

Birding Eastern Lucas County

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Most Iowa birders are familiar with the Whitebreast and Lucas units of Stephens State Forest. These units, found in western Lucas County, have long been known for their breeding warblers, Pileated Woodpeckers, and Ruffed Grouse, and more recently for Chuck-wills-widow and nesting Red-shouldered Hawks. Most birders, if they are even aware of their existence, have not visited the forest units in eastern Lucas County: the Chariton and Cedar Creek units. The birdlife of these units remains comparatively unknown, although in the past few years they have received limited coverage which reveals that they are worth further exploration. This article is not so much about where you can go to find specific species, but more a preliminary report of what has been found so far, and some suggestions for those who like to explore new areas.

The Chariton Unit is the easternmost unit in Lucas County, tucked between the Cedar Creek Unit to the west and the Thousand Acres Unit in Monroe County to the east (**Figures 1 and 2**). This unit, at around 1500 acres, is the second smallest unit of Stephens State Forest; however, due to its topography and lack of heavy use by people, it often feels wilder and more remote than the other units. To reach the Chariton Unit, take Highway 34 east from Chariton, then go north on 500th/340th Avenue for about 5.5 miles. At this point, a dirt road runs west to the forest boundary. It then forks, going north along the forest border or southwest into the forest. I recommend parking at this fork (**Figure 2.1**) and walking down the road into the forest. The forest road may or may not look drivable at this point, but it is definitely not passable once it reaches the valley floor due to flooding and erosion.

Walking down the forest road, you will parallel a deep wooded ravine as you drop into the main creek valley. This ravine is classic Iowa Acadian Flycatcher habitat. It is also a spot where it would not be surprising to find a Worm-eating Warbler. Eastern Towhees are common as you reach the valley floor and Blue-winged and Kentucky warblers are present in small numbers. Walking the road is an easy way to cover a large portion of the forest. This road continues all the way to the west end of the unit, so a person could spend several hours just walking out and back. Among the expected forest species, Scarlet Tanagers seem especially common here and are rarely out of earshot. For the more adventurous, a stream bisects the unit and is a good feature to follow off-trail, as well as a good place to look for Bobcat tracks. Louisiana Waterthrush is usually present somewhere along this stream, and the area's nesting Red-shouldered Hawks tend to stick close to the stream as well.

The Chariton Unit is a really good place to go if you just want to get away from the noise and distraction of other people. In my many trips to this unit, the only other visitors I have encountered were mushroom hunters. One brief note of caution: if it has rained recently, roads approaching the forest can be muddy and the road through the forest can flood. More importantly, stay out of the valley when rain seems likely. In the summer of 2008, there was a flash flood that covered the entire valley floor with rushing water, as

evidenced by huge areas of flattened vegetation, and debris deposited several feet off the ground in trees and bushes.

The Cedar Creek Unit is a larger and more diverse property than the Chariton Unit. Although generally easily accessed, getting to the unit from Highway 34 involves a number of jogs and road name changes, so it is better to consult your Sportsmen's Atlas than depend on my directions. However, a useful reference point is the intersection of County Road H32 and 300th Trail. Driving north along 300th takes you into the middle of the forest where most of the access points are located. Before reaching the forest, this road has good habitat for Bobolink, meadowlarks, Grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Bobwhite, and the occasional Northern Mockingbird.

While there are large chunks of the unit that probably never see a birder, a couple spots that have been birded suggest that the rest is well worth exploring. The first of these is reached by taking 510th Street east from 300th Trail. As the road drops down to a stream crossing, there is a new parking lot on the south side of the road (**Figure 2.2**). On the north side of the road, walk the service road that runs up a hill to the north and west. This area

