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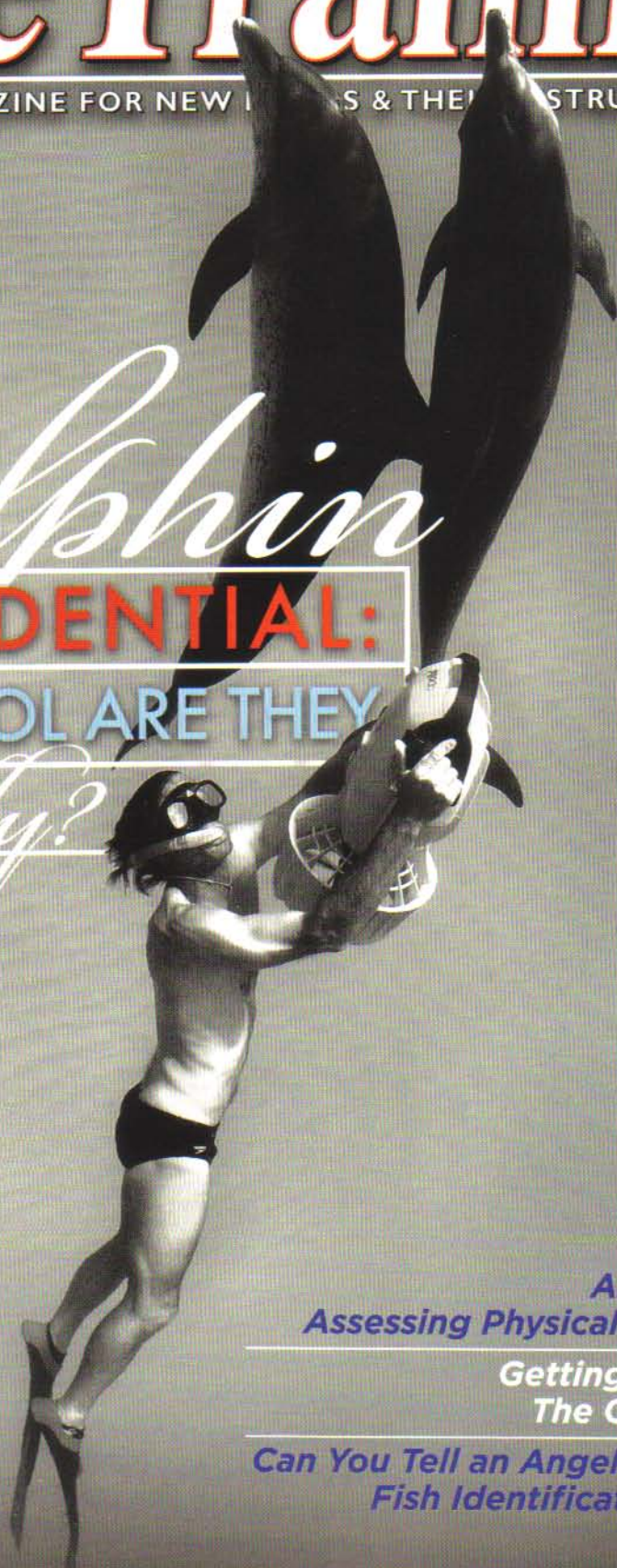
# Dive Training<sup>TM</sup>

