



OUTDOORS

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A veritable bounty of options

From fishing to hiking to birding, Hennepin-Hopper has it all restored

You know how it is when you see something unusual," Rick Seibert said.

I do.

It's one of the most compelling reasons to save and savor secret places — for the surprises the wild world springs on us.

In this case, it was a black-bellied whistling duck Seibert flushed Tuesday at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes.

I saw a report by Doug Stotz, a conservation ecologist and ornithologist at the Field Museum, of the duck on IBET, the birding network. The duck, described as "a striking and gregarious duck of the Neotropics" by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is a rarity in Illinois.

The report gave me a reason to call Seibert, the site manager at Hennepin-Hopper.

"There was no mistaking it," he said. "It had the orange bill and patches on the back of the wing. The orange bill is what really stuck out."

That's the sort of thing I've come to expect at The Wetlands Initiative project, just south of Hennepin. The project began in 2001 with the restoration of two backwater lakes east of the Illinois River and wetlands, prairies, fens and seeps, where corn and soybeans had grown.

It has become a favored stop for a different sort of restoration — that of my spirit. Hennepin-Hopper belongs with sacred Illinois wild places such as the Rock Creek canyon, "The Dam" on the North Branch of the Chicago River, Wooded Isle in Jackson Park and the sandstone bluffs of the lower Fox River.

My first experience with Hennepin-Hopper came in October 2001. Dick Schroeder and I used push poles to survey the dramatic changes, from the cornfields of the summer before to lakes with stunning aquatic growth (marsh smartweed, softstem bulrushes and sego pondweed) and 8 feet of water clarity.



The observation tower at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes offers a chance to view waterfowl and the restoration project, one of Illinois' little-known outdoor gems, just south of Hennepin. | DALE BOWMAN—FOR THE SUN-TIMES

I was awed. Then in the spring of 2004, when the site opened to public fishing, I had one of the most memorable fishing outings of my life with Seibert and Schroeder.

My fishing trips there since (public fishing days are Fridays and Saturdays in season) have been OK, but the lakes have been affected by invasive plants and a carp problem. But the site itself has become a destination for me, just as a place to reconnect.

I am often in the area for fishing or hunting — it's about a half-hour from Starved Rock — and make side trips off Route 29 a ritual, either to hike the trails or to climb the observation tower and survey the revival. To me, that's getting religion.

But because of his job, Seibert is there for the full sweep of nature's bounty. I picked his memories a bit. The lakes have largemouth bass to 9 pounds and healthy walleye to 7.

"I had a muskie in my lap I know weighed 30 pounds," Seibert said. "The sad thing is, the carp are healthy, too."

Some 100,000 pounds of carp have been removed by commercial fishermen, but the carp thrive, muddying the waters and presenting an ongoing challenge. Some invasive aquatics, such as Eurasian milfoil, provide more challenges.

Overall, though the place is just stunning, from many bald eagles to nesting pintails.

"This is the time of year when

hummingbirds come, when the jewelweed comes into bloom," Seibert said. "If you take the trail and walk down through the seep there, you will see them."

A white-faced ibis has been around for a long time. The other day, Seibert said they were surveying the lake and flushed 11 black-crowned night herons. That's not an unusual bird in Illinois, but that number is stunning. A year ago, Seibert saw his first Virginia rail.

"You never know what you are going to see," he said.

For information and directions to Hennepin-Hopper, go to www.wetlands-initiative.org/HennHopper.html.

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