

Birding Areas in Wayne County

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Wayne County (Figure 1) has many excellent, though poorly known, birding areas. Like much of south-central Iowa, it is characterized by rolling hills, wooded stream valleys, grasslands, and agricultural fields. There are almost no natural wetlands or lakes in the county although it is now dotted with small reservoirs and farm ponds. The South Fork of the Chariton River flows across the northeastern corner of the county. Several large woodland tracts are still found in this river valley. The main attractions in Wayne County are the grassland birds. The Conservation Reserve Program has produced large areas of grassland all across the southern part of the county. Some spots almost resemble native prairie where you can still find patches of blazing-star, coneflowers, butterfly milkweed, and compass-plant, and animals such as badger, Franklin's ground squirrel, speckled kingsnake, and regal fritillary. The following information details where to find specific species such as Eurasian Collared-Dove, Henslow's Sparrow, and Short-eared Owl, as well as suggestions for general birding.

SHORT-EARED OWL ROUTE

Wayne County is a great place to see migrating and wintering **Short-eared Owls** (Figure 2). Owls have been found October to April but are less frequently seen at the beginning and end of this period. They are usually visible for a short time around dusk, but can occasionally be found hunting during the day when there is heavy snow cover. There are two good ways to view the owls: (1) go to a field which they are known to occupy and wait for them to begin hunting or (2) drive quickly through the area, watching for owls hunting or sitting on fence posts. The first method generally produces extended viewing of a small number of owls. The second method allows you to cover a lot of ground and will produce many

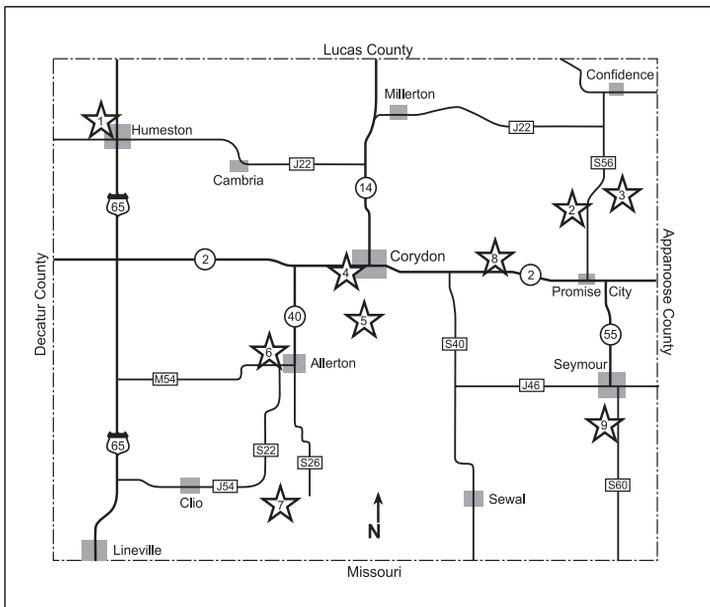


Figure 1. Overview of birding areas in Wayne County: (1) Lakeside Park (Humeston Reservoir), (2) Rathbun Wildlife Area (W.A.) (Swamp Oaks area), (3) Rathbun W.A. (Woodpecker and Coffey marshes), (4) Corydon Reservoir, (5) Short-eared Owl route, (6) Bob White S.P., (7) Medicine Creek W.A., (8) Private lake, (9) Seymour Reservoir.

