

## Birding the Red Rock Area

By Ann Johnson

The Des Moines River Valley takes on a different look as one moves southeast from Des Moines. No longer under the influence of the Des Moines Lobe glaciation and its gently sloping landscape, the steeply rolling hills move water rapidly into the river, leading to severe flooding problems in the south east quarter of the state. After devastating floods in 1947, money was appropriated by Congress to construct a flood-control dam across the Des Moines River. After several delays, in 1960 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began construction downstream from the old town of Red Rock in Marion County, and the gates to the dam were closed in March of 1969. Heavy snow melt and spring rains filled the permanent pool in just four days and thus began a new chapter in avian ecology for south-central Iowa.



The Red Rock area stretches from a state wildlife management area near the town of Runnells in Polk County to the Army Corps of Engineers recreation areas below the dam near Pella in Marion County. The area encompasses 47,610 acres of U.S. government lands managed by the Corps, another 25,572 acres under long-term lease to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources as a wildlife management area, and additional lands in Elk Rock State Park and Roberts Creek Park, managed by the Department of Natural Resources and Marion County Conservation Board respectively. Although by most standards this area has been under-birded, about 300 species of birds have been found here in the past 20 years. With better coverage, who knows what might be found!

As with any of Iowa's reservoirs, much of the birding is highly dependent on water levels and may change almost daily. At full storage, Red Rock Reservoir expands from the 7,000-acre permanent pool to 50,000 acres of water. This greatly affects not only the birdlife but also accessibility to birding areas. The following guide must be used with the understanding that any given area may be nearly devoid of birds or conversely may be the hot spot of the moment. All possible areas are not listed, and a good county map may lead an enterprising birder to less explored areas and tremendous results. Also not included is the vast system of unmaintained roadways on federal and state lands which, after 20 years of little to no maintenance and periodic flooding, may require a four-wheel drive vehicle and some walking. For the adventurous, the possibilities are nearly unlimited.

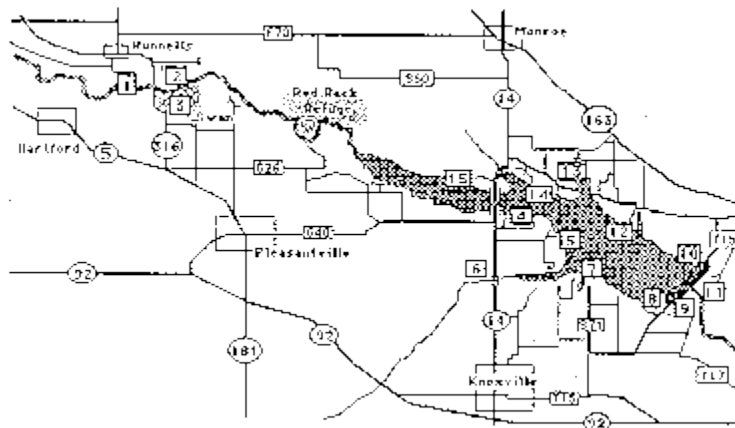


Figure 1. Overview of the Red Rock area. Numbers in boxes refer to numbered areas in text.

### UPPER REFUGE AREA

(1) The tour starts at the Runnells post office on Highway 316 in southeastern Polk County (Figure 1). The Department of Natural Resources wildlife management area south of town may contain a number of water-related birds during flood years. Periodically the roads are under water, but if possible go one block south to the south edge of town, go west at the T-intersection for about two blocks, and then turn back south across the railroad tracks. In 0.2 miles the gravel road will turn right but you will continue straight ahead on the dirt road into the public hunting area which may be full of herons, cormorants, and shorebirds. If the vegetation is short, most likely in flood years, this may be a good place to look for Buff-breasted and Baird's sandpipers.

(2) Return to the Runnells post office. During periods of drought, one of the most productive areas is the public hunting area east of Runnells and Highway 316. To get here go east of Runnells for 0.8 mile on Highway 316 and, as the road straightens to the south, turn east on a gravel road marked "Road Closed Ahead - Bridge Out". Immediately turn right onto the dirt road and drive back about 0.1 mile to the first of several ponds. These ponds seldom dry up completely, and in times of limited habitat may prove to be the only area available to shorebirds and waterfowl. During normal years the ponds are primarily occupied by people fishing or riding their four-wheelers.

