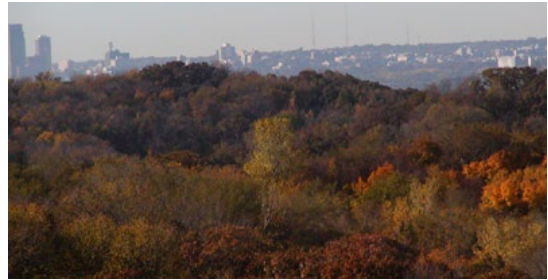


Hitchcock Nature Center Honey Creek

By Mark Orsag

Nestled in the southern half of the Loess Hills, Hitchcock Nature Center (HNC) is a former YMCA camp that has become a county park and is managed by the Pottawattamie County Conservation Board (PCCB); HNC provides spectacular views of the Loess Hills and the adjoining Missouri River Valley. The Loess Hills tower hundreds of feet above the flat valley floor on their imposing west face and reach a height of 1200-1400 feet above sea level. The Loess Hill themselves are a nearly unique land formation in North America; they are composed of windblown soils deposited long ago on the eastern side of the Missouri River Valley by prevailing westerly winds. The landscape at Hitchcock Nature Center today is a rugged mix of prairie remnants, forest, and Bur Oak savanna. An active program of controlled burns to restore prairie is underway at the site. Privately-held lands adjoining the nature center include wetlands, a small lake, and larger prairie remnants. These lands are generally off-limits to birders but crucial parts of them can be scoped from within the nature center or from other accessible areas.



HNC is located about ten miles north of Council Bluffs, Iowa near the small town of Crescent (which has good eating options including *Henry's Diner* and *The Pink Poodle...*). The city of Omaha, Nebraska is easily visible from the HNC Lodge and from the Hawk tower off to the southwest. A number of other excellent birding sites are also within easy driving range of Hitchcock (in both Iowa and Nebraska)-- the DeSoto and Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuges, Lake Manawa, the Mid-America Ponds, Fontenelle Forest, Neale Woods, etc. HNC is best known to Iowa birders for its excellent fall raptor flights. Hitchcock is one of the few active hawkwatches on the the Great Plains and, apparently, the best one. Annual autumn counts of southbound hawks, eagles and vultures are conducted at the site through a joint effort by the Pottawattamie County Conservation Board (PCCB) and the Hitchcock Hawkwatch Association (HHA)--a volunteer group of birders/hawkwatchers.

Funneled past Hitchcock by the updrafts created by the hills and by the north-south channel of the Missouri River Valley, raptors and other avian migrants overfly the location in large numbers in the fall. On "big days" the birds can seem to fill the sky in a spectacular manner. HNC's fairly central location on the North American continent also promotes migratory diversity; western, eastern, southern, and northern species all appear here. Spring raptor flights occur at HNC as well, but are a pale echo of those seen in the fall and no organized raptor counting is done at Hitchcock in the spring.

The Hitchcock Nature Center HawkWatch (HNCH) began in 1992, when Loren and Babs Padelford, working in conjunction with widely-known raptor biologist Jon Stravers, founded the fall hawkwatch-- with the Padelfords counting migrating hawks from the deck of the HNC Lodge. In recent years, the hawkwatch has developed a larger volunteer pool, employed a weekday counter (funded by the PCCB), and now uses a new 50 foot hawk tower (the construction of which was funded by the Iowa West Foundation) adjacent to the lodge to conduct counts. Counting is part-time between 15 August and the beginning of September, but is full-time (daily) between 1 September and 20 December. Flights generally begin around 10am and end around 6pm during the peak of the fall season in late September and in October, but weather

conditions can alter this daily timetable dramatically. Hawkwatch festivals are held at HNC in October and November annually.

