

Creating a miracle on shoreline

Nature Conservancy quickly turning Emiquon Preserve to wetland wonder

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LEWISTOWN, Ill. -- Greater yellowlegs jittered around shoreline muck. Teal banked away, ahead of us.

Stunning shorebirds, gangly and long-legged as models, walked stiltedly along a point of exposed mud on Thompson Lake. I had no idea what they were until, from the back of the voyageur canoe, Jeff Walk, a conservation planner for The Nature Conservancy, said, "Look at the black-necked stilts."

And I had a lifer sighting. One of the marvels of TNC's Emiquon Preserve is that it is already the farthest point north in Illinois where black-necked stilts nest.

I had a chance to take canoe and walking tours of TNC's 7,000-acre floodplain restoration project last month during the Caterpillar Friends & Family Summer Picnic at Dickson Mounds Museum.

You'll be reading more about Emiquon in years to come. I love The Wetlands Initiative's Hennepin & Hopper Lakes upstream on the Illinois River. Emiquon is even more ambitious and has the economic clout of TNC and the intellectual strength of the University of Illinois at Springfield, which built a field station.

I'm curious how it will turn out.

In places we parted thick plant growth or saw it in the water --cattails, arrowhead, smartweed and sago pondweed. Back at the launch, cricket frogs by the dozens leaped around shore.

Right now, Emiquon is in the first blush of returning to a natural state from the throes of being in agribusiness production of soybeans and corn.

It was bought in 2002. In 2006, farming ended and restoration began in the spring in 2007. Immediately after drainage stopped, plant and animal life exploded. A miracle can happen that fast.

"As soon as you put water on it, ducks and geese show up," said Jim Herkert, TNC's director of science in Illinois.

As he piloted a voyageur canoe around Thompson Lake, Illinois Natural History Survey fisheries biologist Mike McClelland said there are roughly 30 species of fish already in the lakes.

Walk said as many as 69,000 migrating waterfowl in some 25 species hit Emiquon this spring. It had 1,212,715 duck use days last year.

The day we toured, Thompson, the main lake, was about 2,000 acres. It's been as small as a couple hundred. In 1912, it was 3,500 acres.

"People want things the same all the time," TNC land steward Tharran Hobson said. "Things aren't the same in nature. The cyclical nature benefits a wide array of organisms."

A visitor taking the tour asked what seemed an innocuous question at the time: How much difference would it make if the project was opened to the Illinois River during a flood?

Under full summer sun on a 90-plus degree Saturday in August, it seemed solely a hypothetical poser. Project director Jason Beverlin answered they roughly figured an inch or so in water levels.

It gave perspective for the staggering amount of water carried along the Illinois River, and a record level of water upstream last week, we might add.

Emiquon, a couple miles upstream of Havana, is a drop in the bucket. But what a stunning drop.

"That lake has a lot of life in it right now," said Dr. Mike Lemke, biology professor who heads the Emiquon Field Station for UIS. He's the kind of lover of knowledge who can't wait to show kids (or adults) microscope slides of the multitudes of variety of life teeming in the water.

He should be excited. Emiquon is special, worth every bit of the three-or-so hour drive.

TNC plans formal access with a parking lot soon, but, for now, visitors who wish to paddle Thompson need to call the office -- (309) 547-2730 --and sign a waiver. Dickson Mounds Museum --www.museum.state.il.us/ismsites/dickson/ -- is a good starting spot.

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