

Birding the Burlington Area

Charles R. Fuller

Birding in the Burlington area is as diverse, if not more so, than anywhere in Iowa. This southeastern corner of the state features the Mississippi River and associated bottomland, forested hillsides and gullies, superb suburban areas, a unique preserve, intensively

farmed land, and a beautiful state park. This bird tour will include all of Des Moines County, northern Lee County, southern Louisa County, and a small portion of Henry County (Geode State Park).

DES MOINES AND EASTERN HENRY COUNTIES

In **Burlington**, which is the seat of Des Moines County, there are a number of birding areas that I call superb suburban sites. **Crapo Park** is the first (Figure 1, 1). The entire park is good birding at any season, as it is an arboretum with a wide variety of trees, including many conifers. During migration, anywhere in the park is good for migrants, especially warblers. The best location, however, is the sewer walk in **Dankwardt Memorial Park** (Figure 1, 2), which adjoins Crapo Park. San Antonio has its river walk, and Burlington has its sewer walk!

To find this area, exit Highway 34 at Main Street, which you follow south 2.1 miles from the downtown area. Immediately after crossing Cascade Bridge turn right into **Dankwardt Memorial Park** (Figure 1, 2). Proceed 0.5 miles on a winding road, and turn right on a lane marked "Shoquoquon Tennis Club." Park in the tennis club lot and just 20 yards to the left is a path to the sewer, where you can walk both directions along the sewer. In the winter, Carolina Wrens can be heard singing, and this is the most reliable spot for Winter Wren. Look for it along the open creek all the way to the railroad tracks. Other winter birds include Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, Pileated Woodpecker (all year), Brown Creeper, and Golden-crowned Kinglet. In past years Hermit Thrush and Eastern Phoebe have wintered here. In migration, this is an excellent place to see warblers, and particularly the "low" ones like Mourning, Canada, and Ovenbird. The area is also rich in nesting summer residents.

Adjacent to Crapo Park is **Sacred Heart Cemetery**, which in the winter is a good place to find winter finches, Robin, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Long-eared Owl.

The second superb suburban area is **Aspen Grove Cemetery** (Figure 1, 3). To find this area, leave Highway 61 at Sunnyside Avenue, and proceed east for 1.8 miles until you reach a stoplight. Turn right and continue to the Corse Street entrance, where you are in the "old" section. In winter, search the numerous hemlock trees scattered about for Crossbills of both species. Pine Siskins are here, and with persistent searching, usually a Saw-whet Owl can be found.

Northern Goshawk has roosted here several winters. This is also an excellent area during migration.

After birding Aspen Grove Cemetery, it is easy to reach **Starr's Cave Preserve** (Figure 1, 4). Retrace your steps along Corse Street and Sunnyside Avenue, and it is 1.3 miles to Irish Ridge Road, where a brown sign points the way north. Follow Irish Ridge Road to the preserve. Along the entrance road is the best spot for migrants and wintering sparrows. It is the most reliable location for Canada, Mourning, and Connecticut Warblers. During the nesting season, if you have not seen a Yellow-throated Warbler here, continue on to the Nature Center. Along the river trail at the Nature Center, you should also find Northern Parula, Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow-throated Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and possibly Cerulean Warbler. A Western Tanager visited here one recent year. The usual fare of summer residents abounds.

Eurasian Tree Sparrows were first discovered nesting in the state in an area north of Burlington. If you proceed north of town on Highway 99, shortly after you cross Flint Creek, turn east on **Tama Road** (Figure 1, 5). For the next six miles check feeders, brush piles, and human dwelling areas, where there are at least as many Eurasian Tree Sparrows as House Sparrows. Now that you have seen this bird, retrace your route to Highway 99. The **waterworks plant** (Figure 1, 6) just north of the Tama Road turn-off, if the river level is high in the spring, is an excellent spot for shorebirds. A Snowy Plover showed up here one spring.

Casey-Barrow Access (Figure 1, 7) on the Mississippi River can be found by continuing north on Highway 99 to just past mile marker 9, where you turn east and follow the brown conservation signs. Along the way, in the winter, there is a good chance of seeing Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings, which prefer these bottom-land fields. Smith's Longspurs have been present here in some springs. Another spring highlight was the sighting of a Lark Bunting. At the access, the area is best birded from the parking lot by scoping the island and sandbars. Many interesting birds are found here, particularly in the summer and fall. Look for gulls, terns, herons and egrets, and shorebirds. Black-bellied Plover, Avocet, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Marbled Godwit, Piping Plover, both species of night herons, Snowy Plover, Little Blue Heron, Laughing Gull, and Common and Least Terns, have all been seen here.

