

Winneshiek County Birding Areas

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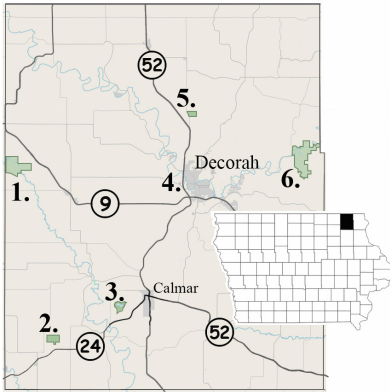


Fig. 1. Winneshiek County Birding Areas

If you are looking for a scenic destination to do some birding in Iowa, Winneshiek County is worth a visit. Winneshiek County sits in the Paleozoic Plateau, a small area of southeast Minnesota, southwest Wisconsin, northwest Illinois, and northeast Iowa not blanketed by the Pleistocene glaciers (2.5 mya — 12,000 years ago), and consequently, the area has little glacial drift, debris deposited by the glaciations. Sometimes called the Driftless Area, the landscape was not bulldozed and filled

in by advancing glaciers, and most stream valleys are deep and still show dramatic weathering actions that started during the Middle Pleistocene. Winneshiek County has a karst topography in which rainwater slowly dissolved calcareous rock and, over time, formed cracks in the bedrock that enlarged to form underground channels that eventually became springs, sinkholes, and caves. To view this erosion, a float trip down the Upper Iowa River takes you past tall limestone/dolostone cliffs through which the river cut a channel. A further attraction in the county are the sinkholes associated with algific talus/cold air slopes where rare flora and fauna found a fragile refuge in Arctic-like conditions in the surface substrate. Iowa Golden Saxifrage and the Iowa Pleistocene Snail are two examples of Pleistocene holdovers whose ancestors were around when Woolly Mammoths roamed the area. Readers who wish for more information about the geology of the county should read Jean Prior's *Landform Regions of Iowa* (University of Iowa Press, 1991), but there is a lot to experience in the public areas owned by the Iowa DNR or the Winneshiek County Conservation Board that offer wonderful birding and nature observation. Here are six hotspots to start (Fig. 1).

1. Cardinal Marsh

Located in far western Winneshiek County, Cardinal Marsh includes 1165 acres managed for waterfowl and other wildlife by the Iowa DNR. A mixture of woodland, restored prairie, crop land, and marsh habitat make this the county's premier birding destination. Turn north on 345th Ave. from Co. Rd. A46 four miles west of Ridgeway or turn south on 345th Ave. from State Hwy. 9 two miles east of Cresco to reach Cardinal Marsh.

Early spring waterfowl viewing in mid- to late-March is excellent, and you can expect to see Trumpeter Swans, Greater White-fronted

Geese, and many migrating duck species. Sandhill Cranes arrive shortly after ice-out, and it's neat to watch them do their noisy courtship dances prior to nesting here. Migrating shorebirds can congregate at Cardinal Marsh in mid-May if mudflats are exposed. Wilson's Phalaropes and Stilt Sandpipers have been seen, along with



Trumpeter Swan; Cardinal Marsh; Winneshiek; 21 July 2020. Photograph by Larry Reis

Dunlin, Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Plovers, and Least Sandpipers. Surrounding woodlands attract migrating warblers in May, while Baltimore Orioles, Orchard Orioles, and Scarlet Tanagers are returning to nest. Brushy thickets near wetlands attract nesting Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Black-billed Cuckoos, and Willow Flycatchers.

Grasslands harbor Bobolinks, Sedge Wrens, Dickcissels, and Savannah Sparrows during the summer while swampy haunts are home to Trumpeter Swans, Pied-billed Grebes, Soras, Virginia Rails, Swamp Sparrows, and Marsh Wrens. Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Least Bitterns have nested at Cardinal Marsh when water conditions were favorable for flooded cattail stands to flourish.

