



Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission

River Currents

Volume 6 Issue 1

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OSRC Easier to Navigate in 2009

Welcome to this edition of 'River Currents'. It is the first of four totaled editions that Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission will publish in 2009.

I'm hopeful you will find it to be a helpful tool that explains our new streamlined procedures and the improved overall efficiency of agency operations, as we strive this new year to better serve all Oklahomans in the state's efforts to preserve designated scenic river areas in their natural, scenic state.

In addition to the expansion of 'River Currents', the OSRC will undertake the following in 2009:

- Terminate the \$1.00 User Fee charged to floaters
- In the Spring, unveil a redesigned, interactive website located at www.oklahomascenicrivers.net
- In the Spring, publish a new Floater's Guide and Illinois River Area Map
- In the Spring, create a new river area Welcome and Directional/Destination Signage along the State Highway "Scenic" #10 Corridor
- In the Summer, in cooperation with OK Department of Transportation, open a new Watts-US#59 Public Access and Boat Launch Area on the Illinois River
- July 1st, reduce agency rules found at 'Oklahoma Administrative Code 630: Scenic Rivers Commission' from 7 Chapters containing 104 Sections down to 5 Chapters with 50 Sections

If you know of anyone who would be interested in receiving 'River Currents' and/or other electronic publications disseminated by the OSRC to the public, please send their contact information to Meredith Lee, OSRC Education Outreach Coordinator, at osrc2@fullnet.net.

Thank you,
Ed Fite, Administrator
Phone: (918) 456-3251
Email: osrc@fullnet.net

**The Illinois River at
Cedar Valley
on a cold
December morning**



OSRC News



Randy Corp

As a longtime member and current President of Sequoyah Outing Club, I spend 25-30 weekends a year and most of my vacation time at my "home-away-from-home" on

the river. I am an avid outdoorsman and by far my favorite pastime is floating the Baron Fork and Illinois catching smallmouth bass. Living in Edmond I am a bit jealous of those living in northeast Oklahoma who can enjoy the river and its natural beauty on a daily basis.

Over the last several years I have witnessed the improvement in water quality of the river basin and I am truly thankful for the hard work, commitment, and sacrifices of Ed Fite and the Scenic Rivers Commission to preserve one of our state's most valuable resources.

Given the natural beauty and resources the river basin offers, it has created a number of conflicting priorities between several groups with a vested interest in how best to use, manage and protect the river and surrounding land. With the help of the other commissioners, I am confident we can balance these interests in order to preserve and improve the quality of the river. Although an optimistic goal in these difficult economic times, I will work on seeking additional funding through the state legislature to strengthen our effort to negotiate and acquire riparian leases protecting the lands bordering the river. I have met several fellow commissioners and know they have a passion to protect the river and all it offers.

As the newest commissioner on the Scenic Rivers Commission, I am honored and excited to be appointed by Governor Henry to be involved in such an important and productive organization. I look forward to the challenge and welcome any comments you may have. My email address is rcorp@quailcreekbank.com. See you at the River!

Thanks,
Randy Corp

New Commissioners Appointed to OSRC Board

The OSRC Board of Commissioners has had three new appointees since the fall of 2008.

Governor Brad Henry appointed Randy Corp of Edmond to the Board, replacing Dr. D.I. Wilkinson who retired from the Board after 10 years of service. Mr. Corp is the Senior Vice-President of Quail Creek Bank in Oklahoma City, and his introduction is included to the left. David Spears, co-owner of Arrowhead Resort and a Tahlequah Middle School teacher, was also recently appointed to the Board. Mr. Spears is replacing Bill Blackard who served 24 years on the OSRC Board, as one of the appointees of the President Pro Tempore of the Senate. The third recent appointee to the OSRC Board is Dr. Riley Needham of Bartlesville. Dr. Needham was also appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate. He is replacing Alan Chapman who resigned from the Board of Commissioners in order to manage a newly purchased business in Arkansas.

