

Birding Delaware County

Bill Scheible

Whenever I host visitors from out of state, I usually take them on a day trip to north-eastern Iowa to prove that our small square state is more than repetitive fields of row crops. The road from Cedar Rapids to the Mississippi River bluffs passes through Delaware County, but I had done very little birding there until recently, when I chose to pursue a County Big Year in seldom visited, rarely reported Delaware County. In so doing, I discovered several places unknown to me that have proven to be interesting, enjoyable, and lo and behold, even birdy at times.

Largely agricultural, **Delaware County** (Figure 1) is mostly flat in the south, becoming gradually hillier as one progresses toward northeastern Iowa's unglaciated driftless area. The Maquoketa River courses diagonally through the county from NW to SE. In the 2000 census, Delaware County had a population of about 18,400, virtually identical to that of one hundred years earlier. Clearly, this is not a center of burgeoning population growth. Manchester, the county seat, is home to 5,000 people and there are ten other towns, each

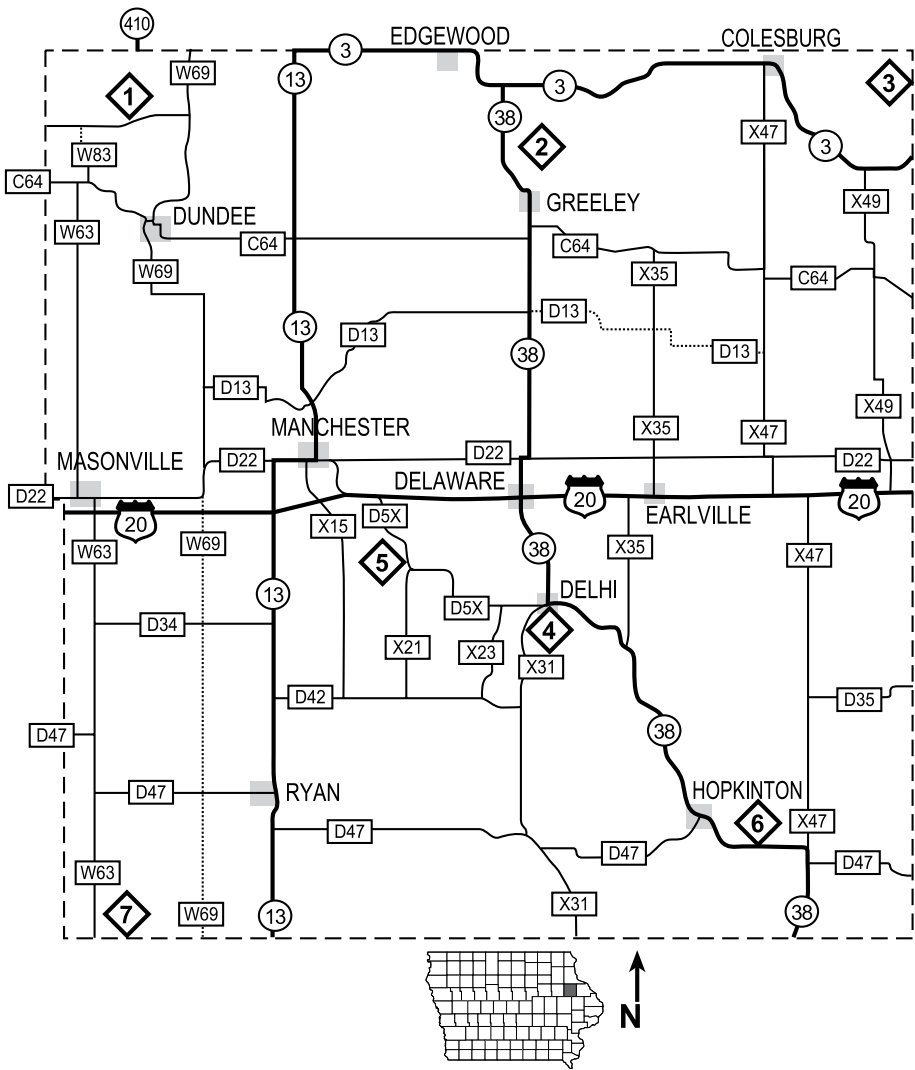


Figure 1. Birding Delaware County: (1) Backbone State Park, (2) Fountain Springs Park, (3) Ram Hollow Wildlife Management Area, (4) Delhi area, (5) Bailey's Ford Park, (6) Hopkinton area, (7) Buffalo Creek Wildlife Area.

of them with fewer than 1,000 citizens. The county is bisected into north and south by U.S. Highway 20 and east/west by state IA Highway 13, avenues that afford convenient access to its four corners.

Here follows a clockwise tour of selected Delaware County birding spots, from north-west to southwest. These areas are highlighted on Figure 1.