Several different sparrow species can be found during the fall, including White-throated, White-crowned, Fox, Song, Swamp, and Field Sparrows as well as Dark-eyed Juncos. Winter brings Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Shrikes, and American Tree Sparrows.

2. Chipera Prairie

Chipera Prairie is a 77-acre grassland managed by the Winneshiek County Conservation Board and is accessed immediately after crossing the railroad tracks on 128th St. along State Hwy. 24 three miles west of Fort Atkinson. An old farm grove serves as an oasis for migrating warblers in May, and Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Sedge Wrens are summertime nesters in the remnant and restored prairie.



Bobolink; Chipera Prairie; Winneshiek; 16 May 2024. Photograph by Larry Reis

Scattered brushy thickets offer outstanding birding for sparrows during October. Large numbers of White-throated and Fox Sparrows sometimes congregate, along with White-crowned, Field, Song, Lincoln's, Swamp, and Harris' Sparrows.

Prairie enthusiasts will find Prairie Smoke and Shooting Star blooming in May and look for Leadplant and Michigan Lilies in mid-sum-

mer. Prairie Blazing Stars dot the patches of prairie in August, and Bottle Gentians top off the prairie wildflower show in late September.

3. Lake Meyer Park

Lake Meyer Park is a 160-acre park managed by the Winneshiek County Conservation Board. Located on Lake Meyer Rd. about a mile south and west of Calmar off State Hwy. 24, the hilly terrain in the park contains a 35-acre lake surrounded by woodlands with lots of mixed oak and Shagbark Hickory trees. Nature trails allow easy walking access through much of the area.

Spring warblers spend a few days feeding in the budding oak trees as they migrate north in early May. Northern Parula, Cape May, Bay-breasted, and Blackpoll Warblers are always good finds. Expect to see lots of lovely spring wildflowers blooming in the woods too. Besides Mayapples, other wildflowers to look for in May would include Blue Phlox,



Scarlet Tanager; Lake Meyer Park; Winneshiek; 18 May 2020. Photograph by Larry Reis

Wild Geraniums, Rue Anemone, Nodding Trilliums, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, and Showy Orchis. Ospreys often stop by to fish the lake for a few days in spring and fall, and Cooper's Hawks, Pileated Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Yellow-throated Vireos, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Scarlet Tanagers, and Orchard Orioles are summer residents. A year-round bird feeding station in the campground is always worth checking, but winter brings the best feeder surprises as Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskins, Purple Finches, and Common Redpolls often show up in irruption years. Eurasian Tree Sparrows have wintered here for several years now and are likely nesting in the area during the summer season.

For people who plan on camping when they come to Winneshiek County, Lake Meyer Park has a nice campground that is open from late April through October.

4. Decorah

The city of Decorah has 23 parks or recreational areas, and some of those parks are excellent places to look for birds. Pick up a Decorah Parks & Trail Guide at the Decorah Visitor Center and Chamber of Commerce that is located downtown at 507 W Water St.

The walking River Trail winds through a riparian woodland along the Upper Iowa River. The trailhead is located by the entrance to Dunning's Spring Park where spring and fall warbler migration can be productive, especially early in the morning. This is one of the most reliable places to see Tufted Titmice in the county. River Otters can occasionally be seen fishing in the river.

The Dunning's Spring Park, Ice Cave Hill & Barbara Barnhart Van Peenen Memorial Park trail system is located directly north of the River Trail, atop the limestone bluffs. A loop hike is a good outing. Park your car at the River Trail/Dunning's Spring/Ice Cave parking lot and hike to the east end of the River Trail as it crosses the Ice Cave Road and climbs the Ice Cave Trail. The trail then returns to Dunning Springs. Along the trail, extensive stands of Eastern Red Cedar trees sometimes hold American Robins, Eastern Bluebirds, Northern Flickers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Yellow-rumped Warblers in winter, and Winter Wrens can be found along the outlet stream. Be sure to check out the beautiful Dunning's Spring, beautiful sight at any time of year, and the Decorah Ice Cave is just a short walk away from Dunning's Spring. Layers of ice build up on the cave's walls during late winter and stay frozen there until late summer.



