

BIRD FINDING GUIDE

Illinois Beach State Park

by Sheryl De Vore

Habitats: Lake Michigan shoreline, sand dunes, sand prairie, sand savanna, sedge meadow, fen, and fragmented pine woods.

Key Birds: Migratory loons, gulls, shorebirds, rails, raptors, owls and songbirds; breeding Brewer's Blackbird.

Best times to bird: Fall migration (September through November) for hawks and owls, spring migration, and winter.

Birding: The 4,160-acre Illinois Beach State Park encompasses 6.5 miles of sandy Lake Michigan shoreline, which provides habitat for 650 species of plants and at least 300 species of birds.

Birders, especially those who enjoy hawk-watching, consider fall the best season to visit Illinois Beach State Park. Virtually any species migrating southward can occur here in the fall as well as spring. Because of the park's location along the lake's western shoreline, strong westerly

winds push migrating birds nearer to birders.

On an October day when west or northwesterly winds blow following an Arctic cold front, birders come here to watch hawks. On the right days, birders might catalog up to 14 species of hawks including Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Harrier, Osprey, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, American Kestrel, Broad-winged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, and on occasion Bald Eagle, and rarely, Goshawk, Swainson's Hawk, and Golden Eagle.

To watch for the hawks, park at the Interpretive Center, then walk east to the lake over a boardwalk. Find the highest point to stand on the shore, or walk south to the wooden tower where you can get an even better view. From here, you have a good chance at seeing Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, Osprey, and falcons – hawks that aren't afraid to fly over the water.

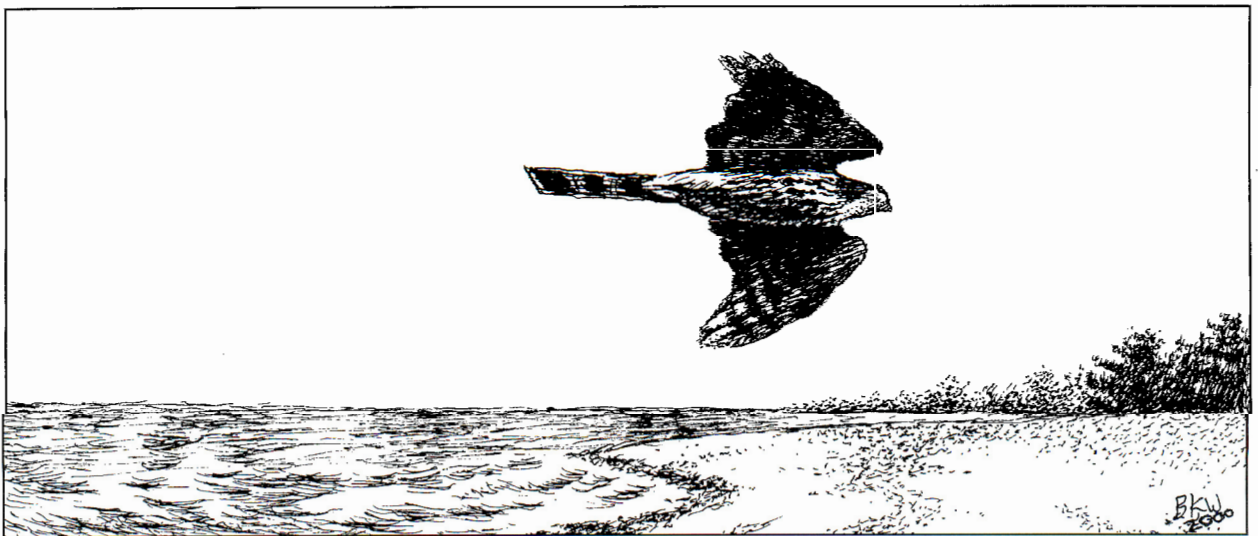
You can also reach the shoreline

via the Dead River Trail. Walking along this trail also affords you a better opportunity to see buteos and accipiters.

The Dead River, a stream blocked by sandbars much of the year, forms an elongated pond where you might see ducks and herons, and when the water level is low, shorebirds.

For ducks, walk the shoreline where you may find large rafts of wintering species such as Greater and Lesser Scaup, Oldsquaw, and Common Goldeneye. Birders occasionally find Barrow's Goldeneye here, too. Look for Great Black-backed Gull, Thayer's Gull, Glaucous Gull, and occasionally an Iceland Gull plying the shoreline. In some years, winter finches such as Red Crossbill and Evening Grosbeak frequent the pines along the Dead River.

As early as March, large numbers of passerines fly overhead on their trek northward. The peak of songbird migration occurs in mid-May to end of May as oaks open and attract



Sharp-shinned Hawk drawing by Brian K. Willis