



# DIVING GEM OF THE MIDWEST

Text by Greg Kent

Photography by Gary Chesnut & Greg Kent

Located in South Beloit, Illinois at the Illinois / Wisconsin stateline 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. They provide shelter from the sun and inclement weather and feature picnic tables, gear benches, suit hang bars, electricity and lighting for night dives.

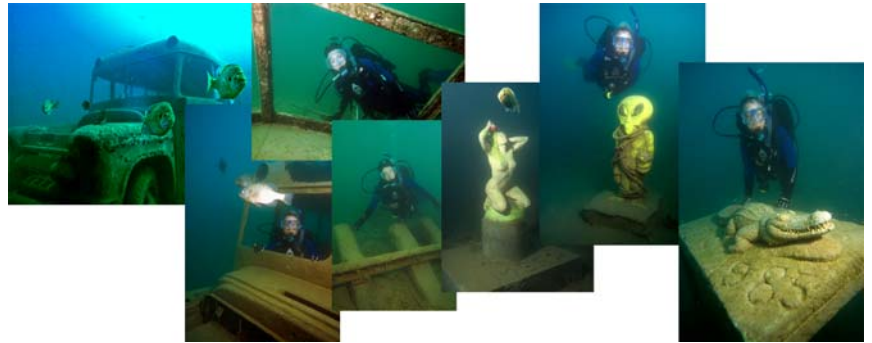
Over the years, twelve training platforms have been added to keep students off the bottom and thus maximize visibility. All are located in 20'-25' depths and vary in size from 8'x 8' mesh grid structures up to a 45' flatbed trailer.



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 boats. 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' yellow submarine! Resting on a sloping bottom in 20' 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 foot depths you may also encounter a number of entertaining characters ... a gargoyle, an alien and even "Casper the Friendly Ghost!"



The west shore offers several more 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 feet 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.

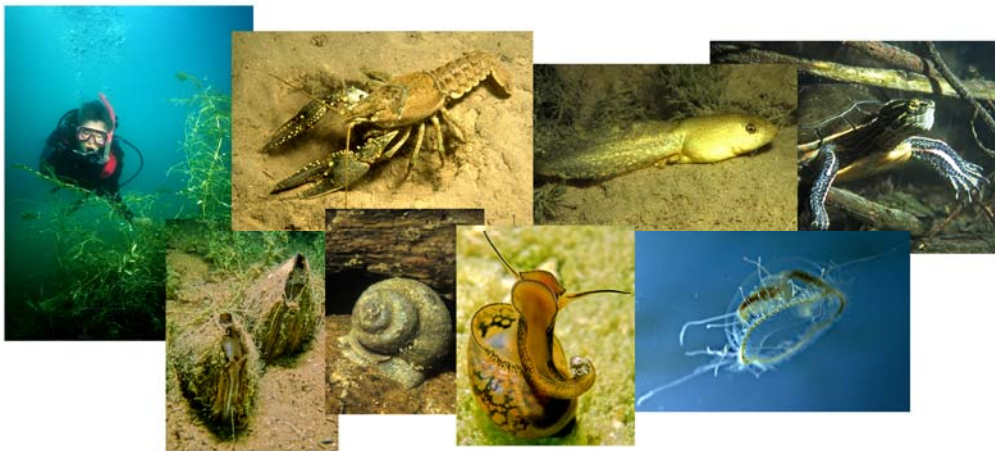
This side of the lake also attracts larger fish, due in part to the habitat offered by the dozens of concrete drainage tiles scattered along the bottom at the southern end of this shoreline; many large enough to swim through.



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 sited in the shallows, and 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 80' in the "Hole" where small platforms and buoyed descent lines have been placed.



Airfills are available at the registration area during specific hours. Three compressors along with 8000 cubic feet of storage are available to quickly supply diver's needs. Inquire regarding available hours and pricing when registering.



Since its beginnings in 1962, when the Witte family first opened Pearl Lake as a fishing facility, it has evolved into a multi-use recreational complex. Today the operation is still owned and managed by the same family and in no way resembles the sand and gravel pit that they began transforming fifty years ago.

Besides the lake's popularity as a dive destination, it also features one of the largest and best kept swimming beaches in the Midwest. A large deck with beach bar and DJ's on the weekends makes this a great spot to relax after the dive or entertainment for non-diving companions while the divers are underwater.

Additionally, a large portion of the grounds is devoted to camping. Well kept and quiet, the campground offers facilities for both tent and 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, and a full service RV dealership and service center is located at the property's entrance.



A local dining favorite, Pearl Lake's restaurant occupies an all glass building overlooking the lake. Its lounge and dining area offer casual dining and cocktails and a great place to unwind and relive the day's diving experiences. Whether it's a thick, juicy burger, a steak or seafood dinner, the food is terrific and the atmosphere can't be topped!

The diving season begins in late April with diving available seven days a week, and ends in October. (Call or visit [www.pearllake.com](http://www.pearllake.com) for opening and closing dates). Diving hours are from 8:00am until dusk, with check-out required before dark. Night diving is permitted on Fridays and Saturdays, and divers must be up and off the grounds and checked out 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 release/waiver, agree to follow standard safe diving practices and register and dive with another certified diver. Student divers must register in the company of a certified instructor, and must sign the same liability release/waiver. 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 10 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 entering the diving area, for any period of time, is required to pay the diver or non-diver fee ... there are NO EXCEPTIONS. SWIMMING OR WADING IS NOT ALLOWED IN THE DIVING AREA. Divers must be fully equipped to be in the water, and non-divers must stay completely out of the water in the diving area. (Swimming and wading are allowed only at the swimming beach.) Both registered divers and non-divers can gain complimentary entry to the beach, when open, at the diving registration area).

