At Des Plaines Conservation Area, more than 5,500 acres await the hunting and fishing sportsman.

The Hunter's Home

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Adele Hodde

It's been at least 10,000 years since the first hunters arrived at what is now Des Plaines Conservation Area in Will County. Nobody can say exactly when those paleolithic hunters trickled in along a retreating glacier drainage in search of mastodon and other prehistoric game.

But it's easy to see what attracted them. A rich abundance of hunting opportunities awaited those who reached the confluence of what's now called the Des Plaines River, along with the Kankakee and Illinois rivers.

And while eons have passed, a nation has been built, busy interstates run nearby and a place called Chicago rose from the glacial marshes, hunters still seek this river and prairie resource for the same reasons as the original hunters—with one big difference.

Quite possibly, there are better opportunities here than ever before.

"This really is a sportsman's paradise," explained Char McDade, a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) office coordinator at Des Plaines Conservation Area, located about an hour southwest of Chicago. "We've got pheasant and deer hunting, fishing, dog field trials, quail and rabbit hunting and a trap range...plus there's waterfowl hunting."

What was originally termed "inaccessible swamp" in portions mapped by the General Land Office during the 1850s now is prized sportsman real estate. The site stands as a ready answer for anyone in northeastern Illinois who asks, "Where can I go hunting and fishing around here?"

Shortly after World War II, this former federal land was transferred to the Department of Conservation (now DNR) and in 1948 became a state recreation area. More lands were added during the 1960s and the site was managed primarily as a day-use area for sportsmen until the mid-70s, when upgrading of the site facilities attracted increasing numbers of sportsmen—more than 350,000 now visit the Conservation Area annually.

There are more than 5,000 acres within Des Plaines Conservation Area today. That provides plenty of elbow room for sportsmen within this regulated wildlife management system. Archery deer hunters, for example, get approximately 10 acres each as 500 archery deer hunting permits get issued annually. Site Superintendent Mike Holem reported those hunters enjoyed a success rate above the state average.

Less than an hour from Chicago, Des Plaines Conservation Area provides upland game hunters plenty of opportunity to bag a limit of birds during the controlled pheasant hunting season. Quail and rabbit hunting is a late-season option.

"Last year I helped a guy drag out a nice 10-pointer," Holem said. "And while I can't promise a world-class buck is here, the site has a good mix of habitats for whitetails and produces plenty of well-fed deer."

Archery deer hunters must plan ahead. The 500 permits get issued on September 1 each year at the Conservation Area on a first-come, first-served basis. Firearm deer hunters must specify the site when applying for a permit in Springfield. But firearm deer hunting is allowed only during the first firearm deer season.

Another tremendously popular hunting attraction at this Conservation Area is the controlled pheasant hunt, which roughly coincides with the state's regular hunting season for pheasants each year. Beginning on the Wednesday before the statewide season opens, and continuing until New Year's Day, pheasants are the upland game to hunt at Des Plaines.

Pheasant hunters arrive knowing there will be birds afield because of the daily releases from the adjacent Des Plaines Wildlife Propagation Center, located on the east portion of the Conservation Area.

Some 40,000 adult pheasants are raised annually at the propagation center. A portion of the pheasants are destined for other DNR-managed controlled pheasant hunts, such as at nearby Kankakee River State Park. But 16,000 of those birds get released at the multiple locations within the 4,500 huntable acres at Des Plaines.

The site is closed to pheasant hunting Mondays and Tuesdays, as well as during the first firearm deer season (Nov. 18-20 this year). But on all other days—including the ever-popular Thanksgiving Day pheasant hunt—Des Plaines Conservation Area allows 215 hunters with permits to participate in the $15 pheasant hunt.

Hunters need to apply for permits in advance through the DNR website, with the first lottery beginning August 14.

