



PEARL LAKE
— BEACH —

DIVING GEM
of the
MIDWEST





PEARL LAKE BEACH DIVING GEM OF THE MIDWEST

Text by Greg Kent

Photography by Gary Chesnut & Greg Kent

Located in South Beloit, Illinois at the Illinois / Wisconsin state-line and just 5 minutes west of Interstate 90, Pearl Lake's 35 acres of clear water offers one of the finest diving and diver training environments in the Midwest.

At first glance, you would expect to find this crystalline lake nestled somewhere in the Northwood's. Instead, it is just a few minutes north of Rockford, Illinois, the state's second largest city, and only a convenient one-hour drive from the metropolitan areas of Chicago, Milwaukee and Madison.

From April to October, certified divers come here to enjoy a relaxing day of diving in an undemanding, but interesting and enjoyable, environment. The lake offers an ideal site for certified divers to sharpen their skills after a time out of the water, and to share an outing with family members in Pearl's park-like atmosphere.



Additionally, the finest professional dive stores and instructors in the Midwest utilize the lake to initiate their students to diving at this site ideally suited for their introduction to the exciting underwater world. Although the dependably clear water (15'-40+') and the abundant aquatic life are an attraction to instructors with students, there is something more. Pearl Lake's staff has worked hard to make the student diver's first open water experience as safe, interesting and enjoyable as possible. The same concern has seen to it that the diving professionals who train their students here can do so with a minimum of effort and with maximum safety.

A plus for students and experienced divers alike is the ease of entry. Unlike most quarries with limited and difficult access, Pearl offers over a dozen beach-like entry areas, including several capable of accommodating a number of large groups. Additionally, training depths and interesting sites are located just a short swim offshore. Also, two large pavilions are available on the east and north beaches, as well as several other smaller ones at entry sites around the lake. They provide shelter from the sun and inclement weather and feature picnic tables, and gear benches, and suit hang bars, electricity and lighting for night dives at the larger ones.

Over the years, twelve training platforms have been added to help keep students off the bottom on descents and thus maximize visibility. All are located in 20-25 ft. depths and vary in size from 8'x 8' mesh grid structures up to a 45-foot flatbed trailer.



When it comes to interesting attractions for the certified diver or an exciting first tour for the student, Pearl doesn't fall short. The east beach offers an old step van and several small boats and a 24-foot sailboat. Just north of this area, a narrow channel bisects two shallow sand flats and harbors what is one of the lake's most interesting "wreck sites" - a 33-foot yellow submarine! Resting on a sloping bottom in 20 ft. depths, it's a scaled-down version of a World War II U-boat. Just to the south of the sub, two additional sunken vessels add to Pearl's own "Wreck Alley." A 30-foot long former Lake Michigan patrol boat can be found on the sandy slope in about 25 feet of water and a bit further to the south, the lake's largest wreck, the 45-foot-long "Thora Ann", a classic Great Lakes fishing tug, rests at depths of 30 - 40 feet.



Off the north shore, divers can explore a full-size school bus, a 30' cabin cruiser, a statue of "The Lady of the Lake," or they can drift along railroad tracks left over from the days when this was a busy sand and gravel producing operation. Swimming along the sloping bottom at 20 - 25 ft. depths you may also encounter a number of entertaining characters ... a gargoyle, an alien and even "Casper the Friendly Ghost!" Also, off the northeast beach entry, in approximately 35 feet of water, is the 40-foot cruiser, "The Clark".



The west shore offers several other small boats, another large cabin cruiser, the statue of "Wally Gator," and a Beechcraft twin-engine airplane. In 2012, what is probably the lake's most unique dive site, was added to the area known as the "West Bay." There, in approximately 20 ft. of water, lies the "steam shovel." Although it was never actually steam powered, it was so named by the staff in that the shovels that originally worked the sand and gravel operation were.

This side of the lake also attracts larger fish, due in part to the habitat offered by the dozens of concrete drainage tiles scattered along the bottom at the southern end of this shoreline; many large enough to swim through.