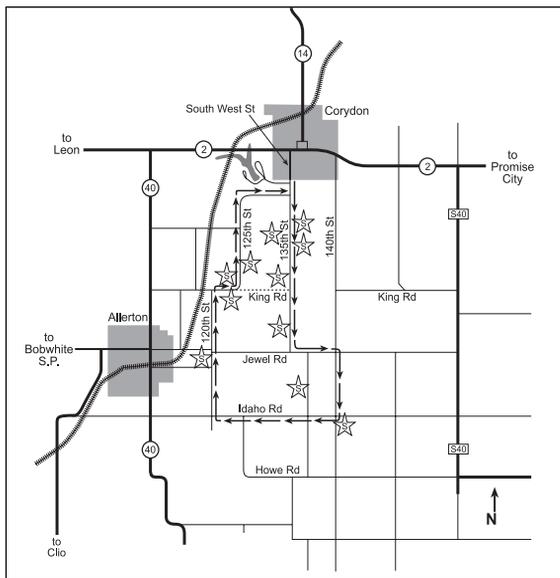


Figure 2. Short-eared Owl route. S = Short-eared Owl locations, winter 2001–2002.

more sightings — seeing a dozen owls in an evening is not uncommon when conditions are right.

A good route to drive is outlined on Figure 2. From Highway 2 in Corydon, take South West Street (by the high school) south out of town, where it becomes 135th Street as shown on the map. For those who prefer to sit and wait, the north most spots along 135th Street and the section of King Road between 120th and 125th Streets are the most consistent areas. Other species that are frequently found on this route include Sharp-shinned, Coopers, Red-tailed, and Rough-legged Hawks; American Kestrel; Great Horned Owl; Ring-necked Pheasant; Northern Bobwhite; Wild Turkey; and Loggerhead Shrike. Northern Mockingbirds have been seen along 125th Street, but only rarely. Occasionally, wintering flocks of meadowlarks, Horned Larks, or Lapland Longspurs are also found here. This route also is good in the breeding season for the common grassland breeders, especially Upland Sandpiper.

Three other areas often have Short-eared Owls. The farmland north and east of Clio regularly has small numbers wherever there are grassy fields. The grasslands south of Sewal along S40 are worth a check, although the best areas by far are just across the border into Missouri. Lastly, Medicine Creek Wildlife Area, discussed later, is probably as good as anywhere, but is rarely checked in winter.

Although they may not be notable a few years from now, **Eurasian Collared-Doves** are still difficult to find in southern Iowa. This species has been seen sporadically in Allerton since first being found there in January 2002. The birds have been found along Highway 40/Main Street, from the north edge of Allerton to the area of the railroad tracks, and along County Road J46 in the three blocks west of its junction with Main Street. So far only three birds have been seen with no evidence of breeding. This location is convenient to check because Allerton is the starting point for the following grassland bird route.

MEDICINE CREEK AREA GRASSLAND BIRD ROUTE

Medicine Creek Wildlife Area is a newly developed area south of Allerton (Figure 3). This public area and the surrounding private land contain some excellent grassland tracts. Breeding species found here include Northern Harrier; Upland Sandpiper; Sedge Wren; Loggerhead Shrike; Grasshopper, Henslow's, and Field Sparrows; Dickcissel; and Bobolink. The route shown in Figure 3 takes you through several types of grasslands and should produce most of the species mentioned above. Henslow's Sparrows are most frequently found on private land in this area. All of the locations marked on the map represent birds that could be heard singing from a public road. If you want to actually see the bird, there are a couple good spots: (1) the private field to the east of Medicine Creek Lake, which is easily viewed from the road and has had a high density of singing sparrows, and (2) the public land west of the lake near the cedar grove, which has fewer sparrows but can be walked.