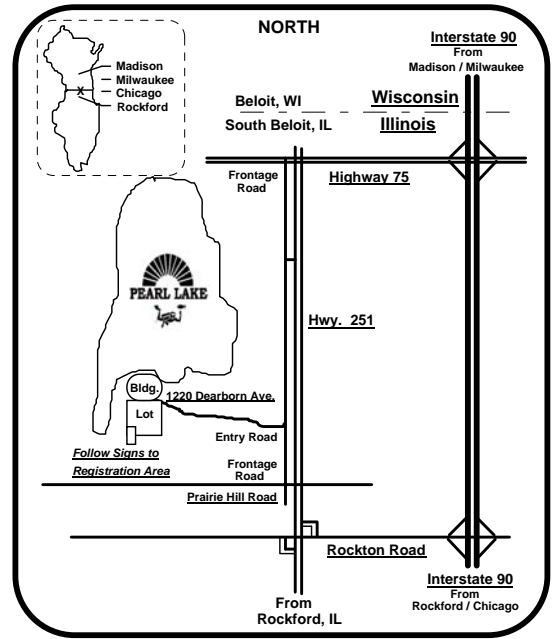
EACH diver, instructor and non-diver is issued a pass that must be placed on their vehicle's dashboard while in the diving area (one pass per each individual is required). That card also lists the general diving rules and information, as well as procedures to be followed in an emergency. ALL cards should be returned and each individual should sign out at the registration area upon completion of the diving day.

Call 815-389-1479 or visit [www.pearllake.com](http://www.pearllake.com) for current fees.

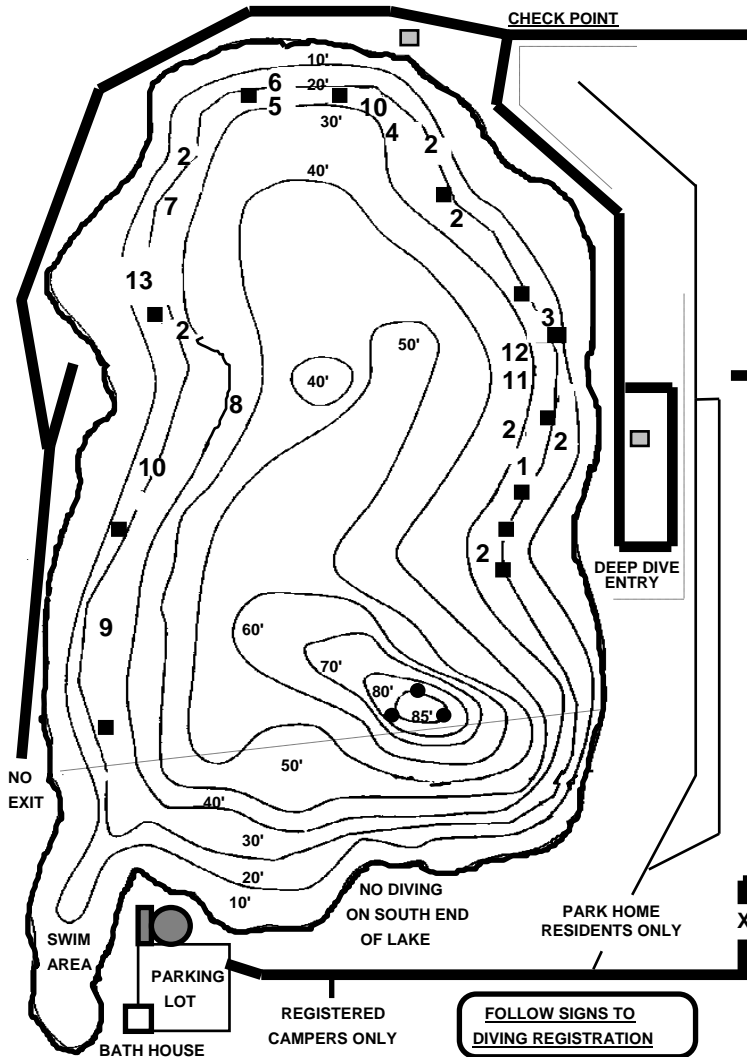
So, whether you are a neophyte diver just earning your fins, an "old moss back" looking for a little underwater relaxation, or a dive instructor or store looking for the ideal site to introduce your students to diving, you'll find it at Pearl Lake ... The Diving Gem of the Midwest!



1220 Dearborn Ave.  
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 (E) [info1@pearllake.com](mailto:info1@pearllake.com)  
 (W) [www.pearllake.com](http://www.pearllake.com)



**NORTH**



**DIVE / TRAINING SITES**

- 1 STEP VAN
- 2 BOATS
- 3 SUBMARINE
- 4 SCHOOL BUS
- 5 M.D.S. LADY OF THE LAKE
- 6 R.R. TRACKS
- 7 M.D.S. "WALLY GATOR"
- 8 AIRPLANE
- 9 CONCRETE TILES
- 10 CABIN CRUISERS
- 11 "THORA ANN"
- 12 PATROL BOAT
- 13 STEAM SHOVEL
- TRAINING PLATFORMS
- DEEP DIVE PLATFORMS
- PAVILIONS

ABSOLUTELY NO SWIMMING OR WADING

PLEASE DRIVE SLOWLY

PLEASE READ YOUR RECEIPT CARD

**EVERYONE** ENTERING THE DIVING AREA MUST REGISTER & PURCHASE A PASS

ENTER DIVE AREA HERE AFTER REGISTERING

FROM FRONTAGE ROAD / HIGHWAY 251

FOLLOW SIGNS TO DIVING REGISTRATION