

Columbia Mine Preserve opens

TABITHA WAGGONER tabitha@pdclarion.com | **Posted: Sunday, November 17, 2013 11:26 pm**

OAKLAND CITY—Several dozen people from surrounding areas journeyed to the Columbia Mine Preserve to celebrate its grand opening Saturday afternoon at the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge.

The 1,043-acre harbor of eagles, river otters, bobcats and other rare bird species came into the Sycamore Land Trust's acquisition last year. The Columbia Mine Preserve was first slated to open on Oct. 5, Refuge Appreciation Day, but was delayed due to the federal government shutdown.

Sycamore Land Trust Executive Director Christian Freitag and PRNWR Manager Bill McCoy cut the red ribbon to mark the mine preserve's opening.

"Sycamore Land Trust got involved about two years ago," Freitag said. "When I got to tell him, 'we finally got the property,' (McCoy) giggled and practically started crying like a baby girl."

The wildlife at the mine preserve "will blow your mind," he said.

The property now known as the Columbia Mine Preserve had been sold off. One week before Sycamore Land Trust bought the property, the land was being surveyed. They had several prospective buyers over the past two decades, but each time it fell through. McCoy said he never gave up on saving the preserve—and it paid off.

"All I can say is, finding Sycamore Land Trust was a saving grace to this place," McCoy said. "We have the management rights and they own the partnership," McCoy explained. "I certainly hope that partnership doesn't end here." There are still thousands of acres that they hope can come into their possession with help from Sycamore Land Trust, he said, and with help from friends of the refuge.

"It's not something that will happen quick," McCoy said.

After the ribbon cutting, two groups were led around the mine preserve on a 1.5 mile hike. One group was led by PRNWR Assistant Manager Heath Hamilton, who bushhugged the path himself. The hike's highlights included an overlook of Snaky Point Marsh, walks through tall Indian grasses, sniffs of mountain mint ("when you see that in summer you'll be impressed, it has a little white flower on it," Hamilton said) and glimpses of eagles and their nests. Tiger moth caterpillars were climbing everywhere. They look for a warm place at the preserve in winter, Hamilton said.

Barbara Watson of Oakland City asked if it would be safe to hike on the preserve alone or with one other person.

“I’m out here a lot by myself,” Hamilton said. “The wild animals are a lot more scared of you...I would not think twice coming out here by myself or with another person,” he said. Besides, the bobcats are skittish, he said. “If you see one you’re lucky.”

The best time to see bobcats is early in the morning or at dusk, he said.

There’s an opportunity for a 3.5 mile loop around the mine preserve, Hamilton said. He sought input from the hikers who followed his lead through the path, many of whom asked questions about the wildlife around them. Many of the plants growing around the mine preserve are invasive species from Asia, planted by the coal company when they were done with the land, he said. Hamilton pointed out where a deer had rubbed his antlers against a tree. A buck’s velvety antlers can get “itchy and annoying,” Hamilton explained. He also made the hikers aware of the burn marks on the lower trunks of several trees. Ideally, the preserve would like to have a controlled, rotational burn for a third of the preserve every year, he said. Prairie grasses are maintained by fire, he said. One such controlled burn occurred earlier this year.

“I just really want to be able to take people where they can see something,” Hamilton said.

“I just enjoyed it all—the Snaky Point overlook was nice,” Watson said later; her husband Scott Watson agreed. “We hadn’t seen it from above before.” The couple even brought along their toy poodle, Chocolate, who didn’t seem tired from the hike at all and continued to stay ahead of them.

Kathy McClain of Jasper and Lee Sterrenburg of Bloomington also went on Hamilton’s hike. They had visited the mine preserve before, including on a Sycamore Land Trust walking tour in May.

“I like the grasslands,” McClain said.

Reclaimed mines are usually sold for strip mines, Sterrenburg said. “There’s almost nothing like this left for conservation purposes,” he said, explaining why the Columbia Mine was special. “This one’s sort of upscale.”