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## Dolphin

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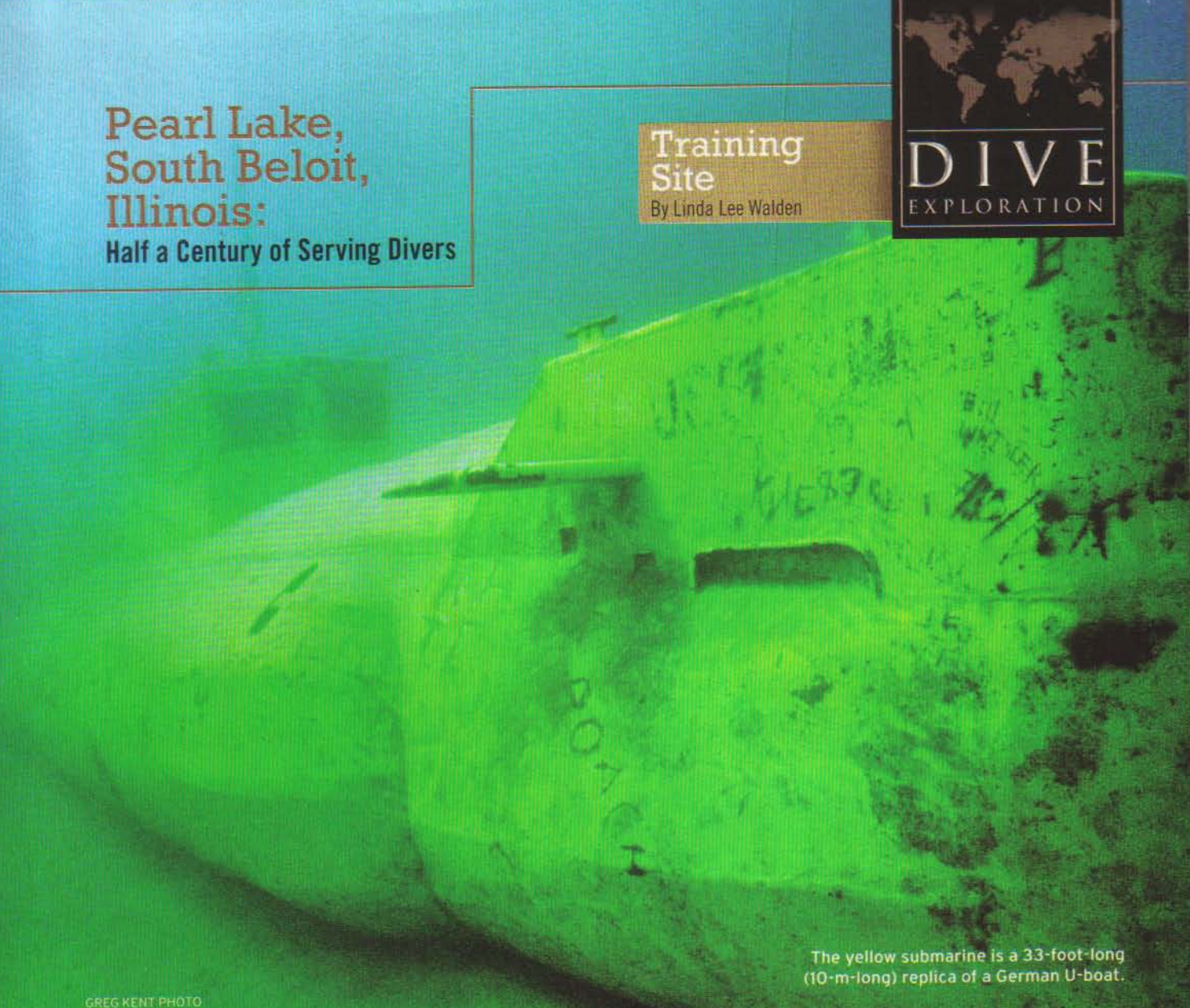
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# Pearl Lake, South Beloit, Illinois: Half a Century of Serving Divers

## Training Site

By Linda Lee Walden

**DIVE**  
EXPLORATION



The yellow submarine is a 33-foot-long (10-m-long) replica of a German U-boat.

GREG KENT PHOTO

**N**ot many dive venues can say that they've catered nonstop to scuba divers for almost half a century. Pearl Lake, on the Illinois-Wisconsin border, is one of those that can.

In the early 1960s Don Witte was a local excavating contractor who saw potential for a multipurpose resort in an abandoned sand-and-gravel pit. Consumers Gravel Co. had been providing materials for road building in the Chicago area since the early 1900s. In 1950, when the South Beloit pit reached the depth of the water table and the pit filled with water, extraction by suction dredge continued. Finally, the gravel played out and in 1955 the operation closed.

When Don and Helen Witte bought the property in 1961 it consisted of a 30-acre (12-hectare) lake surrounded by open land covered with small mountains of tailings and a few cottonwood trees. Witte's vision came to life in 1963 when Pearl Lake opened for fishing, swimming and scuba. A small camping area and a restaurant overlooking the lake were also part of the recreational complex, as well as a seasonal park home community.

