

# Birding Decatur County

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Beautiful Decatur County is located in the middle of the southern edge of Iowa and has a wide variety of habitat for birds. There are rolling hills of grassland and woodlands as well as many ponds and lakes. Even in the brush alongside the roads, one can find many different species of birds.

A large percentage of Decatur Country is grassland or pasture and this provides nesting habitat for a number of species that are declining in other parts of Iowa. A leisurely drive in the county can produce sightings such as Bobolink, Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Northern Bobwhite, Sedge Wren, Northern Mockingbird, and Dickcissel.

There are several large tracts of woodland that provide nesting habitat for woodland species as well as stopover spots for migrating species. Some of these are privately owned, but many are parks or wildlife management areas. Some of the nesting species highlights are Summer and Scarlet Tanager, Kentucky Warbler, Broad-winged Hawk, Black-billed Cuckoo, Whip-poor-will, Pileated Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, and Wood Thrush.

In the brush along the roadsides and in brushy pastures one can find Bell's Vireo, Loggerhead Shrike, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

The easiest places to start looking for birds in Decatur County are in the parks.

**Nine Eagles State Park** (Figures 1.1 and 2) is listed as an Important Bird Area (IBA). This 1,100 acre park has a small lake and rugged woodlands. There are 15 miles of trails that provide easy access from the roads. We usually park near the swimming area and walk the trails around the lake. The north and east sides of the lake are the best places to find nesting Wood Thrushes and Kentucky Warblers. Black-billed Cuckoos have also been seen here.

Another place to park is a quarter mile west of the main entrance. This picnic area near the lake has provided many species, such as Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Northern Parula, Warbling Vireo, Eastern Phoebe, Great Crested Flycatcher, and Pileated Woodpecker. Some years we have found Worm-eating Warbler on the east side of the dam along the trails.

Louisiana Waterthrush can be found along the creeks flowing into the lake in the spring. The upland woods of the park attract many species of warblers during migration. Walking the many trails will provide a workout as some of them are quite steep, but many birds also can be seen from a vehicle along the roadsides.

**Dekalb** (Figure 1.2) and **Sand Creek** (Figure 1.3) **Wildlife Management Areas** (located in the northwest corner of the county) are more rugged and harder to access, but are also good places to find birds. The wildlife management practices provide good winter cover and food sources. The extensive woodland habitat of Sand Creek should provide a lot of different woodland nesting species during the breeding season. Both of these areas provide lowland, creek-bottom woodlands that attract migrating passerines. While some