Welcome back Anthony Dotson

The staff of the OSRC would like to recognize Marine Cpl. Anthony Dotson for his service to his country. Ranger Anthony Dotson, who is employed with the OSRC as a full-time Ranger, was called to duty in September 2007, and served in Iraq until August 2008, with the Anti-tank Training Company, 4th Tank Battalion, of the US Marine Corps. While in Iraq, Ranger Dotson earned the Iraq Campaign Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, Global War on Terrorism Medal, and the Sea Service Deployment Medal. Ranger Dotson returned home safely and spent well-deserved time with family and friends before returning to work November 15, 2008. Ranger Dotson, while deployed, was greatly missed by the entire staff. Ranger Dotson has been an asset to the OSRC both before his deployment and since his return. We are elated that Ranger Dotson returned home safely and wish to commend him for his sacrifice and service to our great country.

OSRC Community Involvement

2008 Illinois River Fest

by Meredith Lee, Education Outreach Coordinator

The OSRC's 2008 Illinois River Fest, held on Sat., Oct. 18th, was a great success for the second year. In this burgeoning annual event, we accomplished our goal of expanding the festival in both size and scope. This year there were 50% more booths, exciting new activities, and a broader range of topics. The only aspect of the festival that didn't grow this year was the environmental footprint. The 2008 River Fest generated significantly less waste than the previous year, with food

stage, and also acted as the ideal site for hands-on activities. The OK Conservation Commission conducted "River Walks", describing the fascinating mechanisms that river critters use to survive, while Lewis and Clark Outfitters took advantage of the river by giving kayak lessons.

The majority of the booths were housed under the giant 60 x 120 foot tent, which was a hub of activity throughout the day. Of the many new booths inside the tent, two popular



▲ Two brave rock climbers scale the National Guard's 30-foot wall



▲ Josh Sparks from Walkabout Wildlife Sanctuary shows off his iguana



▲ Kayak lessons with Lewis and Clark Outfitters



▲ LaDonna McCowan with OSU Cooperative Ext. Service puts the Stream Trailer model into action



▲ Blue Thumb's Cheryl Cheadle takes people on a River Walk to examine life under the water's surface

containers, cups and utensils made of 100% compostable materials like corn, sugar cane and potatoes. In addition, we had several new booths with excellent ideas for sustainable living, including the OK Green Business Alliance, the OK Sustainability Network, and Tahlequah Community Garden.

It was a beautiful day for a festival, with perfect weather and a river-front location at War Eagle Resort. The river provided a scenic backdrop for the food vendors and the music

attractions featured wild animals. Sequoyah State Park brought a snake and an opossum, and Walkabout Wildlife Sanctuary had a giant tortoise, iguana, and python on-hand. The booths this year also represented a wider range of environmental features found in the river basin. The Tahlequah Rock and Mineral Society introduced geology to the festival by bringing rocks from around the region dating back 360 million years, while

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Notes from the Basin

Rivers in Winter: A Season of Quiet Survival

by Dr. Daniel R. Howard, Natl. Science Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellow,
University of Toronto

Winter in eastern Oklahoma silently descends across the landscape each year as the day lengths shorten and air temperatures subsequently begin their steady and inevitable decline.

The late summer songs of woodland musicians have long since evaporated into the lengthening shadows of an unkind solstice, and the brightly-hued trees of an autumn past now stand somber and bare against December's gray palette. Much of life's biological diversity and vigor seems at once dormant and muted. From a distance, the river itself appears to embrace this seasonal malaise as well. As memories of late summer rainstorms fade, stream flows gradually decline. Deep pools dwindle to shallow memories, and what were once long, meandering runs through lush green prairie pastures now percolate as shallow riffles amid

the frost-covered golden grasslands. In some places the river disappears below the streambed altogether, thirsting for distant vernal rains, only to reappear further downstream replenished by a flow unseen.

Winter's hand seems harsh indeed on the Illinois and its aquatic inhabitants.