Today Pearl Lake resort is operated by the Witte's son Mike and his wife Cheryl. Mike has worked at the resort since childhood and considers it just as much home as their house a few miles away. The extended family also con-

sists of longtime employees Carol Mittock, who manages the business end, and scuba instructor Greg Kent.

Although the family could boast of their longevity serving the scuba community, they seem to take this achievement in stride, focusing instead on keeping things running smoothly in the present and making improvements for the future.

Divers have noticed the caring attitude of the staff and convenient facilities, both above and below water. On a typical summer weekend as many as 150 divers converge on Pearl Lake from northern Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, with the majority from the Chicago area.

An estimated two-thirds are there for training, the rest simply for the joy of blowing bubbles underwater.

## Pearl Underwater

When asked about improvements to diving facilities in the past 40-plus years, Mike Witte modestly says, "As diving evolved, so did we." In the '60s, when scuba was in its infancy as a recreational pastime, most of the divers coming to Pearl Lake were robust males, interested in diving hard and partying almost as hard.

Today, according to Witte, divers are more diverse: women, teens, preteens and seniors, as well as males. They are generally well trained, respectful of rules and polite. Many are families training to dive together.

As the number of divers has grown and diving styles evolved, so have the facilities at Pearl Lake. Especially noteworthy are the many options for lake access — almost a dozen scattered around the shoreline — each within an easy swim of training platforms and purposely distributed underwater attractions, most of which are marked by yellow surface buoys.

Almost the entire eastern shore is devoted to scuba diving. Near the southern end are four training platforms, all about 20 feet (6 m) deep. Each platform is constructed of a metal frame topped with mesh. One of the first platforms to be placed in the lake measures 8 square feet (0.7 sq m); the later platforms are 12 feet by 8 feet (3.6 m by 2.4 m).

In addition to the four metal platforms there is a 45-foot (14-m) flatbed trailer, also at a depth of 20 feet. Between the platforms lie an assortment of small boats and a step van.

Moving northward along the grassy eastern shore is the "sub" entry, so named because only a short swim away divers encounter a 33-foot (10-m) yellow submarine, a mock-up of a World War II U-boat. The bow sits at 20 feet (6 m) and the stern at 30 feet (9 m). A metal mesh training platform is on each side of the sub; an 18-foot (5.5-m)

runabout sits nearby. Farther out is the trawler Thora Ann; bow to shore its hull follows the gently sloping bottom from a 25- to 40-foot (7.5- to 12-m) depth.

The north end is a favorite of instructors with large classes. A gravel beach extends into the lake, minimizing silting as students adjust their gear in shallow water. Offshore features include two 8-by-8-foot (2.4-by-2.4-m) platforms and an enormous two-level platform (about 24 by 12 feet [7 by 4 m]) built and placed by an area dive center.

Other north end features include a buoyancy course, several concrete statues, a 30-foot (9-m) cabin cruiser and a school bus. Sunk in 1973, the school bus was simply driven out on the frozen lake and left for the spring thaw; it now rests from 25 to 35 feet (7.5 to 11 m) deep. In places, the remains of train tracks used to haul gravel can still be found.

The west side is farthest away and the least developed. Divers can enter at several points via short, brush-lined paths. A small cove was formed when part of the undermined shoreline collapsed and concrete shapes of various sizes have been dumped along the banks to prevent further erosion. These, plus a garden of aquatic plants, provide excellent homes for the several species of fishes that inhabit the lake.

Two more metal mesh platforms are marked by yellow buoys, as is a twin-engine Beechcraft AT11 airplane. The nose end lies at 30 feet (9 m) and the tail stretches 40 feet (12 m). Several more small boats and a statue of "Wally Gator" greet divers.

At the far south end of the west shore a short spit of land leads to two metal skids placed end to end at 20 feet (6 m) to form an 8-by-18-foot (2.4-by-3.9-sq-m) underwater platform. Oval concrete pipes 6 feet (1.8 m) in diameter provide excellent swim-throughs.

Lastly, back near the south corner of the east shore is the "Hole." Although the average depth of the former quarry is 36 feet (11 m), one section was dug to more than 90 feet (27 m). Over the years the hole has filled to no more than 85 feet (26 m) deep.

Because the natural flow of the aquifer is toward the south end of the lake, sand, silt and debris tend to slide down into the hole, diminishing visibility to less than 10 feet (3 m) at times. Because of the depth and turbidity, the site is used primarily for deep diving and technical courses. Located by descent lines from orange surface buoys, three 6-foot- (1.8-m-) in-diameter cable spools serve as small training platforms at depths of 65-80 feet (20-24 m).