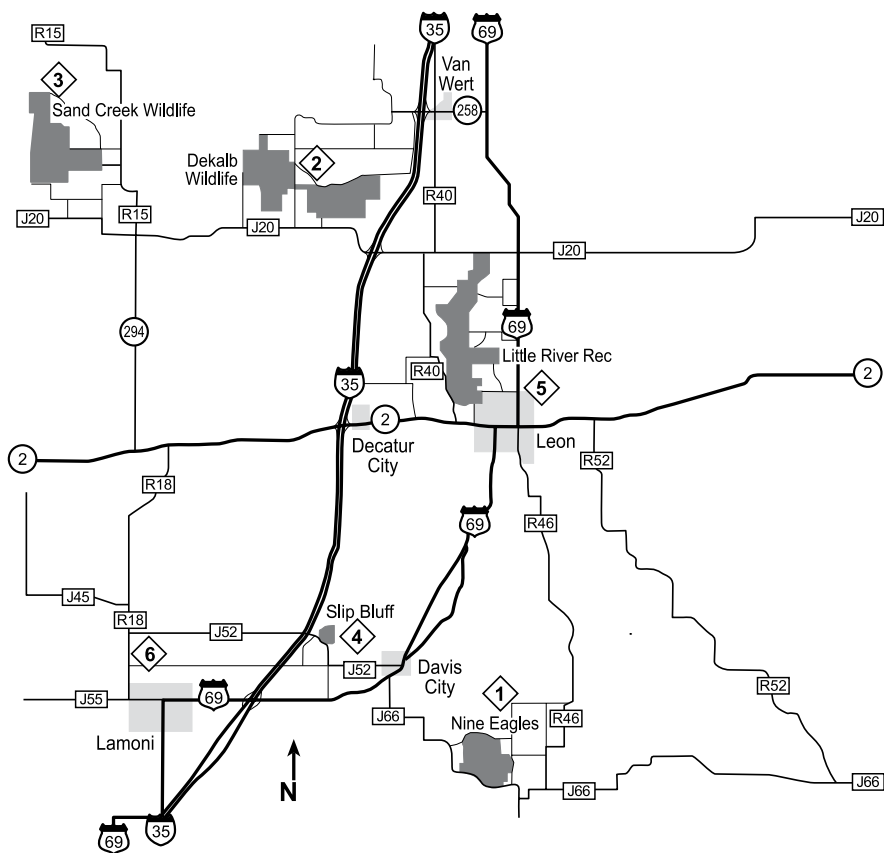


Figure 1. Birding areas in Decatur County: (1) Nine Eagles State Park, (2) Dekalb Wildlife Management Area, (3) Sand Creek Wildlife Management Area, (4) Slip Bluff, (5) Little River Recreation Area, (6) Home Pond and Lake LaShane.

areas of Dekalb can be viewed from your vehicle, Sand Creek requires mostly walking. There are some trails through the woods that can be walked, but they can be steep and rugged in places. Bell's Vireo and Yellow-breasted Chat have been found just inside the gate at Sand Creek.

Another park to visit is **Slip Bluff** (Figure 1.4). This is a county park and is not very well known. This park also has a small lake and is located in the middle of the county along the Thompson fork of the Grand River. There are a few trails and the woods are a great place to bird during migration. A drive through the campgrounds among the mature oaks can reveal a good assortment of warblers during migration.

**Little River Recreation Area** (Figure 1.5) (just west of Leon) has the largest lake in the county and attracts large numbers of migrating waterfowl. The best place to view the lake is from the west side of the dam on Lakeview Road. This is a high spot and, with a