But, a more intimate look below the surface reveals an ecosystem keenly adapted to these seasonal shifts, and alive with activity. With the lowered temperatures brought on by winter's arrival, along with the increased turbulence of seasonal riffles, the river's water flow carries more dissolved oxygen. This seasonal increase in oxygen benefits the larvae of many aquatic insect species such as stoneflies, mayflies and caddisflies, which are often stressed by the low oxygen levels

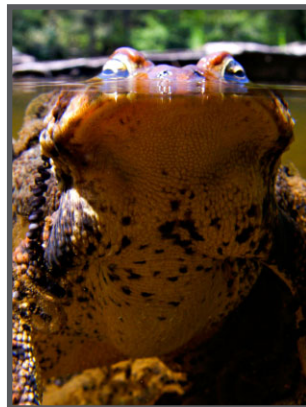
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Top photo: A little pool that is home to some small-stream Brook Trout

Bottom photos (L to R): Mossy plants on stream rocks, Mating toads, and Caddisfly cases on a rock

photos courtesy of Jason Neuswanger - <http://www.troutnut.com>



Notes from the Basin

Winter Recreation

by Dr. Arthur Brown, Professor of Biology, University of Arkansas



“Ice weeds” found on the grounds at the OSRC headquarters.

The Illinois, like most other rivers, provides many valuable resources that transcend the water supplies for municipalities, agricultural interests, nurseries, etc. The river and its tributaries are an important source of recreation for many of us. My students, associates, and I have been studying the Illinois River for decades during all seasons and occasionally continuously for 24 hour periods in an attempt to know “how it works” - that is, how it is structured and how it functions ecologically. Many forms of our recreation also involve this river, including fishing, hunting, canoeing, watching birds and other wildlife, snorkeling, and photography. For me, these are usually enjoyed as family activities involving my wife and our grandchildren. The Illinois is particularly enjoyable during winter, although it is visited less in the winter months. If you have not experienced the river in winter, you might consider doing so.

Preparation for a winter visit to the river is quite different than for summer, due to the need to stay warm and dry. However, some of the objectionable things during summer visits are not there during the winter. Animals like poisonous snakes, ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes, flies, and wasps are much less likely to be encountered then. Also

less problematic are poison ivy and stinging nettles, and the allergens produced by ragweed, molds, and trees.

The flowers of spring and summer are not evident, of course, and the autumn leaves are gone, so the colors are less vibrant. Some of the colorful fruits are still to be found on coral berry, dogwood, and other plants, if they are sought out. An interesting phenomenon occurs to produce “iceweeds” on some cold winter mornings. These plants, although dead, continue to transpire (pump moisture from the ground and release it to the atmosphere) and the moisture released from them forms flag-like projections of ice along the tops of their stems.

Some attractive animals, particularly birds, are found along the Illinois only in winter. Eagles migrate in, along with an assortment of ducks and other waterfowl (mergansers, grebes). Other animals that are there all year long are often easier to see during winter when the heavy foliage is missing. I particularly enjoy

watching the noisy red-headed woodpeckers during winter. The cold-blooded turtles, snakes (some are attractive and not dangerous), and frogs are not likely to be seen during cold periods but many of the mammals and birds are out hustling for food and can be viewed easier than in other seasons. If you are really patient, determined, or just lucky, you could see opossums, raccoons, beavers, muskrats, mink, or even river otters. Since fur prices have declined, trapping is less lucrative and these animals are much more abundant.

If you are a more determined naturalist, photographer, or wildlife viewer, you might consider building or buying a blind like hunters do to enhance your chances of seeing undisturbed animals going about their business. There are numerous kinds of tent-like blinds (Europeans call them “hides”) available at local stores that provide outdoor equipment. An advantage is that the tent blinds also provide some protection against the elements.

