

## **IDNR Office of Resource Conservation Overview**

The Office of Resource Conservation within the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is responsible for the management of Illinois' wildlife, fish, and forest resources, along with stewardship and restoration of natural lands. ORC manages fish and wildlife populations through hunting and fishing regulations based on scientific data. ORC also promotes the state's hunting and fishing heritage. Primary funding comes from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, supported by Federal Fish and Wildlife Funds, State Wildlife Grant Funds, Illinois Forestry Development Funds and Natural Areas Acquisition Funds. The Office also works with the Federal Government and other agencies to remediate lands contaminated by industrial discharges or accidental release of pollutants. The Office administers the state portion of Federal Farm Bill programs including the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program and others. Regulation of state-endangered and threatened species is included among the responsibilities of the Office.

### **Division of Fisheries**

#### **Fish Hatcheries**

The IDNR operates three state hatcheries located strategically across the state including Jake Wolf Memorial Fish Hatchery, Little Grassy Fish Hatchery, and the LaSalle Fish Hatchery. In 2023, the hatchery system produced and stocked a total of 10,334,446 fish from 20 species. The semi-annual catchable trout program provided fish for over 60,000 licensed anglers and their families.

#### **Lake Michigan Program**

Charter and non-charter recreational anglers last year expended 297,885 angler-hours to harvest 8,694 yellow perch and 56,704 trout and salmon from the Illinois waters of Lake Michigan.

#### **Mississippi River**

Recent appropriations for the Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP) of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have offered an alternative funding mechanism to implement ecosystem restoration projects throughout the Upper Mississippi River System. This has resulted in many new projects involving IDNR biologist, including the Lock and Dam 22 Fish Passage project intended to enhance fish passage via a large fish ladder. This will be the first fish passage structure ever built on the Mississippi River and will serve as an excellent test for future fish passage projects.

#### **Illinois River**

In conjunction with the state hatchery system, the Illinois River was stocked with 3,833,543 Sauger (fry-2.0-inch fingerlings), 43,000 Largemouth Bass (1.5 inch), and 9,000 Smallmouth Bass (4.0 inch) in 2023.

### **Division Highlights**

District Fisheries Biologists conducted multiple assessments on 219 impoundments to evaluate fish populations.

Rivers and Streams Biologists sampled 108 sites in 5 basin surveys for streams and sampled Illinois' large rivers, including the Mississippi, Ohio, Wabash, and Illinois.

The Division of Fisheries expanded fish hatchery production in 2023 by entering into a lease agreement with Big Muddy Farms use the former Logan Hollow Fish Farm facility. The location consists of 60 rearing ponds totaling 200 surface acres of water with additional indoor fish rearing raceways.

### **Northern Illinois**

- Fisheries managers sampled 76 impoundments to determine fish population status and evaluate management actions. Intensive basin surveys also were completed for the Rock, Upper Rock, and Des Plaines Rivers, and the northern Mississippi River was surveyed.
- Fish surveys on the Rock River produced a high catch rate of Walleye, which are stocked annually, in addition to natural populations of Smallmouth bass, Channel catfish, Sauger, Flathead Catfish and Northern Pike. The Rock River also produced the certification of a new state and world record shovelnose sturgeon.
- Eighty-year-old Kash Gustafson, caught the shovelnose sturgeon on pole and line that weighed 11 pounds, 13 ounces. The fish was released alive back into the Rock River.
- The Wetlands Initiative's Hennepin and Hopper Lakes at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge is cooperatively managed with the IDNR Division of Fisheries. In 2022, the fish population was sampled in the spring with Largemouth Bass, Bluegill, Black Crappie, Bowfin, Northern Pike, Muskellunge, and Pumpkinseed Sunfish being collected.
  - Particularly of interest, the muskellunge population is developing rapidly.
  - The diverse aquatic vegetation at this site is also re-creating quality waterbird habitat that was historically found in the Illinois River Valley.
- In a cooperative project that has been conducted annually since 2007, artificial fish habitats were placed at various sites throughout Braidwood Lake in 2023.

