



BIG RIVERS, BIG LANDSCAPE

Kentucky's new crown jewel • By Kevin Kelly

VISITORS WHO ACCOMPANY Terry Cook to the area where the Tradewater River empties into the Ohio River are amazed by the surroundings.

Views of the Ohio for miles in each direction. Abundant wildlife. River bluffs. Wetlands. Forests.

"I think it provides something for everybody," said Cook, who is the director of The Nature Conservancy of Kentucky.

Big Rivers Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and State Forest located west of Sturgis covers 6,732 acres in Union and Crittenden counties. It also offers an array

of recreational opportunities.

Visitors can hunt, fish, paddle, watch the wildlife or simply imagine themselves stepping back in time to the days of Lewis and Clark or when cave-dwelling bandits were marauding boats on the river.

"It is sort of a crown jewel in the western part of the state," Cook said. "I think anyone who goes out there can really recognize how important and how unique the property is."

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources and the Kentucky Division of Forestry assembled the property in

two phases. The effort to piece together this large wildlife management area spanned 5 years. The Nature Conservancy of Kentucky played a critical role by acquiring the biggest tract of the property and holding onto it until the state agencies could buy it.

The first phase of the Big Rivers project involved the purchase of a 2,488-acre tract in Union County. In September, the agencies bought 4,244 acres in neighboring Crittenden County. The property was rated as the top project for the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program.

"If you enjoy the great outdoors, this



Big Rivers straddles the Tradewater River at its confluence with the Ohio River.



MARK GODFREY/TNC PHOTO

is a must-see,” said Tony Wheatley, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife’s land acquisitions coordinator. “People are going to think I’ve lost my mind, but if you want to talk about Cumberland Falls, if you want to talk about Natural Bridge, and if you’re into all those kinds of things, Big Rivers WMA needs to be on your list.”

The area is home to steep upland hardwoods, bottomland hardwoods and rare post oak flatwoods, a community of slow growing, drought resistant oaks. It offers key habitat for the federally-endangered Indiana bat and fat pocketbook mussel. Mi-

grating waterfowl use the area as a stopover. The Shawnee National Forest lies across the Ohio River in Illinois.

The Union County side features the Caseyville Bluffs, a line of sandstone cliffs overlooking the Ohio and Tradewater rivers. Visitors enjoy the views there, and also from The Lookout – a spot on the Crittenden County tract offering outstanding views of the management area and the Ohio River.

“The overlook offers one of the best scenic views in the state,” said Scott Harp, regional wildlife coordinator for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. “It’s a beautiful view of

“It’s nice to know that we have that big of a chunk of land. The overlook there, when you look across, it’s one of the prettier places I’ve been in the state. **It’s just cool.**”

the bend from a high elevation overlooking some nice rolling hills. On the Union County side there’s some really nice sandstone bluffs. The geological formations there are very impressive.”

The area is readily accessible.

Traveling west from Sturgis, visitors can access the Union County portion of the area from KY 1508; and on the Crittenden County side, access is from KY 365. Additional access to the Crittenden County side of the property is available via Bells Mine Road off KY 365.

With 4.5 miles of Tradewater River frontage and another 4.1 miles on the Ohio River, the property also can be easily accessed by boat.

“You can get anywhere on this area with a one-mile walk,” Harp said. “From every parking lot or the rivers, there’s a one-mile walk or less.”

An old railroad bed is evidence of long-ago hopes the ground might hold enough coal to sustain a mining operation. Aluminum producer Alcoa assembled the property decades ago. In recent years, it had been owned by Kimball International and The Forestland Group, both of which managed the property as a source of sustainable timber.

“You’re looking at a property that has not been clear cut,” Wheatley said. “In the state of Kentucky, to find 7,000 acres that has not had any mining, any land disturbances on it is totally unique.”

The property boasts excellent populations of deer and turkey, and it stands to reason.

The ingredients are in place. There's a good mix of upland forest, thick bottomlands and agricultural land. The native vegetation offers ample hard mast such as acorns and a variety of soft mast, including blackberries, black cherries, wild plums and persimmons.

"The Ag-land is extremely rich and fertile," Harp said. "So there's plenty of beans and corn for animals to eat around there. If we reduce some of that crop ground, there's plenty of acorns and everything else there for them to eat."

Big Rivers WMA is open for hunting under statewide regulations for all squirrel, rabbit, quail, furbearer and turkey seasons except during the modern firearms deer quota hunt in November. The area also is open under statewide regulations for archery/crossbow deer seasons (except when closed for the deer quota hunt), the youth-only firearm season in October and the free youth weekend hunt.

Gabe Jenkins was among gun hunters drawn to participate in the quota hunt this year. Jenkins, a wildlife biologist with Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, took a 14-point buck on the final day of his hunt.

Last year, Jenkins participated in a deer herd health check study on the property, which previously had been utilized as a well-known commercial hunting preserve. The study found the deer herd at an acceptable level and in good health overall, Jenkins said.

"I would hope that we can keep it at the same level," he said. "We also have to realize it's going to be hunted pretty hard. There's a lot of interest in that place because of its story and potential."

