

Birding the Jane Addams Trail in Northwestern Illinois

by Keith and Mary Blackmore

One of the richest birding spots in the greater Freeport area is to be found along the Jane Addams Trail, a former railroad bed, which currently extends from the southern trailhead west of Route 26 and just south of the Route 20 bypass, north to the Badger Trail at the Wisconsin state-line. The southern trailhead abuts the Pecatonica River. Traveling north, on foot or by bicycle, one soon finds the trail following the floodplain of Richland Creek virtually all the way to the stateline. Numerous bridges along the route afford excellent viewing access to the meandering Richland Creek bottomlands, wetlands, feeder streams and the habitats associated with them.

More than 100 herbaceous plant species provide ground cover beneath the 27 shrub species and 34 tree species initially documented. Needless to say, this plant diversity welcomes many of our feathered friends. A survey by two experienced birders, Mary Blackmore and Dan Wenny, on the northern half of the trail from Richland Road to the stateline recorded 77 species. Bird walks by the Northwest Illinois Audubon Society usually note some 55 species for a two-mile morning stroll in April.

In March, waterfowl can be found in the numerous backwaters and man-made ponds near the trail. Wood Ducks raised their young in

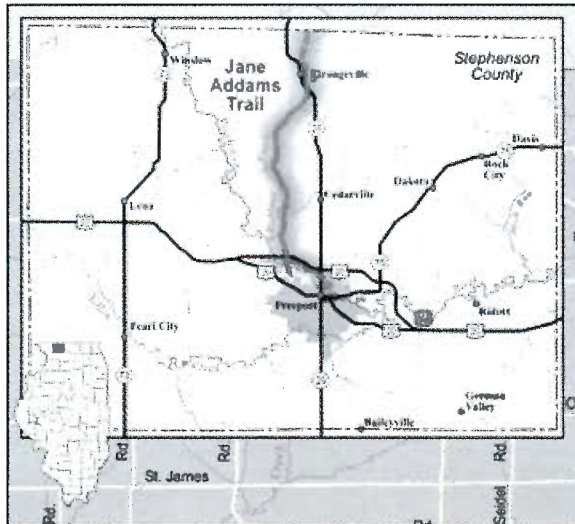


Red-necked Phalarope. This is one of the more uncommon species that has been seen along the Jane Addams Trail.

Photo by Mark Bowman.

The Jane Addams Trail is a 12.85-mile long rail trail in Stephenson County, Illinois. Jane Addams, the trail's namesake, was born in Stephenson County.

A detailed map can be found at janeaddamstrail.com.



several of the backwater ponds. Sedge meadows attract Swamp Sparrows, Sedge Wrens and rails. The wetlands south of Orangeville host breeding Sandhill Cranes, and in drier years, exposed mudflats provided habitat for a variety of shorebirds. Grassland birds such as meadowlarks and sparrows can be found in the open areas of Butterfly

Farm, a trailside holding of the Jane Addamsland Park Foundation. Cliff Swallows use nearby bridges for their nesting colonies. Woodland areas along the trail attract a variety of warblers during migration.

Certain areas along the trail have already gained some notoriety. One remembers the Virginia Rail in the sedge meadow just south of Route 26 at Orangeville, or the Red-necked Phalarope and the Marbled Godwits at the Orangeville wetland, or the Golden-crowned Sparrow and the Great Horned Owl nest with their two young trailside at Scioto Mills. As more birders visit the area, such special sightings are certain to increase.

While major parking areas are only available at the southern trailhead and the Orangeville trailhead by the BP station, one can gain access to the trail nearly anywhere that one of ten roads cross it. This is an agricultural region so be sure to consider this when parking along a roadside.

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