

This vacation hotspot offers everything from art to golf to monster catfish.

The Rise of Rend Lake

Story By Joe McFarland
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Some of America's best-known vacation destinations once were barely more than a speck on a road map. A wide spot in the road. The proverbial one-horse town. There was a time, back before so many campers and motels converged on the landscape, when it would have been possible to drive through these middle-of-nowhere hamlets and not realize there was a town present at all. A couple of plow horses, a barn, and a gas pump along a gravel back road were all that stood to defend the name on the map. Many existed in name only.

Then everything changed.

Rend City, Illinois was one of those tiny vestiges on a map. Founded as an overnight coal town in the early 1900s, Civil War veteran Colonel William P. Rend operated his collier near the flood-prone Big Muddy River between 1907 and 1920, before the town died. Col. Rend was one of America's industrial-age coal barons, and his mining town, Rend City, was built to house miners and provide for their community needs. As with so many old coal towns, when mining ceased, so went Rend City.

But it wasn't the end for Rend.

It had been decades since this southern Illinois speck on a map was anything one might call a tangible place. A church existed, and a few houses. But in the early 1950s, locals decided to do something that would transform the landscape around Rend City into one of the most popular and diverse recreation areas in southern Illinois.

At first, the project had very little to do with vacations and recreation. Locals wanted to fix the chronic water problems faced by everyone living near the Big Muddy River. Not that there was a shortage of water—floods were frequent. Yet insufficient water existed for practical uses. Dry summers turned tiny city lakes into shallow watering holes.

Locals suggested that a huge reservoir above Rend City could solve both problems.

"The roads around here were always flooding because of the Big Muddy," recalls 75-year-old Joe Anne Malkovich, whose late husband, Dan Malkovich, was instrumental in organizing the Rend Lake Association some 50 years ago. Dan Malkovich (who'd later serve as acting director for the Illinois Department of Conservation) and

others promoted the idea of building a dam along the Big Muddy River near Rend City. The appropriately named Rend Lake would provide a permanent solution to chronic flooding throughout the region, in addition to securing a tremendous water supply for communities in seven counties.

And there would be recreation. After all, promoters touted, a giant lake could be used for more than just drinking water. Fishing and boating were natural extensions of an 18,900-acre lake, and planners quickly envisioned colossal developments springing up. When finished in the early 1970s, supporters proclaimed there would someday be resorts and golf courses and millions of visitors at this ocean of recreational opportunity.

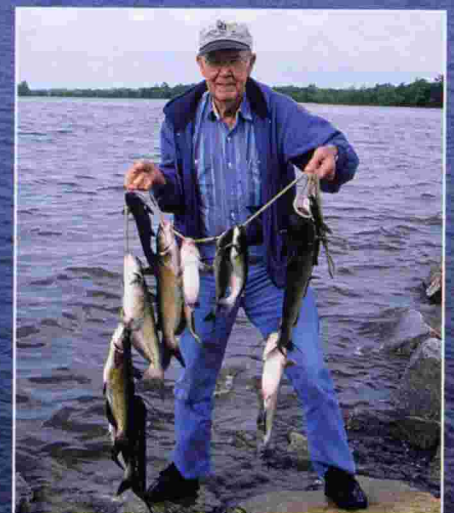
A visit to Rend Lake today, starting with a quick exit off Interstate 57 near Ina, begins with the showy Southern Illinois Artisan's Shop and Visitor's Center, where guests can take in the varied displays of art and wares from scores of Illinois craftsmen. The museum-store setting also serves as a welcome and information center for curious travelers.

It's possible to spend a dozen separate vacations at Rend Lake without

Few could have imagined the Rend Lake success story before this giant impoundment was created more than 30 years ago.



(Photo by Gary Andraszko, ISM)



experiencing everything there is to see and do here. The lands and waters surrounding this recreation destination, cooperatively owned and managed by the Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Rend Lake Conservancy District, are ripe with opportunities for anyone seeking a complete trip to southern Illinois.