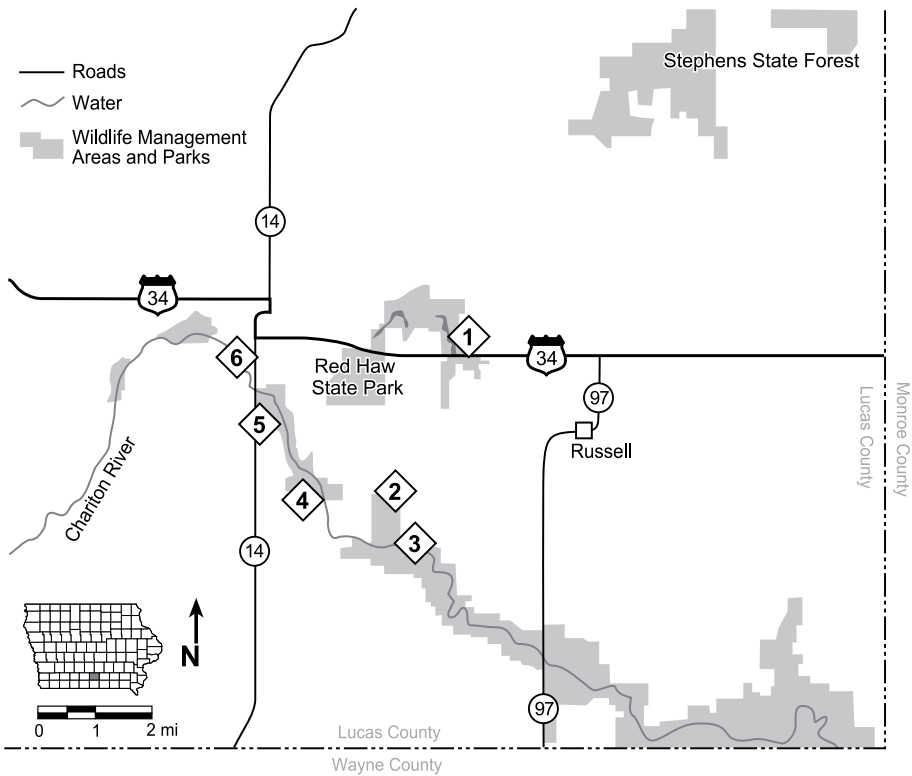


Figure 1. Map of eastern Lucas County showing the location of Stephens State Forest and other sites mentioned at the end of the article.

is a mix of forest, old field, cedar groves, and cropland. As you reach the top of the hill, the old road will pass a big cedar grove then arrive in a wide open grassy area, which serves as a good orientation point. From this opening, an old road/path runs off to the north along an old fence line. Following this path will take you through an area that has had Acadian Flycatcher, Blue-winged Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat territories. Birds of scrubby habitats like Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, and Eastern Towhee, are common. This section of the trail can be spectacular for butterflies as well. Returning to the open hilltop, if you continue due west you will begin to drop down into a stream valley. This interesting valley is wooded on the sides but fairly open along the stream. This is confirmed breeding location for Blue-winged Warbler, and Pileated Woodpeckers are seen occasionally.

A second spot to visit for a good hike is reached from the north parking lot on the west side of 300th Trail (**Figure 2.3**). Jim Sinclair and I explored this area once in May and found nice flocks of migrants plus several interesting breeding birds. At the parking area, a male Summer Tanager was singing from the oaks. Following the trail into the forest, you are immediately in mature woods, which is excellent for warblers and forest breeders. The trail eventually forks and slopes downhill into a stream valley. We took the right fork down to the stream, and then walked the stream bed south for some distance before finding and following the other fork back to the parking lot. Along the stream, we were repeatedly scolded by an angry pair of Red-shouldered Hawks. The recent appearance of these birds in

