

Iowa DNR News

CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sept. 10, 2024

- [Habitat variety attracts birds and birders to Iowa River Bird Conservation Area](#)
- [Save the Date: Statewide Volunteer Day is Sept. 28](#)
- [Wiese Slough Wildlife Area](#)

Habitat variety attracts birds and birders to Iowa River Bird Conservation Area



An accessible viewing platform overlooks the wetlands and grasslands on the Otter Creek Wildlife Area, in Tama County. Otter Creek is a popular birding area and part of the Iowa River Bird Conservation Area (BCA), a designation covering a mix of public and private lands that stretches roughly 45 miles along the Iowa River from Iowa County to Tama County. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Driving slowly along the two-track, generously labeled “340th Street” by Google Maps, Anna Buckardt Thomas has her windows down and is identifying each bird by its call. “House wren, red-winged blackbird, killdeer, goldfinch, catbird, flicker, cardinal, Eurasian tree sparrow, common yellowthroat,” the state avian ecologist said.

This stretch of the Otter Creek Wildlife Area, in Tama County, is an eBird hotspot; a popular birding website and app that logs bird sightings for users and adds each individual’s bird records to the global data set.

Birds are attracted to the mix of grasslands, marsh and shrubs in the middle of Otter Creek. Sora and Virginia rails nest here, and yellow rails will show up occasionally in the fall. A warbling vireo is singing. So is an indigo bunting. Dead trees are allowed to remain standing, providing snags for woodpeckers and bluebirds.

The area also supports other wildlife including ornate box turtles, regal fritillaries, and the most impressive annual tiger salamander migration in the state – prompting the closure of County Road E66, while the amphibians cross the asphalt, heading towards the marsh.

Otter Creek is part of the Iowa River Bird Conservation Area (BCA), a designation covering a mix of public and private lands that stretches roughly 45 miles along the Iowa River from Iowa County to Tama County.

The Bird Conservation Area program emphasizes habitat conservation at a large, landscape level to establish stable or growing bird populations. Each BCA includes a combination of public and private lands, well-managed for wildlife conservation. The program is non-regulatory, and private landowners participate only if they wish. It's part of a larger national and international all-bird conservation effort dedicated to the conservation of game and non-game birds alike and is guided under the umbrella of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative.

Today, the Iowa River BCA is a mix of floodplain forest, wetlands, prairie savanna and river oxbows. Dedicated in 2004, it was the first BCA to be centered on a river. The patchwork of habitat, crop fields and rolling hills extends through four counties.

For those new to birding or new to Otter Creek, there is a viewing platform just off U.S. Hwy. 30, that has accessible parking, a ramp to the main viewing area and a spotting scope trained towards the prairie and marsh. It also has information panels on the history of the area.

“There’s so much variety in this BCA, which means it can support large, diverse numbers of birds and other wildlife,” Buckardt Thomas said. More than 230 different species have been documented here, many of which are breeding species. The BCA supports large amounts of waterfowl, shorebirds and grassland birds, including species in greatest conservation need – both migratory and breeding.

Barn owls, northern harriers, short eared owls, have been known to nest in the corridor. Grasshopper sparrow, bobolinks and black-crowned night herons are here too. Peering through a pair of binoculars, the marsh water levels appear to be more conducive to attracting ducks and herons, than shorebirds, she said. It’s actively used all year long, but has the most visitors during migration.

“Having native shrubs, like these dogwoods, is really important for migratory habitat because they produce all kinds of berries in early September, and migrating birds will gobble them up for energy,” she said.

Diving down a two-track, she brings the truck to a stop, bringing the binoculars up to see what’s dancing up ahead - a brown thrasher, another species in greatest conservation need, and three catbirds.

Six pelicans soar effortlessly over the boat ramp and parking lot on the deeper basin, looking for a meal. Yellow-headed blackbirds nest here. Marsh wrens, sedge wrens and common gallinules can be heard.

“The best way to explore Otter Creek is by walking the dikes, because it offers the most opportunity to see birds and other wildlife,” she said. Dikes are mowed to maintain their integrity, providing relatively easy hiking conditions and viewing of the wetlands.

Heading into far southwest Benton County and the eastern section of the BCA, south of the town of Belle Plaine on Hwy. 21, is the main Bird Conservation Area sign and information kiosk.

Here are some of the larger grasslands where American kestrels will nest. Indigo bunting, goldfinches, dickcissels are everywhere. The grasslands also support grasshopper sparrows, bobolinks, northern harriers, and more.

Continuing south, Hwy. 21 passes over the Iowa River and its oxbows on the Iowa County line, where visitors can pull off to search for Baltimore orioles, black-crowned night herons, spotted sandpipers, bald eagles, great blue herons, and prothonotary warblers that have been seen here. Swallows nest under the bridges. Redstarts, Canada geese, wood ducks, hooded mergansers, phoebes, and red-shouldered hawks all nest near the water. Cedar waxwings can be heard from the boat ramp.

