



the

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EMIQUON: BACK TO NATURE



Another gorgeous sunset at Emiquon, photographed by Kelvin Sampson, a volunteer with the Emiquon Corps of Discovery. Photo courtesy of Sampson and the Corps.

There's a swath of marshy land in west central Illinois that is becoming a bit of a celebrity. Each year about 30,000 people visit Emiquon Preserve, located off the Illinois River between Havana and Lewistown. According to its owner, The Nature Conservancy – a nonprofit conservation group that preserves and protects “important land and waters” around the world, scientists and students from five continents have traveled here to study the Emiquon Preserve. In 2012, the Emiquon Complex, which includes the preserve and adjacent properties owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was named a wetland of international importance through the

Ramsar Convention, an international treaty to protect wetlands that is implemented by representatives from participating groups.

What visitors see at Emiquon today – beautiful vistas of water, plants, and animals, including threatened and endangered species, is far different from what Illinoisans saw twenty years ago.

Doug Blodgett, a biologist and director of river conservation for The Nature Conservancy, grew up across the river from the land. When he was a child in the 1960s, the preserve was a “huge farming operation...When we went to Peoria or Canton, we drove through the heart of it.” There were cattle, corn and

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The praying mantis is one of many insect species at the Emiquon Preserve. Photo courtesy of Jane Ward and the Emiquon Corps of Discovery.

soy crops, and later 500 head of elk. “I grew up hearing the old timers tell stories of Thompson Lake and Flag Lake that had been there before, and the catches of fish commercial fisherman had, 170,000 pounds of fish in a single haul. The old timers used to talk about waterfowl so abundant that when they got up off the Lake they would blot out the sun.”

The original wetlands, including Thompson and Flag Lakes, were home to Native Americans for millennia. Later, European explorers Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet travelled through the

area. Between 1910 and the early 1920s, the lakes were separated from the river and drained to convert the land to agricultural use.

Scientists now know that floodplains -- flat areas beside rivers that may or may not have water, are essential to the health of the rivers they adjoin. They filter the water and help regulate its flow, break down pollutants, and provide nesting areas for fish. “Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, comparable to rain forests and coral reefs,” according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s website. Wetlands also help moderate our global climate by “storing carbon within their plant communities and soil instead of releasing it to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide,” it states.

According to the Illinois State Museum’s website, “Harvesting the River,” agricultural production in the Illinois River Valley, along with

pollution and sewage from farms and towns along the Illinois River, damaged the river and its ability to produce fish and aquatic plants.

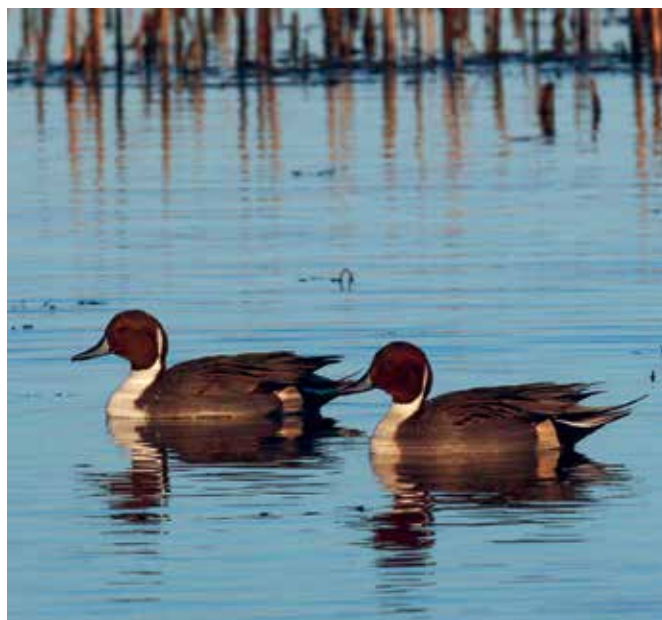
“A century ago the Illinois River was one of the most productive inland rivers in North America,” Blodgett says, and The Nature Conservancy wanted to restore it. “We couldn’t make it exactly like it was before, it’s gone, but we could make it closer to the way it was.” Working with other groups and scientists, the nonprofit developed a plan. It decided the

adjoining floodplain had to be restored to help the river. In 2000, The Nature Conservancy borrowed \$18.5 million to buy 7,600 acres of farmland to re-establish the former sites of Thompson and Flag Lakes as wetlands. The Nature Conservancy works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (which operates the neighboring Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge), the adjacent Dickson Mounds Museum, the University of Illinois Springfield (which runs a research site at the preserve), and the Illinois Natural History Survey.

“The water quality in the Illinois River near the Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge was good in 2000 and remains so today. However, the habitat restoration work completed at Emiquon has greatly



Bald eagles were plentiful at Emiquon this spring. Photo courtesy of Chris Young and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.



