

Birding Clayton County

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Clayton County, in scenic Northeast Iowa, is known for several reasons: a weekend getaway from the big city, recreational activity and tourism, and the fifth largest county in Iowa. It also should be known for its avian wildlife.

The northeastern part of the county boasts some of the most beautiful scenery in Iowa. Popular destinations in this area include Bloody Run County Park, Marquette/McGregor, Pikes Peak State Park, and Effigy Mounds National Monument.

Bloody Run County Park (Figure 1.1) occupies about 150 acres of woodland and edge habitat and contains several camping sites. Bloody Run Creek flows throughout the park. Turning onto 128th Street from U.S. Highway 18 (about a mile west of Marquette) and following the mile long road to the county road, one cannot help but admire the sheer beauty of Bloody Run Creek as it meanders along the road. Abruptly turning south near a gathering of homes, a large grassy opening emerges on the west side of the road. The edges of this grassy area often hold many species during migration. Continuing, the road crosses the railroad tracks. A second camping area is near the railroad tracks along the creek. In this area and across the creek, Blue-winged Warbler is fairly common in the spring, summer, and early fall. It also is home to several species of sparrows in both spring and fall migration. The road doubles back across the railroad tracks to a third camping area tucked into a small patch of young timber. This area is often the best location to search for birds in the park. I have had 23 warblers in this area. Pileated Woodpecker and Louisiana Waterthrush also are found here.

Another notable birding stop is located at the intersection of U.S. Highway 18 and County Road B45 in **Marquette** (Figure 1.2). The ponds have been home to Willow and Least flycatchers and Marsh Wren during the summer season, and are always a worthwhile destination on a Clayton County Big Day.

The South Unit of **Effigy Mounds National Monument** (Figure 1.3) is in extreme northeastern Clayton County. The access road is not accessible by public vehicle and it is best to ask at the headquarters before hiking this area of the monument. The primary birding area is located on top of the bluff. Acadian Flycatcher, Cerulean Warbler, and Eastern Towhee are common here during the summer months. Ruffed Grouse has been heard in this section.

A stop at **Pikes Peak State Park** (Figure 1.4, map available at park), south of McGregor, is a necessity when considering a birding trip in Clayton County. My best birding in the park has always been near the main overlook at the south entrance to the park. Just north of the main overlook is a bear mound. At least one Yellow-throated Warbler, a real gem this far north, has been seen here in the spring and early summer months since 2004. A walk to the Crow's Nest and down to Bridal Veil Falls is always productive as well, as is a walk along the edge at the parking lot and to the Bear Mound north of the overlook. My Pikes Peak list is nearly 150 species. Highlights have included all seven regular woodpeckers, the five regular *Empidonax* flycatchers, Carolina and Winter wrens, both Kinglets, Gray-cheeked, Swainson's, Hermit, and Wood thrushes, 27 warblers, including Pine, and several sparrows. During the summer months, there are usually four or five hummingbird

feeders hung from a pine tree at the shelter at the north edge of the parking lot. I have estimated up to 55 hummingbirds here in the fall, but have not found anything unusual.

The **Sny Magill Area** (Figure 1.5), a vast area of private and public lands, is usually a good stop for someone birding Clayton County. From Pikes Peak State Park, turn north toward McGregor, go approximately one-fourth mile, turn west onto King Road and follow for approximately two miles. The road curves sharply to the west and downhill. After the first descent, the road becomes level for a short distance. Here, both species of cuckoos, Pileated Woodpecker, Wood Thrush, and Blue-winged Warbler can be heard. Continuing down the road and around another sharp corner, the road straightens, and excellent edge habitat becomes visible on both sides of the road. I have counted over a dozen Blue-winged Warblers along this half-mile stretch of road during late May and early June. A summer Broad-winged Hawk has been seen occasionally in this area. Continuing just past the intersection with Keystone Road, cross a bridge, and a parking area is available just to the east. A stagnant pond is visible across the road. Pied-billed Grebe and Green Heron have nested at this pond for at least a couple of years. Walking along Sny Magill Creek to the east, one can find Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Least Flycatcher, Cerulean Warbler, and Louisiana Waterthrush. Although not the best location for warblers in the county, I have found no less than 16 species in this area.

Driving back to Keystone Road, turn to the east and travel along Sny Magill Creek for about four miles, to the intersection with County Road X56. Turn to the south and enjoy looks at more agricultural species, such as Gray Partridge, American Kestrel, and both species of meadowlarks.

