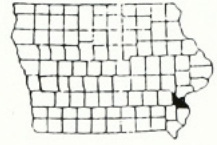


# BIRDING CONE MARSH

CAROL THOMPSON

Cone Marsh State Wildlife Management Area is located in northwestern Louisa County on a lowland between the Iowa and Cedar rivers. This lowland area, called the Lake Calvin Basin, was thought to be the lakebed of a glacial lake formed when Illinoian (300,000 years before present) ice advanced into eastern Iowa and blocked these southeast-flowing rivers. More recent studies have shown that the landscape is actually composed of younger Wisconsinan and Holocene (less than 30,000 years before present) deposits. Alluvial features such as broad floodplains, terraces, and dunes are the dominant landforms, creating large areas of flat terrain. The marsh, located in the Iowa River floodplain, was formed from a series of abandoned meander loops (oxbow lakes).



The 701-acre wildlife area was acquired by the state in 1960 with smaller purchases in 1968 and 1969. Much of the actual marshland is owned by two private hunting clubs. The boundary of the state land is indicated on Figure 1. There are no facilities at the marsh. Part of the area is diked to provide artificial water control. The marsh can be especially productive for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds and, in some years, marsh birds (rails, herons, etc). Rarities in recent years include Cinnamon Teal, White-faced Ibis, Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, Black, Yellow, and King rails, and Common Moorhen. The habitat fluctuates with changing water level and ranges from numerous pools of open water to vegetation-covered mudflats. The pools at the north end are the deepest and tend to be permanent. The pools at the south end fluctuate more and can provide excellent mudflats in late summer. Other habitats include old fields with a lot of brush, dense willow stands, and a small area of mature timber (mostly burr oak). Atlasing efforts at the marsh and surrounding area yielded 76 species, 70 percent of which are probable or confirmed nesters.

Cone Marsh is an excellent place for group or individual outings and can be birded either by foot or by car. To reach the marsh, drive south from Lone Tree on X-14 (this road becomes G-28 at the Louisa County line) for approximately 6 miles. At this point the paved road turns east, and there is a gravel road to the south. This is the northwest corner of the map in Figure 1. If you are birding in the early morning, it is usually best to continue east on the paved road for another 1.25 miles and then turn south (left) on a gravel road. This allows a tour of the marsh in a clockwise direction with the sun behind you for the first few stops. Drive south along the road approximately 0.75 miles until you can overlook the marsh (#1 on Figure 1). All of this side of the marsh is private property. The old railroad car at the nearby farm has given this spot the colloquial name "caboose." Scoping the marsh from here can be very productive. Many ducks, geese (including sporadic large flocks of Snows and occasional Greater White-fronted), shorebirds, and wading birds may be seen. There is a little drainageway just off the road leading down to the marsh where American Pipits and Common Snipe have been seen.

Continue south to the intersection and turn west. During migration both Lapland and Smith's longspurs are sometimes found in the cultivated fields to the south (#2). Check the other fields in the general area as well. NOTE: these fields are private property, but area farmers have been very cooperative and have allowed hiking, especially in early spring. After a snowstorm, the birds can often be found along gravel roads in the general area.

