

Woodland Birding in the Algona Area

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When settlers first arrived in what would become Kossuth County in the 1850s, virtually all the timber was found surrounding the location of present-day Algona. It was a wooded island in a sea of prairie grasses that is today more accurately described as an oasis in a desert of corn and soybean fields. Depending on the season and conditions, the timber around Algona acts as both a migrant trap, attracting a surprising number of species and individuals with food and resting places, and as a frontier outpost for species more commonly found nesting in woodlands farther to the east and south.

As you approach from the south to within a few miles of Algona on Hwy 169, the geological feature that promoted this woodland growth becomes visible: the Algona Moraine. The debris that piled here along the base of the Wisconsin Glacier 12,000 years ago marks its last stand in Iowa before the final retreat. The ridge left behind is about three miles wide north to south and stands almost 100 feet above the flat terrain to the south. Situated on a promontory north of the moraine, Algona sticks out like a sore thumb into the path of the East Fork of the Des Moines River, which surrounds Algona on three sides before cutting through the Algona Moraine and continuing south. The H. M. and Eva Smith Wildlife Area (WA) and Ambrose A. Call State Park protect some of the virgin timber, and they offer visiting birders a woodland alternative to the wetland pothole birding of northern Kossuth and adjacent counties.

Two miles south of Algona on Hwy 169, just north of its intersection with 180th Street, a sign marks the entrance to Smith WA (Figure 1), an unimproved Kossuth County Conservation area that is open to public hunting. Its 140 acres are comprised of a series of ridges and seasonal streams running from the moraine to the west toward oxbow wetland pools and the Des Moines River to the east. Smith WA is almost entirely wooded except for an old farmstead location and the wetland area in the bottom.

Smith WA is an excellent spot to search for passerines during migration because of its lack of human activity (except hunting) and the wide variety of habitats in a small area: wooded hills and stream thickets, wetland, savannah, open agricultural land, and an isolated clump of Cape May Warbler-producing spruce trees. Whip-poor-will and Kentucky and Hooded Warblers are the most recent new migrant species found here. A single Tufted Titmouse seen here once is the only one I have encountered in Kossuth County. Pileated Woodpeckers occasionally roam the woods and possibly nest. Other nesters include Wild Turkey, Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, Eastern Towhee, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Yellow-throated Vireo. The trail along the western border gives easy access to edge species, and it is the best location to spot a Swainson's Hawk. A pair of Swainson's nested some-

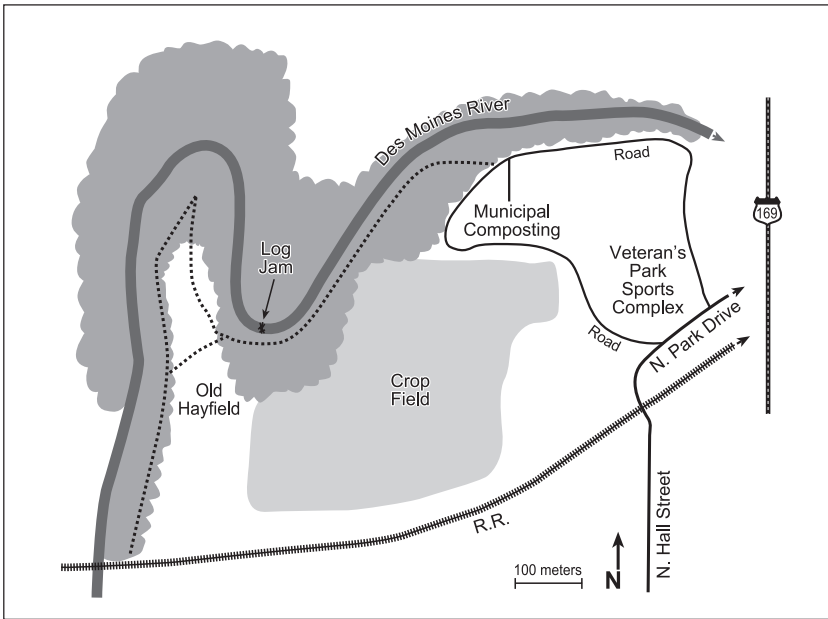


Figure 1. H. M. and Eva Smith Wildlife Area

where nearby for several years and could often be seen over the crop fields or near the gravel pits a mile south, but they have not been as regular recently.

