

Birding Area: Purple Martin Lake Water Resource Area

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Purple Martin Lake Water Resource Area is one of Polk County's newest birding spots and in the space of just a couple of years has already recorded an impressive 163 species. This recreational area is owned by the Des Moines Water Works (DMWW) and was previously a quarry. The lake also supplies water to the customers of the DMWW. The area offers birding and hiking along with canoeing and kayaking. In exchange for allowing the public access to the area, Iowa's Department of Natural Resources agreed to manage the property on behalf of the DMWW as an extension of the nearby Walnut Woods State Park. The project also had the cooperation of the City of West Des Moines and the Friends of Walnut Woods State Park.

The park is conveniently located northeast of the intersection of Interstate 35 and Highway 5, has ample parking, and usually has a portable restroom available. Access the site from Highway 5, taking the exit at Southeast 35th Street and going north to Army Post Road, then west to the end of the road. As the name implies, Purple Martins are a prominent feature of the lake as the martin houses are located by the parking area and there are even stadium bleachers available for viewing the martins. This year's first Purple Martin was seen on 19 March and the martin managed to survive several chilly nights later that week. Recent eBird reports show that typically 25–30 martins are seen on any given day during the spring.



Figure 1. Harris's Sparrow, Purple Martin Lake, Polk, 25 October 2019. Photograph by Tom Dougherty, Urbandale, IA.

In addition to the Purple Martin houses, there are about 20 bluebird boxes spread out along the walking trails to the east and west of the parking areas. Having walked the trail several times, I can vouch that the Tree Swallows enjoy the well-maintained nest boxes, too.

Ospreys also take advantage of nearby man-made structures for nesting. A cell phone tower on the southeast boundary of the area has been used by a pair of Ospreys over the last few years.

As you drive the last quarter mile of Army Post Road before reaching the parking lot, be sure to check out the habitat on the north side of the road. Plenty of sparrows and woodland birds can be seen and heard along this stretch. In 2019, I even saw a Red-shouldered Hawk in this area. Once you are at the parking area, enjoy the Purple Martins, Eastern Bluebirds, and Tree Swallows but also check the shrubs that border the lot. I have seen Harris's Sparrows

(Figure 1), White-crowned Sparrows, and Yellow-throated Vireos while barely leaving my car.

Viewing waterfowl is also easy as a nice, clear view of the lake is just steps from the parking lot. Although the lake is not huge, if you have a scope, bring it along because the birds often seem to congregate at the north end of the lake. The lake sees mainly diving ducks in the springtime with mergansers, scaup, and Common Goldeneyes the most common species. Dabbling ducks occasionally drop by but are somewhat less common. A few swans have been recorded here but are seen much more regularly and in greater numbers at nearby Dale Maffitt Reservoir.

To the west of the parking area is a wooded area bordering a short stretch of Army Post Road that is not open to vehicle traffic. This area provides great woodland habitat worth checking. A well-maintained trail also leads to the west of the parking lot and continues around the west side of the lake. This area provides grassy habitat along with close-by wooded areas for easy viewing and listening.

Although not as popular a warbler spot as areas around Saylorville Lake, the lake has seen many notable species, including a not-often seen or heard Connecticut Warbler in 2018. Other migrant warblers recorded here include Golden-winged, Orange-crowned (Figure 3), Mourning, Magnolia, and Chestnut-sided.



Figure 2. Orange-crowned Warbler, Purple Martin Lake, Polk, 25 October 2019. Photograph by Tom Dougherty, Urbandale, IA.

The wooded areas around the parking area and lake offer many opportunities to find other interesting species including Bell's, Blue-headed, and Philadelphia vireos, Willow Flycatchers, and both Baltimore and Orchard orioles.

Purple Martin is a great location whether you only have 15–20 minutes to do some birding or if you plan to spend an hour or two. Scoping the lake for waterfowl and checking the area around the parking lot is quick and easy and you may be surprised how many species you can see in a short amount of time. If you have more time for a hike, walking the trails either on the east or west side of the lake will add to your birding opportunities.

To learn more about Purple Martin Lake Water Resource Area, check out the eBird page for this site. Go to: <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L6211053>. To see a bar chart of species that have been seen here week by week throughout the year, just click the link for “Bar Charts” on this same web page.

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