

# Birding Areas of Des Moines

Robert I. Cecil

As Iowa's largest city, Des Moines is frequently visited for business, events, and shopping. A metropolitan area with over 350,000 people, it still has excellent birding opportunities, with some, such as Waterworks Park, just minutes from downtown (Figure 1). Even from the downtown area, birders may see Bald Eagles soaring in winter over the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers, or watch Peregrine Falcons that have been successfully introduced into the urban landscape. If your visit is to the state capital, check the grounds in summer for the Western Kingbirds that have nested there in recent years.



*R. I. Cecil*

## WATERWORKS PARK/GRAYS LAKE/BROWN'S WOODS/DENMAN WOODS/WALNUT WOODS STATE PARK COMPLEX

The city of Des Moines is fortunate to have nearly 6 miles of green space that follows the meandering Raccoon River through the south central part of the city. While the areas are contiguous, they offer a variety of birding opportunities. Some of the areas are low and subject to flooding, especially Waterworks Park, Grays Lake, and Denman Woods.

**Waterworks Park** Following the Raccoon River for about three miles is Des Moines Waterworks Park, consisting of the Arie den Boer Aboretum, manicured grassy areas with scattered trees, riparian woodlands, ponds, and oxbow lakes. The area is most easily accessed from Fleur Avenue, about 2 1/2 miles north of the Des Moines Airport and just southwest of the downtown area. From downtown, follow Grand Avenue west until it angles south and crosses the Raccoon River bridge, becoming Fleur. From I-235, take the Airport/Martin Luther King exit and follow the signs to the airport along a circuitous and confusing route to Fleur (this route is scheduled for

reconfiguration in the future). Entering the area across from the Gray's Lake entrance takes you through the arboretum, which is noted for the spring bloom of a large grove of flowering crab trees.

At 1.3 miles from the entrance off Fleur Drive is the iron pedestrian bridge across the Raccoon River, a favorite birding spot. Crossing the bridge provides access to both riparian woods and thickets to the left, or to a grassy area with scattered large trees straight ahead. During spring migration, warblers can be abundant here, and it also is good for woodpeckers, thrushes, and flycatchers. With some luck, you may find one of the Pileated Woodpeckers that nest in the area. Nesting species include Wood Duck, American Redstart, Belted Kingfisher, Blue Gray Gnatcatcher, and others. Near the iron bridge and on into the park are a number of sycamore trees. Yellow-throated Warblers can be found singing high in their treetops in late April, but nesting has not been confirmed.

At mile 1.7, the road forks. To the right, it continues along the Raccoon River. Here, additional small lakes can be checked for waterfowl and the woodlands can produce passerines.

At mile 2.7, another large loop begins by turning right at a parking area and small bridge. Immediately to the left there is a small marsh. This 1.5 mile loop traverses mature riparian forest and farther, large open areas containing soccer fields. After completing the loop, a right turn will return you to the fork at mile 1.7. Mississippi Kites are now scarce summer residents of Des Moines. They have been seen soaring over Water Works Park, although your chances of seeing one are iffy, at best.

**Gray's Lake** Directly across Fleur Avenue from Waterworks Park is Gray's Lake. This large lake is worth checking for gulls and waterfowl in spring, fall, and winter, and the adjacent strip of woods along the Raccoon River may harbor passerines. Gray's Lake is scheduled for major development as a recreation area, so the impact on birding remains to be seen.

**Denman Woods** Another part of this complex is Denman Woods, accessed by turning south off Grand Avenue at 31st Street. After about 0.5 miles, the road crosses the railroad tracks and angles left, becoming Edwards Avenue and then right, becoming SW 31st Street. It travels thorough a riparian woodland which, in wet years, features Prothonotary Warblers. About halfway down this dead end road is a

grassy trail blocked by a chained gate, the entrance to "Lost Planet." A moniker given by locals to this rather surreal spot, Lost Planet is a lime dump once used by the Des Moines Waterworks. While it is mostly dry and barren, during rainy periods it can offer shorebirds and ducks, and at the far corner is an area that usually has water. A trail circles Lost Planet and can be good for passerines, diurnal raptors, and owls. Continuing on down SW 31st is a cul de sac. Walking to the right takes you past riparian woodland, woodland edge, and brushy areas. A second part of the Lost Planet area is much more interesting in terms of its potential for shorebirds, herons, and rails. Instead of turning right on 31st St., continue straight for 0.1 mile to where the road bends to the left, becoming SW 29th. Park here, cross through a metal gate, and visit the large marshy area just up the hill.