“This is a large-scale cooperative habitat partnership where public and private work to improve the quality of habitat on the area,” she said. There are a lot of conservation easements in the BCA, which permanently protect the habitat while the land remains in private ownership.

American bitterns nest here – another species in greatest conservation need - cerulean warblers, yellow warblers, great crested flycatchers, indigo buntings, and song sparrows are also here. Several trumpeter swan families live up and down the corridor and sandhill cranes have been nesting here since 1992. Lots of eagles and belted kingfishers nest and look for food along the river. An eastern kingbird can be heard singing.

“This is pretty much a happening place,” she said.

Flood of 1993 created the Iowa River Corridor

A network of habitat following the Iowa River, arose out of the historic flood of 1993, when many landowners along the river bottom accepted the offer to buy their flood prone property by the federal government as part of the disaster recovery.

That historic event marked the beginning of the Iowa River corridor, a federally owned, state managed public wildlife area that is a major component of the Iowa River BCA.

Media Contact: Anna Buckardt Thomas, Avian Ecologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-823-3945.

Save the Date: Statewide Volunteer Day is Sept. 28

Iowa state parks have set Saturday, Sept. 28, as annual Volunteer Day, when Iowans are invited to lend a hand at several state parks and forests hosting

volunteer events. Join park staff to help care for Iowa's natural areas, freshen up campgrounds and facilities, and spend time outdoors.

Clean-up efforts will be unique for each park depending on needs, and may include litter pick-up, staining or painting buildings, removing invasive species, rebuilding picnic tables, harvesting prairie seeds and more. The state parks and forests participating include:

- Bellevue State Park, Bellevue
- Geode State Park, Danville
- Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, Keosauqua
- Lake Anita State Park, Anita
- Lake Darling State Park, Brighton
- Lake Macbride State Park, Solon
- Mines of Spain State Park, Dubuque
- Lake Wapello State Park, Drakesville
- Pikes Peak State Park, McGregor
- Pilot Knob State Park Forest City
- Springbrook State Park, Guthrie Center
- Union Grove State Park, Gladbrook
- Wapsipinicon State Park, Anamosa
- Waubonsie State Park, Hamburg
- Yellow River State Forest, Harpers Ferry

Citizens interested in volunteering can find complete details on times, meeting locations and activities at www.iowadnr.gov/volunteer. For general questions about Statewide Volunteer Day or other volunteer opportunities, contact Mary Runkel (Statewide Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator) at mary.runkel@dnr.iowa.gov/515-443-2533.

Wiese Slough Wildlife Area



A shallow wetland tucked into the timber at Wiese Slough Wildlife Area in Muscatine County. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Wiese Slough is one of those places where the locals go when they need to get their outdoors “fix.”

At nearly 1,900 acres, it’s easy to find, too, conveniently located just off Hwy. 6, between Atalissa and Moscow, in Muscatine County. Wiese Slough Wildlife Area began in the 1940s as an old oxbow off the Cedar River and was pieced together over decades because its sandy soil was challenging to farm.

Today, the area is mostly timber with a patchwork of sloughs, potholes, grasslands and prairie. Timber consists of floodplain friendly river birch, hickory, oaks, pecan and sycamores. The wetlands are mostly ground fed, but are often affected by flooding from the Cedar River.

“It’s well known locally,” said Andy Robbins, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “It’s one of our most heavily hunted areas for morels. Some kayakers come out to paddle, too. The Big River Long Beards NWTF chapter out of Davenport helped with a tree planting and it seemed like they all had a hunting story or connection to the area.”

A small remnant prairie is tucked into the timber, at just high enough elevation to be out of the floodplain. Prickly pear cactus grows there. Cleft phlox – a rare, sandy soil wildflower – is also found here. On this August morning, partridge pea with its little yellow flowers was in bloom seemingly everywhere.

Management on Wiese Slough is a battle against encroachment and from invasive plants and the staff from the Odessa Wildlife Unit will use a combination of row crops to prepare fields to be converted to prairie, and prescribed fire to try to keep it that way.

Standing on the dike near the boat ramp in the middle of Wiese Slough, two wood ducks fly over the tree tops toward the upper end. A great blue heron leaves its hunting spot for a less busy slough. Water lilies covering the water will be gone at first frost. Button bush is found here in pockets.

Waterfowl hunting is good early in the season and can host big migration days when conditions are right. Hunters wanting to be on the water will need a skiff or kayak as most sloughs are shallow. Given its size, Wiese Slough receives a fair number of phone calls from nonresident deer hunters looking for more information.

Sandhill cranes nest here, but, strangely, trumpeter swans, do not.

“Hundreds of trumpeter swans migrate through here in the spring and trumpeters have been released here to try to establish a nesting pair, but for some reason, won’t nest here,” Robbins said.

It is also a popular place to bird watch.

The slough is split in half by the Cedar River and accessing parts of Wiese south can be challenging.

Media Contact: Andy Robbins, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 319-551-8459.