### **Central Illinois**

- Fisheries managers sampled 44 impoundments to determine fish population status and evaluate management actions. Intensive basin surveys also were completed for the Salt Creek and the Upper, Lower, and South Fork of the Sangamon River, and central Mississippi and Illinois Rivers were surveyed.
- The Lake Shelbyville Fish Habitat Alliance (LSFHA) comprised of staff from the IDNR and USACE, local businesses, fishing clubs, and volunteers continues to enhance the quality of the Lake Shelbyville fishery for anglers and the economic benefit of local communities.
  - The LSFHA has built and placed over 1,800 cube structures (PVC/field tile cubes), over 350 artificial stumps, 420 porcupine balls, 18 rock reefs (380 tons of total rock), as well as raising and planting numerous aquatic/semi-aquatic plants.
- Nearly 1,300 children attended the 2023 Two Rivers Family Fishing Fair.
  - This event included attractions such as the catch-and-release bluegill pond, the popular One-Cast station, and bow fishing stations where children can shoot at moving targets in a pool or at a 3D target.
  - The event is hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge (administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), and Pere Marquette State Park (administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources).

### **Southern Illinois**

- Fisheries managers sampled 101 impoundments to determine fish population status and evaluate management actions. An intensive basin survey also was completed for the Big Muddy, and southern Mississippi and Ohio/Wabash Rivers were surveyed.

- Fisheries managers worked cooperatively with Federal partners, municipalities, and private entities to place fish habitat structures at 16 lakes in southern Illinois, including Cedar Lake, Lake Kinkaid, Lake Murphysboro, Pyramid State Recreational Area lakes, East Fork, and Newton Lake.
  - About 620 structures were constructed and placed in Rend Lake with the Assistance of the Army Corp of Engineers and the Sesser-Valier Outdoorsmen Club.
  - Sixty cedar tree structures were constructed and placed at 10 sites in Crab Orchard Lake with the assistance of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Blue Heron Boat Club.

### **Aquatic Nuisance Species Program**

- The IDNR continues to be a major partner in the Invasive Carp Regional Coordinating Committee. IDNR staff and partners continue to work above and below the Corps of Engineers' electric barrier system to monitor and prevent the upstream migration of invasive carp in the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS).
- Contracted harvest efforts continue to suppress densities of invasive carp above the Starved Rock Lock and Dam.
- From 2010 to 2023, 1,708,678 individual invasive carps (93% Silver carp) were removed by contracted fishers. The total estimated weight of invasive carp removed is 7,289 tons (14,578,232 pounds).
- No invasive carp have been collected in Lockport or Brandon Road pools since the inception of this project in 2010.
- The leading edge of the invasive carp population remains near Rock Run Rookery in Dresden Island pool (approximate river mile 281; 46 miles from Lake Michigan). No appreciable change has been found in the leading edge over the past 13 years.
- Contracted commercial fishers have removed more than 22 million pounds of invasive carp from below Starved Rock since late 2019.

### **Mississippi and Ohio Basin**

- The IDNR is coordinating with neighboring states to achieve management and control of invasive carp in the Mississippi and Ohio River drainages.
- A program modeled after the Illinois River contracting with commercial fishers for the harvest of invasive carp was launched on the Wabash and Ohio Rivers in 2022 and has removed over 5 million pounds of invasive carp.
- A program to support removal via payments to processors for local pickups of invasive carp has resulted in over 12 million pounds of invasive carp removed in 2023.

### **Division of Wildlife Resources**

#### **2022-2023 Deer Season Harvest** (final 2023-2024 season numbers not yet available)

Hunters in Illinois harvested a preliminary total of 158,010 deer during all 2022-2023 archery and firearm seasons that concluded Jan. 15. The total preliminary deer harvest for all seasons compares with a total harvest of 146,438 deer for all seasons in 2021-2022. During the 2022-2023 deer seasons, hunters took 45.04% females and 54.96% males.