Heading south from Burlington, you will need to find Summer Street Road. From the junction of Highways 34 and 61, go south 1.5 miles to the last stoplight in town at Mason Road. Follow Mason

Road east to the first stoplight, where you take Summer Street south until you reach Sullivan Slough Road. This road will take you to the **Mississippi River bottom lands** (Figure 1, 8). The most obvious landmark is the Alliant Energy generating plant. Check the settling ponds there, before you drive down the cinder road. This road floods almost yearly, and May and June is the best time to find Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, which nests in the area. If you have not seen Pileated Woodpecker yet, park along the road in the dense timbered area, and eventually one will call or fly by. If the woods are flooded, Prothonotary Warblers should be visible. The boat ramp at the end of the public road is a good spot to view the Mississippi, and in the winter look for Bald Eagles, gulls, and waterfowl.

Another river viewing area is **Lock & Dam No. 18** (Figure 1, 9). Reaching this area involves crossing the Great River Bridge into Illinois and driving approximately five miles east on Highway 34. From there, turn north following the asphalt road to the Lock & Dam. For the list purists, virtually all that you observe on the Mississippi River will be in Iowa, because the river channel goes through the locks just in front of your eyes. In the spring and particularly in the fall until ice-up, ducks, loons, grebes, and gulls are the highlights. Most years, one, if not all, species of scoters will be found. A Red-throated Loon and Western Grebe were there in 1999, and a Brown Pelican was found recently. However, as of this writing, the dam area has been closed to the public, as a result of September 11. It may reopen sometime in 2002.

Geode State Park (Figure 1, 10) is the only state park in the immediate area. The majority of the park is found in **Henry County**. It features a clear lake, with hilly, heavily forested ravines. Most of the forest is deciduous, but there are areas where cedars abound. During winter, both Long-eared Owls and Saw-whet Owls may be found in the cedar groves.

To reach Geode, travel west on Highway 79 from Middletown. The park has many trails, and you can walk around the entire lake if you are so inclined. Follow the main road to the little stone bridge that crosses a creek, which enters the north end of the lake. In spring, you should find Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow-throated Warbler, Northern Parula, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher here. This area is especially good for migrant thrushes and warblers. An added benefit in the spring is the spectacular wildflower show along the stream. Near the ranger's residence at the north edge of the park is Shelter No. 1, where Summer Tanagers are yearly nesters. Even if there are no birds in Geode, the scenery is spectacular.

SOUTHERN LOUISA COUNTY

Horseshoe Bend (Figure 2, 11), in southern Louisa County is part of the **Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge**. I first discovered it after a Black-necked Stilt was reported there. To find this area, from Highway 99 between mileposts 27 and 28, take F Avenue south. At the T, turn west, and shortly thereafter south again. Along the first wooded section in the summer, Prothonotary Warblers are easy to find, and you should see Black-billed Cuckoo and Great-crested Flycatcher. Cross the levee and continue to a parking lot on the east. Along the road, look for Willow Flycatcher and Sedge Wren. From the parking lot, locate the maintenance shed and walk toward it on the refuge road (only when the refuge is open). Past the shed (watch for the Great-horned Owl that roosts there), there is a shallow lake. You can walk around to the middle of the lake on a mowed trail. Depending on the season, many things are possible. Ducks are plentiful in the spring and fall. If the lake is receding, particularly in August and September, numerous shorebirds can be found. There are also herons galore in late summer with a good chance of Little Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, and Yellow-crowned Night Heron. In May 2001, four Glossy Ibis stayed for several days, and a Red Knot showed up on Labor Day, 2000.

NORTHERN LEE COUNTY

Head south on Summer Street Road to Highway 61, and continue on 61 across the Skunk River and into Lee County. At the convenience store, go east on X-50, which, after about six miles, reaches the **Colusa Elevator on the Mississippi River** (Figure 3, 12). In the winter, watch for Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings in the fields. Some winters, Short-eared Owls have found this heavily farmed area to their liking. A Prairie Falcon was present in late 2001. If the river is frozen elsewhere, there should still be some open water along the bank past the elevator. Bald Eagles and diving ducks are found here, and most years Long-tailed Duck has been present. In the summer, watch for White Pelicans, gulls, terns, and shorebirds by scoping the sandbars in the river.

SUMMARY

This southeastern corner of Iowa has a lot to offer in diverse birding habitat. Both Mt. Pleasant and Burlington have ample motel accommodations, and Geode State Park has many camping sites, both

