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Science meeting tracks Emiquon progress

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The notion that all science is “cold and hard” was debunked nicely at the Emiquon Science Meeting Thursday.

Once a year, researchers from a variety of institutions, organizations and schools get together to share the work they are doing and bring each other up to date on the progress of the Emiquon flood plain restoration.

The meeting is held at Dickson Mounds Museum near Lewistown. The museum sits on a hill and overlooks the sprawling floodplain and thousands of acres of wetlands.

The Nature Conservancy has the largest holding at about 6,700 acres. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service controls another 2,600 acres and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources operates Dickson Mounds.

Scientists are looking at everything from the number of duck-use days (one duck using the site for one day) to diets of fish to decomposers that return nutrients to the system. All the information is used to determine if the work is on track and help head off problems before they get out of hand.

Nerissa Michaels of the Illinois Natural History Survey is trying to determine what fish stocked in Thompson Lake at the Conservancy’s Emiquon Preserve are eating.

To do that, largemouth bass – and other species – are captured and their stomachs flushed out before release so the contents can be identified.

At the end of her presentation, she showed a picture of herself with a very large largemouth.

“And I’d like to thank all the largies I stole lunches from,” she says to laughs from the audience.

“So you release them stunned AND hungry?” came a not-so-serious question from the seats.

Then came the admission.

“Well, I go to the bait shop first and buy some worms so I can fill them up before putting them back,” she says.

That extra effort earned Michaels a round of applause.

“I am such an animal lover,” she says after her talk.

Other highlights from Thursday’s meeting:

Water levels have continued to rise. Thompson and Flag Lakes have merged into one lake, 4,663 acres in size and holding 7.6 billion gallons of water.

Waterfowl counts show ducks other than mallards that have specific habitat requirements are using Emiquon thanks to a diverse portfolio of habitat types. Half of the non-mallard diving ducks counted in aerial surveys in 2009 were found at Emiquon.

The site also is attractive to American coots with Emiquon attracting 85 percent of those counted in the Illinois River Valley.

“This place is a coot magnet,” says biologist Randy Smith of the Illinois Natural History Survey.

Mallards are generalists and “will land on virtually any piece of wet real estate,” Smith says. Other ducks, however, have specific requirements that cannot always be met elsewhere in the valley.

Monitoring is underway to determine how Emiquon’s prairie plantings are progressing.

Other talks focused on potential problems and predicting what directions a restoration might go.

Wetlands under restoration do not automatically progress to the same final “climax” state. Depending upon factors present, restorations may fall short or veer off in other less-desirable directions, especially if management is not present and invasive species are allowed to dominate.

Common carp have degraded the wetlands at Hennepin-Hopper Lakes (another floodplain restoration) to the point that fish had to be killed and the restoration reset. A few carp that escaped early efforts to eliminate them from the restoration became a factor in only a few short years.

Don’t overlook the small things.

Doyn Kellerhals, a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Springfield, presented her research on the bacteria that decompose leaves of silver maple trees. Bacteria are very difficult to tell apart until they are examined at a DNA level.

She is learning that bacterial communities change as leaves break down. And different bacteria are at work in different habitats. Kellerhals reminded the audience that the small things really do matter.

“I really like talking about the fish and the ducks, but this is where it all starts.”

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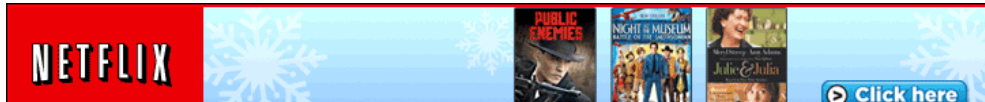
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