- Archery deer hunters took a preliminary total of 69,557 deer during the season that began Oct. 1 and concluded Jan. 15. The total archery harvest during the 2021-2022 season was 66,630 deer.

- Youth deer hunters harvested a preliminary total of 3,339 deer during the three-day Illinois youth deer season Oct. 8-10, compared to 1,847 in 2021.
- Traditional firearm season hunters took a preliminary total of 76,854 deer during the firearm season Nov. 18-20 and Dec. 1-4. This compares to a harvest of 70,456 deer taken during the 2021 firearm season.
- Muzzleloader hunters harvested a preliminary total of 2,856 deer during the muzzleloader-only season Dec. 9-11, compared with a harvest of 3,046 deer during the 2021 muzzleloader season.
- Late-winter seasons: The 2022-2023 late-winter antlerless-only and special chronic wasting disease (CWD) deer seasons concluded Jan. 15 with a combined preliminary harvest total for both seasons of 5,404 deer. Season dates for the seven-day late-winter and CWD seasons were Dec. 29-Jan. 1 and Jan. 13-15. During the same seasons in 2021-2022, a total of 4,504 deer were taken.

Sixteen northern Illinois counties were open to the special CWD season, which is used to assist in slowing the spread of chronic wasting disease in the Illinois deer herd. And 24 counties were open for the late-winter antlerless season in 2022-2023. Counties that are at or below their individual deer population goal for two consecutive years may be removed from the late-winter season.

### **Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)**

During the period of July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023 (FY23), IDNR staff collected and submitted 11,139 tissue samples statewide from white-tailed deer, yielding a total of 369 CWD cases in 18 northern Illinois counties from 11,101 testable samples.

- Disease prevalence in CWD counties for adult deer harvested by hunters was 6.2% The prevalence rate for hunter-harvested adult males (7.5% continues to be higher than that of adult females (4.5%).
- Counties that produced the highest number of hunter-harvested CWD positive deer included LaSalle (59), Jo Daviess (54), McHenry (50), Grundy (46), Stephenson (38), Carroll (19), Ogle (21), Kendall (13), Boone (11), and Livingston (10).
- Rates of CWD infection in adult deer removed by IDNR sharpshooting and hunter harvest were 5.7% and 3.1%, respectively. Thus, targeted removal of infected deer by sharpshooting continues to be an effective method for managing CWD across northern Illinois.

### **2023 Turkey Harvest**

#### **Youth 2023**

- Youth turkey hunters harvested a preliminary total of 1297 birds during the 2023 Illinois youth turkey, season compared to 1,264 in 2022.

#### **Spring 2023**

- Hunters harvested a preliminary statewide total of 14,826 wild turkeys during the 2023 Illinois Spring Turkey Season compared to 12,826 in 2022.

#### **Fall Archery 2023**

- Hunters harvested a statewide total of 803 wild turkeys fall archery turkey season, compared to 801 in 2022.

#### **Fall Shotgun 2023**

- Hunters harvested a statewide total of 262 wild turkeys during the 2024 fall gun turkey season, compared to 267 in 2022.

### **Bobcat Hunting**

The 2023-2024 Illinois bobcat season concluded Feb. 15 with 370 bobcats harvested by hunters and trappers. A total of 214 (55%) of bobcats were taken by hunting, while trapping accounted for 156 (40%) of the harvest. Nineteen (5%) were salvaged by permit holders from circumstances such as roadkill. Hunters and trappers in Jo Daviess County reported 19 bobcats - the most for any county this year. There were 7,000 bobcat lottery applicants in 2023 and 1,000 permits issued for the season. The bobcat harvest from the 2022-2023 season was 367, with 16 salvaged.