There's a world-class shooting complex and hunting preserve located east of Rend Lake Resort and just

south of Rend Lake College. The complex includes handicapped-accessible facilities for skeet and trap shooters as well as a handicapped-accessible archery range with concrete pathways. A short distance south of the Southern Illinois Artisan's Shop and Visitor's Center is the popular, well-manicured Rend Lake Golf Course, with 27 holes of rolling challenges set beside Seasons restaurant, offering fine dining indoors and out, along with indoor banquet facilities.

Rend Lake offers surprisingly diverse recreation opportunities, with plenty of fun pursuits.

Across the road from the restaurant is Seasons Lodge, where guests can stay in plush, modern facilities with a swimming pool, spas, fireplaces and quick access to the golf course.

Farther north along the east shore of Rend Lake is Rend Lake Resort,



At Rend Lake Resort's modern, well-furnished lakeside cabins, "roughing it" means sleeping late.

part of the 3,300-acre Wayne Fitzgerald State Recreation Area. Lodging here includes "boatels" where guests can troll their boats right to their shoreline rooms and even fish off the patio deck. There are Jacuzzi rooms available for special getaways, as well as a swimming pool and children's pool for

guests. Bikes to explore the nearby trails are available and the resort offers a newly constructed banquet and conference facility.

Scattered around the resort are cozy cabins for guests, and visitors can swap fish stories at Reilly's Lounge, located adjacent to Windows Restaurant. A gift shop is open nearby.

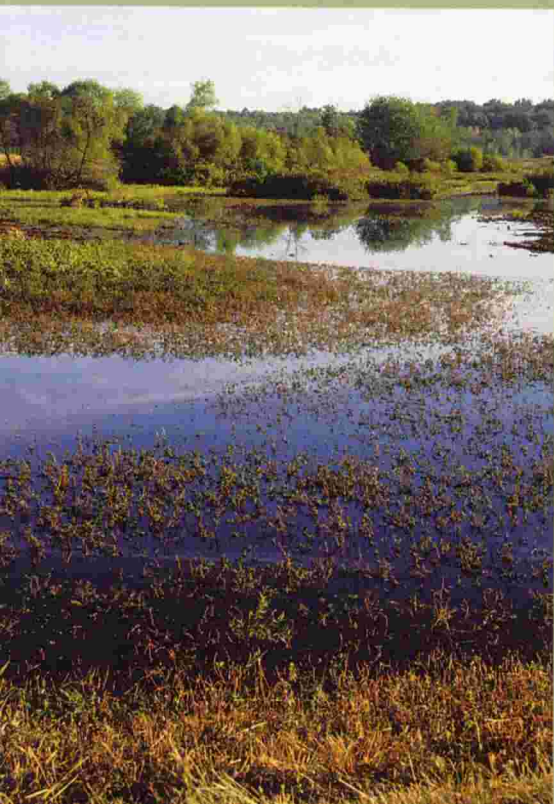
Within Wayne Fitzgerald SRA, controlled pheasant hunts are offered between November and January. Horseback riding and camping are options from spring through fall. Hunt-

ing dog field trials are held every weekend in September and October. For those looking for sightseeing exercise, a recently completed 4.2-mile fine-gravel hiking and biking trail winds through the recreation area and connects with an additional 5.5 miles of paved trails managed by the Rend Lake Conservancy District and the Corps of Engineers.

The recreation area maintains 243 Class A campsites, along with 20 tent-only Class D primitive sites at its lake-accessible campground. Additionally, the Corps of Engineers offers five lake-accessible campgrounds with Class A and B sites, as well as a group camping area.

Anxious to test the 18,900 acres of water? Everything from kayaks to sailboats to powerful speedboats clip the

Waterfowl habitat and gift shopping are two of the surprisingly varied features of today's Rend Lake.



(Photo by Gary Andrashko, ISM.)



waves at Rend Lake during prime seasons. Rend Lake Marina offers rental fishing and pontoon boats, as well as marine supplies and repairs, boat storage and slip rental.

Anglers might feel a bit intimidated when they first arrive at Rend Lake. There is so much lake, fishermen might wonder where to try their luck.

