

Bird Finding Guide

A nature field guide to the Illinois River Valley at Chautauqua and Emiquon National Wildlife Refuges

by Thomas V. Lerczak

Chautauqua and Emiquon National Wildlife Refuges (NWR), in west-central Illinois, together function as an ecological centerpiece of the Illinois River Valley. In addition to their wildlife values, the refuges provide prime wildlife viewing and recreational areas for the public. This article focuses on several key observation areas at the refuges and selected nearby sites, which provide the visitor with a sample of the major wildlife habitat types found in this unique part of Illinois, and, as such, provide birders with opportunities to catalog many species.

SPECIAL NOTE

A compass will be useful in locating landmarks mentioned in the following text. Binoculars are a must for picking out important landmarks and observing wildlife from a distance.

ESTIMATED LENGTH (TIME) OF TOUR

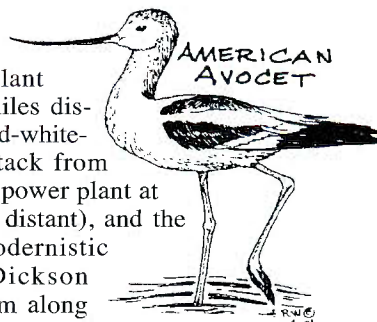
With an early start and without spending too much time in any one particular location, it should be possible to cover this entire tour in one day. A more leisurely pace, however, is suggested, spreading this tour over two days.

STOP #1. A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE ILLINOIS RIVER VALLEY AT HENRY ALLAN GLEASON NATURE PRESERVE, MASON COUNTY

Directions: In Havana, locate the intersection of Promenade Street and U.S. Route 136 (Laurel Ave.). Then proceed east on U.S. Route 136 for 5.4 miles to County Road (CR) 2130E. Turn left (north) on CR 2130E. Continue north on this road 3.5 miles to the T-intersection at the Manito Road (CR 2000N). Turn right (east) on the Manito Road. Continue east for 1.7 miles to CR 2300E. Turn left (north) on CR 2300E. Continue on this road for 2.0 miles. The parking area for H.A. Gleason Nature Preserve is on the left. (Be aware that in a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, everything is protected by law. Groups of 25 and over require a special visitation permit from the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.) Follow the footpath directly west to the preserve. Continue up the path to the top of the first rise, then turn north to the top of the larger hill known as Devil's Tower.

From the top of this large hill (actually a stabilized sand dune), several important landmarks are vis-

ible: the smoke-stack from Havana's power plant at 230° (11.2 miles distant), the red-and-white-striped smokestack from the Duck Creek power plant at 335° (6.7 miles distant), and the light brown modernistic buildings of Dickson Mounds Museum along the Illinois River Valley bluffs at 260° (11 miles distant) — the final destination of this tour. Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, on the bottomlands of the Illinois River, lies between 250° and 320°.



Drawing courtesy
of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

The state of Illinois is organized into 14 areas called natural divisions. These divisions are defined not by political boundaries but by factors such as geological history, bedrock, topography, flora, fauna, and soil type. You are standing within the Illinois River and Mississippi River Sand Areas Natural Division. The distant wooded bluffs and beyond are part of the Western Forest-Prairie Natural Division. Between these two natural divisions is the Upper Mississippi River and Illinois River Bottomlands Natural Division. (For more information on the natural divisions of Illinois see the winter 1997 issue of "The Illinois Steward" magazine, the winter 1999-2000 issue of "Illinois Audubon", or contact the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission at 309-543-2744.)

Prior to settlement of Illinois by Americans of European descent (i.e., for all practical purposes, before the 1800s), about two thirds of the state consisted of various types of prairie (mainly a mixture of grasses and wildflowers). Today less than one-tenth of one percent of the original prairies remain in many small, scattered patches. The 110-acre H. A. Gleason Nature Preserve contains native sand prairie and savanna remnants. Plants adapted to dry and nutrient-poor conditions survive very well at this preserve. Fire-tolerant blackjack and black oaks (with hybrids) are the dominant trees. Prickly pear cactus and little bluestem grass are common across the prairie, giving this preserve a certain "western" feel.

This site is a good place to scan the sky for soar-