A second access to Denman Woods is via Greenwood Park/Ashworth Park, the location of the Science Center of Iowa, south on 45th Street from Grand Avenue. The parks, consisting of one of the city's remaining Burr Oak savannahs, are worth checking. The road passes a small, marshy pond and a swimming pool before ending at a large parking lot. Continuing on from the parking lot is the Bill Riley Trail. In spring and summer, the deep woods here may produce Scarlet Tanager, Yellow-throated Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, thrushes, and other woodland species. Pileated Woodpecker has nested behind the Science Center. The trail crosses two railroad tracks and then angles east along the Raccoon River.

**Walnut Woods State Park** Walnut Woods State Park is a 300-acre facility in the southwest corner of the Des Moines metro area. This open walnut woodland along the Raccoon River is most conveniently accessed by taking I-35 south to Exit 68 (also Highway 5 or the airport exit), going 0.5 miles east, then left 1.3 miles to the park entrance. This park is not heavily frequented by birders, but is good for spring migrants (over 20 species of warblers in one day), and in summer for woodland species such as Eastern Wood Pewee, Carolina Wren, and Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireo.

**Brown's Woods Forest Preserve** An island of deep forest and dense understory, Brown's Woods is one of the premier locations in south central Iowa to look for several uncommon to rare species, including Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Hooded Warbler, Kentucky

Warbler, Ovenbird, Summer Tanager, and Scarlet Tanager. Well maintained paths provide easy access to this 484-acre preserve. To get to this area, continue on from the first entrance to Walnut Woods State Park (directions above) 1.5 miles to 11th Street. Go left on 11th, which then curves to the right, becoming Brown's Woods Drive. Continue 0.7 miles to the preserve entrance. Another access is from I-235. Take the SW 63rd Street/ Highway 28 Exit south 3.5 miles, turn right on Brown's Wood's Drive, and continue 0.2 miles to the entrance.

**Terra Lake** An unlikely birding hot spot is the diminutive Terra Lake in the suburban community of Johnston just north of Des Moines. Over the past three winter seasons, it has produced Greater White-fronted Goose, Ross's Goose, Greater Scaup, and Oldsquaw, as well as virtually all of Iowa's regular waterfowl species. Barrow's Goldeneye, Black Scoter, Little Blue Heron, and Sabine's Gull have also visited this location. Its resident Canada Geese and Mallards usually keep some water open throughout the winter, making it a refuge for wandering birds. The easiest access is from I-35/80. Take Exit 131, Merle Hay Road. Go north on Merle Hay 0.6 miles to Pioneer Parkway and after another 0.4 miles, turn left on Crown Point Road. A second access point is just past Crown Point Road at the Iowa Public Television offices.

**Dale Maffitt Reservoir** Constructed over 50 years ago as a water source for the City of Des Moines, Dale Maffitt Reservoir and 1,358 acre park offer a spacious and serene setting to check several birding habitats. To visit, take Exit 68 (as for Brown's Woods/Walnut Woods above), but go right (west). After 0.3 miles, go right at the "T" intersection and continue on a short distance to the lake. The first entrance leads to a large open woodland and Burr Oak savannah, which is good for migrant warblers, woodpeckers, and Eastern Bluebirds. Adjacent fields and fence rows should be checked for sparrows. The 200-acre lake itself rarely produces large numbers of migrant waterfowl, but in spring and fall is one of the best spots in the Des Moines area for Common Loon.

The second entrance is just across the dam and offers a less mature woodland habitat plus dogwood thickets and other brushy areas. Continuing on foot past the end of the access road, there are conifer groves that might be checked in winter for owls and winter

finches. For the more intrepid, this trail completely circles the back side of the lake.

**Glendale Cemetery** The largest cemetery in Des Moines, Glendale consists of acres of rolling hills covered primarily by mature conifers, making it the best spot in the city to look for winter finches. While there have been no major finch invasions in the past few years, it has continued to be a reliable location for Pine Siskin and Red-breasted Nuthatch. During invasion years, it has produced both crossbills, Evening Grosbeak, Bohemian Waxwing, and others. As a birding area, its value is not limited to winter — in spring and fall it can be excellent for warblers and, to a lesser extent, sparrows. Glendale Cemetery is reached from the downtown area by exiting I-235 at 42nd Street in Des Moines, going north about 1 mile to University Avenue, then left about a mile (past 48th Street) to the entrance on the right.