Raptor migration is generally modest until around 20 September, when the flight begins in earnest. This “prime period” lasts until around 20 October. In the recent years of full-time coverage (600-750 count hours per season), the HNC hawkwatch has averaged around 13,000 raptors and vultures of nineteen species annually. In 2005, over 16,000 raptors and vultures of twenty species were counted. Red-tailed Hawks, which appear in an amazing variety of morphs and subspecies at Hitchcock, are generally the most abundant raptor migrants followed by Turkey Vultures, *Swainson's Hawks* (which tend to appear in very big numbers between 27 September and 5 October annually), Sharp-shinned Hawks, and Bald Eagles (which dominate the 15 November—20 December late season at HNC). Other common raptor migrants at various times during the fall season include: Ospreys, Northern Harriers, Cooper's Hawks, Broad-winged Hawks, and American Kestrels. Uncommon and occasional annual migrants include *Mississippi Kites*, *Northern Goshawks*, *Red-shouldered Hawks*, *Rough-legged Hawks*, *Golden Eagles*, *Merlins*, *Peregrine Falcons*, and *Prairie Falcons*. HNCH's rarest annual raptor migrants are *Ferruginous Hawks*. *Black Vultures* have been recorded in two of the last four HNCH seasons.

North or northwest winds are generally best for hawkwatching at HNC, but during prime period (20 September- 20 October), in particular, good flights can occur during a broad spectrum of conditions. A wide array of avian species ranging from Red-headed Woodpeckers and Blue Jays to American White Pelicans and Franklin's Gulls can be seen migrating past the site (at times in huge numbers for certain species) in the fall along with the raptors.

While the fall raptor flights are clearly Hitchcock's main birding attraction, HNC and the surrounding areas have much else to offer in terms of birding. The lands adjacent to HNC also have some excellent habitat, but, as noted earlier, are privately owned and off-limits. Parts of these lands, however, can be scanned from nature center lands or from public (gravel) roads nearby. There are also a number of good birding trails at the nature center itself including the Habitat Loop Trail, Badger Ridge Trail, The Chute Trail, The Hidden Valley Trail, and the very physically demanding Westridge Trail (which also boast the best views and prettiest terrain in the park). Some of the other best birding spots (excluding those on private land) include two driving routes near the nature center-- the Missouri Ave-152nd and Ski Hill Loops. The main road at HNC itself, Page Lane, is also well worth walking or driving at any time of year. There are two prairie overlook decks at Hitchcock, one off Page Lane and the other at the campground, that are also well worth stopping and scanning.

Spring passerine migration at and around HNC, particularly in May, can be quite interesting. Hitchcock is a solid, if not spectacular, warbler spot with huge numbers of Yellow-rumped Warblers and a broad sprinkling of other species annually. Other types of neo-tropical passerines, however-- thrushes, flycatchers, vireos, orioles, buntings, grosbeaks, sparrows, and tanagers, seem to turn up annually in excellent numbers and variety. This is a good area for Western strays, which in the last couple of years have included sightings of *Lazuli Buntings*, *Spotted Towhees*, and *Black-headed Grosbeaks*.

Summer birding at Hitchcock can be a very rewarding experience as well. Nearly 100 breeding species can be found at or near Hitchcock. *Lark Sparrows* are often found near the campground and along Badger Ridge trail. *Black-billed Cuckoos* can be more difficult to locate away from a couple of generally no access spots on private land, but are found at times along the Habitat Loop and Hidden Valley Trail. *Blue Grosbeaks* and *Western Kingbirds* are commonly

found along the two driving loops between June and mid-August. *Wood Thrushes* and *Whippoorwills* are common breeders at the nature center itself. *Grasshopper Sparrows* and *Bobolinks* can sometimes be found from the Prairie Overlook Deck near the campground. *Bell's Vireos* and *Yellow-headed Blackbirds* breed on adjoining private land and can at times be seen or heard from the Missouri-Ave-152nd driving loop. *Willow Flycatchers* can be found along both driving routes. *Scarlet Tanagers* and *Cooper's Hawks* are most commonly seen along the buggy trails in the valleys but can also be found at times along Page Lane itself. *Yellow-throated Vireos* and *Blue-gray Gnatcatchers* are found along the most remote parts of the rugged Westridge Trail. Other more sporadic summer residents in recent years have included *Summer Tanagers*, *Broad-winged Hawks*, and *Acadian Flycatchers*.

Winter is generally the least productive birding season at HNC, but the Missouri-Ave-152nd loop can be quite interesting even then; the nature center itself also usually holds good numbers of *Purple Finches*, and *Hermit Thrushes*, *Spotted Towhees*, and *Townsend's Solitaires* have been semi-annual in recent years.

Hitchcock is a rewarding place to bird. For more information, please visit: [Hitchcock Nature Center](#)