(3) Back at Highway 316, continue south for 2.5 miles to a parking area on your left overlooking the Swan Wildlife Refuge. This is a good place to peruse the area for post-breeding herons and egrets and migratory shorebirds, waterfowl, and pelicans. The overlook is also one of the best places in south-central Iowa to watch for raptors as they move through the river valley. Peregrines Falcons are seen nearly every fall. Each fall the Department of Natural Resources pumps water into a series of ponds here to provide habitat for migratory waterfowl. Some years the number of birds using these ponds borders on the spectacular. The refuge is an inviolate area from early-September through Christmas Day, but in late summer a walk down from the overlook and along the dikes may produce a number of shorebirds. Piping Plover and Least Tern have both been seen here. One word of warning to county listers; Polk, Marion and Warren Counties all converge in this area so check your county maps carefully to know where you are looking.

Go south from the Runnells overlook for 2.5 miles on Highway 316 to the stop sign at Highway 5. Turn left onto Highway 5 and drive about 5 miles to the town of Pleasantville. At the grain elevator in Pleasantville, turn east on County Road G40 and drive 8.5 miles (watch out for the sharp curves at the midway point) to the stop sign at Highway 14. Once you reach Highway 14, you are ready to explore -

## **THE RESERVOIR**

(4) Your first stop will be South Elk Rock State Park. From the T-intersection at Highway 14, go south 0.3 mile. Watch for the "Elk Rock State Park" sign and turn left (east) onto the park road. Immediately turn left again and you are on Old Highway 14 which has become a boat ramp. The weeds in the area are good for sparrows, the shoreline trees provide roosts for many Bald Eagles each winter, and the lake itself may produce a number of ducks, pelicans, cormorants, and gulls. Glaucous Gull has been observed from this point. Prior to the filling of the lake, the wooded bluffs of Elk Rock were home to several Cerulean Warblers and with perseverance some may still be found in this area.

(5) Return to the park road and follow the old highway south for another 0.3 mile. In wet weather you may need to return to Highway 14, turn left, and turn left (east) again in 0.3 mile opposite a brown "Historical Marker" sign. Watch for raptors along this gravel road, particularly as you get closer to the lake. As the road makes its second curve north, 2.1 miles from the highway, turn right onto a narrow gravel road headed east. Check out the wooded roadside area along the way, especially during migration, and stop at the T-intersection in approximately 0.2 mile. After the high water in the summer of 1990, this area produced Piping Plover, Snowy Egret, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and several other rare species in a three-week span. It has also been one of the surest places to find Buff-breasted Sandpiper in the fall. Sparrows, woodpeckers, and other passerines are also abundant through here. If you back track for 0.2 mile to the main gravel road, turn right and go another 0.3 mile to the boat ramp.

In early winter, as the shallow end of the lake freezes and birds are forced closer to the dam, this is a good place for waterfowl viewing. Lighting is much better here, also, than at many other observation points.

(6) Return to Highway 14 and turn south (left). In 1.7 miles you will cross Whitebreast Creek and surrounding wetlands. The water here is usually shallow and because of its depth is one of the best locations for early spring waterfowl and possibly pelicans. If water levels are right, shorebirds, herons, and egrets may be abundant as well, although the raising of the permanent pool has made the water deeper in this area. Birding here can be somewhat difficult as there is barely enough shoulder to pull off the highway and traffic can be heavy. The old highway, reached by turning west on the first gravel road north of the bridge and immediately back south, can offer some respite from traffic.

