

Photographs courtesy of The Wetlands Initiative



The Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin and Hopper Lakes in Putnam County



Yellowheaded blackbird

Photograph by L. B. Tettenborn



Black meadowhawk dragonfly

Illinois wetlands get international designation

Peoria sits on the Illinois River about 45 miles between two wetland complexes that have been recently designated as having international importance.

South of Peoria, near the town of Havana, where the Spoon River meets the Illinois, sits the nearly 14,000-acre Emiquon Complex. The expanse of wetlands, which comprises the Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, the Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge and the Emiquon Preserve, are owned and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy, respectively.

North of Peoria, about two hours from Chicago, is the Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin and Hopper Lakes, a 2,700-acre stretch of "beautiful backwater lakes and marshes" managed by The Wetlands Initiative, says Paul Botts, executive director of that organization.

The two sites are among three in the United States being added in 2012, receiving designation as Wetland(s) of International Importance, in accordance with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, an intergovernmental treaty of 160 member countries adopted in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971. There are 34 such Ramsar sites in the United States. Along with the two newly designated sites, the Cache River in southern Illinois and the upper Mississippi River floodplains, which include parts of Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin, are on the list as well. Internationally, there are more than 2,000 Ramsar sites.

"As far as we can tell, this is the first time the designation has been given to two sites on the same river at the same time," says Doug Blodgett, the director of river conservation for the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

"What this adds up to is, this is a great day for the Illinois River. That, to me, is the summary message. We hope that this recognition will bring to some people's attention who aren't aware of all the good and exciting stuff that's happening in the central Illinois river valley," Botts says.

Both Emiquon and the Dixon Refuge sites are open to the public and are unusual in that they are the result of restoration rather than preservation efforts, Botts says.

"If you talked to folks in the '80s and '90s — experts in the field of conservation — many were not sure that you could do this: that you could put back truly high-quality wetlands that had existed but had been completely drained. That was a fairly controversial idea for some folks. This recognition says the national and international experts are agreeing it can be done. It has been done. For us here, this is really a pretty big deal," Botts says.

Until 2001, that acreage was farmland, and the same was true of the Emiquon Preserve until 2007. But both were once in the natural floodplain of the Illinois.

The diverse wetland habitats have drawn returning populations of flora and fauna, including such migrants as neotropical songbirds.

At Dixon, Botts rattles off what has come. Two hundred sixty bird species and more than 670 native plants also thrive at the site.

The pied-billed grebe, once on Illinois' endangered species list, has "exploded" at the site and was delisted in 2004.

Until last year, there were 94 species of butterflies in Illinois, and now, Botts says, there are 95, with the discovery of the black meadowhawk dragonfly at Dixon.

Maureen Foertsch McKinney



Redwinged blackbird chick