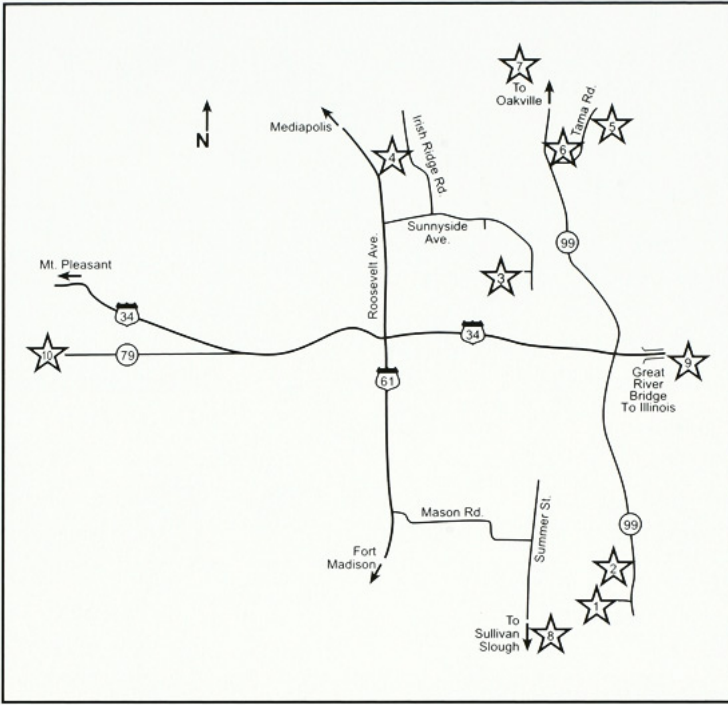


Figure 1. Des Moines and Eastern Henry Counties. (1) Crapo Park, (2) Dankwardt Memorial Park, (3) Aspen Grove Cemetery, (4) Starr's Cave Preserve, (5) Tama Road, (6) Waterworks Plant, (7) Casey-Barrow Access, (8) Mississippi River bottom lands, (9) Illinois Lock and Dam No. 18, (10) Geode State Park.

modern and primitive. In addition, Des Moines County offers several camping areas.

420 S. Garfield Avenue, Burlington, IA 52601-4145 (CFuller989@aol.com)

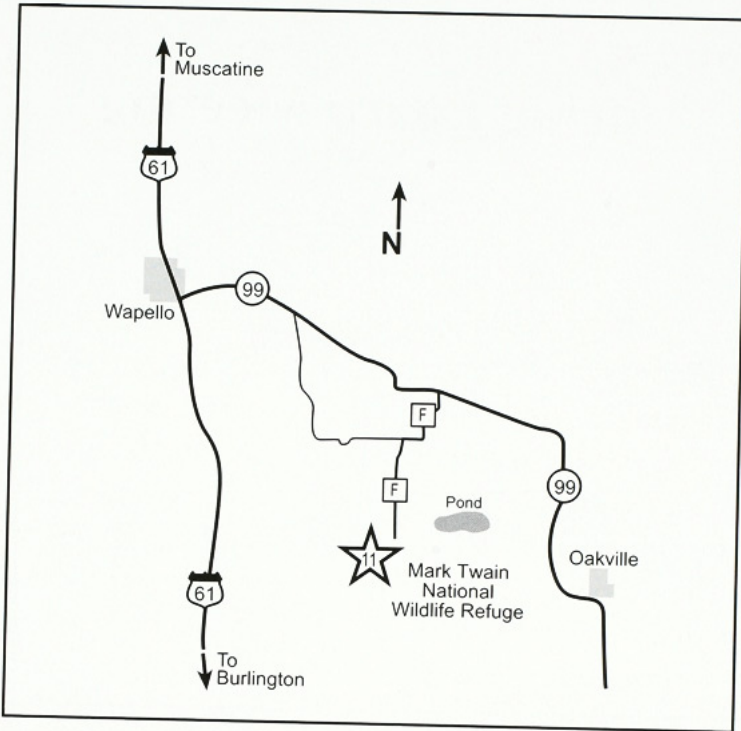


Figure 2. Southern Louisa County. (11) Horseshoe Bend in Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

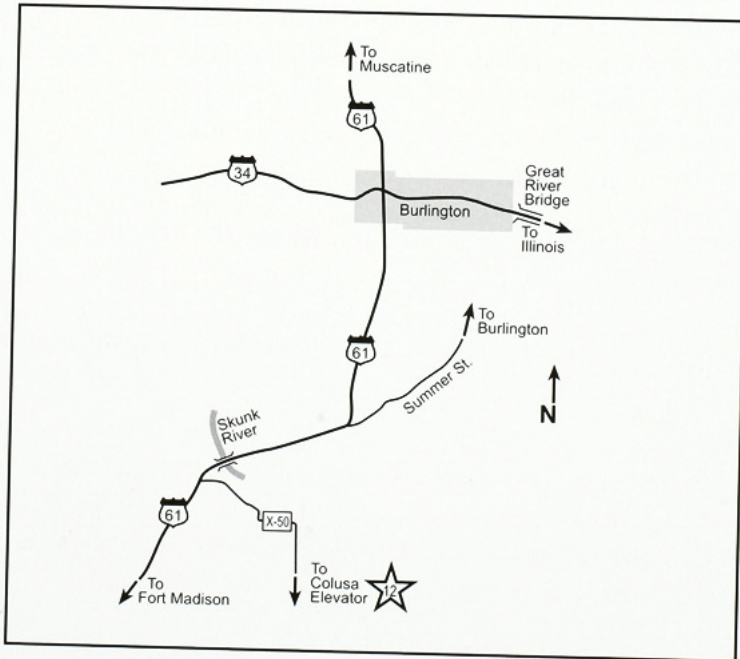


Figure 3. Northern Lee County. (12) Colusa Elevator on Mississippi River.