

Birding Ida and Sac Counties

Peter Ernzen

Birdwatching in Ida and Sac counties can be both challenging and rewarding. The two counties share a distinctive rural atmosphere. I wrote this article while I was birdwatching. Most of my time is spent in Ida Grove; therefore, the initial focus is on Ida County. One constant in Ida and Sac counties is the importance of state Highway 175. All areas mentioned are easily accessed from this state highway.

IDA COUNTY

Ida County is the smallest county in Iowa and has a distinctive rural character. The two landforms comprising Ida County are the Northwest Iowa Plains and Southern Iowa Drift Plain. Rolling hills and well-drained soil types mark both landforms. In the extreme northwest part of the county is the Little Sioux River. The Maple River runs from the northeast near the town of Galva through Ida Grove and Battle Creek before exiting the county.

Historically, there are few birding records for Ida County. The exception is a Swallow-tailed Kite, which is on display at the Calhoun County Historical Museum in Rockwell City. Locally, several bird specimens are on display at the Ida County Historical Museum in Ida Grove, including a Burrowing Owl.

The easiest way to bird Ida County is to travel Highway 175 from east to west. The highway enters eastern Ida County near the town of Arthur. The drainage ditches on the north side of the highway between Arthur and Ida Grove can be wet in the spring and produc-

tive for shorebirds. In addition to the regular shorebird species, Western Sandpiper and Wilson's Phalarope have been recorded.

On the west side of Ida Grove is the 252-acre **Moorehead Pioneer Park** (Figure 1), which is named for the first permanent settler of the county. The park is owned and maintained by the Ida County Conservation Board. An extensive article about Moorehead Park was published in *Iowa Bird Life* in 1994 (Ernzen 1994). Historically, Ida County was virtually treeless. This remains true today with roughly 500 acres that are treed. Approximately half of the timber exists in and around Moorehead Park. The park has an extensive trail system and a brochure showing all the trails may be picked up at the Ida County Conservation Board headquarters near the entrance to the park.

Because of the limited acres of timber in Ida County, Moorehead Park is a classical passerine trap. Both spring and fall migrations are productive in terms of species and numbers of birds. Spring migration typically starts at the beginning of May and lasts until early June. Warbler migration can be phenomenal and involve species that are not typically thought of as occurring in western Iowa. Because of the lack of habitat, birds do not typically linger for more than a couple of days. Blackburnian Warblers are often found in the oak trees above the railroad depot on the west side of the park. Blackpoll, Black and White, and Wilson's warblers and American Redstart are common in migration. In recent years, both Blue-winged and Golden-winged warblers have been seen annually. Large numbers of Mourning and Canada warblers can be found throughout the woods late in spring migration. Southern and eastern species that have been recorded at least one time include Yellow-throated, Pine, Worm-eating, Prothonotary, Kentucky, Connecticut, and Hooded warblers and Louisiana Waterthrush.

Other rare passerine species that have been recorded in spring in Moorehead Park include White-eyed Vireo, Summer Tanager, and Lazuli Bunting. Large numbers of common migrants are sometimes concentrated in the park, with 200 Swainson's Thrushes present in the spring of 1996.

Summer birds of the park are regular Iowa species. Common nesting birds include Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole, Gray



*Wilson's Warbler
photographed in Moorehead
Park and provided courtesy of
Don Poggensee.*

Catbird, Brown Thrasher, and Indigo Bunting. As the timber has matured it has attracted species not previously present. Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Eastern Towhee, and Wood Thrush have nested in the park in the last three years.

The 12-acre spring-fed Lake Moorehead attracts many goose, duck, gull, grebe, loon, and heron species to the park. Many of the more common species of waterfowl have made appearances at this lake. The best birds have included White-winged Scoter, Common Loon, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Cattle Egret. Ospreys often can be seen hanging out in the spring and fall.

Late fall, winter, and early spring are great times to see sparrows. All common sparrow species with the exception of Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Le Conte's have been seen in Moorehead Park. However, Nelson's, Le Conte's, and Henslow's sparrows have been recorded in other parts of the county. Late October/early November is usually a good time to find Spotted Towhees. Winter birding can be slow. However, Northern Saw-whet and Long-eared owls have both occurred in the Scotch pines near the depot and on the east side of the lake near the comfort station.