Tucked into the northwestern corner of the county, **Backbone State Park** (Figures 1.1 and 2) was Iowa's first state park, established in 1920. Its signature feature is "the backbone," a high rocky ridge enveloped by a sharp bend of the Maquoketa River. Largely mixed-hardwood forest, Backbone SP has several well-maintained trails but it can also be birded from the vicinity of the paved road that runs north/south through the upper half of the park. This portion of the park can be entered from the north from Strawberry Point or from east and west by way of County Road C57. It could be that this central road provides Iowans with the easiest access to nesting species such as Acadian Flycatcher, Veery, and Cerulean Warbler, all of which I've viewed while standing beside my car. Other species that can be found in proximity to the road are Wood Thrush, Carolina Wren, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula, and Scarlet Tanager. Yellow-throated Warbler is sometimes present just inside the east entrance and Red-shouldered Hawk can be heard, but seldom seen, at the west entrance near the Six Pines Campground. This entire area is a productive spot during spring and fall migration. East of the park along County Road C57, pasture on the north side of the road is home to Grasshopper Sparrow, Dickcissel, and an occasional Sedge Wren.

The lake at Backbone SP, a creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression, is primarily a recreational body of water. From a birder's perspective, it's impoverished. Below the spillway, though, there is very nice habitat along the road to South Lake Campground. Many of Iowa's summer resident species are present here, and this is a fairly good spot for spring migrants, too.

Backbone SP, by the way, is within Breeding Bird Atlas block No. 320. There are two nice campgrounds as well as several rental cabins at the state park.

Fountain Springs Park (Figure 1.2) is a 180-acre site in north-central Delaware County near the town of Greeley. The park features a trout stream, and walking the nearby trails can be rewarding. In addition to common woodland species, I have found Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Louisiana Waterthrush here in June.

Ram Hollow Wildlife Management Area (Figure 1.3) is a 480-acre DNR property located in the far northeastern corner of Delaware County. Hilly and heavily timbered, with rough trails, this is a physically challenging trip compared to other areas in the county. Just over the border from White Pine Hollow in Dubuque County, Ram Hollow would seem to be a location for Ruffed Grouse, although I've failed to find them in three trips here. Many hardwood-loving species can be found here, and I once had a 7-woodpecker day at Ram Hollow.

The **Delhi area** (Figure 1.4) provides another multifaceted birding area along the Maquoketa River. Like the impoundment at Backbone State Park, **Lake Delhi** serves humans well and birds poorly. However, at the southeastern edge of the town of Delhi is the 40-acre **Silver Lake**. When water levels are low, the north end of the lake, adjacent to IA Highway 38, has proven to be Delaware County's best location for migrating shorebirds (this is a severely mud-flat challenged county!). A variety of migrant waterfowl stop here as well, and twice it has afforded close up comparisons of Cackling vs. the resident Canada Geese. Southwest of Delhi, accessed by County Roads X21 or X29, is **Turtle Creek Park**, a 200-acre mixed use area. Local homeowners have placed gourd houses near the lakefront, and this is the only place in the county where I've found Purple Martins. The small lake

seldom offers much, though. I've not explored this area extensively, but it should be noted that Turtle Creek Park is included in Breeding Bird Atlas Block No. 324 and warrants further scrutiny.

Bailey's Ford Park (Figure 1.5), midway between Delhi and Manchester off County Road D5X, is probably my favorite birding spot in Delaware County, no doubt in part because of the bubbling, mood-leveling trout stream that meanders down its middle. Bailey's Ford can be a pretty good migrant trap and I've recorded 22 warbler species here (not all in one day, mind you). An extensive trail system departs from the campground in the northwest section of the park, across the stream, and the semi-open, mixed cedar/hardwood habitat here can be very productive for summering species as well as migrants. When snow blankets the ground up to the banks of the trout stream, this park is postcard worthy. It should house wintering Saw-whet and Long-eared Owls. It should, but I've yet to find them. There are three campgrounds at Bailey's Ford.

The **Hopkinton area** (Figure 1.6) is another good birding area. Along County Road X47, about four miles south of Highway 20 and five or six miles northeast of Hopkinton, there is a private park maintained by the Worthington Sportsmen's Club. Managed primarily for fishing, the spring-fed lake has consistently been my best spot for migrating waterfowl. An annual \$20.00 membership fee provides access to the property. Least Bittern and Sora are here, and it's the only place in Delaware County where I've seen a gull (Ring-billed) or a tern (Forster's)!

West of Hopkinton, Pheasant Road makes a loop with County Road D47. Hilly pastureland here is home to Grasshopper Sparrow and Bobolink and, to my knowledge, is the only Delaware County location for Henslow's Sparrow. Both Bell's Vireo and Orchard Oriole frequent this area.

Finishing up our tour, the **Buffalo Creek Wildlife Area** (Figure 1.7) is a nice upland habitat located just off County Road W63 in the southwestern corner of the county, not far from the Linn County line. Largely rehabilitated prairie, but bordered by scrub timber and Buffalo Creek, this is a very good spot to search for resident and migrant sparrows. It is Delaware County's most reliable location for almost certainly breeding Sedge Wrens. It's the only place in the county where I've found Northern Bobwhite.