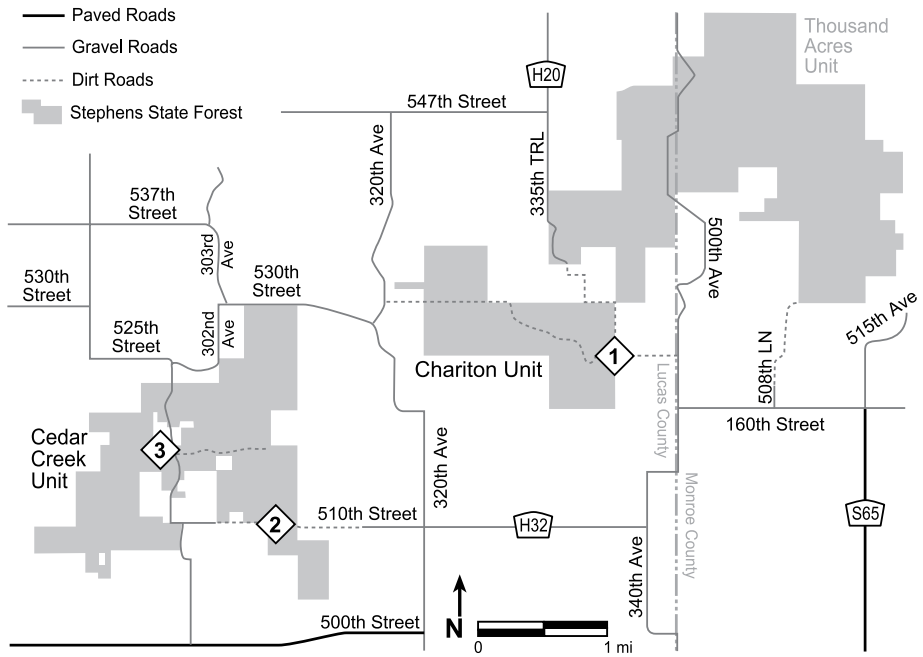


Figure 2. Map of the Cedar Creek and Chariton Units of Stephens State Forest showing the three sites mentioned in the article.

southcentral Iowa is an exciting development. After being occasionally reported as singles off and on for years, Red-shouldered Hawks now appear to be nesting in every unit of Stephens State Forest as well as the Rathbun Wildlife Area. In addition to the hawks, Northern Parula and Louisiana Waterthrush were singing along the stream, and waves of migrants continued to pass by. The hilly, wooded slopes of the area seem perfect for Acadian Flycatcher and Kentucky Warbler, and with regular coverage would undoubtedly produce the occasional Hooded or Worm-eating warbler. These two spots cover only a small part of the Cedar Creek Unit. There are a number of other access points to explore the forest that may be even better than those described above.

While visiting the Chariton and Cedar Creek units, there are other nearby spots that may be worth a visit. The following loop will quickly cover multiple habitats, each with its own interesting birds in season. Taking Highway 34 back toward Chariton, the shallow south end of Lake Morris (**Figure 1.1**) comes right up to the road. There are often migrating ducks, herons, and shorebirds here and on the private restored wetland on the south side of the highway. To the south along 255th Avenue, Slab Castle Wildlife Area (**Figure 1.2**) is a great spot for nesting Henslow's Sparrow and interesting prairie wildlife in general. South of Slab Castle, where the road crosses the Chariton River (**Figure 1.3**), there is a nice wetland and floodplain forest habitat. This is another spot where Red-shouldered Hawks have nested. Returning north on 255th, take 450th Street west. This will take you past Engebretsen Wildlife Area (**Figure 1.4**). This is another excellent area for Henslow's Sparrow and the extensive restored wetlands are often loaded with waterfowl and wading birds during migration. Continuing west on 450th will take you to Highway 14. Take Highway 14 north to Pin Oak Marsh (**Figure 1.5**). The large pools on either side of the road have been productive for migrating puddle ducks, wading birds, and shorebirds depending on water levels. Just north of the Chariton River bridge, on the west side of the highway, there is a small parking area (**Figure 1.6**). Walking the trail west into the forest will take you to an area that has produced Prothonotary Warbler and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in summer.

All of the locations discussed above are situated between the Lucas and Whitebreast Units of Stephens State Forest to the west, and Colyn Wildlife Area and Rathbun Lake to the southeast. The next time you are planning to visit those popular birding locations, allow some extra time to explore the underbirded areas of eastern Lucas County.

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