Tufted Titmouse; River Trail in Decorah; Winneshiek; 16 January 2018. Photograph by Larry Reis

Twin Springs Park at the west edge of town can be a warbler magnet during May and September. The tired and hungry migrants are attracted to the sheltered streambank along Twin Springs trout stream where they can fuel up on emerging midges, mayflies, and caddisflies. Other parks that offer good birding opportunities in Decorah include Phelps Park, Palisades Park, Carlson Park, Chattahoochie Park, and the Decorah Community Prairie; camping is available at the Pulpit Rock Campground.

5. Seed Savers Exchange

Seed Savers Exchange is a private organization dedicated to preserving heirloom varieties of garden vegetables, flowers, and fruits by organically growing, saving, and selling those older, mostly forgotten varieties' seeds. They invite visitors to tour their gardens in season and have groomed some trails that connect different areas on the farm such as an historic apple orchard, old homestead site, and a spring-fed trout stream. Pine Springs Creek, scenic limestone cliffs, a magnificent stand of mature White Pine trees, Bur Oak and Sugar Maple woodlands, pastureland for rare White Park cattle, and all those vegetable and flower gardens offer birds a wealth of habitat options. Check the pines for roosting or nesting Great Horned Owls, and Wood Thrushes, Red-eyed Vireos, and Eastern Wood-Pewees nest in the deciduous woodlands. Seed Savers Exchange is



Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Seed Savers Exchange; Winneshiek; 10 August 2018. Photograph by Larry Reis

also an excellent area to look for migrating songbirds. Warblers, kinglets, Eastern Phoebes, and Cedar Waxwings like to forage for emerging midges, caddisflies and mayflies in the limbs overhanging Pine Springs Creek. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds frequent the flower gardens during late summer, and Eastern Bluebirds often nest around the apple orchard. Anyone who enjoys gardening might find it hard to leave the marvelous vegetable and flower gardens that are growing near the Lillian Goldman Visitors Center where you can buy many rare heirloom seeds and wonderful gardening gifts. To get to Seed Savers Exchange, follow State Hwy 52 for three miles north of Decorah before branching off on County Road W34 (North Winn Rd) for one mile.

6. Coon Creek WMA

Coon Creek WMA is a rugged public wildlife area owned by the Iowa DNR. Small crop fields are scattered among 1700 acres of timbered hillsides with the Upper Iowa River forming the northern border. Drive six miles east of Decorah on State Hwy. 9 and then five miles north on Glenville Rd. to join up with Coon Creek Rd. that takes you past the western border of the Coon Creek WMA where there are a couple of parking areas. An additional parking area at the south end of the unit is accessed by driving in an access road along Coon Creek. You can also walk in from the east after parking at the Lundy Bridge canoe access on the Upper Iowa River.

The birding is not easy at Coon Creek WMA. Either follow a few field roads or bushwack through the woods, but some of the hills are very steep. Rewards for your hard work might include nesting Scarlet Tanagers, Eastern Towhees, and American Redstarts. Nesting Blue-winged Warblers, Kentucky Warblers, and Ruffed Grouse are also possible here.

Don't expect to find many birds that make the eBird Iowa Rare Bird Alert list in Winneshiek County, but if you are looking for a captivating place in Iowa to see a nice variety of Iowa's common birds in a beautiful setting, you won't be disappointed during your visit here. Dennis Carter, a good friend who moved to Decorah in his later years and helped me learn about birds, was able to see 266 different birds in Winneshiek County while he was still able to get out in the field. He gave credit to a memorable birding experience in his younger years for moving back after he retired. You might be amazed and delighted by the birds you find in Winneshiek County too. Go to Visit Decorah (<https://decorah.com>) for lodging and camping information.

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