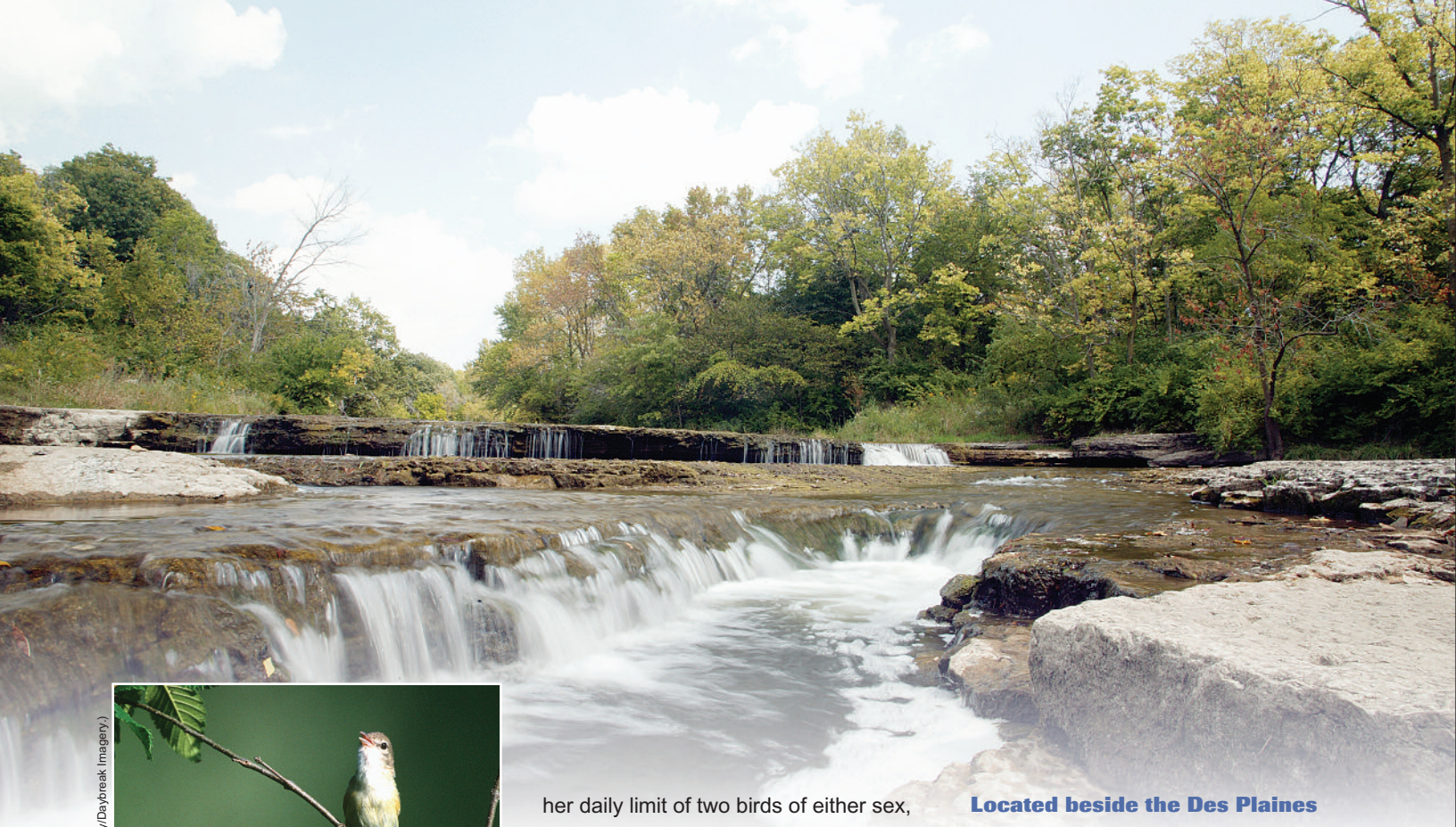
As with any popular public program, the reservation calendar is often full as the season arrives. But stand-by hunters are welcome to show up any day hunting is allowed to fill in the empty spots from no-shows and cancellations. Hunting hours are from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Site staff maintain access to well-groomed trails and roadways throughout Des Plaines Conservation Area.

Hunters are required to wear a cap and upper, outer garment of solid blaze orange (minimum 400 square inches). They also must report to the check station prior to hunting and leave their hunting license at the check station while afield.

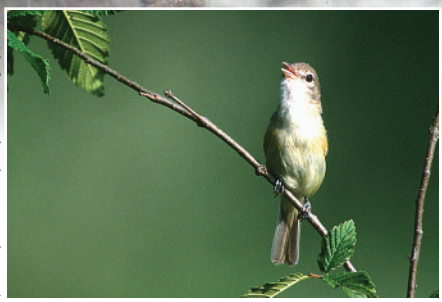
While Holem and his crew release enough birds to ensure that every hunter has the opportunity to bag his or

Described as "inaccessible swamp" during a 19th century land survey, this Conservation Area survives today as important wildlife habitat.



(Photo by Richard Day/Daybreak Imagery.)

Located beside the Des Plaines and Kankakee rivers, watersheds converge at this creek-and-backwater-rich habitat.



