

Lampe: Angling for smiles

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Energy returns to old Dixon Fishing Ponds with opening of Hooked on Fishing Park

Tori Brinkler was all smiles Thursday afternoon.

The 9-year-old from East Peoria had already caught seven fish, and the promise of more bites made her eager to cast again.

Brinkler remained upbeat even when her line tangled in a low-lying cottonwood limb.

"This is fun. If I wasn't here, I'd probably be sitting home watching TV," said Brinkler, who is normally limited to one fishing trip per summer. "And we get to come back again."

Then she went back to fishing, an energetic, smiling embodiment of what Hooked on Fishing Park hopes to accomplish.

Thursday was the grand opening for the East Peoria fishing facility, which is located at the old Dixon Fishing Ponds between Illinois Route 116 and the Illinois River.

The smiles and squeals of youngsters from the Fondulac Park District were reminiscent of years past, when those same ponds drew huge crowds of anglers throughout the summer. This is a place where generations of local anglers caught their first fish. But since 1992, the Dixon ponds had been shuttered to fishing.

The seeds for reopening were planted last year, when Nate Herman of Herman Brothers Pond Management hooked up with Mike O'Reilly of Prairie Home Alliance. Their plan was to create a free fishing facility for youngsters, senior citizens and disabled anglers.

Since agreeing to a 10-year lease with Jim Dixon, work has been ongoing to pull off last week's opening, which was twice delayed by Illinois River flooding.

With the floodwaters gone, organizers were finally able to show off a park that has seen more than \$200,000 worth of improvements thanks to generous investors.

The changes are impressive. Hooked on Fishing Park features concrete and white-rock walkways, landscaping, a 10-foot wide concrete fishing pier, many handicapped-accessible fishing spots, a large pavilion and a dock overlooking artesian wells that feed cool, clear water into the ponds.

The ponds are fully stocked with hybrid bluegill, catfish, rainbow trout, largemouth bass, hybrid striped bass, crappie and even yellow perch.

"Our goal is to have every person catch a fish on every cast," O'Reilly said.

While that wasn't possible in the heat of Thursday afternoon, hungry hybrid bluegill did keep volunteer

instructors busy unhooking fish and baiting hooks. Kevin Patton of Washington runs the Web site ilfishing.com and was among the volunteers who worked last week.

"It just sounded like a worthy effort to try to get people involved with fishing who don't necessarily have an opportunity, especially kids," Patton said. "It's really an impressive facility. They did it up right."

Before wetting a line, participants receive fishing instruction. Then they get hands-on training in the ponds. And each participant gets to take home a free rod and reel and tackle.

For now the emphasis is on youngsters ages 10-12. In time, programs will be offered for senior citizens and anglers with special needs. There is no plan, however, to open the park to the general public for fee fishing.

"Everybody that comes here, I want them to have a good time and to go home through the gate with a smile on their face," O'Reilly said. "I do not see a downside to this project. And in a couple years, let's hope it's better than it is now."

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