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Bird Finding Guide: Boone County

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One of the few places left in Illinois where Cerulean Warblers likely breed is in Boone County. This male Cerulean Warbler was photographed at McClaughrey Springs, Palos Preserves, Cook County on 29 May 2009 by Nolan Lameka.



Boone County is in the northernmost tier of Illinois counties that border the Wisconsin state line; it is slightly east of equidistant between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River. I-90 bisects Boone County on an east-west axis. It is a relatively small county of 282 square miles, with one of those miles being covered with water (mostly the Kishwaukee River and feeder creeks). It has a population of approximately 51,500, mostly in its county seat, Belvidere (est. pop. 23,000), although development in the county has surged in the past decade, and many new subdivisions have sprung up in what were once agricultural fields. The current population is up about 9,000 (+21%) from the 2000 census.

The county is predominantly agricultural, but there are several enjoyable places for birding, and the Boone County Conservation District (BCCD) is working to acquire many of the remaining natural areas. This article will survey several locations attractive to migrating and nesting birds.

Geographic Features

Boone County was historically tallgrass prairie and savanna, which made it ideal for settlement and agriculture. The most extensive area of marsh and wetland lies in the

southeastern quadrant of the county, south of Garden Prairie, along Coon Creek, a tributary of the Kishwaukee River. Seasonal flooding frequently keeps this area from being productive for agriculture. The Kishwaukee River is a very high-quality stream which runs through the county, passing through Belvidere and entering Winnebago County to the west. The Boone County Conservation District has obtained a number of properties along the river, some of which it is replanting with native trees and prairie plants.

The northwestern portion of the county becomes more rolling and is bisected by Kinnikinnick Creek, another high-quality stream. The creek has carved its way through some hilly areas, creating cool ravines and dells which are attractive to a number of species of birds.

Garden Prairie Slough

Garden Prairie Slough is the local name for a permanent marsh and seasonally flooded wetlands that lie along Coon Creek in southeastern Boone County. Historically, this entire area was probably wet prairie and marshland. Garden Prairie lies nearly on the McHenry County line, and the respective county conservation districts, in conjunction with Illinois Department of Natural