

Birding Lake Forest's Open Lands

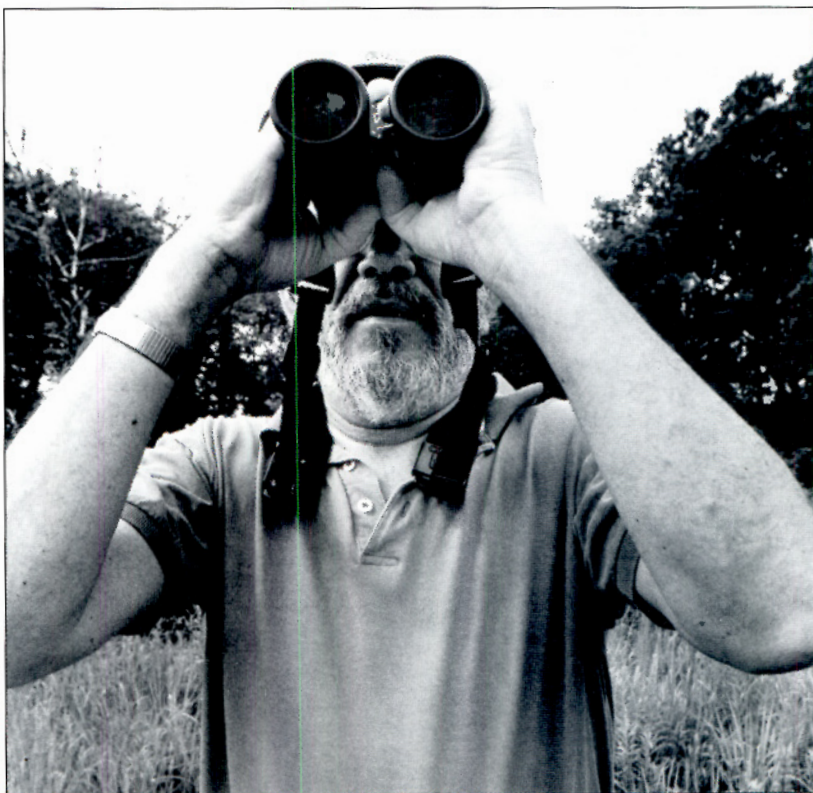
Year-long bird survey yields 102-species checklist

by William Moskoff

The residents of Lake Forest 30 miles north of Chicago think they live in "a special place." Such, in fact, was the title of a public television documentary on the Lake Forest Open Lands Association, a local conservation organization that has since 1970 purchased or been given land to set aside as permanent open space. Founded in 1967, the organization established the noble goal of protecting and preserving natural areas, an ambition that has since been achieved. What is perhaps unknown to local residents and others nearby is that the Lake Forest Open Lands properties are excellent places to bird.

The Open Lands comprises two major properties, the 100-acre Shaw Woods and Prairie, located in east Lake Forest at the western end of Laurel Avenue, and the 16 acres of the West Skokie Nature Preserve at Westleigh and Waukegan Roads in west Lake Forest. Shaw is dominated by virgin prairie and to a somewhat lesser degree has a substantial savanna at the southern end of the property. West Skokie, formerly a meadow, is now in the process of being turned back into prairie. What both have in common, and what helps make each such a good place to bird, is the Skokie River, which runs through both sites, the east branch through Shaw and the west branch through West Skokie.

After casually birding the open lands for about a year, I began to develop a checklist for the area and to that end I birded the two properties systematically from June 1, 1992 to May 31, 1993. Shaw is the better of



William Moskoff spent a year birding at Shaw Woods and Prairie and West Skokie River Nature Preserve in Lake Forest to compile a checklist. Photo by Rob Dicker. Courtesy of Pioneer Press.

the two for species diversity; in one year I identified 102 species there. In the spring and fall a variety of warblers can be seen near the Skokie River. Indeed, 18 species of warblers have been identified, including Connecticut, Mourning, and both waterthrushes. Belted Kingfishers have been seen flying up and down the water looking for a meal and both Great Blue and Green-backed Herons have staked out places on the banks. During the spring migration Solitary Sandpipers were seen from the bridge that marks the first place

where you can see the water once you enter the property.

Early on a cool mid-April evening, when a small group went to see American Woodcocks perform their spring mating ritual in the middle of the prairie, they were also treated to three Northern Harriers, a male, female, and immature, flying low over the prairie in search of prey. Later that same evening, an overflight of about 200 Bonaparte's Gulls temporarily distracted the group from its woodcock vigil.