

BIRDING THE WEST END OF CLEAR LAKE

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Although Clear Lake itself is a 3,643-acre lake, the area around it is highly populated and offers limited access for birding. There are, however, several good public-owned birding areas at the west end near the town of Ventura. These areas are in western Cerro Gordo County, except for part of Ventura Marsh, which extends into Hancock County.



McIntosh Woods State Park is a 60-acre wooded and brushy area on the north side of Clear Lake. The park entrance is on Lake Street 1.0 miles east of S-14 in Ventura. Just past the Ranger's house there is a small marsh that can be checked from the east and south sides. The wooded area to the east has a self-guided interpretive trail and is a good spot for warblers and other woodland birds. The main road goes south to a boat ramp. Beyond the boat ramp, a long sandbar extends into the lake, providing a good viewing point for water birds. Occasionally a Pileated Woodpecker is seen flying between the park and timber on the south side of the lake.

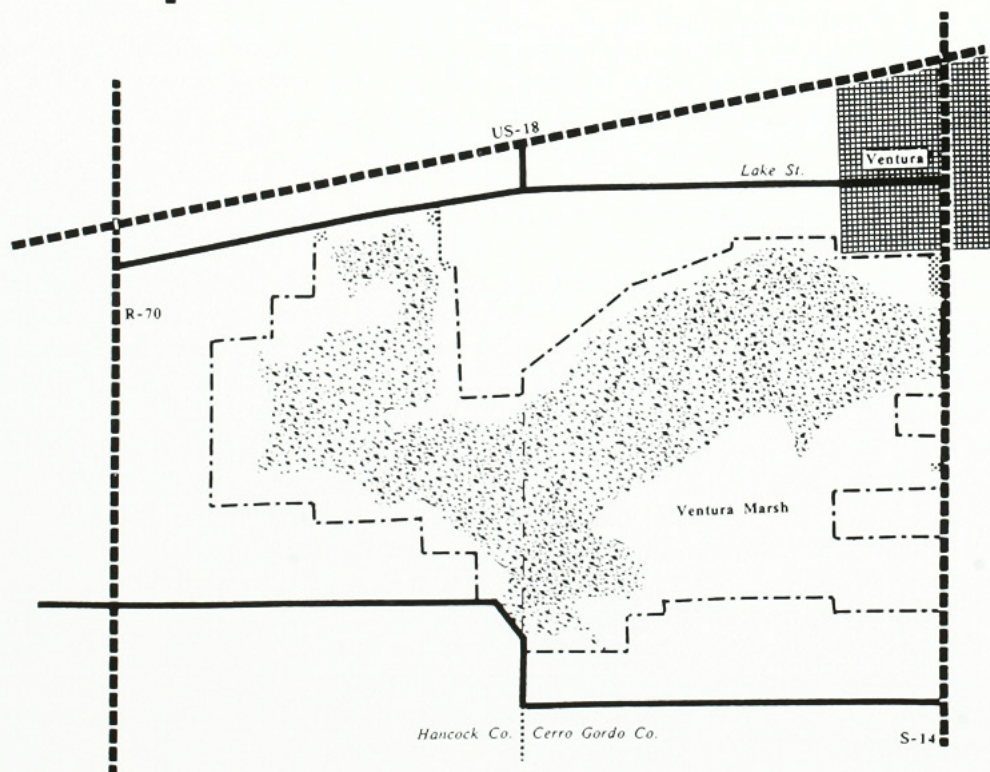
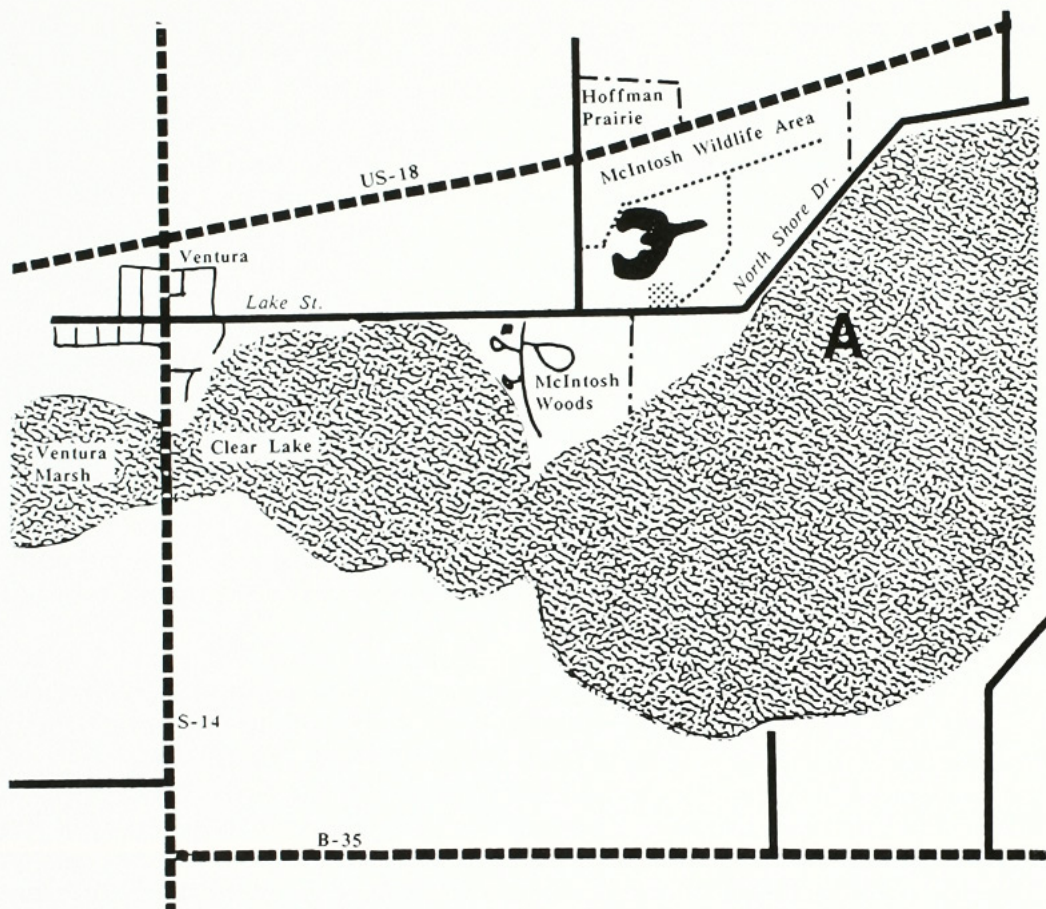
McIntosh Wildlife Area is a 220-acre Public Hunting Area that lies between U.S. Highway 18 and North Shore Drive (a continuation of Lake Street). The area is mostly grassland with fields of brome, alfalfa, and switchgrass. Except during occasional drought years, the 17-acre marsh on the west side of the area is good for ducks and wetland birds, including Yellow-headed Blackbird. There is an oak woods on the southeast corner of the area. McIntosh Wildlife Area is used for study of both game and nongame species, so birders should avoid colored flags used to mark nests and live traps used to capture predators.

