

## Jersey County Anhinga

by Joe Suchecki

One great advantage of attending an annual IOS meeting is the large number of good birders in the field. Chances are someone is going to find a really good bird. The 2001 annual meeting held at Pere Marquette State Park near St. Louis on 19 May was no exception.

One of the IOS field trips was led by local expert birders Frank Glaser and Gilbert Ives. After spending the first hour of the trip birding Pere Marquette for passerines, Frank and Gil led the group to the Illinois River in search of water birds. We worked our way north from Pere Marquette Lodge along Route 100 and stopped along the road adjacent to a backwater slough. Scanning the water we found the normal inhabitants including Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Double-crested Cormorant, Mallard, and Wood Duck foraging along the edge of the slough where the rising Illinois River waters met the floodplain forest. We also saw some migrating warblers and a Red-headed Woodpecker working the dead trees on the other side of the slough.

A birder asked me to look at something she had found sitting in the trees on the far side of the slough. She pointed out a black shape, almost totally obscured by vegetation. With my binoculars, I could only see a black shape with what appeared to be vertical white streaking about 10 meters high in a tall tree. Because it was obscured by branches and leaves, I could not even tell if it was a bird.

Puzzled and wanting to obtain a better view and determine what this black-and-white object actually was, I retrieved my spotting scope. And, as birders often experience, by the time I set up the scope, the black shape was no longer there. We scanned the skies and saw nothing. We continued to scan the slough and a few minutes later I noticed a bird flying over the water and instinctively yelled — Anhinga!

Sure enough, flying north over the slough about 70-80 meters away was a large cormorant-like bird. However, this bird was different. It had a long, straight neck with a long, straight bill. It also had a relatively long and obviously wedge-shaped tail with brown terminal band, and there was distinctive white streaking across the upper wings and back. The bird circled a couple of times around the slough, gained some altitude with outstretched wings, and then headed south along the river and out of sight. The bird gave everyone just enough time to get good looks and cinch the identification.

A fairly common inhabitant of freshwater lakes and wetlands in the far south, Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*) are most often seen in Florida and other Gulf Coast States. Both the Illinois and Missouri checklists categorize the Anhinga as "casual" and require documentation of all sightings. Bohlen (1989) lists several historical records for Illinois and questions whether records from the late 19th century around Cairo, Illinois, where they were noted as common, provides for the possibility that this species may once have bred in the state. Sibley (2000) indicates a much more restricted breeding range from Eastern Texas and southern Arkansas to coastal South Carolina, and Illinois records are most likely due to wandering or post-breeding dispersal.

Bohlen lists four records between 1977 and 1986, mostly from southern Illinois. More recently, accepted Illinois records for this species include: Monroe County, July 1993; DuPage County, April 1995 (first northern Illinois record); and Williamson County, September 1998 (Johnson et al. 1998, Johnson and Stotz 1999). The Jersey County Anhinga is only the second record of the species in the St. Louis area (personal communication Bill Rowe), the first record being the 1993 Monroe County bird seen and photographed by IDNR staff at the floodwaters of Fountain Creek (personal communication, Randy Korotev).

The handful of records for this species indicates that sighting an Anhinga in Illinois is indeed a rare event. Luckily, for those of us on the trip, the Jersey County Anhinga gave everyone a great look and was a new state bird or lifer for many people. Unfortunately, many birders later in the day and the next day failed to relocate the bird.

### Literature cited

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- Sibley, D. A. 2000. The Sibley Guide to Birds. Chanticleer Press, New York, NY. 544 pp.

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