Bushwhacking is still my favorite method of exploring Smith WA, but taking the northern trail will lead you to a unique structure called the Cozy Grove Sugar Shack. Members of the Kossuth County Conservation Board and other interested parties tap the surrounding maple trees each spring to make syrup at the Shack. Boiling the sap has been a tradition at this location for 50 years, and they demonstrate the process yearly to busloads of school children and the public. I watched my first Golden Eagle cruise back and forth over leafless March treetops while drinking hot chocolate at the Sugar Shack.

To continue your birding trip, turn north from the entrance to Smith WA, and then turn west on 190th St. This road turns north again after a mile and becomes Call Park Road. A mile further, the road descends the hill to pass the entrance to Call Park (Figure 2). Call Park's 130 acres are also wooded except for the mowed expanse inside the auto loop, and the park's facilities are all located along a central ridge. Like those at Smith WA, the streams that flank this ridge flow during the spring and wet periods in the summer, but are usually dry by fall. Call Park does not have many visitors other than weekends in warmer weather, so a ranger only seasonally staffs the park.

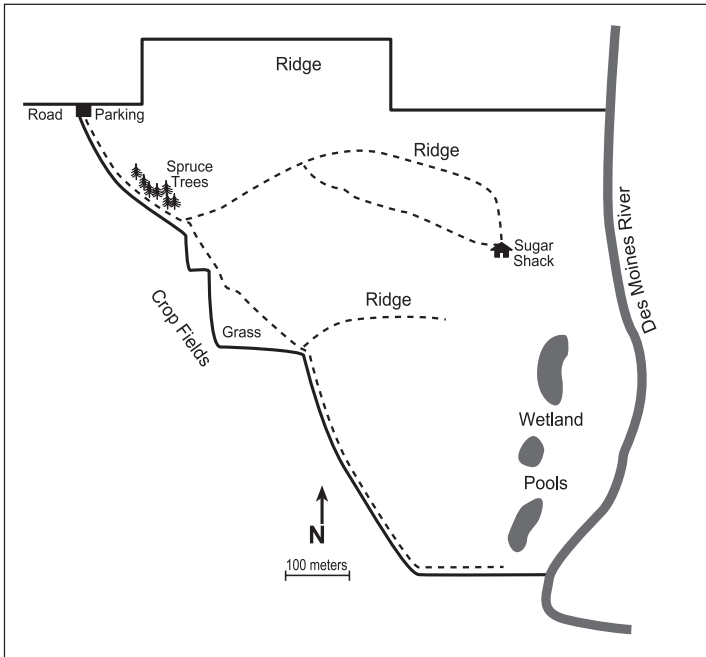


Figure 2. Ambrose A. Call State park

Call Park's trail system makes it easy to quickly search for birds. I usually start in the first parking lot and work down the road to the ranger house. Barred Owls can regularly be found along the beginning of the trail leading up the south creek bottom. Singing Acadian Flycatchers have been found along this creek a couple of times, as has Louisiana Waterthrush. Continuing up the creek, close viewing of warblers and flycatchers along the creek can be the rule of the day if weather and foraging conditions are right. At other times, mixed-species flocks will forage in the treetops on the hills flanking the creek and you must work your way along the ridge tops to get a good view and lessen the strain of "warbler neck." After reaching the top of the park, I return along the road to search the more open areas. Migrant thrushes can often be found in good numbers around the edges of the open central area after a fallout. Quite often though, the park will be birdlessly quiet, highlighting the hit-or-miss nature of birding a migrant trap — some mornings that seem promising to me must encourage the birds to fly somewhere else. The bird species found at Call Park are similar to those at Smith WA, although Yellow-throated and Worm-eating Warblers have pushed Call Park's warbler total to 33 species. Cooper's and Broad-winged Hawks occasionally nest in the park; and pioneering Carolina Wrens have been found here on a couple of occasions, but without any evidence of nesting.

After leaving the park, turn left on Call Park Road. At the T intersection, turn right onto S. Hall Street and pass over the river bridge. Ponds on both sides of the road may host water birds, but there isn't any public access to this private land. Hall Street takes you straight through Algona to the next stop. When you cross the railroad tracks, the street

turns east and becomes North Park Drive. Enter either road on your left through the municipal composting area or the Veteran’s Park sports complex. In the northwest corner of this area, a trail leads west along the Des Moines River. This nature trail (Figure 3) was initially a project of local service organizations, but damage by regular flooding became too much to keep up with and the trail is now imaintainedi by individuals with various off-road vehicles. The trail passes through floodplain forest and ends in an old hayfield that is gradually losing out to the encroachment of new trees.

