

Birding Raccoon River Park in Polk County

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OVERVIEW AND HABITAT

Raccoon River Park is a large park in West Des Moines. It is well known for its numerous softball fields, walking trails, swimming, and fishing opportunities. The park also harbors some outstanding birding areas and should be checked more often than it currently is, especially during migration. The park can be reached by taking Interstate 35 to the Grand Ave. east exit. Drive east on Grand Ave. for about three miles. There is a sign on the right side of the road pointing to the park.

Raccoon River Park contains varied habitats. In the center of the park is a large lake surrounded by stands of cottonwoods. The area of the park along the Raccoon River is more typical of densely wooded bottomland. The west edge of the park has a marshy area, and there is some grassland habitat on the east side of the lake and along the north shore. Finally, there is a small beach on the north side of the lake, and some mudflats occasionally appear in the southeast section of the lake.

BIRDING THE PARK

Several areas of interest for birders visiting the park are listed on Figure 1. Below is a summary of the birds I have seen and those that I think may be good candidates for appearing in a particular area.

The **marsh area near the parking lots** (Figure 1.1) is the first area you will notice as you begin your loop around the lake. I have seen Green Herons and breeding Wood Ducks and Blue-winged Teal. Hooded Merganser is also a possibility. Early spring is a good time to find Rusty Blackbird and Wilson's Snipe. In May, Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, Yellow Warbler, Warbling Vireo, and Baltimore Oriole can easily be found in the trees bordering the marsh. There is also good potential for migrants such as American Bittern, Virginia Rail, and Sora.

Blue Heron Lake (Figure 1.2) is not known for large numbers of waterfowl, but some interesting species can be found on the lake. It's a good lake to find mergansers, grebes, and loons in spring as well as small numbers of both diving and dabbling ducks. Great Blue Heron and Belted Kingfisher are easily found near the shoreline, and I have seen Osprey hunting over the lake.

The **tree line bordering the marsh** (Figure 1.3) is a good area to view warblers in both spring and fall because the trees are relatively small, and the birds tend to be lower and often at eye level. Any of the expected migrant warblers can be found along this corridor, including golden-winged and magnolia. American Redstart breeds in this area. There are lots of willows along the shoreline, and both Willow and Alder Flycatchers have been observed. Harris's and Lincoln's Sparrows can also be found in the shrubs.

The **cottonwood stands** (Figure 1.4) are another good area for warblers, vireos, and orioles. Baltimore Orioles breed in the huge cottonwoods, and Warbling and Red-eyed Vireos become more conspicuous as you get closer to the river and adjacent woodlands. Northern Waterthrush and Canada Warbler seem to like this habitat best. Bird boxes for Eastern Bluebird and Tree

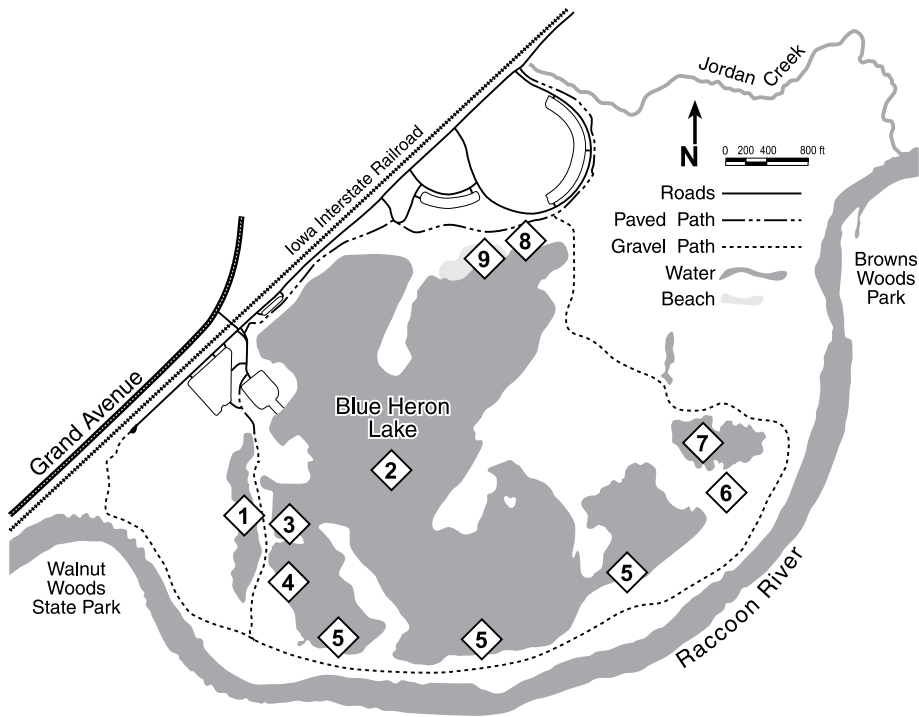


Figure 1. Birding areas in Raccoon River Park: (1) marsh area near parking lots, (2) Blue Heron Lake, (3) tree line bordering marsh, (4) cottonwood stands, (5) riverside woodland, (6) grassland/shrub habitat, (7) pond shallows, (8) weedy/open space, (9) beach.

Swallow are here also.

The largest area of the park for quality birding is the **riverside woodland** (Figure 1.5). This is the best location for Swainson's, Gray-cheeked, and Wood Thrushes, and they often are seen foraging on the path in front of you. All the swallow species except Purple Martin forage over the river, and this is another good place for Belted Kingfisher. Be prepared for "warbler neck" during the warbler and vireo fallout because the trees are tallest here. Scarlet and Summer Tanagers are possible, and this is probably the best spot to see Great Horned, Barred, or Eastern Screech-Owls.

Grassland/shrub habitat (Figure 1.6) surrounds a shallow pond and consists of grass, shrubs, and very small trees. Northern Bobwhite has been found here, and Eastern Phoebe can be seen, because there is a nearby farm building on which it nests. This habitat is the most reliable location to find Palm Warbler foraging among the shrubs lining the pond. Other birds to be seen include Northern Waterthrush, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Indigo Bunting, and Great Crested Flycatcher.

Great Blue Herons inhabit the **pond shallows** (Figure 1.7). Often, there is mud exposed on the edges, and during migration, it is possible to see as many as 10 Spotted Sandpipers in a

small area. Wilson's Snipe is also here. Even though I have not seen other shorebirds here, the shallows may attract a few.

The **weedy/open space** (Figure 1.8) is a large mowed area of the park near the softball fields. Shrubs line the shoreline and during peak migration in spring, resident and migrant sparrows are common. Song, Chipping, Savannah, White-throated, Harris's, White-crowned, Lincoln's, and Clay-colored Sparrows can be fairly numerous feeding on the dandelion and other weed seed heads.

Raccoon River Park has a small and relatively productive **beach** (Figure 1.9). In spring, Franklin's, Bonaparte's, and Ring-billed Gulls loaf along with Caspian and Forster's Terns.

SUMMARY

I have birded Raccoon River Park in the fall and had good success with small fallouts of migrant passerines, but my favorite time is early May. I have been able to tally 85 species in the park in a matter of four to five hours, so with a little luck, an alert birder can obtain a good list. The walking trail is well maintained and flat, so practically anyone can bird this park with little physical strain. I encourage everyone, especially in central Iowa, to add Raccoon River Park as one of their birding destinations for spring. Contact me with any questions at my e-mail address below.