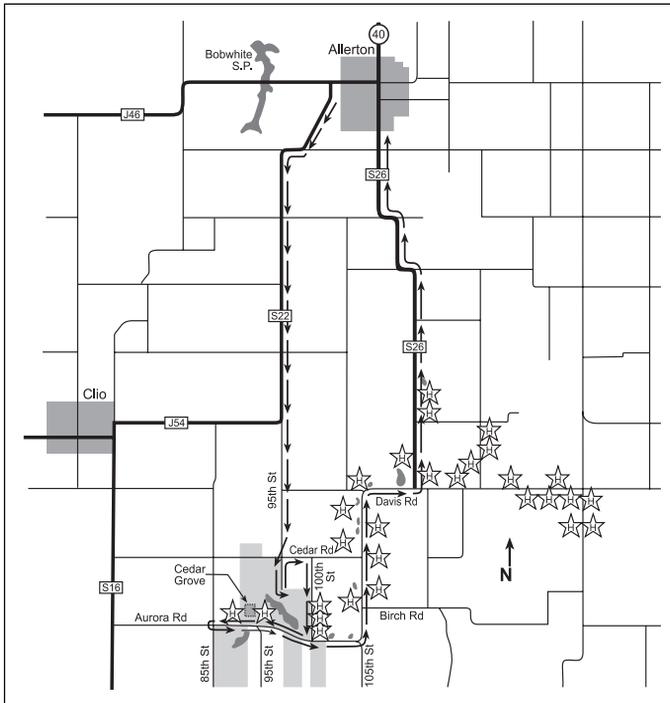


Figure 3. Medicine Creek area grassland-bird routes. H = Henslow's Sparrow locations from spring 2002. Shaded areas = Medicine Creek Wildlife Area.

Several lakes and farm ponds are found along the route. These are often excellent for waterfowl in the spring and fall. The lake at Medicine Creek Wildlife Area hosts a small but growing Great Blue Heron rookery and often has cormorants and Great Egrets in small numbers. The large private pond at the junction of Davis Road and S26 is often the most interesting spot to check. It has produced Sora, American Bittern, Black Tern, and several shorebirds including Wilson's Phalarope. The farm fields between S26 and the town of Clio serve as a brief stopover site for tens of thousands of migrating Snow Geese. If present, these flocks are hard to miss, and almost always contain Ross's and Greater White-fronted Geese as well.

If you want to explore a little, there is a large forested area south of Medicine Creek Lake that looks interesting but has never been birded in the breeding season. The entire area is also good for raptors in the winter. In the past when there has been extremely heavy snow cover, Short-eared Owls have used the cedar grove west of the lake as a roost site.

RATHBUN WILDLIFE AREA

In northeastern Wayne County, much the land bordering the South Fork of the Chariton River is part of the **Rathbun Wildlife Area** (Figure 4). Much of this area has not yet been explored by birders, but two spots have been found to be productive so far.

I refer to the first spot as the “**Swamp Oaks area**,” unofficially named for its large swamp white oak trees. It is reached by taking Highway 2 east from Corydon to the town of Promise City. On the east side of Promise City, take County Road S56 north. After about two miles, there is a gravel lane on the west side of the road that leads to a parking area (see Figure 4). There is no sign on the road to mark this access, but it can be recognized by the presence of the green public hunting area signs along the fence line. This area is a large, confusing patchwork of agricultural fields, oxbow pools, forest, and occasionally maintained trails/ service roads. Poison ivy and mosquitoes are abundant, so come prepared. This area is also an extremely popular turkey hunting spot in the spring. For courtesy and safety reasons, I do not bird this area when hunters are present.

The following directions are best used in conjunction with Figure 5, and it may be wise to bring along a compass. To reach the most interesting areas, hike

