

Birding Northeast Iowa on Highway Nine

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If you have some extra time while in northeastern Iowa, check out the lesser known but equally satisfying birding spots along Highway 9. This section of highway, particularly from Manly to Cresco, has a number of habitats and centers that offer some choice Iowa vistas and the possibility of seeing exciting birds.

Most of the area around this section of highway, which is in Worth, Mitchell, and Howard Counties, is agricultural land, and at first glance there doesn't seem to be many birds around other than the typical grassland/farmland birds. However, tucked away in river valleys and nestled in the farmlands are some wonderful birding spots that are worth a trip for more desirable birds, especially during migration seasons.

East of Manly, just past the Plymouth blacktop, which is S56, and across the bridge on the right, is the **Shellrock River Wildlife Area (WA)** (Figure 1.1) maintained by the Worth County Conservation Board. It is a primitive area of 128 acres and has, in addition to a prairie area, two ponds, two areas of cedar trees, and the river's edge to make good habitat for shorebirds, rails and bitterns, sparrows, and eagles or hawks soaring overhead in migration. Generally, the ponds evaporate part way by mid-summer creating wonderful mud flats for shorebirds. Buff-breasted Sandpipers have found this area several times. Sora and Virginia Rails are found in the spring along with American Bittern. LeConte's Sparrows along with other sparrows in migration are generally found here, also.

Return to the highway and continue on the road east to 1.5 miles west of Osage, in Mitchell County. This is just before the bridge crossing the Cedar River. At this point on the

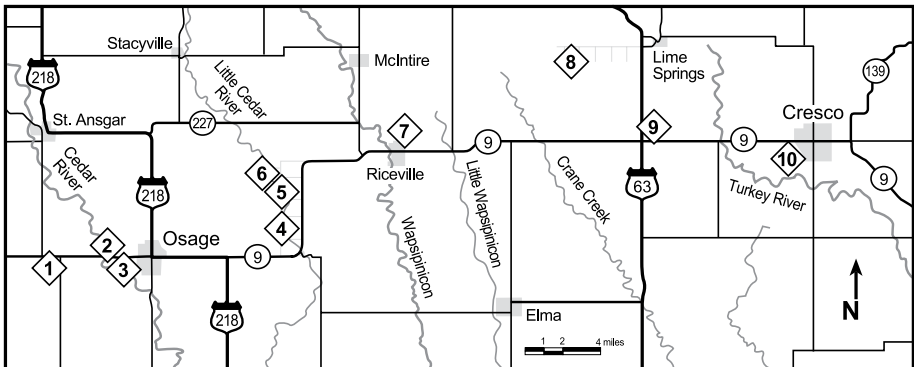


Figure 1. Birding Northeast Iowa on Highway Nine: (1) Shellrock River Wildlife Area, (2) Mitchell County Conservation Headquarters and Nature Center, (3) Spring Park, (4) New Haven Pot Holes, (5) Brownsville Wildlife Area, (6) Pioneer State Park, (7) Lake Hendricks Park, (8) Hayden Prairie, (9) Daniel "Yogi" Mullen Wildlife Area, (10) Vernon Springs Park and Nature Center.

left is the **Mitchell County Conservation Headquarters and Nature Center** (Figure 1.2). This is in conjunction with the L. R. Falk WA, which ties into the Green Belt River Trail.

The Nature Center religiously feeds birds all year round. The Center has an aerated pond for Trumpeter Swans. Woodpeckers, nuthatches, sparrows, and other common birds are found there. Pileated Woodpeckers are heard and seen occasionally in the area. Though the center is small, it offers several nice displays of Iowa wildlife with a display of Iowa bugs and butterflies that local school children put together.

The Green Belt Trail begins at the center and quickly leads to the river where a four-mile roundtrip trail parallels the river, going all the way north to the town of Mitchell and Interstate Park. The trail is a bit rough in some areas, but it is beautiful, and in spring and fall could produce any of the warblers found in any other part of the state. Thrushes, towhees, hawks, herons, and other birds provide lots of activity along the trail. Half way to Mitchell on 370th Street there is an exit if one chooses not to go the whole route, or as an entrance to do only the top half of the trail. At this exit/entrance on 370th there is a nice stand of pines used for shelter by owls in the winter.