Continue on County X56 for about five miles, watch for **Mississippi Road** (Figure 1.6) and turn to the east. As the name suggests, the road follows the Mississippi River. However, one must be cautious, as this gravel road is home to some of the most dangerous corners in the county. You will notice a gathering of homes and trailers, commonly referred to as Willy's Resort, or Frenchtown. The boat ramp can reward birders with views of a few waterfowl species and a few migrants. Continuing south you will see **Frenchtown Park** (Figure 1.7), a county park, on the east side of the road. The entrance from the north can be a bit awkward to get into. You must take the turn wide (it is a 300-degree turn), cross the tracks (slowly, they are a bit rough), and it may wash out when it rains. Driving into the park and to the boat ramp can be rewarding. By far, this is the best area for waterfowl in the county. Puddle ducks are abundant in migration and diving ducks are a bit more abundant just to the south. Louisiana Waterthrush is common in the summer, as are warblers, sparrows, and other migrants in migration. I have found nearly 100 species in and around the park, including 20 species of warblers. About one-fourth mile south of the Frenchtown Park entrance is a spectacular view of the Mississippi River and its backwaters. Though I have not viewed Snow and Ross's goose, Mute Swan, or any of the sea ducks from this location, all are rare possibilities. Hiking the railroad tracks along this stretch will kick up sparrows in the fall. Canoeing this area could turn up several waders or possibly a Yellow-headed Blackbird (a species that to my knowledge has not occurred in Clayton County).

Just a mile or two to the south, along the Great River Road, is the access road to Abel and Esmann Island known as **Island Road** (Figure 1.8). This half-mile stretch of road is home to riparian habitat on the north side and more Mississippi River backwater to the south. Prothonotary Warbler is plentiful during June, with up to a dozen singing males. This has been the only reliable area for Sora in the county as well. Small numbers of water-

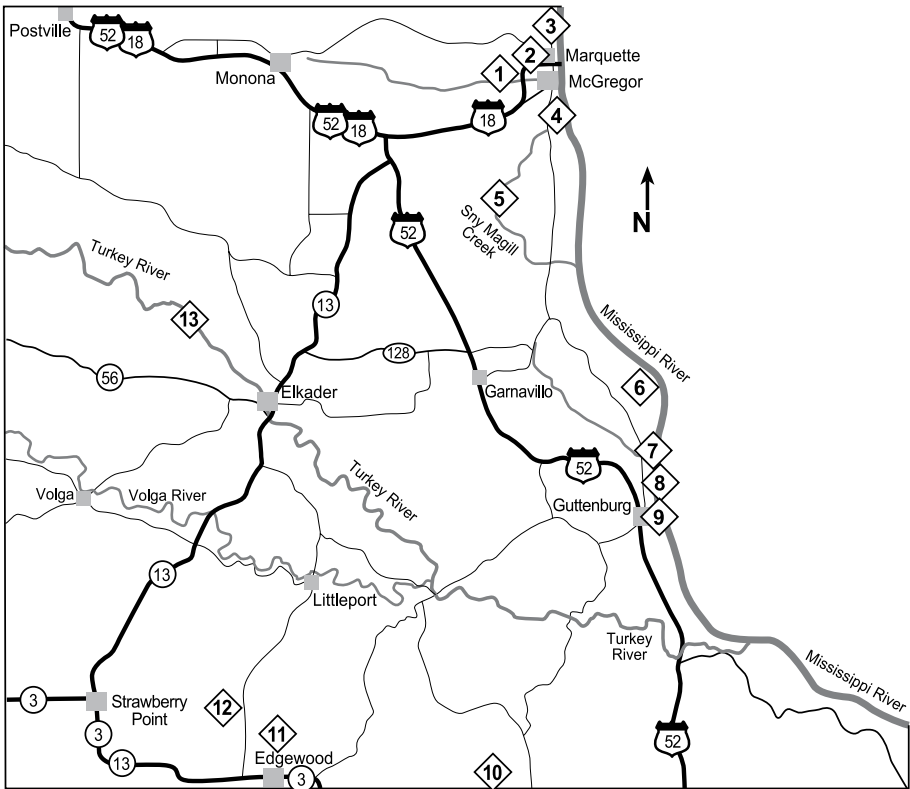


Figure 1. Birding areas in Clayton County: (1) Bloody Run County Park, (2) Marquette, (3) Effigy Mounds National Monument, South Unit, (4) Pikes Peak State Park, (5) Sny Magill Area, (6) Mississippi Road, (7) Frenchtown Park, (8) Island Road, (9) Guttenberg, (10) Camp Klaus, (11) Bixby State Preserve, (12) Mossy Glen State Preserve, (13) Big Spring Road.

fowl are on the south side during migration and this side of the road is one of two reliable areas in the county for shorebirds, with Willet being my best find in this area. Though shorebirds are not usually abundant in this area, it is worth a check if you are in the area.

