

Birding Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area

James Durbin

Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area provides a 410-acre lake on more than 1,500 acres of land and is conveniently close to the cities of Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, and Waterloo (Figure 1). The lake offers a variety of fishing, boating, or swimming opportunities. Trails provide birders with scenic views of wooded hills, marshy areas, and meadows. The area is open year-round and provides maximum outdoor recreation activities.

TRAILS

There are 15 miles of trails for the birder, hiker, snowmobiler, bicyclist, cross-country skier, and equestrian, with connecting access to many area facilities and scenic overlooks. Pleasant Creek is also a popular site for organized dog field trials.

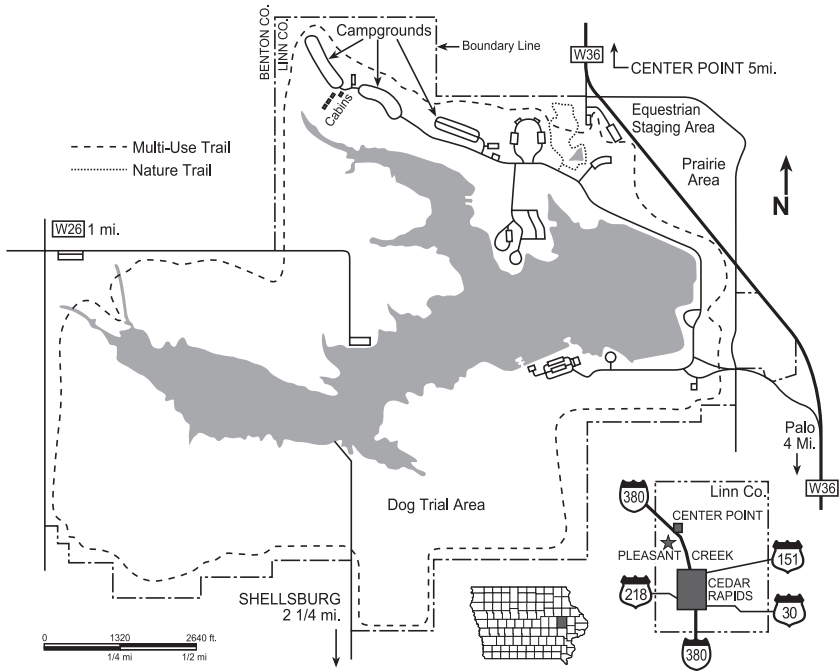


Figure 1. Map of Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area.

FISHING, SWIMMING, PICNICKING, AND BOATING

The lake is one of the highest quality fishing lakes in the region and is stocked with largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill, channel catfish, and tiger muskie. Shoreline fishing has been enhanced by the construction of jetties. Bait is available for sale at the boathouse.

Pleasant Creek is a relaxing place to spend a day at the beach. The swimming area is located on the north shore. A privately operated concession offers supervised swimming and a modern bathhouse where refreshments are available. The Pleasant Creek beach has become one of the most popular in Iowa.

Picnic areas are located on the northeast and southeast shores. Several shelters are available and may be reserved for a small fee.

Pleasant Creek Lake is one of the most popular boating spots in eastern Iowa. Four launching sites are conveniently located around the lake. These sites have a total of seven ramps for fishing, leisure boating, and sail boating access. Boats, motors, canoes, and paddleboats may be rented at the boat house. Any size boat motor may be operated at "no wake speeds."

CAMPING AND CABINS

The Pleasant Creek campground features 69 campsites, 43 electrical hookups, and two modern shower and rest room facilities. From the campground, campers have a pleasing view of much of the recreation area.

Four new camper cabins were recently added to the area. The rustic pine log cabins offer visitors a sense of pioneer lifestyle. The cabins have electricity, covered porch, and basic furnishings. Visitors must provide their own bedding, towels, cooking utensils, and other camping items. Cabins are located near the campgrounds so cabin users will have use of the shower and toilet facilities.

HUNTING

A portion of the Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area is open to public hunting. Popular species of game include rabbits, pheasants, and quail.

NEIGHBORING TOWNS

Pleasant Creek lies approximately 15 miles northwest of Cedar Rapids and 40 miles southeast of the Waterloo-Cedar Falls metropolitan area. Palo is located five miles south of the park.

BIRDING THE PARK

I have compiled a list of 217 species for the lake area from my personal sightings and input from other birders.

Pleasant Creek Lake has several habitats that attract a wide range of species for birding. In the spring as soon as the water is open, waterfowl start returning. Uncommon species such as scoters and Western Grebes are seen every couple years. Common Loons are often seen as late as early July. Pacific and Red-throated Loons have been seen in recent years. The sandy areas and the beach will usually have some shorebirds on them. A good assortment of gulls and terns can be expected during migration.

Along the trails and in the woods that are located in several areas, warblers and other migrants can be found. My list for warblers is 24 along with seven species of vireos. All of the thrushes can be found there seasonally.

If you are looking for grassland birds, look and listen in the pasture areas along Lewis Bottoms Road that is parallel to W36, which runs north out of Palo. The other area for grassland birds is in the dog trial bowl in the south part of the park. This is approximately 80 to 90 acres of grass.

Last year I did a study for the Iowa DNR and monitored the Henslow's Sparrow population located there (Figure 2). The birds arrived the first week of May and stayed until the third week of August. The highest count of singing males was 25. I was amazed at how close I was able to approach the singing birds. After reading some data on them, I found that they will nest densely if the habitat is good. Bobolinks, Sedge Wrens, Dickcissels, Grasshopper Sparrows, meadowlarks, and Eastern Kingbirds also occupy this area.

The DNR is currently working on a proposal to amend the mowing practice in the area. The practice is to mow in strips every other year. They are either going to mow in wider strips to give the birds more protection or begin mowing in halves every other year.

There is some controversy with the dog trial people as they need two 40-acre areas for their trials. The DNR is hoping to expand the grassy area so that more area is available.

The DNR is also working with the equestrians to improve the horse trails.

While in the area, you might want to visit such places as Squaw Creek Park, Matsell Bridge Natural Area, Wickiup Hill Outdoor Learning Area, Rock Island Preserve, or any of the many parks and natural areas that are located in Linn County. If you are looking for a nice place to take part in any of the activities listed above, Pleasant Creek Lake should be on your list of places to visit.

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Figure 2. Henslow's Sparrow in Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area, 12 June 2004. Photograph by James Durban, Marion, IA.