake.

A new fish-cleaning station stands ready for use alongside the boat ramp. Only electric trolling motors—and hand or foot-powered vessels—are allowed. John boats and paddle boats can be rented from the concessionaire.

Fish biting and you didn't bring your equipment? The Beaver Dam Café and Bait Shop is one of more than 150 organizations throughout Illinois participating in the DNR Access to Fishing equipment loan program. Available to anglers and would-be anglers of all ages, the loaner system works just like a library—but instead of a spellbinding novel you walk away with a day's free use of a rod, reel and tackle pack.

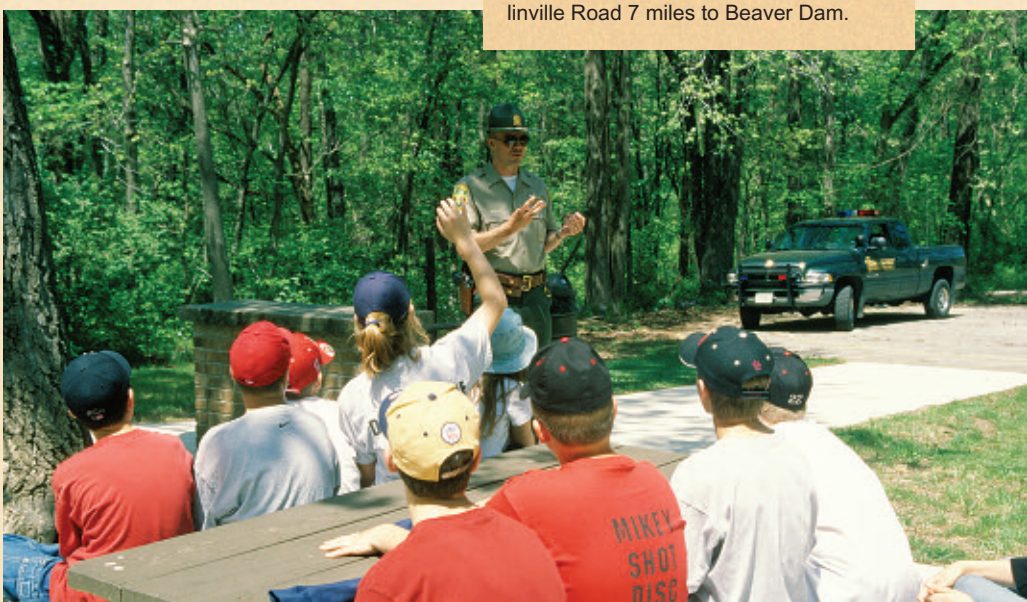
The concession operation is popular with campground residents. Not only can they take a break from cooking over the campfire or on their RV stove to enjoy a tasty breakfast, lunch or dinner, they can step into the adjacent store to pick up some last-minute outdoor staples, such as a bag of marshmallows or can of insect repellent.

Camping at Beaver Dam ranges from 18 Class B tent camps to 64 Class A sites, with more in the planning phase. Those looking for something a little primitive—but with four walls and a roof—may enjoy staying in the two-room Rent-a-Cabin equipped with one full-sized bed with mattress, two sets of bunk beds with mattresses, an electric heater, ceiling fans and a table and chairs. The cabin is adjacent to the campground's full shower house. All facilities are accessible.

An expansive prairie restoration plot adjacent to the campground provides a colorful backdrop for a large picnic ground featuring a baseball field, eight restrooms and four pavilions. All pavilions can be reserved through the site office. A nearby playground, including a basketball hoop and sand box, provides hours of fun for youngsters.

Facts at a glance

Beaver Dam State Park, 14548 Beaver Dam Lane, Plainview, IL 62685.
Telephone: (217) 854-8020.
Concession: (217) 854-5156.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R4/beaver.htm.
Rent-a-Cabin Reservations: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/programs/camping/rent_a_camp.htm.
Directions: Traveling west on Route 108 in Carlinville, turn left (south) at the Amtrak Station and go 7 miles to the state park. From Shipman, take the Carlinville Road 7 miles to Beaver Dam.



(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

The Beaver Dam State Park archery range is popular with sportsmen, and provides an excellent backdrop for hunter safety education programs. Contributions from the Carlinville Chapter of Whitetails Unlimited made construction possible. Twice each year, the chapter voluntarily picks up trash along the highway adjacent to the park.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

Three of the four known populations of the state-endangered ground plum (*Astragalus crassicarpus*) occur on glacial drift prairies (prairie openings within a forested landscape) in Macoupin County.

Bill Wiser took the opportunity during a picnic outing to Beaver Dam State Park to teach his granddaughters Laura and Ellie Halpin the fine points of fishing for largemouth bass.

Wintertime recreation at the park includes ice fishing, ice skating, cross-country skiing and sledding, when conditions permit, and wildlife observation.

A favorite stop throughout the year is the elevated observation deck looking over a marsh. Visitors may find white-tailed deer, raccoons and wild turkeys quenching their thirst on the edge of the marsh while hawks soar overhead and an assortment of songbirds, including bluebirds, orioles, finches, cuckoos and nuthatches, flit around in the brush and trees surrounding the wetland. Waterfowl and shorebirds are found seasonally, and visitors in early summer are often rewarded with glimpses of families of wood ducks. Constructed by park staff, the deck was funded by local chapters of Ducks Unlimited, Whitetails Unlimited and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

For a great overview of the park, explore 8 miles of trails that circle the lake, pass by the marsh and branch off through the woodland. Benches scattered along the trail system and park roads provide quiet places to rest and observe the passing world.

An archery range near the concession is available for use free of charge, with archers required to bring their own bow and arrows (broadhead points are not allowed). All archers under 16 years of age must be accompanied by an adult.

A short distance from the more developed section of the park is a tract most commonly used by hunters. Hunting programs at Beaver Dam include spring turkey, archery deer and squirrel, and furbearer trapping is permitted. Additional information on hunting programs can be obtained from the site's hunter fact sheet posted on DNR's website or by telephoning the site headquarters.

"The improvements that we've been able to make over the last few years are greatly appreciated by the 350,000-plus visitors we have annually," Challans said. "We host a number of special events throughout the year—things like a cancer walk, Special Olympics, and wingshooting clinic—that have proven very popular."

Whether you are looking for a quiet spot for a picnic and hike with the family, a chance to reel in a limit of trout for dinner or set up at a beautiful campground for a few nights in the great outdoors—with the option of a meal out just minutes down the road—Beaver Dam has it.

"And if tradition holds, word of mouth about Beaver Dam will continue and more visitors will discover the opportunities here," concluded Challans. "That's just what we want."

Take the time during your visit to the park to enjoy a meal at Beaver Dam Café and Bait Shop. Overlooking the lake, the facility is open year-round and also offers boat rentals and sale of fishing licenses, bait, tackle and outdoor staples.