



BIG OAKS

Newsletter of Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge & Big Oaks Conservation Society

Spring 2008

Refuge Manager's Corner

By Joe Robb

As I prepared for this year's Christmas Bird Count, the weather predictions kept my attention. Snow. Freezing rain. Heavy rain. My mind began to divide the refuge into separate routes dependent on the weather. Winters arrival always brings uncertainty and new tasks for the refuge; the Christmas count was successful even with the bad weather and the volunteers spotted species such as: golden eagle, bald eagle, short-eared owl, American pipit, and a lonely, cold eastern phoebe.

We also have a new Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) employee, Ashley Buchanan who jumped in and helped during our refuge hunt. Ashley, originally from Oklahoma, is currently working on her Master's of Science degree at The Ohio State University. Her research dealt with neotropical migrant birds at Ottawa NWR on Lake Erie. She will gain experience at Big Oak's and help with our work that has recently overwhelmed us due to the loss of 3 of our permanent staff. Our other SCEP, Cydney Meadows, will also be back in 2008 to finish her study of the effect of prescribed fire on reptiles and amphibians. Though it's Winter, the amphibian breeding season is just around the corner.

We had a successful fall prescribed fire season in October due to the late summer drought. We treated about 5,600 acres to slow down woody encroachment into the refuge's grasslands. Some experts think these late "growing season" burns are more

effective than fires during early spring (March-April); we'll test this by monitoring these areas with the help of former intern and Hanover College Student, Paul Killian, who will work on this as an Independent Study project.

We also have had some work done recently on Old Timbers Lake's dam. The spillway's control pipe had water leaking in through a joint, so to remove water pressure for the repair procedure, we lowered the lake level about 8 feet. The repair was a success, and now the engineers and safety experts are discussing the next steps to improve some of the other dam's issues. The lake has refilled back to pool level with the recent rain and the fish await the anglers next spring. Drawdowns like this are good for lakes; they reconsolidate sediments which improve water quality and spawning habitat for fish. Anglers also reported excellent fishing (for those with small boats and willing to fish from the shore) during the period of the drawdown. Fish biomass should also be shifted from small fish to larger fish because of the feeding frenzy caused by the drawdown.

We also had a hectic refuge deer season in 2007 with a fair harvest (499 deer) and a hunt that went smoothly due to the excellent volunteer response. We had volunteers staffing gates, helping to check deer, and BOCS members selling food, compasses, maps, hats and other items. All this help kept our meager staff afloat thru this busy time; we deeply, deeply appreciated everybody's effort.

As our spring public season opening approaches, we'll need these volunteers again for our planned special events: Turkey Season, Youth Turkey Hunt, Outdoor Women at Big Oaks, and Take a Kid Fishing Day. With the recent agreement that allowed the Big Oaks Conservation Society to take over management responsibilities for Old Timber's Lodge, opportunities for involvement at the lodge will expand. See more information about the Lodge in this issue.



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Letter From The President

By Jim Leveille



“A Call to Arms”

Welcome to our BOCS newsletter. As we head forward into 2008, your society has a very busy and exciting agenda. Our newest challenge and opportunity will be assuming stewardship of Old Timbers Lodge. The ground-breaking agreement which BOCS signed with the Indiana Air National Guard is the first of its kind. The agreement requires close cooperation between BOCS, the Indiana Air National Guard, the U.S. Army and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition to Dr. Joe Robb, I would like to thank Major General Martin Umbarger, Indiana’s Adjutant General, Col Shane Halbrook, Lt. Col Matt Sweeney and Paul Cloud for mentoring this agreement to completion.

As we move into this role of responsibility, it is essential that we maintain our focus on our primary goal, that of supporting our refuge. Preservation of Old Timbers and our support of BONWR are mutually compatible and complimentary goals. I urge you to attend our Old Timbers Lodge “makeover” weekend starting the morning of Saturday, May 17th. This will be our first opportunity to back up with actions our commitment to the lodge.

