

Columbia Mine Preserve grand opening Saturday

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This Saturday, the Columbia Mine Preserve will finally be opened to the public, beginning with a grand opening ceremony at 1 p.m.

The 1,043-acre property, part of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge that came into the Sycamore Land Trust's acquisition last year, was supposed to open on Oct. 5, Refuge Appreciation Day.

But with the federal government's shutdown, the grand opening was postponed and the wildlife refuge was shut down. But life still continued within the mine preserve, which harbors rare bird species, river otters and bobcats.

It took about a decade for everything to come together for the Columbia Mine Preserve to find a safe home with SLT.

"Things just kept happening to prevent it," Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge Assistant Manager Heath Hamilton said.

Parking lots were built, trails laid out and maps were printed, Hamilton said. Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Peabody Energy and Ducks Unlimited were instrumental in the opening of the mine preserve.

Now the mine preserve will no longer be closed, but open to all. Nature photographers, hikers and birdwatchers alike will be able to enjoy the preserve from within.

Indiana bats, copperbelly watersnakes, river otters and bald eagles are a few more species that they hope will benefit from the protection of the preserve, connects over 5,000 acres of wetlands, forest, grasslands and more.

Folsom recommends those interested in the Columbia Mine Preserve check out a new video <http://tinyurl.com/m5colzu> of bobcats in their habitat.

The mine preserve isn't open to hunting and fishing just yet, but probably will be in 2014, Hamilton said. There's a long process that goes into getting land on the federal register for hunting and fishing, he said.

During the ceremony, a couple of short speeches will be given by Sycamore Land Trust Executive Director Christian Freitag, SLT Director John Lawrence and PRNWR Manager Bill McCoy, SLT Communications Director Katrina Folsom said.

A ribbon cutting ceremony will follow and refreshments enjoyed before McCoy and Hamilton take groups on short hikes through the preserve.

“I’ve picked a couple scenic areas...to get people familiar with the preserve,” Hamilton said.

“It’s a really nice open landscape,” he said. There are many scenic landscapes including an array of wetlands, lakes and forests. People will have a chance to enjoy a bluff overlook and views of Bald Eagle Nest and Snaky Point Marsh.

People should wear clothes and shoes they feel comfortable walking up to a mile in, he said.

The Columbia Mine Preserve is there for the public’s enjoyment, Hamilton said.

There are a lot of hidden treasures within the mine preserve.

“(The preserve) doesn’t really reveal itself until it gets back off the road,” he said.

“We do have a pretty good chance of seeing deer, wild turkey, ducks, hawks and other small songbirds on our walk,” he said.

“I’m excited to get to show people what’s there,” Hamilton said.

Go here for a map of the mine preserve: www.fws.gov/refuge/Patoka_River/map.html

Check out www.sycamorelandtrust.org/columbia-mine for more information and directions.