Back at the headquarters and across the bridge to the right is the half-mile long road to **Spring Park** (Figure 1.3). The park is along the Cedar River, where camping and restrooms are available. The park gate is open in the spring through fall. Otherwise access is by foot. Warblers, including the Cape May, visit the water at the artisan well in the park. The river's edge allows for viewing occasional shorebirds, eagles, and hawks, and the ducks that use the river. Here, also, a Pileated Woodpecker is occasionally seen. At the entrance to the park is the Harry Cook Nature Trail that winds its way into Osage, a two-mile round trip hike. Though this trail doesn't follow the river, it offers a lovely walk and great birding habitat.

Leave Spring Park and return to Highway 9. Across the highway is the River Road, which meanders along the river to Mitchell. On this side of the river, eagles are seen during the winter, and a pair has nested in summer along the river the last few years.

Continuing east on Highway 9, the **New Haven Pot Holes** (Figure 1.4) in Mitchell County are the next stop. The pot holes are surrounded by a wooded area of 168 acres that make up most of the park and a wonderful habitat for woodland birds. Take a left turn off the highway just before the Little Cedar River Bridge onto Shadow Avenue, which goes to the park. It is a one-mile jaunt. The park is a primitive area with a quarter-mile hike to the east to the potholes. At the further-most potholes, there is a raised platform to view the water and the marshy area around the water. Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, and other warblers can be found here in spring. In dry seasons the ponds dry up by late summer. The park has mostly mixed deciduous trees, but there is an area of pines to the north that has been used by owls, especially Long-eared and Great Horned Owls, in the past.

A mile north of this park, continuing on Shadow Avenue, is the **Brownsville WA** (Figure 1.5). There is a narrow dirt road that goes down to the river area. This could be good for warblers, sparrows, and grassland birds because the area has 190 acres of timber, marsh, and grassland with walk-in access.

Even further north on Shadow Avenue is **Pioneer State Park** (Figure 1.6). The twenty acres of timber regularly has turkey, woodpeckers, and lots of birds in migration.

Return south to Highway 9 and go across the Little Cedar River where there are five acres to the north of the bridge that is a public area, and there is a park just south of the bridge called Francis Park. It is a nice shady spot for warblers.

At Riceville, toward the west end, is a sign indicating that taking Addison Avenue off of the Main Street will lead to **Lake Hendricks Park** (Figure 1.7) run by the Howard County Conservation Board. Just before the park is the trailhead of the WAPSI Great Western Trailhead Bike Trail. The trail is a 10.5-mile trail to the northwest; however, there is a loop back at five miles. This trail combined with the park gives access to prime birding in Howard County.

The lake itself is deep enough to have a few ducks and a loon or two in the spring and fall, along with regular geese and puddle ducks. Pine trees in the area protect Great Horned Owls and other owls in the winter. There are several trails to walk to see thrushes and warblers in the park.

In Howard County, east of Riceville about seven miles and then north five miles on Jade Street is **Hayden Prairie** (Figure 1.8). This is 240 acres of native prairie that resembles Iowa of 150 years ago. The prairie has 130 species of wildflowers and attracts many grassland and prairie birds including Bobolink, Dickcissel, Northern Harrier, and others. It is a beautiful spot in Iowa!

Just east of Davis Corners, which is the intersection of Highways 9 and 63, is the **Daniel “Yogi” Mullen WA** (Figure 1.9). It is 240 acres along the branch of the Turkey River which is a primitive grassland and river corridor and holds many possibilities for birds. The drawback is that access is by walking only. Another drawback is that it is heavily used in any hunting season.

And finally, but certainly not least, is the **Vernon Springs Park and Nature Center** (Figure 1.10) south of Cresco. This area of 64 acres is next door to Cardinal Marsh of Wineshiek County and offers a variety of birding habitats. It is two miles south of Cresco and begins with the Nature Center by the Turkey River, which has several nice displays of wildlife that is being added to yearly. At the park there is a dam and a pond that attracts ducks and cormorants in migration. The timber hosts turkey, and occasionally Ruffed Grouse. Pileated Woodpecker is heard regularly in the woods. Warblers tumble over themselves along the timbered ridges in spring and fall and then sip water at the edges of the river. There is a hiking trail along the limestone bluffs.

There are surprises waiting for the birder who has the time to bird northeastern Iowa. These are only a few of the areas of natural beauty that attract birds and wildlife in this region. Certainly it is worth a trip during spring and fall migration.

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