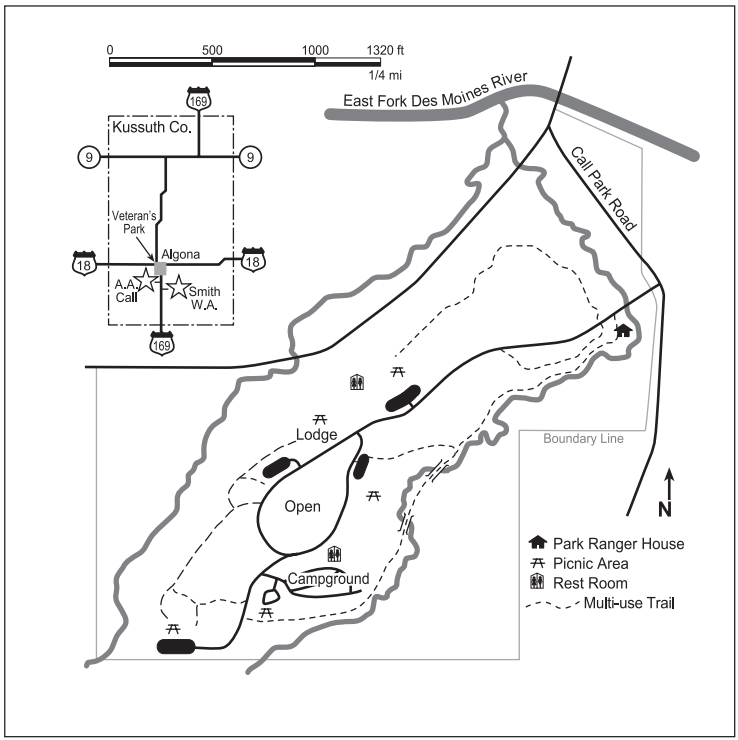


Figure 3. Nature Trail

This trail is another good place to search for migrants, but the main attraction here is nesting Prothonotary Warblers. The area reached just before “the mother of all logjams” is the best spot to search, although they have been found both up and downstream from the logjam on occasion. Brown Creepers and Pileated Woodpeckers have also been seen along the river here during nesting season. The logjam itself is often an interesting birding location — it swarms with insect life, which in turn attracts flocks of swallows, flycatchers, warblers, and waxwings. You can follow the trail back to your car, or, if you’d like to scan the open sky for a while, you can loop back on the railroad tracks. The summer resident Turkey Vultures are most notable here, especially as the flock gathers in the evening. They used Call Park as a roosting location in the past, but in recent years have moved behind the

ridge above the railroad tracks at Veteranís Park.

And now for something completely different. Turn east on North Park Drive and then south on Hwy 169. At the top of the hill, go east on Oak Street five blocks to N. Phillips Street. Turning left here will take you to the front gate of Riverview Cemetery. Surrounded by a hayfield, second-growth woods, and raised thicket-covered railroad embankments, the cemetery is good spot to look for sparrows. Interestingly, the large spruce trees in the north-east part of the cemetery seem to entice an unusual number of lingering June warblers and flycatchers. In winter, when Smith WA and Call Park are locked in frozen, quiet solitude, the conifers of Riverview offer the possibility of crossbills, siskins, and redpolls. A Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, or Merlin will often use the cemetery area as a hunting ground and base from which to raid neighborhood bird feeders. Flocks of Pine and Evening Grosbeaks have lingered here in the past, and hopefully they'll return again in the future.

The central portion of the cemetery is an open hilltop overlooking the Des Moines River valley to the north that is an excellent vantage point for hawk watching during fall migration. The birds travel down the valley from the north and pass overhead to retake the valley path on the south side of Algona. The river acts as a leading line: accipiters and falcons migrate along the wooded "buffet line" of small songbirds, and buteos and vultures use the updrafts from the valley ridges and rising thermals from the pavements of town to gain height. Kettles of Broad-winged Hawks regularly use the woodland areas around Algona in both spring and fall to roost for the night before continuing on their migration.

If you have any questions about birding these or any other Kossuth County areas, please feel free to contact me.

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