

# Winneshiek County Birding Areas

## 1. Cardinal Marsh

Located in far western Winneshiek County, Cardinal Marsh includes 1165 acres managed for wildlife by the Iowa DNR. A mixture of woodland, upland, and marsh habitat make this the county's premier birding destination. Turn north on 345<sup>th</sup> Ave. from Co. Rd. A46 four miles west of Ridgeway, or turn south on 345<sup>th</sup> Ave. from State Hwy. 9 two miles east of Cresco to reach Cardinal Marsh.

Early spring waterfowl viewing is excellent and includes Tundra Swan, White-fronted Goose, and many duck species. Sandhill cranes arrive to nest shortly after ice-out. A little later, look for rare migrant Horned and Eared Grebes. Late spring brings migrating shorebirds if mudflats are exposed. Lucky birders could spot Willet, Hudsonian Godwit, Wilson's and Red-necked phalaropes besides Dunlin and both Dowitchers. Surrounding woodlands in spring attract numerous warblers, vireos and the always stunning Scarlet Tanager. Bell's Vireo has been sighted in brushy thickets.

Come summer, grasslands harbor Bobolink, Sedge Wren, Dickcissel and Grasshopper Sparrow while swampy haunts are home to Pied-billed Grebe, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle, Least Bittern and Common Moorhen. Other nesting birds include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Willow Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Wood Thrush, American Redstart and Orchard Oriole.

This is an exceptional area in the fall for Fox and Harris' Sparrows. Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike and Short-eared Owl show up in winter.

## 2. Chipera Prairie

Chipera Prairie is a 77 acre grassland accessed immediately after crossing the railroad tracks off 128<sup>th</sup> St. along State Hwy. 24 three miles west of Fort Atkinson.

An old farm grove serves as a good oasis in May for migrating warblers and vireos. Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Sedge Wren and Northern Harrier are summertime nesters.

Scattered brushy thickets offer outstanding birding for sparrows during October. Large numbers of White-throated and Fox Sparrows sometimes congregate on the site, along with White-crowned, Tree, Field, Song, Lincoln's, Swamp and Harris' Sparrow.

## 3. Fort Atkinson Sewage Ponds

Located on the north edge of Fort Atkinson along State Hwy. 24, the plastic-lined sewage lagoons are sometimes the only place to see passing shorebirds in the county. Starting in July, southbound migrants might stop to feast on the abundant aquatic insect larvae. Solitary, Least, Semipalmated, Spotted and Pectoral Sandpiper are commonly seen along with Lesser Yellowleg and occasionally phalaropes.

#### **4. Lake Meyer**

Lake Meyer is a 160 acre park managed by the Winneshiek County Conservation Board. Located on Lake Meyer Rd. about a mile south of Calmar off State Hwy. 24, the hilly terrain contains a 35 acre lake surrounded by primarily oak-hickory forest. Nature trails allow easy walking access through the area.

Spring warblers spend a few days feeding in the budding oak trees. Northern Parula, Cape May, Bay-breasted and Blackpoll Warbler are always good finds. Osprey often stop by to fish the lake. Cooper's Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Orchard Oriole are summer residents. A year-round birdfeeding station at the Lake Meyer Nature Center inside the park is always worth checking, but winter brings the best surprises, such as Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, Common Redpoll, and Northern Shrike.

#### **5. Decorah Trout Hatchery**

The Decorah Trout Hatchery is situated a mile south of Decorah along Trout Run Rd. Bald Eagle nests in a cottonwood tree beside the hatchery entrance. The rearing pond can be a resting spot for waterfowl and brushy thickets beside the trout stream sometimes shelter Rusty Blackbird during late autumn. Check shallow steam areas for wintering Common Snipe.

#### **6. Decorah**

Decorah offers several good birding sites.

Start by walking the River Trail which winds through woods along the Upper Iowa River. The trailhead is located by the entrance to Dunning Springs Park. Spring and fall warbler migration can prove to be productive here early in the morning.

The Dunning Springs-Van Peenen Trail System is located directly north of the River Trail, atop the limestone bluffs. You can actually loop back to your car after reaching the east end of the River Trail by crossing Ice Cave Rd. to climb the Van Peenen Trail and walking back west to Dunning Springs Park. The spruce and cedar trees here sometimes hold American Robin, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Flicker, Golden-crowned Kinglet and Yellow-rumped Warbler in winter. Look for Winter Wren along the Dunning Springs outlet stream.

Twin Springs Park at the west edge of town can also be a warbler magnet during May and September as the birds are attracted to the sheltered streambank.

Montgomery Street Pits sit just east of the hospital. Migrating waterfowl sometimes rest here along with resident Mallard and Canada Goose.

Other parks that offer birding opportunities in Decorah include Chattahoochie, Phelps, and Palisades.

## **7. Seed Saver's Exchange**

Seed Saver's Exchange is a private organization dedicated to preserving heirloom varieties of garden vegetables, flowers, and fruits by organically growing, saving and selling those older, mostly forgotten varieties' seeds. They invite visitors to tour their gardens in season and in conjunction have groomed some trails that connect different areas such as an historic orchard, old homestead site, and a spring-fed pond. A small stream and a magnificent stand of mature white pines, besides some scenic limestone bluffs, oak and maple forests on south and north-facing hillsides, pasture land for some rare white cattle, and all those gardens create a very diverse habitat for birds. Check the pines for roosting or nesting hawks and owls. This is an excellent area for migrating passerines. Warblers like to forage in the limbs overhanging the stream. To get to Seed Saver's Exchange, follow State Hwy 52 for three miles north of Decorah before branching off on County Road W34 (North Winn Rd) for one mile.

## **8. Winter's Pond**

This is a private pond, about seven acres in size, seen from the intersection of County Roads W20 and A18 (two miles west of Burr Oak) in northwestern Winneshiek County. It can be easily checked from the roadside for waterfowl and shorebirds. American Pipit and Rusty Blackbird have been found here in the fall.

## **9. South Bear Park**

To reach this 38 acre county conservation area, drive six miles northeast of Decorah on County Road W38 (Locust Rd), three miles east on County Road A26 (Big Canoe Rd), one mile north on County Road A24 (Highlandville Rd), and then one mile east on County Road A24 (Quandahl Rd). South Bear Trout Stream runs along the south edge of the park and is bordered by brushy second growth forest, making both prime resting and foraging habitat for warblers and thrushes during migration periods. Surrounding steep hills help create thermal updrafts that often attract hunting raptors soaring overhead. The north half of the park, north of the Quandahl road is a steep, rugged south-facing slope dominated by cedar trees to the east and deciduous trees to the west. Ruffed Grouse are commonly flushed from the dense cedar thickets. Primitive camping is provided at this park.

## **10. Coon Creek**

Coon Creek is a rugged public wildlife area owned by the DNR in eastern Winneshiek County. Scattered small crop fields are mixed amongst timbered hillsides amounting to 950 acres. Drive six miles east of Decorah on State Hwy. 9 and then five miles north on Glenville Rd to join up with Coon Creek Rd. that takes you past the property.

This area is not easy to bird. Either follow field roads or bushwack through the woods, but some of the hills are very steep and timber rattlesnakes are a possible problem. Rewards for your work include Scarlet Tanager, Eastern Towhee and American Redstart, plus possibly Blue-winged and Kentucky Warblers.