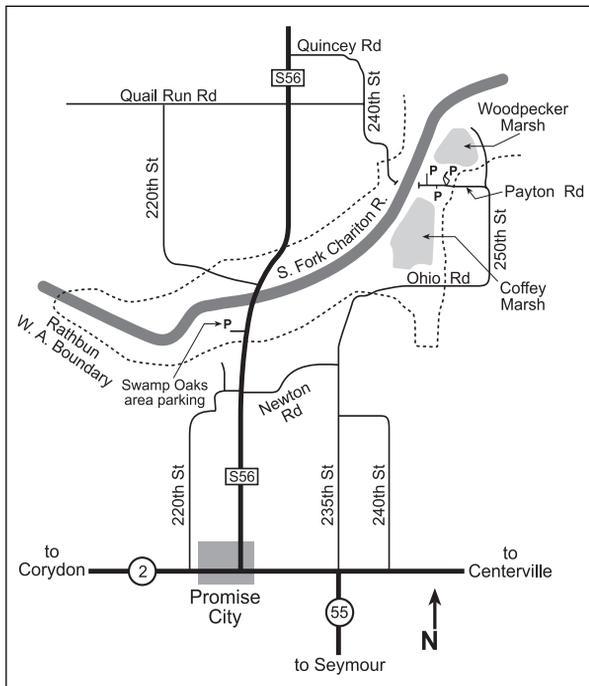


Figure 4. Rathbun Wildlife Area.

west from the parking lot on the service road. This road skirts a open field (currently soybeans), then crosses a creek and tree line. This creek ranges from boots required to completely dry depending on season and recent rainfall. After crossing the creek the road turns south and soon passes through another tree line. It then turns west for a short distance before coming to a culvert. This culvert forms a meeting point of several different trails. Only one of these trails leads into the forest and that is the one to take. This trail will take you through areas of large hickory, buckeye, and butternut trees as well as a grove of very large swamp white oaks. Along the way there are a series of oxbow pools and grassy openings. The trail eventually dead-ends at a scrubby opening and a fence marking the start of private property. Most of Iowa's common forest bird species can be expected along this trail including Great Horned and Barred Owls; Great Crested Flycatcher; Yellow-billed Cuckoo; Scarlet Tanager; Wood Thrush; Yellow-throated, Warbling, and Red-eyed Vireos; Northern Parula; American Redstart; Ovenbird; and Eastern Towhee. Wayne County's only known Pileated Woodpeckers are resident in this area. The large oxbow pools provide habitat for Prothonotary Warblers and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and are good places to view other species as they move along the edges of these openings. From the main forest path there are several short side trails that may be worth exploring. Often these dead end at oxbows and provide good vantage points. The other trails that originate at the culvert skirt the edges of agricultural fields, but some birds can be found along them. Willow Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler, and Bell's Vireo are relatively common along these edges wherever willow thickets are allowed to grow. Bell's Vireo is also present along nearby roads in similar habitat.

This area has only been birded for one breeding season. There are many additional species that seem likely to be found here in the future, such as Summer Tanager and most of the southeastern warblers. This area has a very unique feel to it and deserves exploration by those of you interested in other aspects of natural history such as butterflies, reptiles and amphibians, and plants. It has already produced an amazing odonate list, including several extremely rare species. I would appreciate hearing from anyone who visits this area.

The second interesting spot is known locally as the **Woodpecker Bridge area**, although the bridge is no longer standing. It includes Woodpecker and Coffey Marshes and a stretch of the South Fork of the Chariton River. This area is reached by taking Highway 2 east from Promise City to the Seymour turn off. There is a huge red arrow pointing south toward Seymour, but you want to take 235th Street north. This road goes north for a few miles before turning east, where it is called Ohio Road. It then turns north and is called 250th Street. After a short distance, it will turn west as Payton Road. The various parking areas along this road are shown on Figure 4.

Woodpecker Marsh sits on the north side of Payton Road. A gravel drive will take you down to small parking area. From here you can see a Great Blue Heron

rookery that has about 25 active nests. In late summer, Great Egrets and Green Herons are usually present along with large numbers of Wood Ducks. In early spring, there are often Bald Eagles feeding on the winter-killed fish.

Coffey Marsh is a large, newly created area to the south of the road. There is a small parking area and a service road that leads down to the marsh. A dike runs all along the west edge of the marsh, providing an elevated hiking trail. This spot attracts good numbers of Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets and is an excellent spot for Green Heron. This marsh is rarely visited by birders, but looks perfect for post-breeding herons in late summer.

At the end Payton Road is the South Fork of the Chariton River. It is a fairly unimpressive river at this point and is often shallow enough to walk across. Of interest is a large logjam where the old bridge used to stand. This is a good spot to find waterthrushes, flycatchers, and sparrows in migration.

