

Birding Hancock County

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Birding in Hancock County is a never ending task that is pure joy! There are major marsh/water areas: Pilot Knob State Park; a river with lots of habitat; and Twin Lakes, Crystal Lake, and several smaller areas that are great bird habitats.

Although it is hard to choose from the above, my favorite area is **Eagle Lake** (Figure 1). This lake is predominantly a lake for fishing and hunting, versus boating or water skiing. It offers a large marsh area and a great woodland area to bird, in addition to the water area. On Highway 18, five miles west of Garner and one mile west of a village called Duncan, there is a sign on Lake Avenue that points to Eagle Lake, which is a right hand turn to the north. From this corner, it is two miles to the entrance of the park and the west marsh access. The entrance on the right meanders into the area before the actual parking lot. At the lot there is a wonderful 14-foot high deck that overlooks the marsh. This platform has ample room for scopes and provides great views of much of the water. Particularly in the spring, this is a good spot to view the Red-necked or Western Grebes that are quite often seen at the lake. Black Terns are generally here all summer. Virginia Rail and Sora can be heard, bitterns fly by, Scarlet Tanagers sing, and warblers flit in the trees on a good day in spring.

The picnic area to the north has restrooms and is a nice area to bird the edges for warblers and other migrants. The woodland area to the south meanders through the trees and to a boardwalk that is small but sufficient to call in rails, see bitterns, or hear Sandhill Cranes in the springtime. Continued walking across a bridge and along the trail leads to an extensive but narrow woodland that has many migrant species in the spring. Barred

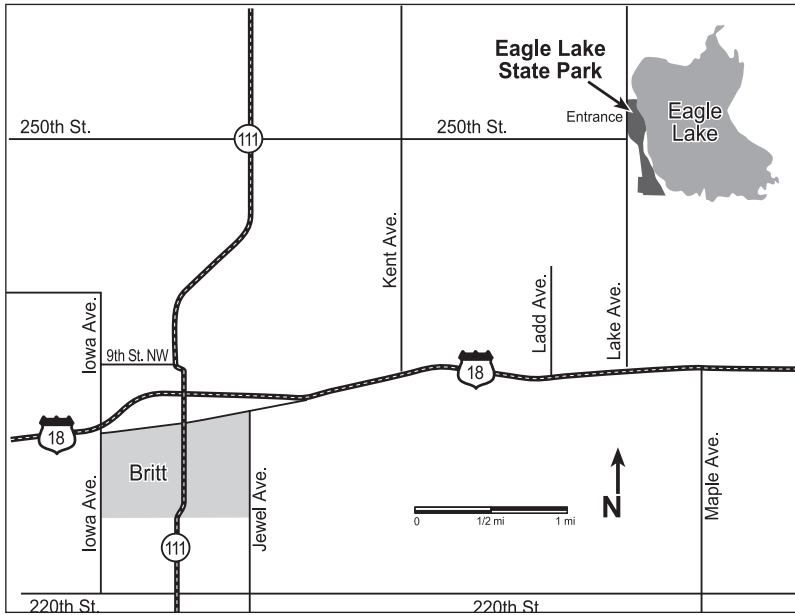


Figure 1. Eagle Lake, Hancock.

and Great Horned Owls live there year around and warblers are plentiful in the fall. It borders the marsh and marsh birds can be heard and seen while searching the woods.

Go back to Lake Avenue, take a right turn out, which is north, to the next intersection and go east not quite one mile on 260th Street to a road that ends at the north side of the marsh area. This is another access to the marsh. There is a parking lot at the end of the road and to the west a small dike to walk on. Generally this is where there are Black-crowned Night-Herons as well as occasional Common Moorhens. There is an area to the east of the dike that is private property and only the very edge of the marsh can be walked to check for shorebirds, marsh rails, bitterns, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and this is where a Sprague's Pipit was found. Cows are pastured in this area by mid-June.

A side trip at this point is a trip to Eagle Flats. Travel back to Lake Avenue and turn to the north; at one mile, turn east on 270th Street. At Maple Avenue, make a turn north onto Maple and go past the area known as Eagle Flats. It is a wetland consisting of three or four ponds, depending on the rains, and prairie grasses mostly on the east side of the road. There is a parking lot on 270th Street. Bitterns, waterfowl, and sparrows can be found here in the spring. North of the ponds, some small wetlands tend to be mud flats during most of the spring, and shorebirds including dowitchers and avocets frequently use this area. There are bits and pieces of additional IA DNR areas north to 280th Street.

