

Birding Area: Green Island Wildlife Management Area, Jackson County

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In our estimation Green Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is one of the elite birding locations in the state of Iowa, right alongside more well-known places such as Yellow River State Forest, Shimek State Forest, and Lacey-Keosauqua State Park. It is located in Jackson County between Bellevue and Sabula, along the Mississippi River (Figures 1 and 2). It seems that it is still a relatively unheralded and unknown birding location for most Iowa birders and deserves much more recognition.

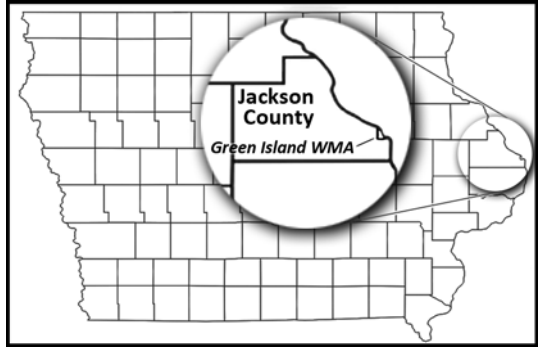


Figure 1. Location of Green Island Wildlife Management Area in Jackson County, IA.

Green Island WMA is a 4,064-acre complex of wetlands (50%), uplands (25%), and timber (25%) tucked within the beautiful forested bluffs of the

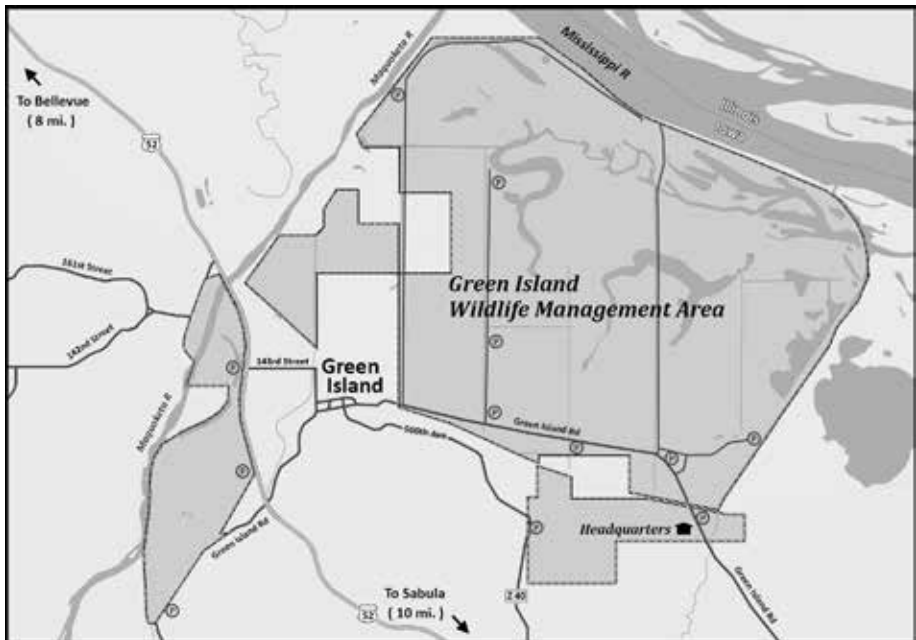


Figure 2. Map of Green Island Wildlife Management Area.

Mississippi River. It is surrounded and sectioned by a system of levees, used by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to manage the habitat, separating the area from the Mississippi River on its northeast and the Maquoketa River on its northwest.

Nesting species include Common Gallinule, Least Bittern, Prothonotary



Figure 3. King Rail, Green Island WMA, Jackson, 30 August 2017. Photograph by Tony Moline, Dubuque, IA.

Warbler, and occasionally King Rail (Figure 3). During migration Green Island is filled to the brim with waterfowl, shorebirds, warblers, and much more. In the winter it is one of the most reliable public properties in the state to view Golden Eagles and a great place to find Bald Eagles, hawks, and other raptors. As of June 2020, the eBird list for Green Island

showed 259 species. There are likely additional species that have not been recorded in eBird yet. For the most recent information go to: <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L1791977?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>. There is an option to select a “Printable Checklist” for the Green Island Area.

The levees provide miles and miles of roads and hiking trails that give close access to the habitat to birders of all levels of experience, interest level, and mobility. Green Island is a perfect place to car bird, and most of the Green Island experience can be had from the seat of your car, but it is also an absolutely incredible nature experience to hike out to and along the rivers on the levees, where motor vehicles are prohibited. You could easily hike five, ten, or even as much as fifteen miles without treading on the same stretch of levee twice. Once out on the levees and away from the roads, you can experience some true social distancing, often without another soul within miles. You can leave civilization behind and experience peaceful solitude surrounded only by the sights and sounds of nature—truly spectacular!

The levee tops are perfectly flat, so they are not strenuous to walk, but this is a wildlife management area, not a park or recreation area, so the levees are significantly vegetated, being mowed infrequently throughout the growing season. Keep an eye out for occasional hidden chuck holes and some wild parsnip and poison ivy here and there. Be aware that ticks are likely to be encountered and take necessary precautions. This is not flip-flop territory. Hiking

boots will be advantageous, along with a good sun hat and some water. The nearest public restroom is in Bellevue or Sabula. Despite the challenges, a hike is still definitely well worth the time and effort—magical!

The Green Island natural area is much larger than many may realize. A



Figure 4. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Green Island WMA, Jackson, 25 July 2014. Photograph by Tony Moline, Dubuque, IA.

newer section on the west side of Highway 52 is primarily restored prairie and floodplain for the Maquoketa River. There are three parking lots along Highway 52 installed by the DNR for this access. A blufftop woodland habitat can be accessed from a trail behind the DNR building or from a parking area on top of the bluff on 500th Avenue. The

east dike eventually connects with the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The property to the north is also all part of that refuge, extending all the way up to Pleasant Creek. About midway there is an access point and parking lot on Highway 52 (look for a sign for Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge). This is a flooded forest environment with a two mile loop trail that is loaded with woodpeckers and is likely great for Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (Figure 4) but is rarely birded in summer due to oppressive numbers of mosquitoes.

It is encouraging to note that the Iowa DNR is working to purchase land to expand Green Island WMA. Despite its distance from much of Iowa, birders who decide to explore this undervisited gem will not be disappointed.

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