

Southern Illinois Birding Hotspots

Part 1: Pomona

by Keith A. McMullen



Southern Illinois birders consider Pomona one of the best places to see migrating and breeding warblers including Prothonotary, Cerulean, and Yellow Warblers. Dennis Oehmke took this photo of a male Yellow Warbler in central Illinois on 14 May 1997.

Illinois has many great birders and no wonder! Our great state has countless excellent birding locations. Most Illinois birders are familiar with the hotspots around the larger cities and metropolitan areas of northern and central Illinois. The likes of Chicago, Champaign, Rockford, Peoria, Springfield, Decatur, Bloomington, and Charleston are all birded fairly well, and many of you live in those areas.

However, southern Illinois has numerous exciting locales that seemingly only a handful of Illinois birders even know about. This article is the first in a series to highlight some of southern Illinois' s best known "secret" birding locations. Many of you IOS members may have visited one or more of these spots in 1996 or 1997 during IOS meetings and field trips. Please read on and enjoy! Hopefully, you can visualize what I see and feel as I walk the paths of the excellent birding spots southern Illinois has to offer.

Let's begin with my personal favorite! I call it Pomona. Others call it Cave Creek.

The reason I refer to it as Pomona is that you reach the location by taking Illinois Route 127 south of Murphysboro to the Pomona exit. Turn west (right) and drive through the small town of Pomona. Yes, it even has a post office and the general store on the corner has sodas and snacks for that necessary energy for a full day of birding. Not everyone takes grocery sacks full of junk food like I do!

At the intersection in Pomona, turn right and you'll be heading north on a gravel road. Travel approximately

1.5 miles until you see a pine forest on your right and a dense, deciduous forest to your left. Shortly you'll see a bridge. This bridge crosses Cave Creek. You can park just before the bridge on the right or cross the bridge and pull over to the side of the road on the right just past a gravel road heading due east.

If my car is already parked on the right prior to the bridge (can't miss my car, license plates read: WARBLR1), then proceed to the latter area for decent parking. The gravel road that heads east is the old railroad bed and is great for walking. Many turkey hunters use this road in spring. Likely you'll already see other birders, hunters, or nature enthusiasts parked there so rest assured you are in the right spot.

Now the fun begins! My favorite time to visit Pomona is, of course, spring. In early spring, neotropical migrants are returning from their winter escapes. Many of these will venture farther north but several species do breed around Pomona; some are difficult to find breeding anywhere else in the state outside of southern Illinois.

You've got two choices of main trails to investigate. You can always walk along the road south back toward Pomona or north, up a hill, and around the curves in the road. However, similar species and habitats result, therefore, I suggest the trail to the east prior to the bridge or the old railroad bed that also travels east.

At the trailhead before the bridge, you'll notice many boxelder and other small maples and shrubs that are less than 25 feet tall. This area sometimes can be flooded with migrants if conditions are right. Nashville Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Gray Catbird, White-eyed Vireo, and many sparrow species feed in these smaller trees and shrubs.

After crossing a small ditch, to your right, you'll notice a hillside dominated by pines. Here is where the