Another favorite place to bird in Hancock County is **Pilot Knob State Park** (Figure 2). It contains 700 acres of recreational habitat with a 15-acre pond among established woodlands and unusual birds for the area. There is an entrance, which is 205th Avenue, on the north side of Highway 9, four miles east and one mile south of Forest City. This road ends at the entrance of the park, where the road intersects with 340th Street. The

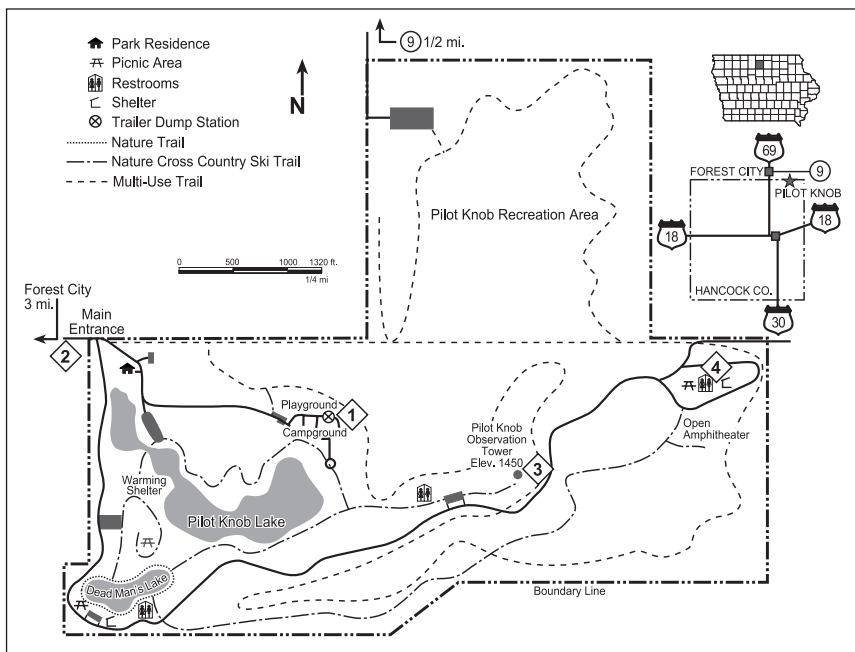


Figure 2. Pilot Knob State Park: (1) campground, (2) main entrance, (3) Pilot Knob Observation Tower; (4) one-way side road.

north side of 340th is Winnebago County and the south side, which is most of the park, is Hancock County. At the entrance there is a road to the left before entering the park, which winds around to the ranger house, office, and campground (Figure 2.1). The campground is a good place to start a search for birds. Drive into the area and around each picnic or camping area to watch and listen for spring migrants, especially warblers and flycatchers. A Pileated Woodpecker has been seen most often by the camping area. There are restrooms here and throughout the park.

When finished with the campground, take the main entrance (Figure 2.2) into the park and slowly bird the length of the park. There are several picnic areas, some with shelters. The first picnic area with a shelter on the left has an access path to the lake in the woods. Follow this path around the lake to find nearly all of the warblers that we anticipate in migration in Iowa, along with other spring thrushes, flycatchers, vireos, and sparrows.

About midway along the main road is a larger parking lot on the left and a short trail that takes you to the tower (Figure 2.3) at the high point of Pilot Knob. The tower can be climbed and the view at the top is panoramic, with three towns visible in the distance, along with the entire countryside. Hawk watches up here can be very productive in peak migration because of the Winnebago River west and south of this area.

Near the east end of the main road of the park, there is a one-way side road (Figure 2.4) that goes into the woods to a picnic area with shelters. Driving this road and listening lets you know if the Acadian Flycatcher is back or if the Cerulean Warblers are nest-

ing here again.

Just outside the park entrance, on the left, is a trail that leads back into the park and travels east to west exiting at the main entrance of Pilot Knob. However, about one-third of the way along this trail is a path to the right, which loops around the woods to the north and arrives at a pond and then back to the trail again. It is a good walk with many woodland birds and the marsh area around the pond is good for sparrows. This area can be accessed from the north off of Highway 9 where there is a recreational sign that points to a recreation area and parking area on 210th Avenue. This lot is for horse trailers and such, though anyone may use the area and gain access to the pond quickly if the trail at the parking lot is occupied. This area is great for warblers and flycatchers in the spring and fall.

A side trip near the park is the **Gabrielson Wildlife Management Area** (WMA) woods on B14 and **Torkelson Pits** south of Pilot Knob on R70 and then east on 305th Street. Gabrielson WMA is a favorite spot for turkey and woodland birds and Torkelson Pits beside the Winnebago River can have grebes, shorebirds, and most any species in migration.