Guttenberg (Figure 1.9) is a beautiful riverside town with kind people and plenty of waterfront to search for birds. A Western Grebe made a weekend stopover on the north side of town in November 2005. Horned Grebe and Bonaparte's Gull, as well as several waterfowl species, use the river as an efficient migration corridor. Least Flycatcher has been found during the summer on a human-made island just south of the marina. Cape May Warbler has been found in backyards. The dike at Lock and Dam 10 is a spectacular walk, if granted permission. Great shorebird habitat exists along the south side of the dike during migration. A Bohemian Waxwing even made an appearance on the southwest side of town in 2003. A new nature trail can be found heading south from the boat ramp located below the dam, and is worth a walk if you have the time.

Several other areas are certainly noteworthy throughout the county and it is very difficult to bird all of these in one day. If you have the time, spend a couple of days in the county, and bird these areas as well.

Camp Klaus (Figure 1.10) is a Boy Scout camp located about one mile north of the Clayton/Delaware County lines. From County Road X3C, just one mile north of Colesburg, turn west onto Horseshoe Road. This road travels a straight, albeit hilly, line for about two miles before curving to the northwest. After another three-fourths mile or so, you will see the entrance to Camp Klaus. I first visited this area on a required event my sophomore year in high school and was very impressed. Migrants were numerous, and I remember my life Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Multiple trips back to the Camp have yielded a checklist of nearly 100 species, including Green Heron, Red-shouldered Hawk, both cuckoos, Pileated Woodpecker, four out of five *Empidonax* flycatchers (no Alder), Carolina Wren, Wood Thrush, a dozen species of warblers, and a few species of sparrows. No visit to Camp Klaus is complete without viewing the spring-fed waterfall at the south end of the camp.

Located two miles north of Edgewood, off Fortune Ave., is **Bixby State Preserve** (formerly a state park) (Figure 1.11), one of the most primitive, yet bird-friendly, areas in the county. I have recorded 80 species here, including Red-shouldered Hawk, both cuckoos, Pileated Woodpecker, three *Empidonax* flycatchers, Bell's Vireo, Carolina Wren, Veery and Wood thrushes, 17 warbler species, and a few sparrows. A walk along the creek to the east can be rewarding; I found nesting Bell's Vireos here in summer 2005.

Proceeding north out of Bixby State Preserve, turn west onto Faucet Road and continue to the intersection of County Road X21. Turn north for approximately one-fourth mile and turn west onto 370th Street. Continue west for a mile and turn north onto Eagle Ave. After about a mile, the road condition drops to a "B-level" road when it runs through a farm. It is recommended to park here and walk for a few minutes to **Mossy Glen State Preserve** (Figure 1.12). It is not advisable to drive on this B-level section, especially if precipitation has occurred in the past few days. Not a hotspot, but this location holds decent numbers of Acadian Flycatchers and woodland/edge species.

One of my favorite areas to bird in Clayton County is the **Big Spring Road** (Figure 1.13) located about 10 or 11 miles northwest of Elkader. This area is heavily birded during the Northwest Clayton County Christmas Bird Count. From the Trout Hatchery itself, drive along Big Spring Road for three to four miles to the intersection with Cable Ave. Most of this road is B-level and can be difficult to navigate during certain seasons, primarily during the spring thaw. (I speak from experience!) The Turkey River flows within 30 feet of the road on one side of the road and a cedar bluff stretches at least two miles along the other side. The western mile of the road is bordered by a large crop field on the north side. This road would be spectacular during migration. A winter visit to Clayton County is not complete without a drive along this road. The Christmas Bird Count has produced Golden Eagle, a few owls, Belted Kingfisher, Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Shrike, Carolina and Winter wrens, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a few sparrows.

This basically summarizes the birding hotspots of Clayton County. Driving around the back roads of the county, however, may turn up several good finds. Highway 52 between Highway 13 and Guttenberg can be good for Gray Partridge during July and August. Bixby Avenue, located one-half mile west of Volga along county road C2W, and specifically 1 mile south of C2W, can be superb for grassland species including Sage Wren, Bobolink, and

Western Meadowlark. Grassland sparrows could easily be found and/or overlooked in any area of the county. I have noted excellent habitat for Henslow's and Grasshopper sparrows sporadically throughout the southwestern half of Clayton County. A canoe trip on the Turkey River between Elkader and Millville can be a rewarding and a relaxing venture. When the Turkey River floods during the spring and/or summer months, it can create wonderful shorebird habitat in the agricultural fields around Millville. Without a doubt, there are many areas yet to be explored and/or discovered in Clayton County, and future birding expeditions will undoubtedly increase the knowledge of birdlife in this scenic Northeast Iowa county.

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