Every area of the lake represents a healthy natural habitat and an ideal freshwater ecosystem to be explored. Huge smallmouth and largemouth bass, walleye and yellow perch and rainbow trout cruise through lush weed beds. White suckers scour the bottom and, on occasion, one of the lake's 20-30 lb. channel catfish will add an extra heartbeat or two for the diver surprised by one approaching out of the gloom. Throughout the lake, schools of several varieties of bluegills drift through the shallows and pester divers for handouts.



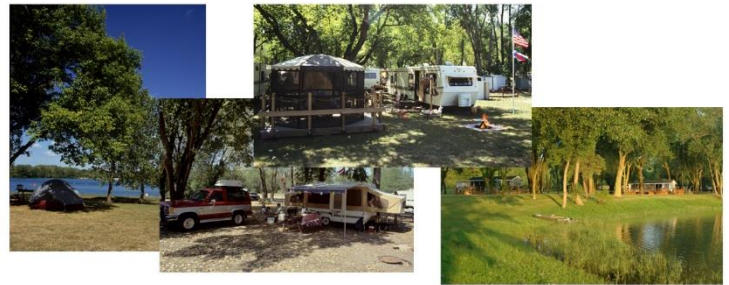
A number of species of aquatic plants add an emerald hue to the environment and the presence of several varieties of invertebrates makes exploring the bottom more interesting. An observant diver will find three species of clams, several varieties of snails, and a population of crayfish. Turtles are frequently sighted in the shallows, and in some years, in the Fall, freshwater jellyfish are present.

Water temperatures vary from the lower 40's in the spring and fall, to the 80's in mid-summer. In July and August, the thermocline can be found at 25'-35' depths. Although visibility is always good, it is typically best in the spring and early summer and in August and September. With average visibility, swimming the sloping bottom at a 20 - 25 ft. profile will normally put the most interesting objects within sight. Traveling back to the entry site in 5 - 15 ft. depths will usually produce encounters with large schools of fish, crayfish, and occasionally, catfish and turtles. The most interesting diving in the lake is generally found shallower than 40 ft. For deep dive training, instructors can take their student divers to depths approaching 70' in the "Hole," where a large training platform with surface buoy and descent line is located.



Since its beginnings in 1962, when it first opened Pearl Lake as a fishing facility, it has evolved into a multi-use recreational complex. Today it in no way resembles the sand and gravel pit that it existed as fifty-plus years ago.

Additionally, a large portion of the grounds is devoted to camping. Well kept and quiet, the campground offers facilities for self-contained RV camping. In that it is always busy with overnights and weekenders, reservations are highly recommended. Seasonal sites are available for recreational vehicles and park homes as well. Pearl Lake Beach also offers its own line of unique and luxurious park home units specifically designed to match the tranquil lakeside community atmosphere.



The diving season begins in late April with diving available Wednesday thru Sunday from 8:00 am until 5:00pm and ends in October. (Call 815-389-1479 or visit www.pearllakebeach.com for exact opening and closing dates). Night diving is permitted on Saturdays only, and divers must be up and off the grounds before 10:00 pm. (Notify the staff when you register that you intend to night dive).

When arriving for the diving day, follow the signs to the registration area. Certified divers must provide a nationally recognized certification card, personally sign a liability waiver/assumption of risk, agree to follow standard safe diving practices and register and dive with another certified diver. Student divers must register through their certified instructor/divestore and must sign the same liability release/waiver (minors require a signature of a parent/guardian).

NOTE: The required **Pearl Lake Beach Scuba Diving Assumption of Risk Agreement & Liability Release** **MUST be downloaded from the Pearl Lake Beach website (www.pearllakebeach.com) and completed in advance of arrival.** Students should forward the form to their divestore/instructor at least 48 hours in advance of the scheduled dive, while certified/recreational dives should arrive with the release completed and present it and their certification card with at least one other certified diver at registration. See **Pearl Lake Beach Diving Policies and Procedures** on our website.

All divers must use equipment appropriate to the diving environment including a buoyancy device, regulator system with an alternate air source and instrumentation, and an environmental suit suitable to the current diving conditions. Any non-divers (over the age of 2) accompanying certified or student divers into the diving area are required to register, sign a liability release/waiver and pay the daily non-diver fee. **EVERYONE**

