



Public lands are Uplands hot spots

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With the Illinois upland game season opening in slightly less than two weeks, perhaps you are still looking for a place to hunt. How about trying some public land for your opening day hunt? Locally, we are fortunate to have much of this type of land available.

Still, you are probably like most upland game hunters and reluctant to try public areas. Of those willing to test these sites, most absolutely refuse to visit these areas after opening weekend.

However, there are a handful of dedicated public area hunters that seem to find success throughout the season. Many of these public lands are proving to be wildlife meccas, particularly for upland game species.

In fact, management efforts by the Corps of Engineers and state wildlife specialists have paid big dividends in these areas. Wildlife populations have thrived due mainly to various habitat enhancement programs.

Wildlife food plots containing corn, sorghums, millets, lespedezas, sunflowers and a wild game food plot mixture provide wintering populations with a nutritious source of feed. Small fields seeded with legume grasses offer excellent roosting and nesting cover. Rows of border shrubs are planted and maintained to ensure the critical edge habitat required by many game species like quail.

Though early-season hunting pressure is sometimes relatively heavy, particularly on weekends and holidays, game populations at these sites seem to maintain their numbers. This is likely due to the abundance of excellent cover found at the site.

The most successful hunters are generally those who are willing to search the densest areas. Though there are many sites containing thick cover and are located good distances from access roads, relatively few hunters actually attempt to seek out and hunt these areas for game.

This can often be the key to successfully hunting public lands. Game species like pheasants, rabbits, and quail soon learn these areas offer a safe haven from most hunters.

Wildlife management techniques at Carlyle Lake are similar to those practiced at other Corps sites. The area typically features plenty of acres devoted specifically to wildlife food plots.

In the past, popular Carlyle Lake hunting spots have included Honker's Point, Elmwood, Stien's Field and the Lotus Access area. Hunters shouldn't overlook the lands on both sides of the saddle dam. This area often yields some of the best hunting success.

There are other Corps-managed areas throughout Illinois that also offer similar mixed bag hunting opportunities. Southern Illinois' Rend Lake in Franklin and Jefferson counties has become quite popular among hunters seeking all types of game.

Of the site's many acres of public lands available to hunters, approximately two-thirds contain good populations of one or more popular game species.

The lands surrounding Rend Lake contain good populations of quail, rabbits and squirrels. Sportsmen will also find excellent hunting opportunities for ducks, geese and deer.

Like Carlyle Lake, wildlife management efforts at Rend Lake have increased game populations at the site. In recent years, this area has become one of downstate Illinois' finest public hunting areas for upland game.

Hunting is permitted on most federal lands surrounding Rend Lake. Only those sites such as established recreation areas and waterfowl refuges are off limits. Hunter access parking lots are located at strategic locations around the lake.

There are also numerous sites throughout the state managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources where hunters often bag two or more wildlife species during a single outing.

Locally, these would include Pere Marquette State Park, several Mississippi River Area (MRA) sites and Horseshoe Lake State Park.

If one Illinois site was to stand out for its diversity and quantity of game, it would have to be Ten Mile Creek Fish and Wildlife Area near McLeansboro. Offering several thousand acres of prime wildlife habitat, this downstate public hunting area has been among the state's best in recent years.

Another excellent downstate site, the nearby Hamilton Fish and Wildlife Area regularly yield good hunting for doves, squirrels, rabbits and quail. The Crawford County Fish and Wildlife Area is another spot offering good hunting for squirrels, rabbits and quail.

Other top downstate hunting areas include Giant City State Park near Makanda, Mermet Lake Conservation Area near Belknap, Saline County Fish and Wildlife Area near

Equality, Sam Dale Lake Conservation Area near Johnsonville and Sam Parr State Park near Newton. Each site offers good hunting for two or more popular game species.

At most of the public hunting areas previously mentioned, special regulations may apply. In many cases, this may mean hunters must first obtain a special permit for the area. Other sites may merely require a hunter to sign in before hunting and record their harvest before leaving.

Some sites may also feature special hunting hours, and may even be closed certain days of the week. Interested individuals should always contact the site prior to planning a hunting trip.

Most of the state's public hunting areas, along with phone numbers, are listed in the 2018-19 Digest of Illinois Hunting and Trapping Regulations. Single copies of the publication are available from most license vendors or IDNR offices.