

Middlefork River Valley

by Steven D. Bailey

Toward the end of May 1987, I was packing for a three-week trip to Montana when I received a call from a friend and birding companion, Marilyn Campbell. She had just gotten a call from two other birders who were fairly certain they had just seen several Mississippi Kites at Kennekuk Cove County Park northwest of Danville. She asked if I wanted to confirm the sighting.

I was able to get to the park just before dark. I checked a couple of areas where the bird had been seen, but I was only able to get a brief glimpse of a distant bird that could have been a Mississippi Kite. It also might have been a Northern Harrier. When I returned from my trip more than three weeks later, I learned that virtually every other birder within 100 miles had viewed up to nine sub-adult kites (Vermilion County's first record) practically right up to the day of my return, when they disappeared almost as suddenly as they appeared.

But I did get another chance. A few years later I was able to add this elegant bird to my county list when I observed another sub-adult less than a mile from the first sighting across the river in the Middlefork State Fish and Wildlife Area.

The Middlefork River Valley provides some of the best birding opportunities in east-central Illinois. Although parts of the valley have been extremely altered due to strip mining, several fine natural areas offer habitat to a wide variety of birds.

These include three state nature preserves and a national historical (archeological) landmark, as well as the Middlefork River itself, 17 miles of which have been designated as Illinois' first and only state and national scenic river. All of these areas are found within a corridor of state and county parks bordering the Middlefork River.

Part 1 of this guide will explore the Kickapoo State Park and Middlefork River Valley complex. Part 2, to be published in a forthcoming issue, will guide birders through Kennekuk Cove County Park.

Kickapoo State Park

Breeding warblers, vireos, and woodpeckers are the highlight at this state park. To get there, take Interstate 74 to the Oakwood/Potomac exit (exit 206) and turn north. Go 1 mile to the Kickapoo State Park turn-off, then east 2 miles to the park's west entrance. This 2,800-acre area was strip mined from 1850 until the late 1930s. The current vegetation along with some plantings are the result of natural regeneration. The park has trails, camping sites, and boat and canoe rental.

Just past the entrance to the north is a parking lot. At the Cypress Day Use Area you can obtain a park map at the large wooden map near the main road. You may want to check the trees and successional area east of

the parking lot. I have found this to be a productive area for migrants in the spring and fall. Or you may want to walk the old road west of the playground which leads to a small prairie restoration area. If you continue north you will enter a fine oak-hickory-maple forest with a few American beech trees. This is the Middlefork Woods Nature Preserve. In the summer, expect to see all six woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Wood Thrush, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, both tanagers, Kentucky and Cerulean Warblers and, with luck, an Ovenbird or Louisiana Waterthrush.

Another good area, especially for breeding warblers, is the No. 6 Lake Day Use Area. Around the ponds and along the Middlefork River, you can expect five species of flycatcher, including Acadian, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, both orioles, Yellow-throated Vireo, and at least seven kinds of warblers, including American Redstart, Yellow, Yellowthroat, Yellow-throated, Cerulean, Northern Parula, and Prothonotary. The Pileated Woodpecker is a good possibility.

Much of the remainder of the park, now officially a state recreation area, is heavily used for outdoor recreation. Although the park has 22 ponds ranging in size from .2 to 57 acres, all are deep strip-mined pits, with little or no marshy edge. However, a good day, especially during migration, could produce the Com-

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