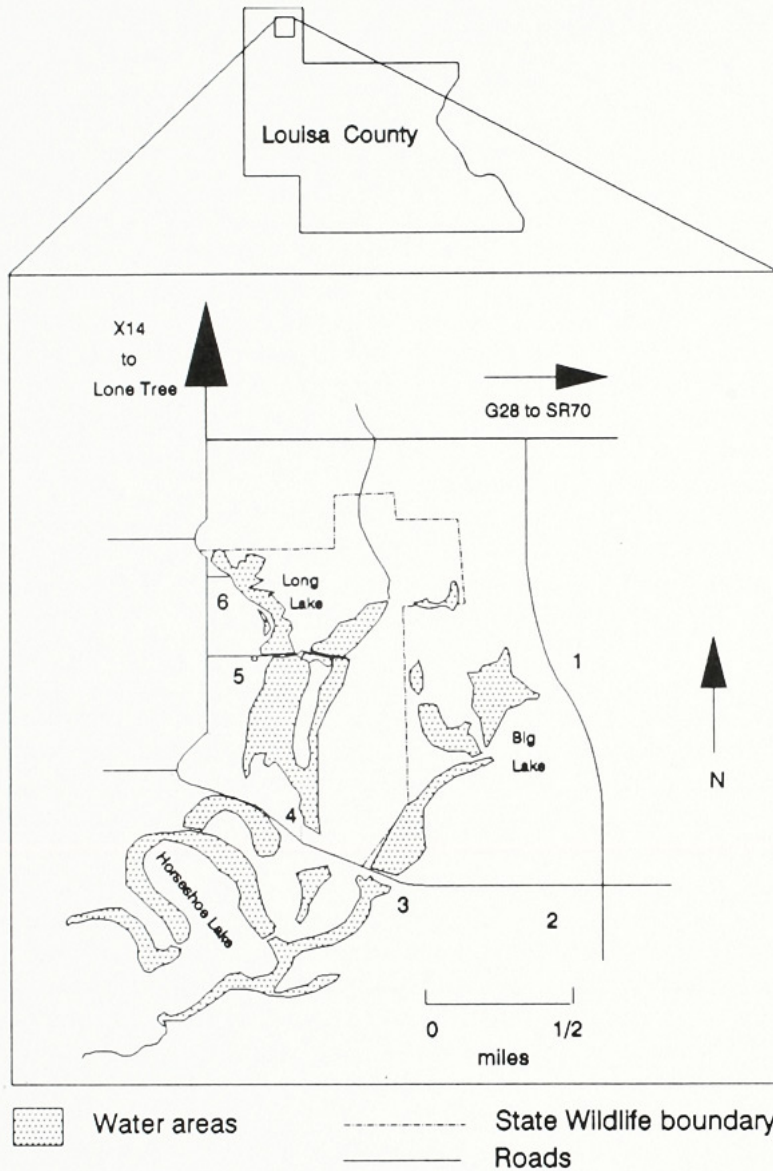


Figure 1. Cone Marsh Wildlife Management Area

Proceed west and you will drive down a slope onto the floodplain. Park along the road (#3) and scan for waterfowl and shorebirds. This is usually a good area for large flocks of Common Snipe (especially to the south), and can yield many other species, including Rusty Blackbirds. However, if a lot of vegetation is present, the birding can be extremely frustrating.

Continue west about 0.3 mile to a small parking lot on the north side of the road (#4) where there is a small dike over the southern part of Long Lake. A path parallels the east side of the lake and connects with the main dike to the north (#5). The path allows some views of the marsh (if the water level is not too high and you can get through the bushes) and is often good for field/shrub birds. There is a low wet area just to the southeast of the parking lot where rails and American Woodcock

occasionally can be found. On the south side of the road at #4 is another oxbow which can be viewed from various points along the road. This is also a very good area to view waterfowl. This area is private property, so do not trespass.

Proceed west on the gravel road to a T-intersection and turn north. Approximately 0.5 mile to the north there is a gravel road to the east which leads to the main dike. Park at the parking lot on the top of the hill. During spring and fall the fields near the parking lot can be good for Fox, Lincoln's, Le Conte's, and Lark sparrows, Brewer's and Rusty blackbirds, an occasional American Woodcock, and even the rare Yellow Rail. A walk along the dike is usually worth the time, especially in spring and early summer (by late summer the weeds are taller than most people). In any season watch out for holes of burrowing mammals in the dike. Waterfowl are usually abundant, Canada Geese nest at the north end of Long Lake, Black-crowned Night Herons can sometimes be seen, both bitterns as well as Sora, Virginia, and King rails can be seen or heard, and other marsh birds such as Sedge Wren, Marsh Wren, Swamp Sparrow, and Common Yellowthroat may be common. There have been several Black Rail sightings in this area as well. Yellow-headed Blackbirds returned to nest in the marsh in 1989. The other (east) side of the dike opens into some fields where Bell's Vireo and Willow Flycatchers have nested. Sharp-tailed and Le Conte's sparrows can sometimes be flushed from the grass in this area during spring and fall. The trees along the edge can be good for vireos and warblers during migration.

From the parking lot return to the north-south gravel road and turn north (right). Go about 0.25 mile and turn onto a small gravel road (#6) that leads to a boat launch and parking area. The woods around the area are good during migration for woodpeckers, passerines (including sightings of Worm-eating and Yellow-throated warblers), and occasionally owls (both Barred and Great Horned have nested here). The area along the marsh to the north of the parking lot often produces Soras, but is very wet and difficult to walk. A trail leads to the south from the parking area. Just inside the woods there is a seep area where Winter Wrens are often found in migration. The trail leads to a dike along the edge of a small pool. Wood Ducks are often seen here, and owls sometimes perch on the trees. The trail actually leads to the main dike (#5), but is becoming impassable. The woods west of the pool are fairly open and easy to walk. Displaying woodcock are often seen on the edge of the woods on the west side.

Just north of #6 is a gravel road intersecting from the west. A drive west on this road can be a very productive side trip, with possibilities for ducks, shorebirds, shrikes, bluebirds, and sparrows. Returning to the main loop around Cone Marsh, just north of the T-intersection, there is a nice overlook where a magnificent patch of marsh marigolds blooms in early spring. This area can be good for early waterbirds and usually for Marsh Wren.

As with any marsh area subject to the vagaries of weather patterns, the birding at Cone Marsh can be very good or very poor. Some of the species mentioned as occurring at the stops are rare or uncommon and should not be expected. During extended dry periods such as occurred in 1988-89 the marsh may have little or no water. The area is a state wildlife area and hunting is permitted so fall birding is often not good. A trip to Cone Marsh can be an enjoyable birding experience.

Thanks are due to the members of the Iowa City Bird Club who provided many welcome comments and additions to this article including Bud Gode, Rick Hollis, and Cal and Bernie Knight.

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