Canoeing is an excellent way to enjoy the river, but be careful. Choose a mild day when the water is at normal levels, not higher. Take along a dry bag or large, water-tight bucket for each person with fire-starting materials, dry cloth-

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Spotlights in the River Basin

Combs Bridge: A Chapter Closes in Local History

by Meredith Lee, Education Outreach Coordinator



Combs Bridge, one of the Illinois River's most notable and historic landmarks, has been slated by the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners to be replaced in 2012. The bridge was originally built in 1926, and although structural improvements have been made to it since, it remains a one-lane, low-weight capacity bridge and it has become dangerous for the modern-day heavy vehicles that regularly traverse it.

The bridge has seen many changes in its lifetime, from gravel roads and horse-drawn buggies, to asphalt and 18-wheelers. At the time it was built, the only other bridge in the Tahlequah area was the old Hwy. 62 Bridge. When these bridges weren't convenient, people had the option of fording the river at one of three points - Swannanoa, Carne's Ford or Ward's Bluff. The name of Combs Bridge has also changed over time. It was originally called Eagle Bluff Bridge after the bluffs directly across the highway, but became known by the locals as Combs Bridge.



Combs Bridge was built as a link to the Combs community, or Ellerville, which was established in the late 1800's by William Edgar Combs. William Combs was a preacher, farmer and businessman, and he started the Combs General Baptist Church, which was also used for the local school. The one-room school saw many students pass through its doors, including one of the OSRC's own employees, Maintenance Supervisor James Hickman. In his days at Combs school, there were around 30 students, ranging from 1st to 8th grade. A generation earlier, in the 1920's, his mother also attended the school. That building still stands today, and although it hasn't operated as a school in years, it just closed its doors as a church within the past year. Today, Ellerville community no longer has an operational church, school or post office, but the families that have historically lived there are still making it their home.



The water beneath Combs Bridge has also had a dynamic history during the bridge's 83 years. Of the ten highest floods recorded on the Illinois River, nine of them occurred while Combs Bridge has been in place. During the highest flood, on May 10, 1950, the water reached 27.94 feet, which would have been 5 to 6 feet higher than the floor of the bridge. The most recent of the 10 highest floods took place in March of 2008. It was the 8th highest at 22.29 feet, nearly reaching to the floor of the bridge. During the flood of 1950, the force of the water was so strong that it knocked a tree onto the bridge's approach ramp, washing the approach away and bending the bridge's supports. After this, a new 80-foot metal approach ramp was built, and that ramp still stands today. Other than this reconstruction, there have been only a few minor changes made to the bridge. The driving planks that run parallel to the bridge were periodically replaced during the many years that they were wooden, but two years ago, these planks were switched to metal. The bridge also had some aesthetic work done in the early 1980's. Because it had begun to rust, it was sandblasted and painted green.

Combs Bridge was built using a hot-riveting technique that is rarely used today, but has clearly withstood the test of time.

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on the **W**ild Side....