The back side of **Ventura Marsh** in Hancock County is the third favorite spot and a good place to bird in the spring and fall. It is primitive in that, other than parking lots, there are no maintained paths, no lookouts, and no amenities. It is a marsh with potential for good waterfowl and marsh species. There is a parking lot at the east side of this area, which is on West Lake Street, one mile west of the town of Ventura. The road becomes 250th Avenue and continues to the marsh access at the border of Hancock County. There is a second parking lot further west on the same road. From the first parking lot, walk along an unused service road. The shrubs along the path are used by sparrows, flycatchers, and warblers. Along the edges of the marsh, rails can be heard or seen.

Walk in as far as possible from either parking area to access the back ponds that, before the vegetation becomes overgrown in the summer, have mud flats used by shorebirds. The shrubs in the area are good for passerines. The ponds are in the middle of the section and have pelicans, cormorants, gulls, terns, waterfowl, herons, egrets, and bitterns in the spring and fall.

The drawback to this area, besides it being sometimes difficult to reach the inner sanctum, is that it is one of our best local spots for ticks. There is access to the south part of the marsh from 240th Street. Take B14 south of Ventura and then right on 237th which winds into 240th. There is a parking lot on this south road. Again, though, it generally means bushwhacking a path into the marsh, and it is possible to get bogged down in the marsh itself, if not careful.

The other sites in the county are not listed as favorites but are well worth the effort to check and can be very productive for birds.

Crystal Lake is on James Avenue, south of B14 and west of Forest City, or north on B14 from Britt, Iowa and Highway 18. The lake has an access on the east side, north of the downtown area. There are restrooms, picnic areas, and a good view of the lake for scoping and scanning for waterfowl, gulls, and terns. North of the wooded area on James Avenue there is a small pond created by a dike that is just above the lake. Once the pond has thawed out in the spring it is worth checking for all sorts of species. **Crystal Lake WMA**, situated east of Crystal Lake on 320th Street, can be productive. Waterfowl in spring, a few shorebirds if the water level is down, and marsh birds make the WMA area interesting. The area can be scoped from the vehicle at the parking lot.

Meredith Marsh at the curve of B14, which is west of Forest City, is a likely spot for LeConte's and Sharp-tailed Sparrows. The wooded area to the west of the dike is a good spot for warblers and thrushes. The pond itself, especially if low, can contain many shorebirds in spring and fall. The Forest City Waste Site, on B14 just west and south of the Winnebago plant at Forest City can have grebes, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and terns in migration.

The **Twin Lakes** area in the south part of the county is a combination of two lakes and a marsh. The road around the lake starts at Nash Avenue off of B63 west of Goodell. The road winds around the lake with a good view of the lake on the west side of East Twin Lake. Continue around the lake on the north which becomes 120th Street. Peek through the trees for further views of the lake. On the north, as summer dries the lake, sand bars appear where shorebirds like to feed. There is a dike on the east end of the lake for viewing the marsh area and a couple of small ponds that can be good shorebird habitat. The dike is off of 120th Street and has a parking lot.

As you continue east, you can access the nearby area by the branch of the Iowa River and check the ponds or wetlands there, depending on the weather.

Now backtrack on 120th Street and continue to the west to West Twin Lake. A view of the lake and some picnic tables are nestled in the trees at the curve as the lake is approached. Continue west and around to the west end of the lake. Another good view of the lake is on this west side. Grebes and waterfowl use this lake in spring and fall.

The acres of CRP land along B63 in the lakes area are prime Short-eared Owl hunting grounds

Elrod Sherman Park to the east of Goodell is a small park with good birding possibilities. It is close to the Upper Iowa River despite its location in the middle of farmland, and this might explain some of the birds found there. Hunting is not allowed in the park and that makes the park a haven for game birds in the fall and winter.

There are two entrances to the park. One is 120th Street south of the park. The other is the east border, which is blacktop R66 and is a north/south road. Both are accessible by vehicle; the south entrance is open year around and the east one until winter snows settle in. The south road takes you into the county maintenance building area and the facilities, which include restrooms and a picnic area. There is parking here and the pit/lake can be scanned for waterfowl. There is a dike to walk, which accesses the north side of the park.

The east entrance is a road winding into the park. It continues about one-half mile and ends up almost on the west side. It is surrounded by pines, cedars, and shrubs. The area hosts many species in the spring and fall including shrikes, warblers, flycatchers, vireos, thrashers, and thrushes. A Great Horned Owl generally is in the area year around as are pheasants. A trail at the end of this park road leads to the west side and more woodland. Flocks of Cedar Waxwings feed here in the winter.

In addition to all of the above sites, there are a few other small woodland areas in Hancock County that may have game birds. There are some other small pit areas that could produce interesting birds. There are several cemeteries in the county with old pines that hold wintering flocks of finches, siskins, and crossbills in invasion years.

Hancock County surprises the birder because it seems to be just a farmland county, but in fact has a variety of habitats to bird in and the potential to produce many species of birds. The truth is that all of the spots listed are my favorites!