Except for within the hole, underwater visibility is generally good for a quarry lake; averaging more than 20 feet (6 m), it can sometimes top 50 feet (15 m) in late summer.

Water temperature is typical for a lake at this latitude. It ranges from the low 40s Fahrenheit (single digits Celsius) in colder months to the high 70s (mid-20s C) in July and August. The first thermocline varies from as shallow as 15 feet (4.5 m) at the beginning of dive season to 35 feet (10.6 m) in the summer. Below that thermocline the temperature drops 5-10 F (3-5 C).

Life is prolific in Pearl Lake. The lake supports a healthy population of largemouth and smallmouth bass, yellow perch, walleye and, of course, hoards of bluegill. Channel catfish grow up to 30 pounds (13.5 kg) and white suckers help keep the bottom clean. The Wittes have also stocked the lake with hybrid rainbow trout. Turtles are occasionally sighted in the shallows.

Invertebrates include clams, snails and crayfish. And every few years in the fall, nonstinging freshwater jellies mysteriously invade the lake. Aquatic plants such as charweed and leafy pond weed provide habitat for water creatures as well as visual interest for divers.

Plans call for sinking a mock-up of a Great Lakes trading vessel for use in underwater archaeology classes.

## Shoreline Pearl

Access to dive sites at Pearl Lake is conveniently spread around the more than mile-long (1.6-km) shoreline — and so are the topside facilities.

Along the grassy eastern shore 50-year-old cottonwood trees shade a large pavilion furnished with a dozen picnic tables. Nearby is a freestanding one-person changing booth and farther up portable restrooms stand ready. Divers can park within 20 feet (6 m) of the entry points and stage their gear at shoreline picnic tables.

Another large pavilion with gear-hanging bars is located at the north-end beach entry. A portable restroom, changing booth and ample picnic tables are also available here. Parking is just across the gravel drive.

The western shore has fewer facilities, but there are changing booths and portable restrooms. Several of the entry points are equipped with picnic tables and parking is within a few yards (meters) of the water.

In addition to the facilities dedicated to scuba divers, Pearl Lake offers a number of shared amenities. One corner of the south shoreline has been excavated to create a sheltered swimming area with one of the largest inland sand beaches in the Midwest. The bathhouse

features men's and women's hot showers and restroom facilities, as well as an outdoor shower and gear rinse.

Divers can also camp in a tent or RV at the full-service campground. On Friday and Saturday evenings the Pearl Lake Supper Club serves steaks and seafood as well as burgers. Its glass-walled dining room overlooks the lake from the south shore and on summer weekends the beach snack bar is open with music by a DJ.

For nondivers in the family, paddleboat rentals are available. Fishing is permitted in nondiving areas of the lake, but no motorized boats are allowed.

## Details

The Pearl Lake scuba facility has three compressors and 8,000 cubic feet (240 cubic m) of air storage to fill divers' cylinders. It is open seven days a week from 8 a.m. until dusk with night diving on Friday and Saturday. Events are planned regularly during the diving season (late April through mid-October); swimming season runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Divers must have certification cards (unless in a class), thermal protection and a complete scuba unit. Dive flags are not required.

In case of injuries, staff members have radios and are trained in CPR and first aid. A DAN (Divers Alert Network) oxygen kit, first-aid kit and defibrillator (AED) are kept at the scuba center on the ground floor of the restaurant building. Emergency services are available by calling 911 and the nearest ambulance is less than 10 minutes away.

Hospitals in Beloit, Wisconsin, and Rockford, Illinois, are a few miles north or south, respectively. The nearest recompression chambers are in Chicago and Milwaukee.

Rates for the 2010 season are \$20 per diver per day and \$10 for nondivers. Air fills are \$8. Complimentary passes are offered to scuba professionals entering with at least four students.

Pearl Lake is off the U.S. 251 frontage road a couple of miles south of South Beloit, Illinois. For more information, call (815) 389-1479 or visit [www.pearllake.com](http://www.pearllake.com).



LYNN WALDEN PHOTO

Staging is literally steps from the water; buoyed underwater features are only a short swim beyond.

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