Continuing west on Highway 175 to the town of Battle Creek, turn left on County Road L51. Drive south for 2.5 miles to **Crawford Creek Park**. The 260-acre park of grassland contains a 62-acre lake. This park is geared more toward camping and fishing. In spring and fall, however, large numbers of waterfowl can be found. Western Grebe and Common Loon have been recorded here. On the way to the park, there are large grassy areas. Quite often you may observe Bobolink, Western Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, an occasional Loggerhead Shrike, and, rarely, a Blue Grosbeak.

A drive through the county farmland will produce many common grassland birds. Most are sparrow-related species with the occasional Common Yellowthroat in wet areas. Other species reported from Ida County include Vermilion Flycatcher (Rector 1998b) and Pine Grosbeak (Rector 1998a).

SAC COUNTY

Sac County is a geologically diverse area. The county is composed of three landforms: the Northwest Iowa Plains, the Southern Iowa Drift Plain, and the Des Moines Lobe. Both the Northwest Iowa Plain and the Southern Iowa Drift Plain are characterized by hilly well-drained soils. To the east of these areas is the Des Moines Lobe. The Des Moines Lobe is a poorly drained flat area marked by marshes

and shallow lakes. The melting Wisconsin glacial ices created these lakes some 13,000 years ago. Tomahawk Marsh and Black Hawk Lake in southeast Sac County are good representations of glacial lakes in the Des Moines Lobe area. The Raccoon River flows through eastern Sac County and eventually into Red Rock Reservoir, which is southeast of Des Moines. The Boyer River flows west, entering the Missouri River in southern Iowa.

The best place to start birding in Sac County is the town of Lake View, which is located in southern Sac County on Highway 175 (Figure 2). The town borders **Black Hawk Lake** on its western shore in **Black Hawk State Park**. This shallow lake attracts many of the common duck, goose, loon, grebe, gull, and tern species. Spring and fall migrations are the best times to see large numbers of common species as well as some Iowa rarities.

Species that have been recorded at Blackhawk Lake at least one time include Long-tailed Duck, White-winged Scoter, Pacific Loon, and Red-necked and Western grebes. A number of rare gull species have been observed as well. These include a spring record for Little Gull, a summer record for Laughing Gull, and fall and winter records for Long-tailed Jaeger (Ernzen 1996a), Sabine's (Petersen 1996), Glaucous, and Thayer's gulls.

Black Hawk Lake is relatively small and can be easily viewed with a pair of good binoculars. Most of the lake is surrounded by housing, with the exception of three pieces of state-owned land on the south side of the lake. A road, street, or county highway can be used to travel around the lake. In the fall, large concentrations of waterfowl can be observed from the southeast corner of the lake. You may pull off the road or use the boat ramp located on the south side of the lake in Black Hawk State Park. Make sure you use a scope to look at the many ducks. Western Grebes are often tucked in with the large raft of ducks. Sabine's Gull has often been found here as well. Large fish concentrations will always support large numbers of American White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, and loons.

Black Hawk Lake was dredged in 1995 and 1996. A spoils area was located on the southeast corner of the lake. Over the next two years, this area attracted large numbers of shorebirds and gulls. These included Hudsonian and Marbled godwits, Long-billed Curlew (Ernzen 1996b), American Avocet, Snowy Plover, and Sabine's and Laughing gulls. Unfortunately the area has since been filled in and farmed.

On the south side of the town of Lake View is the **Stubb Severson self-guided nature trail**. This area borders **Provost Slough** on the south side of Black Hawk Lake. The area is covered in woody vegetation and has an extensive trail system.

Nesting American Redstart, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Red-eyed and Yellow-throated vireos have been observed here. Many species of wood warblers have been seen during both spring and fall migration. These include Golden-winged, Mourning, Canada, Connecticut, and Black-throated Blue warblers.