Hunters spotted 137 antlered deer and 191 without antlers during November's quota hunt. Nine of the 17 deer harvested during the two-day gun quota hunt were mature bucks, Harp said.

Spring turkey season should be exceptional, he added. Wheatley said he has wit-



JOHN BRUNJES PHOTO

nessed a turkey flock so thick that from a distance he thought it was a tree that had fallen across the railroad bed.

"The turkey population is extremely strong right now," Harp said. "There's been very little pressure on the turkeys."

Furbearer opportunities also should be good this year, he added.

There are projects planned to improve habitat for small game and waterfowl.

For example, about 1,500 acres on the Crittenden County side traditionally have been used for pasture or crop land. Some of that acreage will be converted over time to short grass prairie or receive bottomland hardwood tree plantings near the waterways.

"All these fields directly on the rivers really aren't beneficial; you'd like to have a good 100-yard buffer of trees all the way along the river to establish a riparian corridor, which is great for providing a specific niche for animals," Harp said. "That's one thing that's really hurting a lot of species. That corridor has been broken up. We're going in and planting all of those back to hardwoods to restore it."

Gabe Jenkins took this 14-point buck during the 2013 quota gun hunt. Big Rivers WMA and State Forest also offers small game hunting.

There also are plans to expand dove fields.

"I think this year we had 40 acres on the Union County side and we'll probably put in another 30 acres or so on the Crittenden side next summer," Harp said. "So there will be plenty of dove fields."

For anglers, there are opportunities to fish inland water as well as the rivers. There are several smaller ponds on the Crittenden County tract, including a 4.5-acre lake.

The Tradewater River runs slow in the summer months but at other times, it offers enough current for a leisurely paddling trip to its confluence with the Ohio River.

The Grangertown Landing boat ramp off KY 1508 on the Union County side is a good option to put in on the Tradewater. The Old Providence Road ramp, a private ramp that accepts donations for public use, lies just upstream off KY 923.

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MARK GODFREY/TNC PHOTO

Left to right: Taking a tour of the Tradewater River are Director Terry Cook and Western Kentucky Project Director Shelly Morris of The Nature Conservancy of Kentucky; and Management Foreman Curt Divine of Kentucky Fish and Wildlife.

property for \$12.6 million. Money from license and permit fees paid by hunters and anglers was not used. The Nature Conservancy of Kentucky, The Conservation Fund, The Forestland Group, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund, the Forest Legacy Program, Indiana Bat Conservation Fund and the Stream Mitigation Fund assisted with the acquisition.

Big Rivers represented the largest land conservation project ever for The Nature Conservancy of Kentucky.

"It was a very unique situation of which everything had to go really well," Cook said.

Protecting the lands and waters in that area was at the core of The Nature Conservancy's interest. Opening it up to public use has added benefits, Cook said.

"We think that conservation lands are an important economic contributor to local communities. We think as you open that up and you enhance visitation, you enhance tourism in the area, and that money flows through the local economy," he said. "We saw there being multiple benefits; from the conservation benefits, from the public access benefits and from the local economic benefits that a property like this could have all of those."

In his office in Frankfort, Wheatley is easily reminded about the project. Boundary surveys of the Crittenden County tract are taped to one of the walls.

"Conservation is what gives us the ticket to the hunting and the fishing," he said, "and this project exemplifies that."

Like others, Jenkins can't settle on just one aspect of Big Rivers WMA and State Forest that makes the area stand out.

"It's just a really special place," he said. "It's nice to know that we have that big of a chunk of land. The overlook there, when you look across, it's one of the prettier places I've been in the state. It's just cool." ■



MARK GODFREY/TNC PHOTO

also is a favored haunt for paddlefish and shovelnose sturgeon staging for the spawn, according to The Nature Conservancy of Kentucky.

For Cook, the property represents one of those projects that comes together once every couple of decades. The land acquisition was made possible with the cooperation of public agencies and private partners.

The area was originally part of an 11,000-acre tract bought by an investment fund managed by The Forestland Group with assistance from The Conservation Fund. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife and the Kentucky Division of Forestry pooled nearly \$6.7 million to acquire 2,488 acres of the property in Union County in early 2012.

Kentucky's congressional delegation helped secure \$3.25 million in federal money through the Forest Legacy Program. The Nature Conservancy, Duke Energy, the Crouse Corporation and the Indiana Bat Conservation Fund also assisted. The Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund, which receives funding from the sale of nature license plates, environmental fines and a portion of the unmined minerals tax, provided \$1 million. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife paid the administrative fees.

The second phase of the Big Rivers project was finalized in September 2013 with the purchase of the Crittenden County

Tradewater," Harp said. "If you've got a motor boat, you can motor up to a public ramp in Caseyville. We're working on getting a public ramp just below the Tradewater, so you'd be able to put in at the Tradewater; go all the way down it, then go down the Ohio next to the bank and pull out there."

Crappie and catfish are the primary draws for anglers.

"Catfish over the summer," Harp said. "Crappie for the fall, winter and spring months."

The mouth of the Tradewater River