Another area of focus for BOCS has to be the inadequate staffing of our refuge. When the negotiations which created BONWR were conducted, a full-time refuge staff of twelve was promised. The actual staff has never been above eight and is now down to five full-time and one part-time employee. Dr. Robb and his staff have done an outstanding job of keeping BONWR functioning. But the ongoing lack of staff, infrastructure and maintenance dollars cannot be allowed to continue. No organization can function in emergency mode forever. We can and do assist as volunteers to lighten the burden, but ultimately it is the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Ser-

vice to adequately fund our refuge.

As a volunteer group formed to support the refuge, it is our duty and responsibility to inform our elected officials of this oversight. The refuge and BOCS have stood by patiently, since BONWR’s creation in 2000, for “our turn” for adequate funding. Being responsible and patient citizens is laudable. Unfortunately, federal funding will always be tight. As private citizens, we have a right and obligation to contact our federal representatives and to insure they are aware of our needs: staffing, maintenance funding and a visitor contact station/office complex. It won’t happen without your involvement.

I look forward to working with you at the lodge on May 17, at our Outdoor Woman program on June 7, and at Take-A-Kid-Fishing-Day on June 21st. Feel free to contact me with any questions you have about these activities or BOCS.

Jim Leveille

President, Big Oaks Conservation Society

BIG OAKS CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Mission Statement: To support the goals of wildlife conservation and habitat restoration at Big Oaks NWR; develop environmental education programs; enhance public awareness; encourage use and appreciation for the natural and cultural assets unique to Big Oaks.

OLD TIMBERS LODGE- A HISTORICAL PROSPECTIVE

BY: KEN KNOUF

Located in the northern end of the refuge, atop a 90-foot limestone bluff overlooking Big Graham Creek, Old Timbers Lodge is without doubt the best known structure on the property. Surrounded by mature stands of yellow poplar, white oak, sycamore, and white pine, the 9, 892 square foot “retreat” reflects the vision of Alexander Thomson, the Hamilton, Ohio president of Champion Paper Co and an ardent early conservationist. As with many of his wealthy contemporaries, Thomson pursued active leisure activities such as hunting and fishing, and seeking better opportunities, kept an eye out for a more suitable location.

When Jack Finch of Madison informed him of the availability of a farm 20 miles north in Ripley County, Thomson immediately made the 8-hour drive to survey the property. A week later, Mrs. Thomson viewed the property, fell in love with the surroundings, and a deal was quickly struck with Emmett and Louise Williams, the original owners.

Thomson hired a well-known retired Cincinnati architect, Danish born Gustav Elzner, and the two discussed design and construction of the future home. Aware that limestone was abundantly available in the immediate area, Thomson inquired about its use. Elzner responded that it was an excellent building material and added, “A stone house won’t sweat if the walls are thick enough. They should be at least 14” thick.” So the design took form.

Construction began in 1929 with a quarry opened just 125 yards northeast of the building site. August (Gus) Rahe, nearing age 70, was recruited as the head stone mason and was directly responsible for cutting and shaping the unique spiral staircases as well as the three-ton mantels and window sills. For his efforts, Mr. Rahe was paid 75 cents per hour, considered excellent wages for the time.

The beams and yellow poplar planks for the interior walls came from a planned grist mill that was never constructed as well as 8 barns that were dismantled. One beam stretched over 60 feet from one end of the “Great Room” to the other. The door hinges and other hardware were hand crafted by students from Berea College, KY. No two sets of hinges are alike throughout the lodge. There are claims that the Johnson & Johnson paste wax formula was developed on the oak floor on the Great Room. This can’t be documented,

but it can’t be disproved either---all anyone can say for sure is that the floors have held up remarkably well over the years. Old Timbers was completed in 1932 at a cost of \$75,000.

To further develop the scenic and recreational value of the estate, Mr. Thomson had three dams constructed. In front of Old Timbers, the “duck pond” was formed, in response to youngest son Chilton Thomson’s request. Another dam impounded Graham Creek below the structure while the third dam maintained a small reservoir just north of Old Timbers. Mr. Thomson also had the Civilian Conservation Corps plant over a half-million white and red pine seedlings just west of the lodge.

