The Illinois Conservation Foundation accepts a land donation to create the Torstenson Family Youth Conservation Education Center.

A Site for the Birds—and Illinois Youth

Story By Kathy Andrews

The old, African proverb "It takes a community to raise a child" is a strategy playing out in northern Illinois. So far, the community involves one family, two foundations and two youth organizations…and the effort is less than two months old.

The Illinois Conservation Foundation recently accepted from the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation a donation of 750 acres near Pecatonica in Winnebago County. Now designated the Torstenson Family Youth Conservation Education Center, the property is bordered along the north by a couple of miles of the Pecatonica River, which originates in southern Wisconsin and flows through northern Illinois to its outlet into the Rock River north of Rockford.

Five former river oxbows create expansive wetland habitat within the site's more than 400 acres of floodplain forest. Abundant white oaks and large, dead-standing trees with natural nesting cavities contribute to the large wood duck population present on the property by the fall season.

The interspersion of permanent and intermittent wetlands, woodlands, restored prairies and food plots supports a diverse wildlife community, including white-tailed deer, fox squirrels, raccoons, wild turkey, ring-necked pheasants, mourning doves, herons, egrets, and an assortment of waterfowl and shorebirds. In recent years, the site has hosted a pair of nesting sandhill cranes and bald eagles are frequently sighted.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

"The opportunity for development of this youth education center came about because of the generosity of the late Robert 'Bob' H. Torstenson, an avid hunter and former Chicago businessman," explained Mark Spangler, executive director of Illinois Conservation Foundation. Inducted into the Illinois Outdoor Hall of Fame in 2006, Torstenson, who passed away in 2002, was described by his nominators as a "generous and enthusiastic supporter of wildlife conservation in Illinois, enhancing wildlife habitat on his own property as well as supporting natural heritage and wildlife conservation programs throughout the state and nation."

The Torstenson family developed their Pecatonica farm into a model of forest, wetland and upland prairie land management, and Robert H. Torstenson's estate donated the property to the

An assortment of wetland-dependent wildlife thrives on the many historic Pecatonica River (left) oxbows existing on the Torstenson property.

What the future holds

The Illinois Conservation Foundation plans to conduct limited deer (quality deer management practices will be adhered to on the property), turkey and duck fund-raising hunts, with lodging at the log house and meals prepared by a gourmet chef. ICF's goal is to make the center available to youth free of any admission charge, and proceeds from these hunts will support youth programs and events.

ILLINOIS CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

For more information on the special hunts and programs at the Torstenson Family Youth Conservation Education Center, contact the ICF at (217) 785-2003 or visit www.ilcf.org.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation in December 2004.

According to Charles S. Potter, Jr., president and CEO of the McGraw Foundation, the property was managed for maximum wildlife production and hunting, with hundreds of acres of food plots established annually and numerous shallow-water waterfowl hunting areas created. In conjunction with Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited and the Delta Waterfowl Foundation, the property was utilized for youth hunts.

"When the McGraw Foundation determined that the property was truly an ideal location for youth hunting, and knowing that ICF's mission is, in large part, to introduce youth to hunting, we felt that they would be the best custodian of this property," Potter remarked. "Director Marc Miller recognized the exceptional nature of the property and is to be commended for facilitating this gift to ICF and the people of Illinois."

The focus of the Torstenson Youth Conservation Education Center will be hands-on discovery of nature.

(Photo by Kathy Andrews.)

As Chairman of the Illinois Conservation Foundation Board of Directors, DNR Director Marc Miller realizes the potential a youth education center has, and the work that is necessary to make it a reality.

"Although ICF has owned the property for just a few weeks, we have already begun an aggressive campaign to seek grants and donations to help us realize our dream—and the site's potential—as a prime location for helping children get outdoors and learn about conservation stewardship," Miller said.

It doesn't take long for word to spread about an exciting new opportunity.

This past summer, Jay Sandine, deputy director of operations for the Rockford Park District, developed the Levings Lakers urban fishing and conservation club to instill in participants the core values of education, sportsmanship, community involvement, self confidence, integrity, life-long learning and respect for their community.

LEVINGS LAKERS
FISHING & CONSERVATION CLUB

"Our program was based on the extremely successful, Chicago-based Fishin' Buddies program which has been in existence for more than 20 years," Sandine explained. "With guidance from our friends at Fishin' Buddies, we worked with pastors and community members in the highly urbanized portion of southwest Rockford to recruit as club members at-risk youth between the ages 7 and 10."

Word of a youth conservation education center 15 minutes from an urban environment created quite a buzz in the Rockford community.

"Several of our community members and I toured the site and we were awed by the opportunities the property will provide to expand the youth program to include overnight camping, archery and sessions on conservation practices," said Sandine. Plans also are under way for park district police officers to be certified as DNR volunteer safety education instructors and for club members to participate in future youth dove and duck hunts.

The vision of the Torstenson family, one perpetuated by the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation and now the Illinois Conservation Foundation, was to provide a place where the children of Illinois could escape from the trappings of modern life and learn healthy outdoor skills—skills which only a few decades ago were integral to survival.

"Our inaugural event, just two weeks after acquiring the property, was a youth dove hunt," Miller explained. "Witnessing the enthusiasm and energy of those young people really drove home for me what the founding premise of this center is—providing youth a fun and safe opportunity for hands-on discovery of nature."

Like our youth, the future holds great promise for the Torstenson Family Youth Conservation Education Center.

Rich Kopec, his grandson, Tristan Wolf, and DNR Director Marc Miller (left to right) participated in the 2010 youth dove hunt—Wolf's first hunt—at the new youth education center.

(Photo courtesy Marc Miller.)