*Black-necked Stilt
photographed at Crescent
Lake National Wildlife
Refuge, Nebraska and
provided courtesy of Don
Poggensee.*

Returning to the town of Lake View, travel 2.1 miles south on County Road M68. To the west is the entrance to the **Hallett's Material pits** and to the east is the entrance to **Black Hawk Marsh**. At the material pit, large numbers of geese and gulls gather in spring and fall. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources manages the 975-acre Black Hawk Marsh area. It is flooded in spring, drained in the summer, and reflooded in the fall. This creates interesting habitat for observation of Osprey, American White Pelicans, and large numbers of common waterfowl. As the area is

drained, mudflats become visible and in late spring and early fall shorebird species such as American Avocet and Black-bellied Plover use the area.

Returning to County Road M68, drive north through the town of Lake View. Approximately three miles north of Lake View is **Tomahawk Marsh**. This is a typical glacier marsh consisting of two sections, one on each side of the road. The west section is a large shallow marsh surrounded by upland prairie. The east section contains two large shallow marshes and a number of small, constructed potholes. An old railroad bed can be used as a walking path with two small parking lots on each end of the path.

County Road M68 borders the eastern shore of the western section of Tomahawk Marsh. From the roadside, you can view a large section of habitat. The following birds have been observed from the road: Red-necked, Eared, and Horned grebes, Great-tailed Grackle, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Virginia Rail. Many common waterfowl species have been observed here as well, including Northern

Pintails, Bufflehead, and Hooded Mergansers. Common shorebird species include Willet, both species of Dowitcher, and Wilson's Phalarope. Rare breeding birds include Common Moorhen, Hooded Merganser, and Gadwall. Other species that have been recorded from this side of the marsh include Long-tailed Jaeger, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and Sandhill Crane.

County Road M68 borders the western shore of the largest body of water of the eastern section of Tomahawk Marsh. This is the largest and deepest marsh of the complex. This body of water is open and not as filled with reeds as the rest of the marsh; consequently, it attracts more species of waterfowl during migration. As the water recedes, there often are mudflats, which attract a great variety of

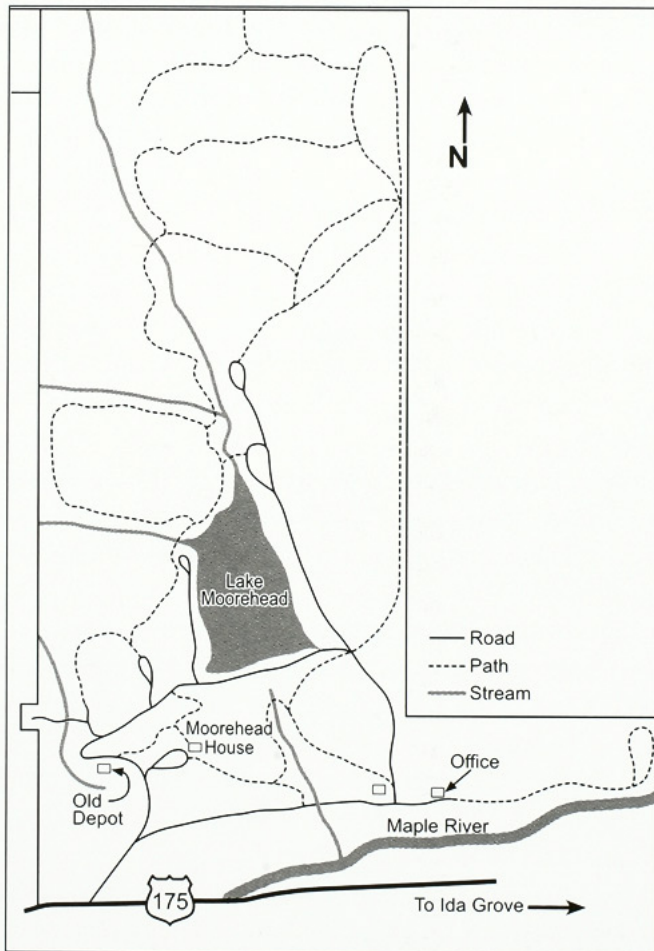


Figure 1. Moorehead Pioneer Park and Lake Moorehead in Ida County.

shorebirds. These include both Hudsonian and Marbled godwits, Long and Short-billed dowitchers, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Red-necked Phalarope, and many more common species.