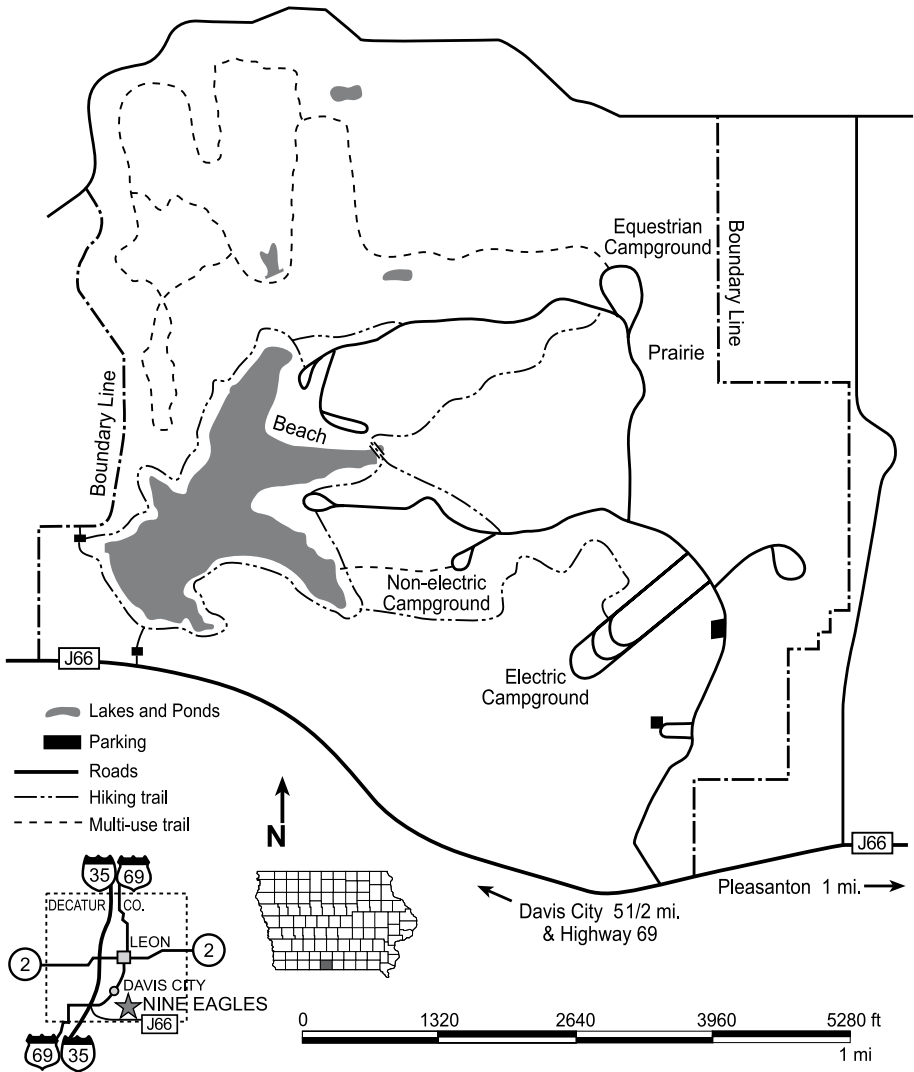


Figure 2. Nine Eagles State Park

good scope, you can see most of the lake. Another place to view the lake is near the campground on 190th Street on the east side of the lake.

A third place to view the lake is at the north end on 170th Street. This spot is harder to get to because you have to go around the lake, but it is worth the trip most of the time. Here you may see birds that are not seen on the other parts of the lake. During migration, thousands of swallows of every type gather here. It is also a good place to find rails and herons. During the summer, Yellow-breasted Chat, Bell's Vireo, Orchard Oriole, and Field

Sparrow can be heard calling along the roads in this area as well. The grasslands along the lake have many sparrows during migration.

There are numerous places along the shoreline that have cedar trees and brush, which provide good habitat in the winter for owls and other winter birds. The drawback about these places is that there are no trails; one has to blaze their own way through the tangles.

There is one good trail that is paved and very easy to walk, which has a lot of different habitat types. This is located across from the water treatment plant on the east side of the lake on Little River Lake Road. There are numerous evergreens and berry bushes along this trail that provide winter shelter and food for birds. This is the best place to find American Robins in the winter.

Our two favorite places to bird in Decatur County are **Home Pond** and **Lake LaShane** (Figure 1.6), both owned by the city of Lamoni. During waterfowl migration, we find that the smaller ponds and lakes melt their ice first, attracting more birds. We have a route that we travel that takes in a lot of these small lakes and ponds. We usually start at Home Pond. This is located at the water treatment plant on the west side of Lamoni. Take Mulberry Street north off of Main Street. It ends at Home Pond. Nearly the whole pond can be viewed from your vehicle, or it can be walked around. We have found a wide variety of waterfowl here, including Common Loon and all three mergansers. In dry years, Home Pond can be excellent for shorebirds. LeConte's Sparrows have been found on the northeast side of the pond as well, but this will involve a little bit of walking.

Next, we move on to Lake LaShane (Figure 1.6), located just west of Elk Chapel Road on 280th Street. The north end is the easiest to access. Here, 280th Street cuts across dividing the lake. Most of the lake can be seen from this road. The north side is shallow and marshy and attracts large numbers of puddle ducks while the south side is deeper and attracts the diving ducks. On a dry year, this north side can be all mud flats and provides a good stopover for shorebirds.

There is a small parking area on the north side of the road, and a trail on the south side, that goes through some pine trees and follows along the lakeside. The other end of the lake can be viewed along this trail. We do not go on this trail during duck hunting season because there are several blinds along this trail that are usually in use. We find Long-eared Owls and Red-breasted Nuthatches in the pine trees every year. This trail is also a very good place to find migrating warblers, thrushes, and sparrows. There was even a Barn Owl found where this trail and the road meet. Walking from the parking area north along the shoreline is a very productive spot for sparrows, warblers, and migrating flycatchers.

From Lake LaShane, we go back towards Lamoni and check out some small farm ponds. These must be viewed from the road as they are private property. The first we call Goldeneye Pond, because this is where we have seen both Common and Barrow's Goldeneyes; then we check what we have named Canvasback Pond (for obvious reasons also). These ponds usually get good results when the bigger lakes fail us.

A drive through the Decatur County countryside almost anywhere, in any season, will provide glimpses of a wide variety of species. Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, Rough-legged Hawk, and American Kestrel are seen regularly in the winter along the roads, especially in the western part of the county.

With its wide variety of habitat, Decatur County provides many birding opportunities.

Many of these do not require a lot of walking, but there are also plenty of places to satisfy those birders who like to trek through the bush.

If you are in the area, or want to make a special trip, birding Decatur County on Iowa's southern edge will seldom disappoint you.

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