

Area 1

Going south (left) from the parking lot, follow a trail leading past a large concrete pad with a sign detailing the history of the area, a primitive restroom, and then into the marsh. The trail loops around and joins itself again near the restroom. The soggy peat substrate and verdant vegetative growth on the outer part of the loop give a real feel for true marsh country. This is an excellent place to observe nesting Willow Flycatchers. Northern Orioles are occasionally spotted, and American Woodcocks have been flushed here in the summer. Keep your eyes open during middle and late summer for the leopard frogs which frequent the wet areas of the path. They will hop out of your way at the very last second. Minute American toadlets, recently metamorphosed from tadpoles, are also common on this trail in late summer. During the very wet year of 1993, it was almost impossible to walk any of the trails on the site without kicking up a frog or toad with every other step.

There is a small section of open water traversed by a wooden bridge at the southwest corner of this loop. Wood Ducks and Blue-winged Teal have been observed here, and this is a good spot for Soras and Least Bitterns. Soras are heard on almost any visit during the breeding season, but only a lucky few actually see these marsh skulkers. One of our most vivid birding memories at Nelson Lake is of slowly pushing our way through chest-high grasses on a sweltering June day and suddenly coming upon a Least Bittern in full view on the edge of this small pond. The bird allowed us a good look before it plunged into the cat-tails.

Area 2

The small area of trees surrounding the ponds near the entrance are surprisingly good for observing birds during spring migration. Both species of kinglets, Fox Sparrows, and White-crowned Sparrows are early spring migrants seen mainly in the thick brush just below the parking lot. Later in the spring, a variety of warblers and vireos frequent the area, especially the tall cottonwood trees growing near the ponds. Species observed include Blackpoll, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Black-and-White, Chestnut-sided, and Wilson's Warblers, and Warbling, Bell's, and Red-eyed Vireos.

Brown Thrashers and Green Herons are fairly common here during the spring and summer. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, declining breeders in northern Illinois, have nested near the ponds and Orchard Orioles, which also breed at Nelson Lake, are occasionally seen here. The orioles are particularly attracted to the elderberries and black cherries growing in the brush below the parking lot.

The ponds are also home to large numbers of bullfrogs and painted turtles, which can be observed during any warm weather visit. There is also a single false map turtle living in the larger of the ponds, and he can often be spotted basking on a log next to his more colorful companions. This is not typical habitat for this species, which is usually found in swift flowing rivers. This individual, possibly came from the nearby Fox River and may have been released at the marsh.

Area 3

This trail leads along the marsh's northern edge toward the woods to the west. Two large shallow ponds just south (left) of the trail are the most interesting places for birding. Indeed, that is where we found the Sandhill Crane pair with a chick in 1994 and again in the summer of 1995. The parents and chick were seen at the first large shallow pond south of the trail.

Louisiana and Northern Waterthrushes use the ponds during spring migration and Soras have also been seen here in the spring when the surrounding vegetation is not yet too high and thick. Great Egrets (state-endangered) and Belted Kingfishers are fairly common around the ponds in spring and summer, and an occasional Black-crowned Night-Heron (state-endangered) as well as a Spotted or Solitary Sandpiper can also be seen at this time of the year. Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Pectoral Sandpipers stop at the second pond during fall migration.

Watch the first pond for giant snapping turtles which can sometimes be seen cruising slowly along with their backs and heads just out of the water. On a good day, we have seen a score or more of these predatory turtles. Do not confuse them with the many non-native carp, which are always roiling up the shallows.

Cedar Waxwings, Eastern Kingbirds, and Tree, Barn, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows are common throughout this area in spring and summer. Willow Flycatchers can be found by taking the branch splitting off the main trail opposite the second pond. Black-billed Cuckoos, uncommon summer residents, have been seen in this same section of woods during the spring and summer.