At the Burning Star Mine in Jackson County, land managers created habitat where bald eagles, swans, whitetails—and now the public—can benefit.

Mining for Wildlife

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

For years, the success of surface-mining reclamation was measured in bushels per acre. Here's how it worked: If a farmer could cultivate healthy crops of corn, soybeans or wheat on the soil replaced after reclamation, and do so for several years, the land was considered productive.

Amazing herds of white-tailed deer roam the 8,500 acres of reclaimed lands at Consol Energy's Burning Star Mine.

But at Consol Energy's Burning Star 5 mine in northern Jackson County, success these days is increasingly measured in turkeys, swans and whitetails—native wildlife thriving in unprecedented numbers where coal mining once reigned.

Consol's strategy for wildlife began roughly 20 years ago, when reclamation experts decided to modify plans at this southern Illinois mine to include substantial acreage for wildlife. Such habitat, while not required by law, is actually perfectly compatible when wetlands, lakes and prairies got woven into the necessary agricultural demonstration. Today, thanks to careful stewardship, huge numbers of wildlife—including the largest wintering population of trumpeter swans in Illinois—thrive amid native grasslands, woodlands and lakes. The U.S. Department of the Interior honored Consol with a national reclamation award for this site.

Sparkling lakes created during mine reclamation attract the state's largest wintering population of trumpeter swans.

What's more, the Pennsylvania-based energy company is partnering with the Department of Natural Resources and the National Wild Turkey Federation to bring sportsmen and birders onto Burning Star 5 for a first-hand look. Starting this spring, wild turkey hunters got their first chance to set up and call amid this wildlife-friendly model of reclamation.

A successful youth-only firearm deer hunt last fall kicked off the public-private land-use partnership, and site-specific permits will be available for all firearm deer seasons this fall and winter.

But hunters aren't the only ones impressed by the site. In addition to big whitetails and hefty gobblers, Burning Star 5 also hosts bald eagles, short-eared owls, northern harriers and (to the delight of Illinois Audubon Society members) a wintering flock of more than 100 trumpeter swans.

"It's a wildlife mecca," explained Rich Whitton, DNR wildlife biologist assigned to manage hunting opportunities at the site. "I don't know of any other place in Illinois that's holding more than 100 trumpeter swans."

With 8,500 acres of new wildlife habitat, Burning Star 5 represents an almost unheard-of piece of good news amid habitat loss in Illinois. As Consol Energy and its partners work toward the long-term protection and management of this exceptional fish and wildlife habitat, DNR remains committed to keeping this burning star shining for ages.

A reclamation plan created for wildlife habitat makes the Burning Star mine a shining example of modern land stewardship.