The best access to the area is from a parking lot that lies 0.25 miles east of the entrance to McIntosh Woods State Park. One can scan the marsh from a car or walk the service road into the grassland, where Sedge Wren, Bobolink, and Dickcissel can be found.

To the east of the south parking lot, there are several pull-outs along the next 0.7 miles of North Shore Drive that border the area. From these locations one can walk into McIntosh Wildlife Area or view the lake. Yellow Warblers are found in the trees and brush at the east end, and Warbling Vireos can be heard in the large trees along the lake shore. Aerator holes (A) keep some water open when the rest of the lake is frozen. Waterfowl can be seen at these holes in late fall and early spring. (There is another aerator hole at the far east end of Clear Lake.)

Hoffman Prairie, an area owned by The Nature Conservancy and open to the public, lies north of McIntosh Wildlife Area and north of Highway 18.

Ventura Marsh is a 733-acre area immediately southwest of Ventura. The 450-acre marsh is bordered by upland area and separated from Clear Lake by Highway S-14 and a water-control structure. Most of the uplands are composed of grasslands that provide cover for nesting birds. Trees and brush line the edge of the marsh on the north and south. The large area on the south contains a 50-acre nesting study area surrounded by a predator-proof electric fence that would give a birder a good jolt when it is energized from late March to mid-July.



The best accesses to Ventura Marsh are on the east and northwest sides. The area of marsh on the south, which is mostly cattails with a few jack pines, is not very productive. A large parking lot and boat ramp located 0.2 miles south of Lake Street on Highway S-14 provides boat access to the marsh. A small parking lot 0.5 miles south of the large parking lot provides walking access to the largest area of uplands.

Access to the northwest areas are from parking lots 1.3 and 1.6 miles west of S-14 on Lake Street. The more westerly lot leads to uplands on the north side.

Birds found at Ventura Marsh include Sedge Wren, Bobolink, Yellow Warbler, and Willow Flycatcher. Over-water nesting species, best seen from a boat, include small colonies of Forster's and Black terns, Marsh Wren, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Nesting waterfowl include Canada Goose, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, and Wood Duck. Occasionally, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, and Redhead nest. Broods of Common Moorhen have been seen at the east end of the marsh. King Rail has been seen, but nesting has not been confirmed. American White Pelican is often present during migration.

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