(7) Follow Highway 14 south for 3.6 miles into Knoxville until you come to the second stop light where Business 92, also called W. Pleasant Street, intersects with highway 14. Turn east (left) and follow the highway as it winds through town to where the road becomes County Road T15. Starting at the Casey's store on the east edge of Knoxville, drive 4.6 miles; watch for the brown Corps sign where you will turn left onto County Road S71 and drive 2.5 miles to the entrance to the Whitebreast Recreation Area. Straight ahead for 0.4 mile takes you to the Coal Ridge boat ramp which allows unobstructed views of the lake and is one of the best places to see loons, grebes, and Oldsquaw. To scan the west side of the peninsula, turn west just before the steep incline to the Coal Ridge boat ramp and drive into the campground. Go past the entrance station and turn left in about 0.1 mile at the sign to the Coalport Boat Ramp. In 0.4 mile you will come to a boat ramp that overlooks the former beach jutting into Whitebreast Bay. Although the high water has for all practical purposes destroyed the beach for its original use, numerous gull species have been seen from this vantage. Try to get here early enough in the day that the western sun is not a problem. The road through the campground follows a ridge and may produce good hawk numbers in fall. At the end of the road is Whitebreast Point picnic area, another good spot for scanning the lake. If you want to do some hiking, go back to the entrance to the Whitebreast area and turn east (left) at the stop sign. Go about 0.2 mile and watch for a parking lot on the north side of the road. This is parking for the "Stu Kuyper Trails" that wander through the timber and continue down toward the lake.

Return to the intersection with County Road T15 and turn east (left) toward the dam. Black-legged Kittiwake and Ross', Laughing, Ivory, Thayer's, Glaucous, and Lesser Black-backed gulls have all been seen around the dam in the past few years. This is also a good site for finding loons, grebes, Greater Scaup, and Oldsquaw. When the river is low, a number of terns and gulls congregate on the sand and gravel bars below the dam. This is also an excellent spot to search for shorebirds such as Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. Well-developed bike trails with wildlife blinds along both sides of the river can provide a great birding opportunity for cyclists and hikers.

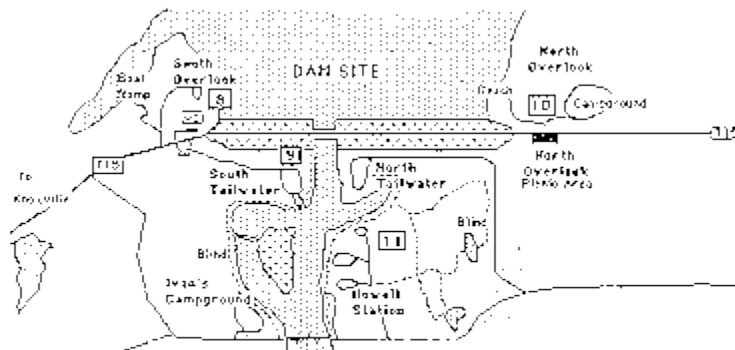


Figure 2. Birding areas near the Red Rock Dam.

(8) SOUTH OVERLOOK - The Visitors Center (open daily in summer, weekends rest of the year) is located at the south end of the dam and is reached in about 3.1 miles from the Whitebreast turn-

off (Figure 2). Stop here for a current bird checklist and a good area map, especially the one of public hunting areas if you are interested in exploring the back roads. The recreation area around the Visitors Center is called South Overlook. In addition to scanning the lake from the deck at the center, drive back south on County Road T15 for a few hundred feet and turn right. This road leads for 0.3 mile to a picnic area at the top of the hill. Because of lighting conditions and proximity to the dam, this is one of the best spots to look for unusual divers. Large numbers of all three mergansers are common in spring. If the lake is not totally frozen in winter, this is also the best place to see the waterfowl remaining at the lake and the opportunistic Bald Eagles sitting close-by on the ice.

(9) SOUTH TAILWATER - Directly across the road from the Visitors Center is the entrance to the South Tailwater area below the dam. This is an important area to bird in the Red Rock area when looking for rarities, especially gulls. The Flood of '93 did major damage in this area and it is no longer convenient to sit in your car and scope the water so may have to walk a short distance. Open water here in the winter is usually good for a few surprises. Bald Eagles normally roost in the trees along The river each winter. In summer walk the path along the hillside and listen for Carolina Wren, Cerulean Warbler, Northern Parula, and other passerines on the hillside to the south.

(10) NORTH OVERLOOK - By returning to the dam road and driving north for 1.0 mile across the dam, you will reach the North Overlook area. This recreation area encompasses both sides of County Road T15 at the north end of the dam and overlooks both the lake and the tailwaters. If you are interested in finding passerines, pull off the road into the picnic area parking lot on the east (right) side and walk the nature trail through the hardwood timber. The beach on the west side of the road, when not in use by swimmers, often has roosting gulls. If there is not a lot of glare from the water, you can also scan the central part of the lake from here.