### **Private Lands**

#### **Illinois Recreational Access Program**

With nearly 97% of the land in Illinois is privately owned land, finding a place to enjoy the great outdoors is becoming more difficult. Developed in 2011 from its first Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) grant, the IDNR launched its first public access program, the IL Recreational Access Program (IRAP).

In 2023, IRAP had over 27,000 acres under lease in 50 counties for spring turkey, archery deer, youth shotgun deer, squirrel, rabbit, quail, pheasant and waterfowl hunting. Several sites are also available for pond and riverbank fishing as well. In addition to outdoor access, IRAP provides new and updated habitat management plans for the landowners, that are specifically written to provide a diverse habitat to improve Illinois' Wildlife Action Plan targeted species and are written in cooperation with IDNR, USDA and SWCDs. IRAP plays an important role in implementing plan habitat projects on leased acres by providing guidance, manpower and up to a 75% cost-share to implement needed habitat improvement projects. Most management practices include nonnative invasive species control, timber stand improvement, prairie prep/planting, tree plantings, and prescribed burning.

#### **Conservation Stewardship Program**

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) provides landowners with an IDNR-approved management plan preferential tax treatment on the enrolled acres in exchange for the landowner's commitment to conservation habitat work on the CSP acreage. Landcover in the program must be unimproved and generally consists of a combination of is forest, grassland, wetland, and lake/pond. Recommended management practices vary depending on landcover and vegetative composition but most commonly nonnative invasive species control and timber stand improvement in terrestrial lands and fish stocking/structure construction in aquatic habitats. There are 2,462 active CSP enrollments in 92 Illinois counties amassing 102,040 acres.

#### **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program**

The Illinois Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a successful private lands partnership between the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs).

Illinois CREP offers financial incentives to landowners for the establishment of long-term conservation easements that improve water quality, capture nutrient runoff, reduce stream sedimentation and establish critical fish and wildlife habitat on private lands within Illinois and Kaskaskia River Watersheds. IDNR is currently processing 43 new easement applications that will establish conservation practices and wildlife habitat on 2500 acres of frequently flooded cropland and environmentally sensitive acres. Established in 1998, Illinois CREP has recorded over 1300 conservation easements, totaling 90,000 acres.

## **Division of Natural Heritage**

### **Highlights**

- The Illinois Endangered Species Protection Act celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Many species have benefited from legal protections in the Act and associated conservation actions including barn owl, Henslow's sparrow, river otter, and Eastern woodrat.
- Illinois has a new license plate to support monarch butterflies. The Monarch Butterfly License Plate is the first Universal Specialty Plate issued by the State of Illinois. IDNR will use the proceeds from the new license plate to create habitat for monarchs and other native pollinators.
- IDNR has formed a multi-office renewable energy committee whose purpose is to develop conservation strategies, mitigation opportunities, and research needs related to the development and operation of renewable energy. Committee members include wildlife biologists, foresters, aquatic biologists, endangered species specialists, and cultural resource specialists. The committee meets monthly and often has guest speakers to discuss the state of renewable energy development in Illinois and the state of relevant science.
- A Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project for Illinois Chorus Frogs (ICF) was awarded for \$1.3 million. Purpose of project is to work with producers in the "ICF habitat areas" to take unproductive areas of farmland and set them aside into small wet areas with a surrounding short grass prairie buffer. Landowner enrollment in priority areas will be incentivized.
- The Department continues to develop a recovery program for endangered species. There are currently 51 species within various stages of the Process, including 50 draft Species Status Assessments and 12 draft Species Planning Documents. Agency peer review of the documents is beginning to ensure the documents represent IDNR, are based on sound science, and present achievable goals and objectives.
- Winter hibernacula surveys at three abandoned mines in southern Illinois revealed nearly a 15% increase in hibernating Indiana bats and a 75% increase in Tricolored bats. These sites remain some of the largest remaining concentrations of Tricolored bats since the onset of White Nose Syndrome (WNS). One of the sites currently ranks the third largest Indiana bat hibernaculum in North America.
- IDNR continues aquatic restoration, monitoring, and survey activities in the Cache River State Natural Area. Accumulated sediments were removed from portions of the Cache River and Buttonland Swamp to create habitat heterogeneity and provide deep water areas for fishes. Fish and amphibian surveys identified critical habitat areas for species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) and provided insights into management frameworks that would ensure those species' continued persistence. Cypress tree health and recruitment was evaluated in Buttonland Swamp to identify opportunities for long-term management of the species. IDNR continues to build