Naturalists can spot the rare Bell's vireo which inhabits the unique dolomite prairie landscape at the Conservation Area. The habitat includes numerous plant communities as well as aquatic resources where everything from bullheads to bowfin attend school.

her daily limit of two birds of either sex, hunters sometimes come up short.

That means, by the end of the season, a surplus of pheasants exists on the site.

"So we have what we call a clean-up hunt after the regular season closes," Holem said. "There are always more pheasants out there, due to the fact not every hunter got a limit, and so we open up the site after the controlled hunt ends; and that's also when we allow rabbit and quail hunting."

What is especially attractive about the post-regular-season pheasant hunt—aside from the fact there is no fee—is that rabbit and quail hunting also are allowed during those days.

DNR Agriculture/Grassland Wildlife Program Manager John Cole said the viable population of wild quail utilizing the site gets regular supplements from released birds during the many dog field trials held at the Conservation Area.

"The survival rate of pen-raised birds in the wild is rather low," Cole said. "But even if there were no additional releases of quail, there would still be a population of wild quail at Des Plaines. It's pretty good quail habitat and what they like, with the sand savannas along the Kankakee River and the efforts at the site to restore natural plant communities."

Dog field trials are the source of some of those quail, and there's no shortage of dog handlers and horsemen who visit the site to test their dog's skills. Holem said as many as 45 organized field trials are held in the fields of the Conservation Area every year.

"It's a good shooting-dog field trial site," offered former Department of Conservation Director David Kenney, who is listed among the users of this sportsman's home. "I've been there a number of times and can say it serves its purpose quite well."

Equestrian trails are open daily from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. from mid-April through October, and two trap fields are located at the site, as well as an archery range for practice before heading afield.

"It really is an important resource for sportsmen in the northern Illinois region," Kenney added.

For anglers, the entire southern boundary of the Conservation Area is bordered by the Kankakee River. Anglers wade the shoreline of that

Two self-service trap ranges are available for the sportsman to practice their wingshooting skills. There is no fee for the use of the facility.

much-improved fishery for some of the most prized sportfish in the region, including smallmouth bass, walleye and hard-fighting northern pike. Bank fishermen also dig in their heels while gearing up for heavy-duty carp action along the river shoreline. Two on-site boat launches exist along the river, but were experiencing construction closures during recent months.

"During the late winter and early spring, bass fishing in the backwaters of the Kankakee River can be excellent," Holem remarked.

Tucked into the eastern portion of the Conservation Area is the 22-acre Millikin Lake, a bank-fishing only site (boats are prohibited) that offers up largemouth bass, channel catfish and bluegill.

"The lake is stocked with catchable-size rainbow trout during the spring," Holem pointed out. "It's great for bass in the spring and it's really popular with ice fishermen in the winter."

It's during the fall and winter that waterfowl hunters flock to this riverine habitat with hopes for a limit of birds. The site offers more than 30 waterfowl blinds (allocated during a July drawing) along the Des Plaines River in the northwest portion of the Conservation Area.

A Class C campground also exists at the site, but has been closed until further notice.

One of the unique geologic features of the site barely exists at all.

"The dolomite prairie at Des Plaines is really interesting," explained Dan Kirk, a DNR restoration ecologist. "It's a very thin soil underlain by dolomite, with the soil ranging from 6 inches deep to no soil at all." The rare Henslow's sparrow has been known to nest on the site, and other avian species such as the grasshopper sparrow and Bell's vireo also utilize the unique prairie environment.

"Des Plaines and nearby Midewin Tallgrass Prairie are the only places I see Bell's vireo," Kirk added.

Wildlife and nature seekers will find the area a surprising expanse of habitat, especially when considering how dramatically the nearby landscape has been modified in the presence of millions of people.

And while mastodon no longer visit this sportsman's paradise, virtually every fish and game species in the region can be found at Des Plaines Conservation Area.

Why not you?

Boat launches which provide access to the popular Kankakee River were under construction for improvements recently. Check with the site for up-to-date access information.

Facts at a glance

Address: Des Plaines Conservation Area, 24621 N. River Road, Wilmington, IL 60481.
Telephone: (815) 423-5326.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/I&M/EAST/DESPLAIN/PARK.HTM.
Directions: Located 10 miles south of Joliet and 55 miles southwest of Chicago in Will County, the site is accessible from Interstate 55 at mile marker 241 (Wilmington exit).
Comments: Groups of 25 or more are welcome and encouraged to use the park's facilities. Registering in advance with the site office is encouraged to avoid crowding or scheduling conflicts. Due to its proximity to the river, natural events can cause temporary closures. Call ahead to the park office before making your trip.