The Thomsons and their four sons spent almost every weekend all year long at Old Timbers. Chilton, as mentioned the youngest son, authored a small book entitled Old Timbers: Heartwarming Memories About An Indiana Farm which is available in most public libraries and for sale through Historic Hoosier Hills. In this book, Chilton describes life at Old Timbers over the eight years the family enjoyed before the government forced them to leave when Jefferson Proving Ground was established in 1940. It was a lifestyle full of happy times with live-in cook Hallie Miller preparing sumptuous feasts for the Thomsons and their many guests. Guests included Indiana Governor Leslie, Mr. Proctor (Proctor & Gamble), and Hoosier composer Cole Porter as well as many of the locals who attended the large parties the Thomsons were known for.

Alexander Thomson died in 1939, a year before the Army announced that it would be constructing a large munitions testing facility in southern Indiana. With understandably bitter feelings, Mrs. Thomson and the boys moved out over Christmas, 1940. Chilton Thomson concludes his small book by writing that he senses the trees around the lodge are “blasted into scrap” and that the “shelling has driven away the birds.” Chilton died in 2007 knowing that the lodge is listed to the National Register of Historic Places, and that the wildlife has returned in full glory. He was made aware that there was an ongoing effort to transfer management responsibility from the Air Guard to Big Oaks Conservation Society. I am certain he and his entire family would be very happy to see Old Timbers used in conjunction with Big Oaks NWR activities.

Preservation Of Old Timbers Lodge

By Big Oaks Conservation Society (BOCS)

Mission...To preserve this historic structure and use it as an educational facility for those who visit the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge.

Old Timbers Lodge is located in the northern end of the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge near Madison, Indiana. The lodge sits at the top of a 90-foot limestone bluff and is the largest structure within the refuge boundaries. It reflects the dream of Alexander Thomson, a Cincinnati industrialist and conservationist.

Work began in 1929 with the opening of a quarry 100 yards northeast of the home site. August Rahe was hired as the head stone mason and was directly responsible for cutting and shaping the unique spiral staircases as well as the three ton stone mantels and the window sills. The beams and yellow poplar siding for the interior walls came from a planned mill that was never constructed and eight dismantled barns. The door hinges and other unique hardware were handmade by students at Berea College, Kentucky. Old Timbers Lodge was completed in 1932 at a cost of \$75,000. Thomson had three dams constructed which resulted in a lake system nearly surrounding the lodge. He also had the Civilian Conservation Corps plant half a million white pine seedlings west of the lodge. The Thomson family resided in the lodge until 1940. Today, trees continue to grow and the area abounds with deer, turkey, squirrels, and great blue heron. Old Timbers was a



Picture taken of Old Timbers Lodge ca. 1940's

unique structure when completed by the Alexander Thomson family in 1932. After the Army established the 55,000+ acre proving grounds, it removed almost every structure and remnant of the communities and people who lived there. Seventy-five years later, Old Timbers is the only residence that remains, a symbol of the sacrifices endured by those forced to leave. Its use by the Army and civilian staff as a recreational facility became its new purpose, and in that capacity, generations of local people have significant memories of gatherings, receptions, and other social events. Since then, it has been difficult for many to use or visit the lodge. Modern building codes, handicapped-access constraints, and sanitary issues are additional reasons that the lodge, as it now stands, sees infrequent use. The Fish and Wildlife Service appreciates the unique historic and cultural attributes of the lodge, but their charter does not include the

personnel or funds to operate this facility. All parties agree that Old Timbers is a precious asset, and its position on the National Register of Historic Places confirms this. But no one has the funds or manning to provide the attention Old Timbers Lodge deserves. Members of BOCS wish to provide a solution to this problem.