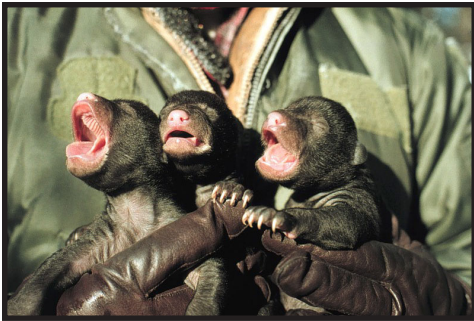
Black Bear Basics

by Dr. Amy Smith, Professor of Biology at Northeastern State University

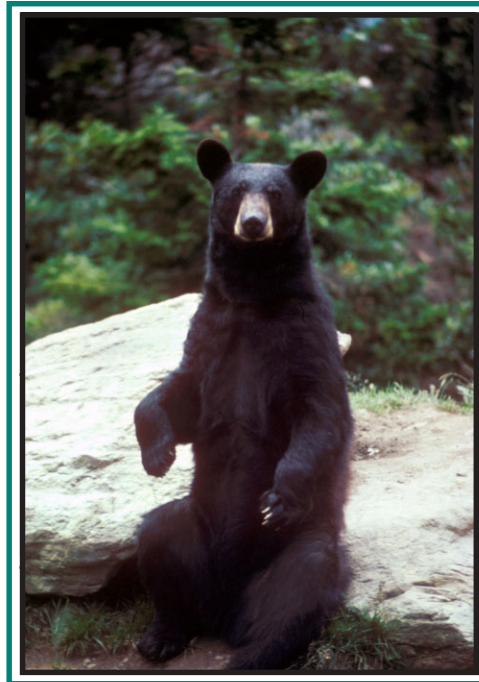
Oklahoma was historically home to two bear species, the Black Bear and the Plains Grizzly. The only species we have today is the Black Bear and we can thank the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission for them. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission released 254 Black Bears in the Ozark and Ouachita mountains of Arkansas from 1959 to 1967. The Arkansas population has grown to about 3,000 bears and some of these have moved into Missouri and Oklahoma.

The Black Bear (*Ursus Americanus*) is named after its predominant color phase but they can also be brown, tan, or

mothers in the early spring when food resources are limited. Hungry, these young bears will take advantage of readily available pet food, bird feeders, livestock food, garbage, and bee hives. Once it discovers a treat, a bear may return several times. As a bear becomes bolder in its search for food, it can cause property damage. Feeding bears alters their natural fear of humans and this may lead to their elimination. A saying among biologists is "a fed bear is a dead bear". Habitual bear offenders may meet their demise if harassment and/or relocation do not rehabilitate them. Most bear problems can be cor-



▲ Newborn Black Bear cubs being inspected as part of a study monitoring movement, denning, and reproductive characteristics



▲ ◀ Adult Black Bears

cinnamon. Like many animals, bears take advantage of abundant food resources in the summer which is when they breed and store fat. They do not give birth until they are in their dens from November to April. Bears do not truly hibernate, but become lethargic during the winter when food is limited. Females can nurse and care for young even in this semi-dormant state. Cubs will remain with their mother for their first and second winters. Females will generally stay close to their mother's territory but males may wander several hundred miles looking for new areas with abundant food, females, and few adult males to compete against for these resources.

Many of the bears that have moved into Missouri and Oklahoma are young males who have been displaced from their

rected by removing food items or keeping them out of reach.

Black Bears are normally reclusive and avoid people. According to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), bears will usually leave an area if given time and an exit route. Yelling and making loud noises will alert the animal and encourage it to leave. The ODWC would like to know if you have seen a bear in Oklahoma. Information on the date and location of the sighting should be mailed to ODWC at P.O. Box 53465, Oklahoma City, OK 73105. For more information on Black Bears, visit ODWC at www.wildlifedepartment.com, the Missouri Department of Conservation at www.mdc.mo.gov, and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission at www.agfc.com.

Rivers in Winter, cont'd from pg. 4

characteristic of summer. Shorter days and lower temperatures also limit the excessive algae growth which can impair water clarity and deplete oxygen when days are longer and water temperatures are higher. In addition to a clear, oxygenated flow, winter also ushers in an influx of food for aquatic invertebrates living along the streambed. Leaves shed last autumn by deciduous riparian trees wash into the river, settling on the stream bottom and providing a flourish of forage and refuge sites for the invertebrate grazers which live there and serve as the backbone of the aquatic food web. Small stream fish such as chubs, shiners and darters absorb the nutrients from the fallen leaves by consuming them directly or preying upon the thriving invertebrate fauna. These small fish in turn become fare for larger species such as the smallmouth bass, which is then plucked from the clear, shallow pool by the stealthy heron.

