

# Birding Squaw Creek Park

*Pete Wickham*

Squaw Creek Park is an outstanding area in Linn County in which to see birds. The park is located about three miles southeast of the town of Marion, and comprises about one square mile of a mixture of woods and overgrown fields. It also contains a small pond and associated marsh. Several birders from nearby Cedar Rapids and Marion have birded frequently in the park during the last twenty years, and thus, a great deal has been learned about the bird life in different seasons. At least 195 species have been found in the park, making it one of the outstanding birding areas in Iowa in all seasons but especially during migration.

The main entrance is off Iowa Hwy. 100 about 0.2 miles west of Iowa Hwy. 13, south of Marion. Follow signs to the lodges. The **long entrance road** (Figure 1.1) passes some fields (where Eastern Meadowlark and Dickcissel nest), the new Prairie Oak Lodge, and a pond with associated marsh on the right and a low area on the left where beavers have built a dam. Parking to bird in this excellent area is on your left, below the original **Red Cedar Lodge** (Figure 1.2).

After parking, one can walk a short distance back along the road to bird next to the beaver pond, now on your right, where a variety of land birds can be found in all seasons. Both Yellow Warbler and Willow Flycatcher nest in the bushes around the dam area. Then cross the road to check for birds at the pond and marsh. This area was developed only about five years ago, and has added significantly to the variety of birds seen in the park. Sora are regularly found in both spring and fall in the marshy edges of the pond. Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, and Great Egret are regular visitors during the warmer months. Occasionally Common Moorhen, Little Blue Heron, and American Bittern have been found during migration. Blue-winged Teal, Wood Duck, Mallard, and Tree Swallow nest in the immediate area. During spring and fall migration, other species of ducks such as Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, and Redhead regularly visit the pond.

After you have finished birding here, return to the parking lot. Drive east and south along the level road. On your right you will notice a **brushy area** (Figure 1.3). On early spring evenings, American Woodcock can be found performing both along this section and along the entrance road in open or brushy areas. Recently Bill Scheible and I counted eight in one evening. After a short distance, the road approaches a section of woods where there are several pullouts for parking. On some mornings during migration, the trees facing east in this section fill with migrant warblers and vireos. Eastern Towhee, Field Sparrow, and Gray Catbird nest in this section. White-crowned, White-throated, and Harris's Sparrows often feed along the road here in the spring. To your left, east of the road, you may notice that Squaw Creek is gurgling along through the countryside.

Near the last of these parking areas, a **path leaves the road** (Figure 1.4) and leads east through a weedy field to a crossing over Squaw Creek, which is a small stream at this point. After crossing the creek, the path leads to a **large open pasture** (Figure 1.5) in which Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, and Eastern Kingbird regularly nest. Back on the road and once it has passed these parking areas, it curves smoothly to the south and ascends one of the main hills in the park. Wooded areas close in on both sides of the road.

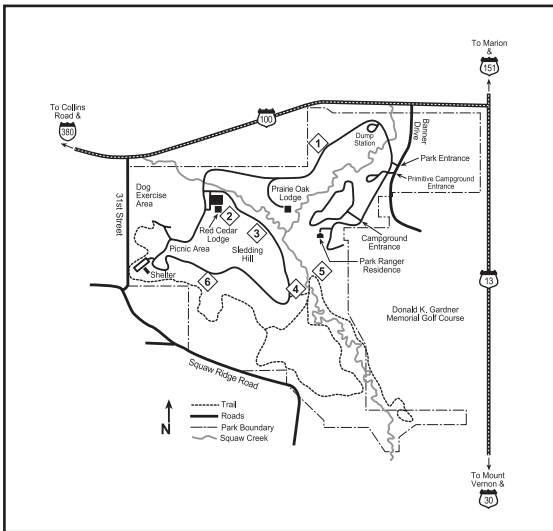


Figure 1. Squaw Creek Park birding areas: (1) entrance road, (2) Red Cedar Lodge, (3) brushy area, (4) walking path, (5) large open pasture, (6) picnic area.

Frequently many smaller land birds — vireos, flycatchers, and warblers — are observed along the road at this point. Blue-winged Warbler are often heard or seen here during their nesting season, and a Blue Grosbeak pair attempted to nest in the open area at the top of the hill two years ago. Eastern Bluebird regularly nest in nesting boxes on either side of the road in this section.

Upon reaching the top of the hill, the road passes a **shaded, mowed picnic area** (Figure 1.6). During spring migration in particular, the trees in these areas often fill with migrants. Mourning and Connecticut Warblers are frequently seen in bushes at the edge of the second grassy area in mid- to late May. In addition, both Swainson’s and Gray-cheeked Thrushes often patrol the grassy areas at this time. Behind the easternmost picnic areas there is a narrow, unsigned trail. If you follow it downhill about 50 feet through the woods to a wider trail, you will find more land birds. (Suggestion: Take a good look at where this trail comes out, so you can find it if you come back this way.) The small brook just beyond the junction of the small trail with the wider trail feeds into Squaw Creek. By turning left, southeast onto the wider trail, one can walk through the woods to find Scarlet Tanager, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and other nesting species. This is also an excellent area in which to see migrant warblers and vireos in the spring. The path ultimately climbs a short but steep hill and continues past a couple of overgrown fields around which one or two pairs of Blue-winged Warbler normally nest.

By retracing your steps, you can return to your car, or you can continue on the trail for a much longer distance. It loops around to the south, then to the east, and finally back north and west to meet the trail you took to the open field area. After returning to your car, and following the road either east or west, one can reach Red Cedar Lodge — the park road is a circular route — and exit the park along the entrance road. I hope this summary entices some readers to want to see Squaw Creek Park. If available, I would be happy to help first-time visitors to the park.

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