As our membership application explains, the Big Oaks Conservation Society (BOCS) is a non-profit support group formed to support the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge (BONWR). The purpose of the BOCS is to support the goals of wildlife conservation and habitat restoration at BONWR and to enhance public awareness, use, and appreciation for the natural and cultural assets unique to Big Oaks. BOCS promotes public awareness of the refuge and develops environmental education and support for school and youth groups. BOCS develops public-use facilities in cooperation with refuge staff. BOCS supports the continued existence of the refuge and the appreciation for the natural and cultural features of the area.

BOCS interest in Old Timbers Lodge is directly related to the purposes and goals expressed in our membership brochure: "...to enhance public awareness, use, and appreciation for the natural and cultural assets unique to Big Oaks."

Picture taken of Old Timbers Lodge ca. 1940's



The story of BONWR cannot be understood without an understanding of Jefferson Proving Ground's history. The story of JPG is well told by the story of Old Timbers. BOCS would like to preserve this landmark for future generations. The group does have members who are willing to donate their efforts to preserving and maintaining Old Timbers Lodge, allowing the BOCS to preserve a valuable part of BONWR/JPG cultural history and providing a place where educational and environmental programs may be held.

Big Oaks Conservation Society's Old Timbers Lodge Priorities:

1. Preservation of the lodge. If BOCS does nothing else but maintains the lodge at its current level for another seventy-five years, that in itself will be a successful outcome.
2. Increase use and public knowledge of Old Timbers in a way that honors its unique history and architecture. BOCS exists to assist BONWR. Activities which support the refuge and educate refuge visitors will be pursued.
3. As funds become available, upgrade and improve the lodge. This includes utilities and the development of exhibits that tell the story of the lodge, the military use of JPG/BONWR, both past and present, and the sacrifices made by the communities displaced at its founding.

In conclusion, it is the hope of BOCS and its members that all of those with an interest in Old Timbers can come together and save this unique historic structure. BOCS's intentions in this matter are altruistic. Several of our members have strong emotional ties to the lodge, and all of us want Old Timbers preserved.



Old Timbers Lodge “Make-Over” Weekend



Fans or casual observers of daytime TV may have noticed the rise in popularity of “make-over” themes. This normally entails rehabbing an individual with new clothes, hair-dos or even cosmetic surgery. While the term “face-lift” has acquired a negative, almost desperate quality, today’s “make-overs” speak to miraculous renewals and new-found hope. On Saturday, May 17th, volunteers from BOCS will conduct a “make-over” event at Old Timbers Lodge. This will be our first large scale infusion of effort and resources toward the physical care of this historic site. Participants will be provided lunch and dinner on Saturday and, most uniquely, will have the option of spending Saturday night at the lodge. This will be the first opportunity most of us have had to overnight at the lodge in many years.



Gate 1 (normal East Perimeter Rd, southern most gate by trailer) will be open to BOCS and JPG Heritage Group members who sign up from 7:15AM to 8:00AM. At the same time, we will also open Gate 6, which is located at the refuge fence and 900 S/ Michigan Rd in Ripley County. The easiest way to get to Gate 6 is to take US 421 until reaching 900 S, turn west for approximately one mile – it ends in the gate.



The bed frames and mattresses once used by JPG employees and guests have been removed from most of the rooms and piled up in the south-western bedrooms. They have not

been used with any regularity in over ten years. A good portion may need to be thrown out. If you’re spending the night, we recommend you bring your own sleeping bags/foam pads/air mattress/cot. We will have one functional shower and bathroom as well as the outside porta-potties. The water will be turned on to the kitchen as well.

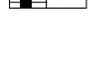


BOCS will provide cleaning and painting supplies. Dave Bear, BOCS Vice President, will be supervising our work. Dave is the Building Trades Instructor at Madison High School and is highly experienced in directing eager (but possibly inexperienced) workers. Wear comfortable work clothes and bring work gloves and safety glasses. Weather permitting; we will be doing some sanding, painting and gutter work. Regardless of weather, there is plenty to do indoors.