(11) NORTH TAILWATER/HOWELL STATION - If there are birds on the water below the dam, the roads through these two recreation areas can sometimes get you closer. To get there, continue north from North Overlook on County Road T15 for 0.5 mile. The road signs get a bit confusing here as T15 both continues north and turns east (right) toward Pella. The Corps, however, has done an excellent job placing directional signs for all their recreation areas so keep watching for them. You will turn right and at the next sign in 0.5 mile turn right again. After passing through a residential area, you will see a sign in 1.1 miles directing you right to the North Tailwater area. You may turn here or continue straight ahead for another 0.8 mile to where the road ends at an old iron bridge. This bridge lost its middle section a few years ago and has been turned into a great observation platform to search for eagles in winter. The recreation area on the right is called Howell Station and contains a campground, a boat ramp, and a picnic area. The campground road closest to the river is unlocked all winter and is a good place to observe birds in the tailwater area.

Return to where County Road T15 splits into three parts and turn right (north] to finish the loop around the lake. The ponds along this road usually have a few ducks each spring. In about 1.5 miles turn west (left) at the stop sign onto County Road G28. The Corps of Engineers operates several recreation areas along this north perimeter road and any may be worth a stop. Unfortunately most of these areas are closed at optimal birding times.

(12) The West Wallashuck area, 3.0 miles from the stop sign, houses the marina which may be open year round. (Recent vandalism has forced the installation of a gate, but you may still walk the area.) Turn left at the sign and drive to the parking lot at the end of the road. This is another good place to scan the lake for divers. The pine groves along the road may produce Red-breasted Nuthatch and Long-eared Owl. From the marina, go back to G28 and head west again.

(13) In 2.0 miles you will come to the dam between Lake Red Rock and Roberts Creek Lake. Divers such as grebes, mergansers, and scoters are often seen from here. Gulls frequently roost on the beach and can be seen from the parking area on the dam. All of Roberts Creek Park is worth birding. The hardwood timber on the west side of the lake is good for passerines, including Scarlet Tanager and Kentucky Warbler, and a Cooper's Hawk nested here a few years ago. The wet areas along the east road

have nesting Willow Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler, and Bell's Vireo. Follow the east entrance road for 0.4 mile and then turn right. In 0.5 mile turn left at a stop sign. In another 0.5 mile the road jogs right and then turns left. At the stop sign turn left again and head due west. Follow this road for 2.0 miles until you come to the north end of Roberts Creek Lake. Depending on water and vegetation levels, this area is usually good for herons, rails, ducks, geese, and shorebirds. At this point the road bends to the north and you will continue north for 0.4 mile to the stop sign. Be sure to check the marshy areas and grasslands, good areas for sparrows, along the way. When you come to the stop sign, turn left and go 1.2 miles, then turn left again. In another 1.3 miles you will return to County Road G28.

(14) Back at G28 go back east (left) for 1.0 mile and turn right into the boat ramp parking lot to scan the lake. Prairie Falcon has been observed here as have many species of gulls and waterfowl. To get to Cordova County Park, turn left on to County G28 and go 1.3 miles west of the boat ramp. Turn left into the park. Some of the backwater areas here, particularly the one reached by bearing left at all times, can be productive for waterfowl. This is also a good place to find migrant passerines. Northern Shrike has been seen here some winters.

(15) Return to G28 and continue west for approximately one mile to the intersection with Highway 14. Turn left (south). A winter side trip from here may be worthwhile. In 0.3 mile turn west (right) toward the Painted Rocks development. Turn left at 0.8 mile and drive another 0.5 mile. Park beside the old Red Rock cemetery and look for Long-eared, Short-eared, and Barred owls in the evergreen trees.

Return to Highway 14, turn south (right), and go across the Mile Long Bridge. Watch to the west of the bridge for pelicans in spring and fall. It is not unusual to see an Osprey or Bald Eagle fly over as you cross. The loop is finished at the G40 turnoff to Pleasantville, 0.5 mile south of the bridge.