The old railroad bed running through the eastern section of Tomahawk Marsh is a good passerine trap because it is lined with trees and shrubs. Many species of warblers, vireos, and thrushes have been seen here. Further along the path, the trees are sparse and are bordered by shrubs. This provides nesting habitat for Willow Flycatchers. The marshes are bordered by prairie grasses, which provide nesting habitat for many sparrow species. The border areas induce Common Yellowthroats to breed in large numbers as well as attracting migrants such as Sora and Virginia rails and Le Conte's and Nelson's Sharp-tailed sparrows.

Just south of Tomahawk Marsh on County Road M68 is a large flat cornfield on the east side and a flat pasture on the west side. In late spring and early summer, these areas often become flooded with heavy rains. The poor drainage provides excellent mudflat habitat. Several outstanding species have been found here including American Pipit, Hudsonian and Marbled godwits, Wilson's Phalarope, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

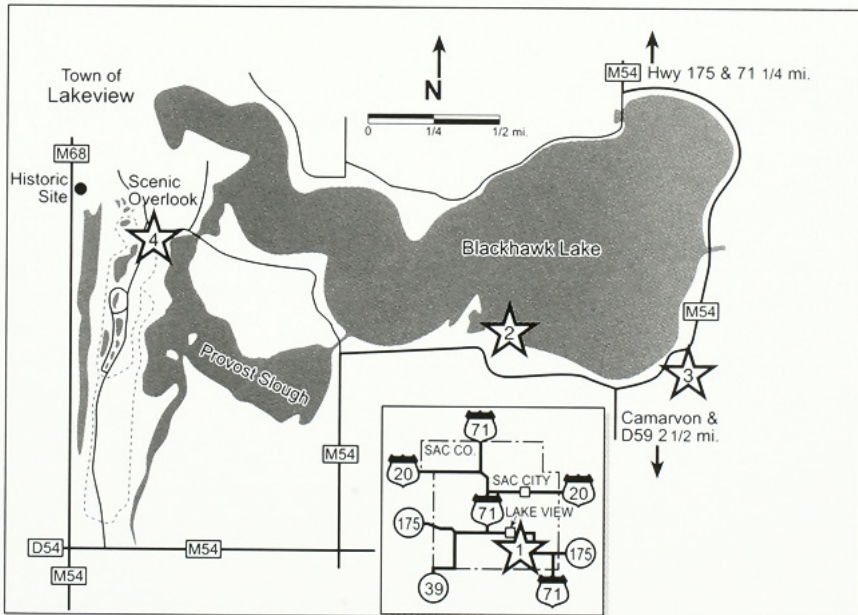


Figure 2. Black Hawk State Park (1) and Black Hawk Lake. Birding areas around Black Hawk Lake include (2) Black Hawk Lake boat Ramp, (3) Black Hawk Lake sports area, and (4) Stubb Severson self-guided nature trail.

Other areas to bird in Sac County include **Kiowa Marsh** in the north-central part of the county and the area south of the **town of Wall Lake**. Kiowa Marsh is located two miles east of the town of Early on County Road D27. The area consists of 75% prairie upland and 25% marsh habitats. Many waterfowl species can be observed here in the spring. Large concentrations of Ring-billed Gulls have been seen here. This also is a good spot to find Sedge Wrens.

Directions to **the town of Wall Lake**: take Highway 175 three miles west of Lake View and turn south on Highway 36 for another three miles. Travel south through town past Andy Williams's birthplace and across the railroad tracks. South and east of town is a flat, poorly drained field. This field frequently floods in the spring. As the water recedes, large mudflats attract significant numbers of shorebirds. Species seen here include Hudsonian Godwit, Black-bellied and American Golden plovers, Dunlin, and Red-necked Phalarope.

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407 Court, Ida Grove, IA 51445-1414 (pkernzen@pionet.net)