We will need to know who is coming for gate entry and menu planning purposes. We will have sign-up sheets at our meetings or you can click on the e-mail BOCS icon on our website www.biggoaks.org. Come out, have fun, spend some time with your BOCS/JPG Heritage buddies and become an “Old Timbers Lodge Keeper”.

Hope to see you all there!





**The Fourth Annual
Outdoor Women at Big Oaks
Plans Underway**

Are you a woman age 14 and over with an interest in developing new skills in the out of doors? Perhaps you've dabbled in recreational activities in the past and are interested in renewing your skills. Well then the **Outdoor Women at Big Oaks** event may be just the opportunity for you. The Big Oaks Conservation Society and Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge, with support from the Indiana Air National Guard, are proud to once again host the fourth annual Outdoor Women at Big Oaks event. This year's event will be held Saturday June 7th at the historic Old Timber's Lodge. The mission of the conservation society and the wildlife refuge is to host an event that helps gain valuable skills in the out of doors. This popular event is an opportunity to have fun and build skills in a non-competitive atmosphere.

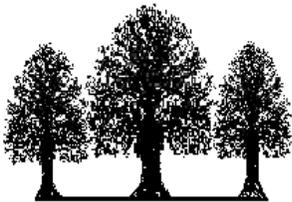
In addition to our popular course offerings such as canoeing, archery, wildflowers and backpacking, we plan to offer new courses like nature walking and bicycling. So if you are a past participant, we are happy to offer new courses to try. Interest and participation in this event has been strong and the committee is once again looking forward to a successful event. It's a great opportunity to meet other women with similar interests as well as spend the day exploring the wildlife refuge and historic Old Timber's Lodge. Mark your calendars and we look forward to seeing you there!

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 Website: www.fws.gov/midwest/bigoaks

REFUGE STAFF

Dr. Joe Robb - Refuge Manager
Dan Matiatos - Refuge Operations Specialist
Janet Pike - Administrative Technician
Brian Winters - Prescribed Fire Specialist
David Jones - Fire Program Technician
Lisa Jones - Park Ranger
Beth Black - Park Ranger
Laura Lake - Park Ranger
Kim Brinson - Maintenance Worker
George Tilley - Volunteer
Casey Mefford- Seasonal Firefighter
Sarah Sorenson - Seasonal Firefighter
Jennifer Johnston- Seasonal Firefighter
Cydney Meadows - SCEP
Ashley Bachanan- SCEP

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BIG OAKS
Conservation
Society
Membership
Benefits

-  10% discount on merchandise
-  opportunities to participate in special refuge events
-  contribute to the improvement of the refuge for all visitors
-  Big Oaks Newsletter

Reminder! BOCS' membership year runs from October 1 through September 30 of the next year. Please pay you dues on time - the Society depends on dues to help fund the Youth Events, etc.

If you would like to join, or rejoin, the **Big Oaks Conservation Society**, to support the refuge, please fill out this membership form and send along with your check to:

Big Oaks Conservation Society Check here if this is a renewal
P.O Box 935
Madison, IN 47250 _____

Yearly Membership Form (Oct. to Sept. 30) Please select a category.

___ Youth \$5	Name(s) _____
___ Individual \$15	Address _____
___ Family \$25	City _____
___ Supporting \$25	State/Zip _____
___ Lifetime (per Individual) \$150	Phone _____
___ Corporate \$500	E-mail _____

**BIG OAKS
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
2008 CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

January	River Otters slide in the snow
February	Great Horned Owls nest
March	Prescribed burning
April	Migrating birds, wildflowers, turkey hunt, fishing begins
May	Lodge Make-over!
June	Outdoor Women at Big Oaks, Take a Kid Fishing Day
July	Butterfly survey
August	Squirrel season starts
September	Migration begins!
October	Deer archery season, Annual Fish Fry
November	Deer shotgun season, Youth Deer Hunt, last chance to fish
December	Christmas Bird Count



**Big Oaks
Conservation Society
P.O. Box 935
Madison, IN 47250**

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David Bear - Vice President
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