Using Highways U.S. 20 and IA 13 as boundaries, driving open country roads in the southwestern quadrant in winter will usually produce Rough-legged Hawk and Lapland Longspur, with an occasional Snow Bunting or Meadowlark (presumably Western).

Any birding expedition requires fuel, of course. Manchester is really one's only option for food, and national fast-food chains and a couple of locally owned bistros are here. There are some convenience stores scattered about the county, too. Curiously, I've not encountered Eurasian Collared-Doves at any of them, but they can be found in the small town of Earlville, just off Highway 20.

Exploring Iowa's less frequently birded counties can be a lot of fun and I highly recommend it. More important, though, is the contribution each of us can make to the expansion of our knowledge of bird distribution in our state. It is, after all, Breeding Bird Atlas time.

1524 Bilgarie Ct. NE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402 (drbeel@mchsi.com)

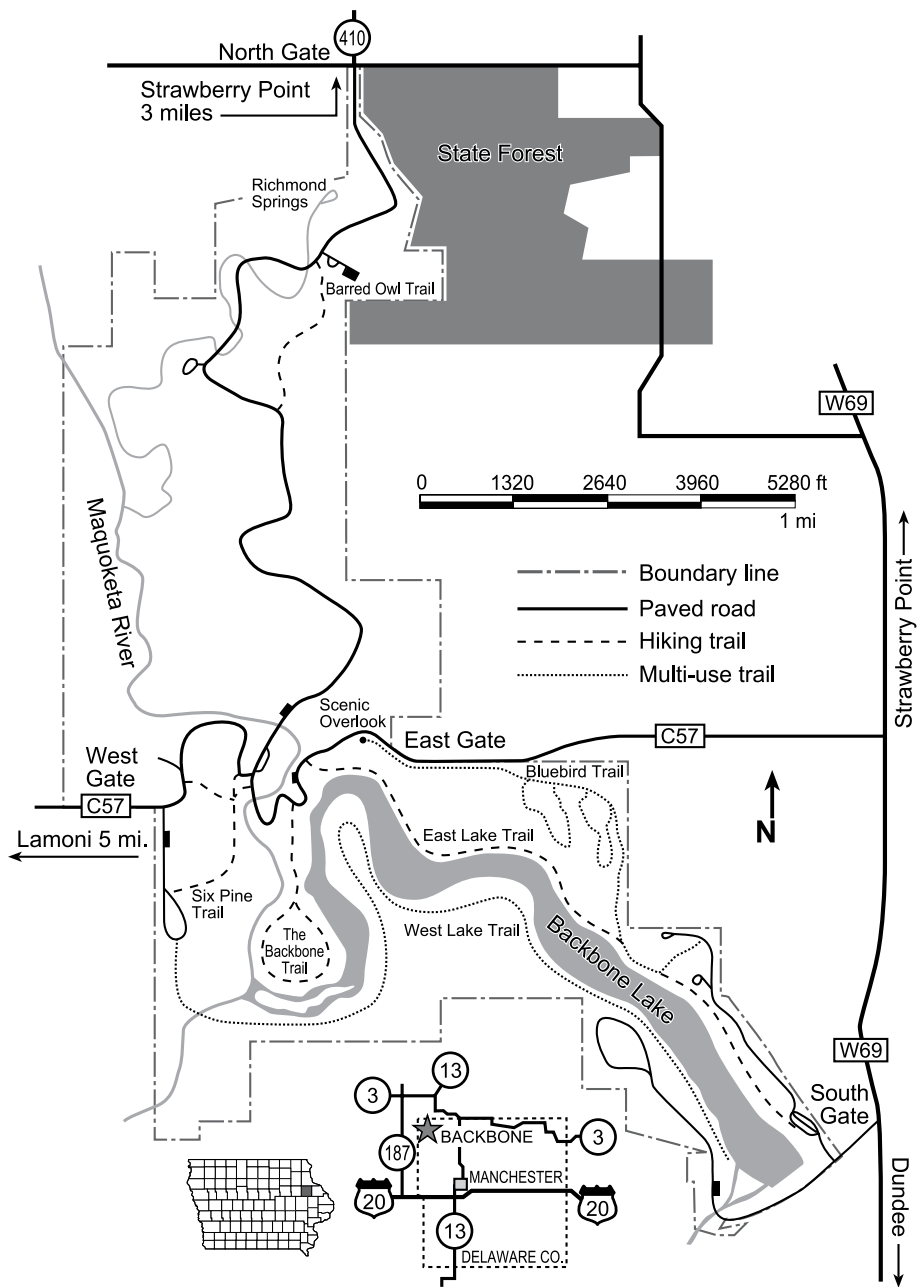


Figure 2. Backbone State Park.