This subsurface winter drama plays on without intercession throughout the bitterly cold days of December, January, and February, with ice forming and thawing along the river's edge and the warm days of spring a distant hope. However, even while the forests and grasslands above the riverbank remain sleeping in winter's embrace, imperceptible changes in the thermal qualities of the river will soon begin to alter aquatic conditions below the surface. Early spring storms, born in the Gulf of Mexico and carried on strong southerly winds, will bring showers in March that warm the chilled waters of the Illinois. This subtle warming of the river in turn will invigorate species lying dormant along its edges. Redbuds and dogwoods, yet leafless but responding to the increasing length of day and warm rains, will celebrate the promise of spring in an exuberant display of their blossoms. Male spring peepers will soon emerge to serenade their mates, serving as the unofficial grand marshals of an impending parade of contestants seeking to fill the acoustic void. Under the surface, many aquatic inhabitants will prepare to transition from the quiet survival strategies of winter to the celebratory reproductive tactics of spring. As the river warms and awakens, so too spring will seemingly radiate outwards from its banks.

But for now winter persists in full form, with spring yet a shadowed promise. The bare branches of the dogwood bow deeply under a fresh load of ice, while spring peepers lay sleeping in the frozen earth at the river's edge. Deep pools have dwindled to shallow memories, and what were once long, meandering runs through lush prairie pastures now survive only as shallow riffles. In some places the river disappears altogether, thirsting for spring rains, but then reappears again replenished by a flow unseen. But below the riffle surface, the mayfly and stonefly celebrate their good fortune, and the darter and the chub their bounty. Winter's hand may seem harsh indeed on the Illinois, and yet life goes on neither dormant nor muted beneath its cold clear waters.

Note to reader: Dr. Dan Howard relocated to Tahlequah in 1999 to attend Northeastern State University, and completed a B.S. in Secondary Science Education in 2002, and a M.S. in College Teaching of Biology in 2004. He taught science courses at Tahlequah High School and Northeastern State University before returning to the University of Tulsa to earn his Ph.D. in Biological Science in 2007. He is currently serving as a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Toronto, but returns to the Illinois River and Tahlequah area frequently.

Winter Recreation, cont'd from pg. 5

ing, thermal blankets, cell phone, and other items you would want if the worst happened and the canoe tipped over. Tie the bucket(s) to the canoe with string that you could break if necessary. The reward for the trip is to see the river and shorelines (bluffs, trees, animals, etc.) without the "green walls" of leafy vegetation obscuring them. The water is also at its clearest during winter. One of the best ways to "get away from it all" during the winter is to enjoy a day, or part of a day, on or along the Illinois River. People have been doing it for thousands of years as indicated by the artifacts found on the shores and under the bluff shelters.

Combs Bridge, cont'd from pg. 6

In the early days of Combs Bridge, the water below it was quite deep - people estimate around 20 feet. Even through the 1970's, it was as deep as 16 feet, and with the water being pristine and clear, it was a popular jumping spot. This made it a dangerous spot as well, and during the 1980's, more than 30 people were paralyzed from jumping from it, and since then, several others have been killed. Now, this area has become even more dangerous, as the river has filled in with gravel and rock to the point that it's only about 3 feet deep. Here, it's easy to see why the Illinois River's number one pollutant is sediment.

The plans for Combs Bridge are to remove it by 2012, and construct a new bridge between 1/2 and 1/4 mile downstream, approximately 1/4 mile north of Peyton's Place canoe operation. A new road will be constructed that connects the new bridge to the road across the current bridge.

Combs Bridge will have been a landmark on the Illinois River for 86 years by the time of its scheduled removal. More than a landmark, to several generations of Cherokee County residents, it has been a constant in everyday life and represents years of memories.

Illinois River Fest, cont'd from pg. 3

the Ozark Plateau National Wildlife Refuge's wonderful display depicted the many unique features of area caves. Outside of the tent were several other fantastic additions like the 30-foot rock-climbing wall from the National Guard, and the Stream Trailer river hydrology model from OSU Cooperative Extension Service.

Throughout the afternoon, the talents of Joe Mack, Franke Lee, Mark Sweeney and Red Eye Gravy entertained the crowd with a diverse mix of music. These musicians generously donated their time towards making this festival a success. Without their contributions, along with those of the festival's many participants and sponsors, this event would not have been possible.

If you are interested in seeing more of the 2008 Illinois River Fest, a webpage will be available shortly at www.oklahomascenicrivers.net/riverfest08.asp.