

Birding Areas in Cedar Rapids and Linn County

James Durbin

Cedar Rapids and Linn County have several birding areas that are among the best in the state (Figure 1). Cedar Rapids with a population of over 100,000 is a leading manufacturing center and distribution point for the surrounding agricultural area. It is nestled on the banks of the Cedar River, which provides the wonderful Cedar River Green Belt containing many good birding sites. The Green Belt stretches from the nuclear plant north of Palo (northwest of Cedar Rapids) to the south side of Cedar Rapids.

Cedar Lake in downtown Cedar Rapids has many water birds. It is reached by exiting from I-380 at the "H" and "J" Exit 21 and going west. The lake stays open all winter due to the power plant that uses the water for cooling. The lake is split into two parts with a channel between that runs west toward the river. The west end of the channel can be reached by taking the 7th Street Exit 20 from I-380 (going south) and when you come to the stop sign, veer to the right and drive beside Cargill on C Avenue. When you have to turn left onto 4th Street, veer to the right onto Stickle Street and cross the railroad tracks. Follow the street until you see the sign for the trail parking. This channel is open in the coldest part of the winter when other parts of the lake begin to freeze. Many species of ducks, grebes, and a Black-crowned Night-Heron have wintered there the past two years. The lake also will have Bald Eagles, Belted Kingfishers, sparrows, and various other birds depending on the season.

Squaw Creek Regional Park on the eastern edge of the city is reached from the east end of the Highway 100 extension (Marion Bypass) or from Highway 13 (1/4 mile) and then the bypass. The park is 663 acres with a drive, campground, and lodge. The drive makes a circle when you approach the lodge. As you drive in, you may see swallows, Ring-necked Pheasants, Eastern Bluebirds, and other grassland type birds. There is a small pond along the drive

where water birds such as the Little Blue Heron and American Bittern can be found. Continuing along the drive where it crosses the creeks, you may see flycatchers, Yellow Warblers, and American Goldfinches. Turn left and drive along the creek and you will see Bobolinks in the summer to the right in the field as well as other woodland and creek-edge birds. Park in the parking lots further along and walk the road taking frequent detours into the woods, open areas, and along the path that follows the creek and you will find many species of birds depending on the season. Field Sparrows, Blue-winged Warblers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks nest in these areas. Continue along the road and stop at the various lots or along the road. The road will take you back to the lodge and you can start around again or continue to another birding area in Linn County.

Willow Donnelly Park is another small park that Joyce and I like to visit. It is along Boyson Road on the northeast edge of Cedar Rapids. Leave I-380 at Exit 25 and drive east along Boyson Road about a mile after crossing "C" Avenue. Turn right into the parking lot. There is a path that follows Dry Creek for about a mile with available side trips. Also, from the parking lot, walk across the grassy area parallel to Boyson Road to a bridge crossing the creek and continuing as a trail that you can follow along that side. After you walk down the trail for a couple hundred yards, there is a small wooded area on your right. We like to wander in this area to see thrushes and warblers in the spring and fall. We have found in this park most of the warblers and vireos that come through Iowa.

Wickiup Hill Outdoor Learning Area (WHOLA) is another area northwest of Cedar Rapids that is part of the Cedar River Green Belt, which stretches from the nuclear plant north of Palo to the south side of Cedar Rapids and includes many birding areas. WHOLA covers an area of about three miles beginning on the north side across from the nuclear power plant to Morris Hills Road on the south. To reach WHOLA, take Blairs Ferry Road (E36) from I-380 in Hiawatha and drive west. After traveling along two right angle curves, you will cross a creek and then turn right onto Featheridge Road (E34). Take Featheridge Road (E34) about 1.5 miles and turn left onto Morris Hills road. Travel 1.5 miles to the entrance. Park at the gate or in the parking lot across the road. The road into WHOLA is closed until the new education center is completed, hopefully by next year. At WHOLA, you will find a new shallow, marshy lake created by the Department of Transportation, oak savannahs, pot holes that dry up in late summer, marshy areas, and backwater ponds that are replen-

ished by the spring floods from the Cedar River. There also are open grassy areas. This park takes several hours to explore. Because of the varied habitat, you can see many different species of birds depending on the season.

The final place I would like to recommend is my **backyard!** I live at 1460 Douglas Court in Marion in Linn County. We have 132 species on our backyard list and 253 species on my list for Linn County. If you are interested in more information about Linn County or would like to go birding, butterflying, or odonating, contact me at durbinjames@mcleodusa.net or call (319) 377-7194.

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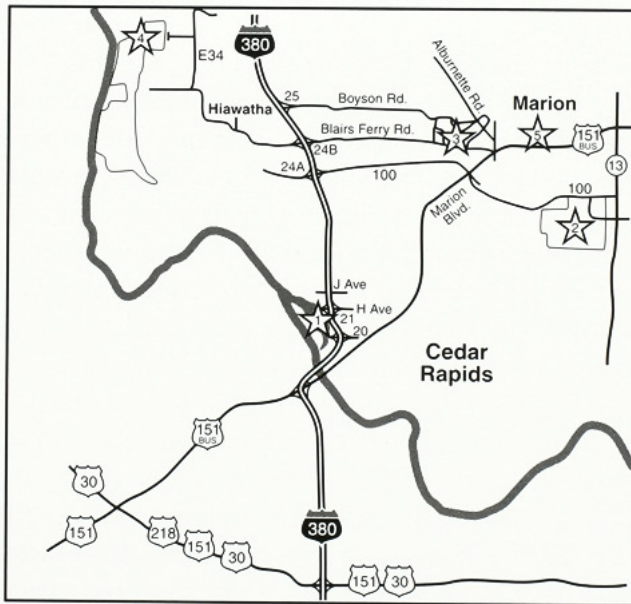


Figure 1. Location of birding areas in Cedar Rapids and Linn County: (1) Cedar Lake; (2) Squaw Creek Regional Park; (3) Willow Donnelly Park; (4) Wickiup Hill Outdoor Learning Area (WHOLA); (5) Durbin Yard.