public and private partnerships in the Cache River watershed to support landscape-scale management.

- IDNR continues surveys and assessments of freshwater mussels. Surveys of the Kankakee River and Vermilion River (of the Wabash River watershed) provide distribution, relative abundance, and demographic information for occupying species. Monitoring of mussel relocation areas was performed as part of a study to evaluate recolonization patterns following removal. More than 15,000 mussels were collected (and returned unharmed) in 2023 as part of these projects. IDNR is partnering with the US Fish and Wildlife Service on studies to explore propagation and augmentation of Sheepnose Mussel and evaluate likelihood of successful recruitment in Clubshell and Northern Riffleshell mussels.
- IDNR completed three studies to refine conservation strategies for state-listed fishes. Study results showed: 1) Spring Cavefish (*Forbesichthys agassizii*, threatened) of Illinois are genetically distinct from those of southern Kentucky and Tennessee; 2) Ironcolor Shiner (*Notropis chalybaeus*, threatened) exist as two distinct populations, one in the Sangamon River basin and one in the Iroquois River and Kankakee River basins. Evaluation of spatial genetic structure indicates there is no evidence of dispersal between these two populations within the past 10,000 years; and 3) Mottled Sculpin (*Cottus bairdii*, threatened) spatial genetic structure suggest both river distance and large rivers are effectively separating populations.
- Staff continued to expand the Hill Prairie Corridor project in west-central Illinois, connecting public land hill prairies to private land hill prairies. This project has multiple partners all working towards reestablishing hill prairies along this corridor.

## **Wildlife Action Plan**

The Department has started a comprehensive review and revision of the Illinois State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). This year-plus long effort will include a reevaluation of species that may qualify as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), developing more complete information on the distribution and condition of habitats, identifying cleaner linkages between recommended conservation actions and the stressors they address, and an updated approach to working with our partners in Conservation Opportunity Areas.

Illinois' current SWAP has identified 421 Wildlife SGCN, 303 SWAP Wildlife Watch List (WL) species, and 330 Plant SGCN. Although there is no regulatory authority associated with this designation these SGCN are vulnerable to population declines due to existing stressors. The management and monitoring of SGCN requires considerable effort by our staff and conservation partners. We use funding from the Federal State Wildlife Grant Program (SWG) to supplement these efforts.

Of the twenty-four Formula and two Competitive SWG Projects that were active during the past year, nine submitted final reports. Completed Projects focused on conducting surveys or assessments for bats, (secretive marsh) birds, bird-voiced treefrogs, Blanding's Turtles, bumble bees, butterflies, caddisflies, cicadas, crayfishes, Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnakes, leafhoppers, mayflies, planthoppers, and stoneflies. This work informed us about 38 SGCN and 72 WL species. Continuing SWG Projects will provide information for an additional 42 SGCN and 22 WL species. Results of these Projects are being used to inform status assessments in the ongoing review of Illinois Endangered & Threatened Species,

reevaluate species as potential SGCN as part of our SWAP revision, and evaluate the effectiveness of conservation actions being undertaken to implement our SWAP.