**Easter Lake** Easter Lake Park is a 454-acre facility that includes the 171-acre Easter Lake. While this area is not heavily birded, it and adjacent Ewing Park offers, in addition to the lake, open woodland and edge for passerines and sparrows. Easter Lake should be checked for waterfowl and often features wintering or migrant Trumpeter Swans. It is accessed from I-235 by taking the SE 14th Street/ Highway 69 exit south for 2.8 miles, then turning left on Indianola Road. Continue 1.5 miles, passing Ewing Park, and then left on Easter Lake Road 0.8 miles to the entrance.

**East 30th Street Ponds** These privately owned quarries and borrow areas must be birded from the road, but because they often have some open water in winter and have domestic waterfowl and Canada Geese to function as decoys, they frequently attract other waterfowl. From downtown, go east on Grand Avenue about 3.5 miles (there is a fork at about 2 miles — stay right) to East 30th Street, an entrance to the Iowa State Fairgrounds. Go right 1.1 mile to the ponds.

#### OF RELATED INTEREST

Within easy driving distance of Des Moines (an hour or less) are some of Iowa's most noteworthy birding areas. They have been described in these previous *Iowa Bird Life* birding area articles:

Birding Areas Update — Warren County, Vol. 55:2  
Birding Northern Polk County for Shorebirds, Vol. 59:3  
Birding Saylorville Reservoir and Big Creek State Park, Vol. 60:1  
Birding the Red Rock Area, Vol. 60:4  
Birding Story County's Prairies and Wetlands, Vol. 62:1

1315 41st Street, Des Moines, IA 50311 (wewarb@aol.com)

# Birding Areas of Des Moines

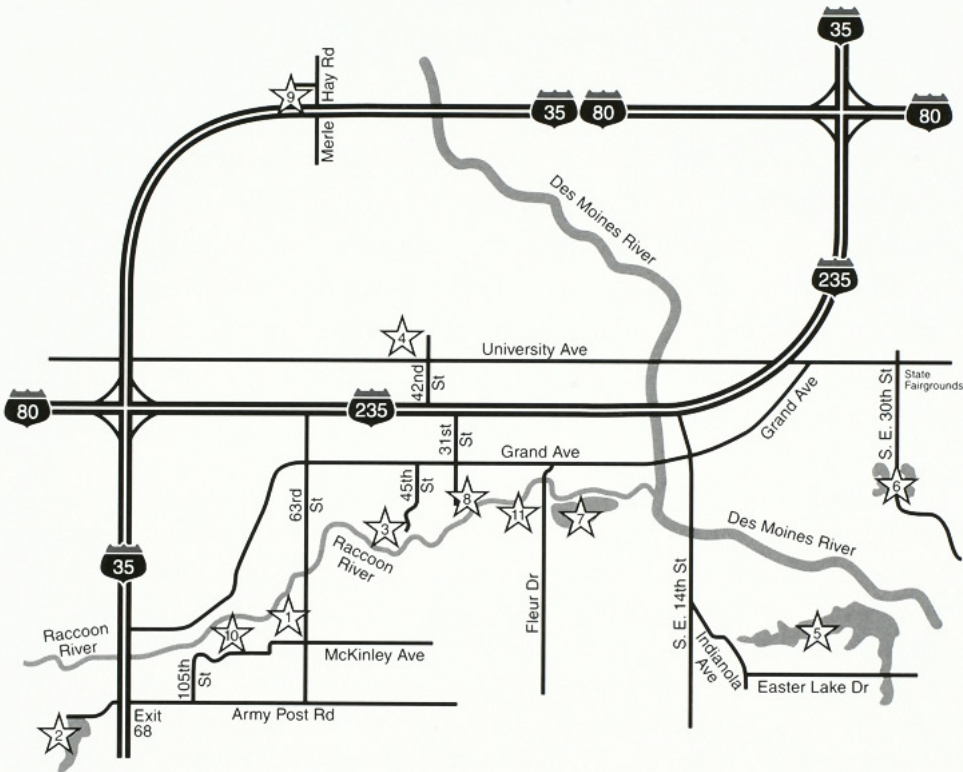


Figure 1. Location of birding areas in Des Moines: (1) Brown's Woods Forest Preserve; (2) Dale Maffitt Reservoir; (3) Denman Woods; (4) Glendale Cemetery; (5) Easter Lake; (6) Southeast 30th Street Ponds; (7) Gray's Lake; (8) Lost Planet; (9) Terra Lake (10) Walnut Woods State Park; (11) Waterworks Park