

## ILLINOIS RIVER: WILDLIFE RESOURCES

Historically, the Illinois River valley provided a diversity, quality, and quantity of wildlife habitats of uncommon value. In 1673, Pere Marquette wrote "We have seen nothing like this river that we enter, as regards its fertility of soil, its prairies and woods, its cattle, elk, deer, wildcats, bustards, swans, ducks, parroquets, and even beaver." In response to luxurious aquatic plantbeds, seasonally exposed mudflats, expanses of bottom-land forests, and the waters of the river and backwater lakes, wildlife flourished.

Significant changes have occurred over time within the Illinois River basin which have had a significant impact upon its wildlife resources. During the 1905-1920 period, some 200,000 acres of the river's rich bottomlands, sloughs and shallow lakes and ponds were ditched, drained and diked. Levees were also erected to safely isolate additional thousands of acres of flood plain from the river. These levied-off areas, which were vital to the river basin's wildlife productivity became cropland.

Today, much of the basin's valuable wildlife habitat is gone-having succumbed to a series of events tied to settlement and progress. Aside from the loss of vast acreage of bottomland hardwood forest, little is more dramatic an example of a decaying resource than the disappearance and decline of wildlife in the river system. The once prolific number of waterfowl, furbearers, shorebirds, wading birds and other vertebrate fauna have been chronicled and-finally-grieved. Probably the most familiar and well documented of these has been the fall of waterfowl numbers, particularly the mallard, in the Illinois River valley. From the 1950-59 ten-year average of almost 1,200,000 peak mallard numbers on the river, the number dropped to slightly over 366,000 for the 1980-86 period. Further declines have been recorded since 1986 and in 1992 only 246,605 mallards were counted, the lowest numbers since surveys began in 1948 and about 80% less than the peak count.

A shift of mallards to the Mississippi River has also been observed, leading to the explanation that this shift is a function of reduced habitat. The toxic Illinois river bottom sediments have also severely reduced the food supply for diving ducks.

Man's continuing struggle to "Improve" the basin over the past 50 years have resulted in many deleterious impacts to the basin's wildlife species and their habitats. The destruction of timberlands for conversion to croplands, the cropping of steep sloped once forested lands, and the intensified production of row crops has resulted in an alarming decrease in terrestrial habitats. The filling of adjacent bottomland lakes which are essential wildlife production areas, and the smothering of valuable plants by sedimentation has degraded quality habitat areas and contributed to the decline of wildlife in the basin.