### **Illinois Nature Preserves Commission**

The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) consists of nine members appointed by the Governor. Pursuant to the Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act (525 ILCS 30/6), the Commission has certain powers and duties, including approval for dedication of nature preserves and registration of land and water reserves in the Illinois Nature Preserves System. The Commission, in partnership with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), protects lands in perpetuity for landowners such as the IDNR, forest preserve and park districts, not-for-profit organizations, corporations, land trusts, and individuals. Lands protected include high quality natural communities, habitats that support endangered and threatened species, geological features, and archaeological sites.

The INPC is a public-private partnership that has been successful for 60 years and is supported by staff members employed by the IDNR. In calendar year 2023, the INPC permanently protected 13 sites, including 7 new or additions to nature preserves and 6 new or additions to land and water reserves. The total acreage dedicated was 877 and the total registered was 826. Adding these 13 sites into the Illinois Nature Preserves System brings the statewide, total number of dedicated Illinois nature preserves to 417 comprising 63,239 acres, and the total number of registered land and water reserves to 207 with 58,949 acres. Altogether, at the end of 2023, there were 624 sites comprising 122,188 acres.

### **Division of Forest Resources**

#### **IDNR Nursery Program (Mason Nursery)**

For FY24, the IDNR Nursery Program produced 859,000 native bare-root trees and shrubs of 29 different species. Additional production included 2,000 native containerized trees and shrubs of 20 different species; 7,000 containerized native wildflowers and prairie grasses of 52 different species; 2,134 pounds of cleaned wildflower seed of 59 different species; 250 pounds of cleaned prairie grass seed of 3 different species. The Mason Nursery also produced 500 pounds of Monarch/Pollinator native wildflower seed mix consisting of 38 different species. Most of this material was sold and distributed widely across Illinois habitats and projects.

#### **Illinois Forestry Development Act (IFDA) Forest Management Program**

IFDA requires landowners to have an IDNR-approved forest management plan. Illinois has 10,057 forest management plans covering 573,816 acres. This equates to approximately 15% of non-industrial private forestland in Illinois being managed for wildlife, timber, recreation, clean water, carbon, and long-term forest health. Recommended forest management practices vary parcel to parcel. Enrolled parcels receive a reduced property tax rate.

#### **Illinois Forest Legacy Program (IFLP)**

The Forest Legacy Program is a partnership between the IDNR and the USDA Forest Service to identify and acquire environmentally important and threatened forests in Illinois. The Division of Forestry



maintains federal eligibility, completing three projects/year within the threatened Illinois forest landscapes. Illinois has seven IFLP properties under easement totaling 558 acres.

### **Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCFP)**

IDNR's Urban and Community Forestry Program reached millions of Illinois citizens through its community, guidance, programing, and financial assistance. This outreach included directing hundreds of thousands in federal dollars to Illinois communities and counties, to amplify local funding and result in \$750,000 being invested in Illinois community tree planting, and other urban forest works. Illinois is among the top three states in the nation in Tree City USA communities (200) and number one in the nation for Tree City USA Growth Awarded communities (107).

### **Illinois Forest Utilization & Marketing Program (IFUP)**

DNR Forestry bonded/licensed 360 timber buyers and listed 749 total authorized agents. Seventy-five sawmills and a few dozen additional hobby mills are currently operating in the state. Verified sales of timber and products, primarily as hardwood logs from private forests, continue to exceed \$50 million annually. The total economic value of the forest products industries in Illinois, including all primary and secondary sectors, exceeded \$22 billion in 2022. The IFUP partners with Stewardship and other forestry programs to expand the multiple-use philosophy of forest management which includes wildlife, timber, carbon, protected species, recreation, soil, and water conservation.

### **Wildland Fire Programs**

IDNR staff conducts prescribed burning on approximately 20,000 acres per year. IDNR Forestry deployed one 20-person fire crew to Minnesota to assist in containing wildfires near Bemidji. Illinois also has a representative on the NASF Wildland Fire Committee and a representative on the Big Rivers Fire Compact. All expenses and salaries incurred during assistance to other states are reimbursed by the U.S. Forest Service.