WAYNE COUNTY LAKES

Wayne County has five small to medium-sized lakes that, during the right conditions, can be productive for waterbirds (Figure 1).

The Corydon Lake Park (Corydon Reservoir) is reached by taking South West Street to the Corydon Cemetery. At the south edge of the cemetery, a road runs west to the lake. All of the common ducks have been found here as well as all four geese. The wintering goose flock often keeps a hole open in this lake. Common Loon, Osprey, Bald Eagle, and small flocks of cormorants and pelicans are annual visitors. The woods surrounding the lake are too small for many forest species; however, Yellow-throated Vireo and Red-headed Woodpecker are common breeders here. In the summer of 2002, Northern Harriers nested in a switch grass

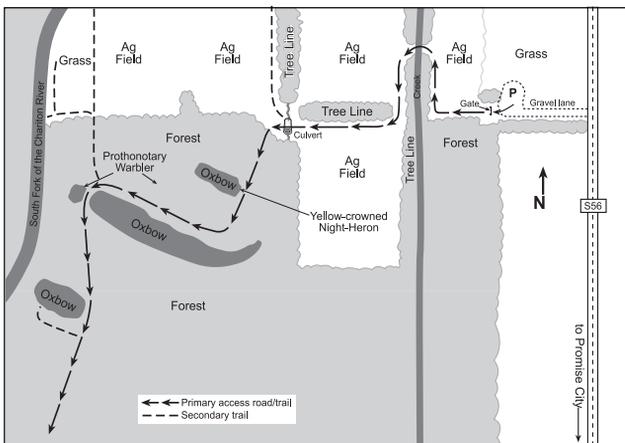


Figure 5. Rathbun Wildlife Area, Swamp Oaks area.

plot that is hidden on the southwest side of the area. There is also an active Purple Martin colony at the caretaker's residence below the dam.

Bob White State Park is located west of Allerton on County Road J46. This lake usually has no waterbirds, but occasionally hosts flocks of Snow Geese in the thousands. These flocks almost always contain some Ross's Geese and usually some Greater White-fronted Geese. There is a good trail system in the south half of the park that goes through forest, prairie, and scrub habitats. Nothing unusual has been found here, but it looks like a reasonable spot for Yellow-breasted Chat or Bell's and White-eyed Vireos.

Lakeside Park (Humeston Reservoir) sits on the west side of Highway 69 on the north edge of Humeston. It regularly has migrant loons and small flocks of ducks. When the water is low it occasionally attracts small numbers of shorebirds. Pay close attention, because the entrance road is easy to miss.

The **Seymour Reservoir** is south of Seymour on County Road S60. It is an interesting looking lake that is almost never visited by birders, including me.

Lastly, there is a large **private lake** east of Corydon on the north side of Highway 2. This is by far the best lake for birds in the county. It has produced all of the common ducks, all four geese, Trumpeter Swan, Osprey, Bald Eagle, pelicans and cormorants, plus the four common gulls. Large goose flocks keep this lake open all winter and it would undoubtedly produce scoters and Long-tailed Duck with good coverage. However, due to it being private property, the viewing is generally at long distance from Highway 2 or from the gravel road that runs north on the east side of the lake. Often the waterfowl that winter here can be found feeding in the farm fields to the north and south of lake, providing a closer look.

In conclusion, some of the most enjoyable birding in Wayne County can be found just by driving the back roads. This is the best way to find Upland Sandpiper, Northern Bobwhite, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Mockingbird, wintering raptors, and spring flocks of American Golden-Plovers or Snow Geese. Good areas to try are the roads to the north of the large private lake, and anywhere south of Highway 2.

If you would like more information on birding in Wayne County, feel free to contact me, and if you bird any of the relatively unexplored areas mentioned above, please let me know what you find.

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