Fortunately for newcomers, many underwater fish-attractor sites exist on Rend Lake. The Corps of Engineers and DNR submerge bundles of Christmas trees every year in selected areas around the lake, and maps of fishing hotspots can be obtained at the Corps

With more than 18,900 acres of water, Rend Lake has plenty of space for recreational boating.

Rend Lake visitors can cruise the woods and waters in a variety of ways.

Rend Lake Project Office, located at the west edge of the dam.

Rend Lake is popular with crappie and catfish anglers and prospects for sporting species, such as largemouth bass, are improving. Some 72,000 largemouth fingerlings were released in Rend Lake in 2002, and catch rates for bass larger than 14 inches jumped 22 percent last year.

Bluegill are widely present in the lake, but sizes tend to range from small to medium. Crappie are another matter. The state record black crappie (4 pounds, 8 ounces) was claimed here by a local resident in 1976. Con-



sequently, pressure for this popular sport fish increased steadily over the years and finally resulted in limits being placed on quantity and sizes anglers can keep. In an effort to improve the number of monster "slabs" being caught at Rend Lake, biologists recommended a daily limit of 25 crappie per angler, no more than five of which can be 10 inches or longer.

The crappie regulations quickly demonstrated a tremendous benefit to fishing quality.



(Photo by Chas. J. Dees.)



The Rend Lake Shooting Complex offers world-class facilities for both shotgun and archery enthusiasts—along with a nearby hunting preserve.

you absolutely want to do nothing.

Even at Rend City, which is still a ghost town by definition, the handful of residents today have endless recreational opportunities in their backyard. William P. Rend and his 13-year mining operation might be long-gone. But his name endures as one of the great vacation destinations in southern Illinois.



"During last fall's fishery surveys, 35 percent of the crappie from trap nets were greater than 10 inches and 80 percent greater than 8 inches," reported Mike Hooe, DNR's fisheries biologist for Rend Lake. "If the growth rates continue, by this fall I expect 60 percent of the crappie population will be greater than 10 inches."

That's a promising future for crappie anglers. Yet, even if there were no crappie in Rend Lake, there would still be plenty of satisfied fishermen.

"There seems to be no end to the catfish in Rend Lake," Hooe laughed. "We never need to stock catfish there."

Channel catfish and flathead catfish can be caught virtually anywhere in the lake, with flatheads ranging up to 50, 60 and even 70 pounds reported every year.

Waterfowl hunters annually converge on the Rend Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, located north of the main lake, for duck and goose hunting

opportunities. Deer hunters find both archery and firearm deer hunting excellent at the site's public hunting areas. One of the original deer hunts specifically for disabled individuals began here more than 20 years ago, with volunteers from the nearby Sesser-Valier High School Outdoorsman's Club assisting disabled hunters whose deer season wouldn't be possible otherwise.

Millions of visitors stop at Rend Lake every year, yet there's plenty of room for all. Want to take a bike ride through secluded woods, then step onto a championship golf course? Perhaps you'd like to peer through binoculars at migratory birds visiting a wetlands. Maybe you'd rather toss in an anchor and socialize in a bay filled with tanned summer boaters. Rend Lake is as active or passive as you choose, with something for everyone. About the only thing you can't do at Rend Lake is, well, do nothing—unless



Facts at a glance

- **Wayne Fitzgerald State Recreation Area**, 11094 Ranger Road, Whittington, IL 62897. Telephone (618) 629-2320. Website: <http://dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgmt/PARKS/R5/WAYNE.HTM>.
- **Rend Lake Resort and Conference Center**, 11712 East Windy Lane, Whittington, IL 62897. Telephone (618) 629-2211. Website: <http://dnr.state.il.us/Lodges/Rendlake.htm>.
- **Rend Lake Conservancy District**, P.O. Box 907, Benton, IL 62812. Telephone (618) 439-4321. Website: <http://rendlake.org>.
- **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Rend Lake Project Office**, 12220 Rend City Road, Benton, IL 62812. Telephone (618) 724-2493. Website: <http://mvs.usace.army.mil/Rend/>.
- **Rend Lake Hotline**. Telephone (618) 629-1828.

Fishing remains a traditional sporting choice at Rend Lake, where anglers vie for everything from big crappie to whopper catfish.