Northern pintails take a break at Emiquon during their southward migration last fall. Photo courtesy of Chris Young and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

benefitted water quality downstream by removing fertilizers and other pollutants,” says Amy Walkenbach, manager of the watershed management section at the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

“Not only has the Emiquon Preserve restoration been a success, it has become a model for wetland restoration -- and the science supporting it, worldwide,” says Illinois Department of Natural Resources Director Wayne Rosenthal.

“We’ve documented over 285 species of

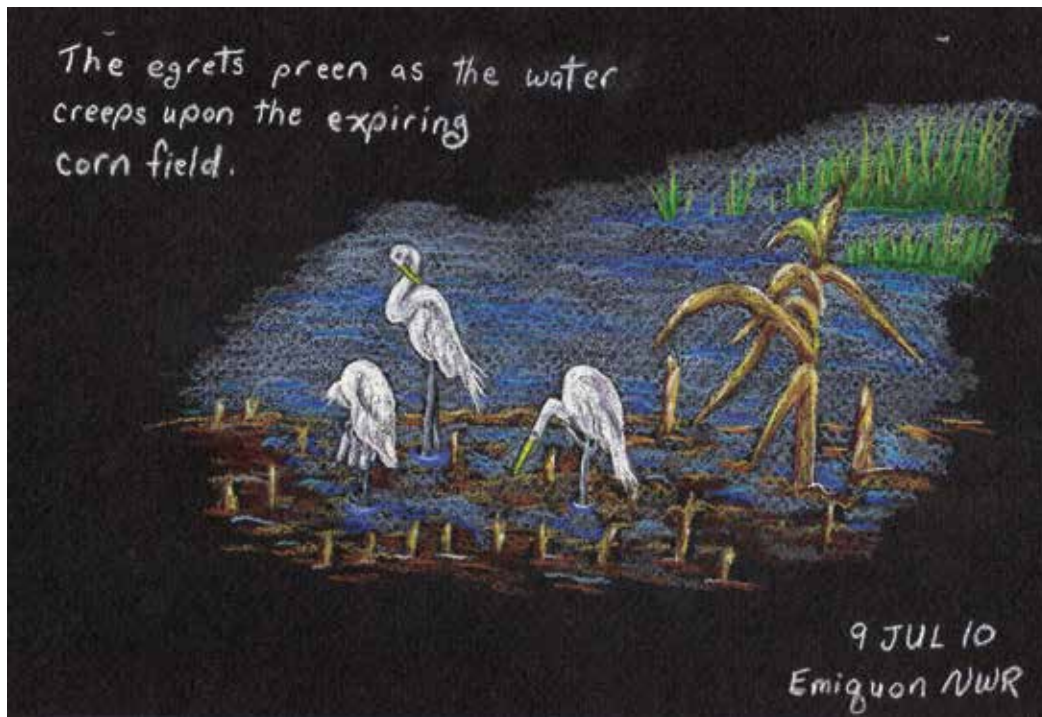
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Visiting Emiquon Preserve

Where: Emiquon is on State Route 78/97 between Lewistown and Havana in west central Illinois

Activities: birdwatching, hiking, fishing, boating (non-electric boats), some hunting, occasional special events, ice skating

Information: exploringemiquon.com and nature.org for rules/regulations and permit information



Liz Cheek, a volunteer with the Emiquon Corps of Discovery, drew this entry in a journal. Photo courtesy of Cheek and the Corps.

birds on our property since the restoration started and at times, just about every year, in one day we'll have at least 200,000 waterfowl on our property," Blodgett says. "We've also documented over 93 percent of the wetland-associated threatened and endangered bird species in Illinois (at Emiquon)."

Birds such as Common Gallinules, American Bitterns, Black-crowned Night Herons, and Least Bitterns, which are threatened or endangered in Illinois, nest at Emiquon, according to Christopher Hine with the Illinois Natural History Survey. It's also home to rare aquatic plants that don't exist in other backwaters of the Illinois River, he adds.

Last year, The Nature Conservancy began operating a somewhat controversial new water control structure at Emiquon. Critics say it could hurt the wetlands while The Nature Conservancy says it will help both Emiquon and the Illinois River. "What we believe from the modeling and the scientific research that's been done, and I would say most scientists agree, is that those (potential negatives) can be managed and we can get benefits of being

connected to the river," Blodgett says.

"We were really confident in our ability to do a wonderful short-term restoration," he adds. "But the challenge is sustaining that long term... Our thought is Emiquon will be the best it can be when it's contributing to the health of the Illinois River and when it's influencing floodplain river conservation in the Illinois River Valley, in the upper Mississippi River system, throughout the U.S., and in fact, around the world."

Despite its successes so far, Blodgett views Emiquon Preserve as a work in progress. "The jury's still out and time will tell" how to accomplish all of those goals, he says.



The Emiquon Corps of Discovery

Founded in 2005, the Emiquon Corps of Discovery is a group of volunteers who document changes at the wetlands through photos, sculptures, poems, journal entries, drawings, or other media. Corps members "analyze with the mind of a scientist, see with the eyes of an artist and speak with the words of a poet," according to experienceemiquon.com. For more information about the Corps, contact: Michelle Quinones at mcquinones13@gmail.com.

