

Letter from the Editor

Meet An Important Illinois Bird Area:

Hennepin/Hopper Lakes

Near the end of May, I was lucky enough to join a group of Illinois Natural History survey ornithologists and botanists leading a public field trip to explore via canoe and on foot the Hennepin Hopper Lakes and associated wetlands just south of the town of Hennepin in Putnam County. As we paddled the lake through the wetlands on a 70-degree, sunny day with little wind, a botanist pointed out a type of native pondweed, a submerged aquatic plant, upon which waterfowl feed. He also mentioned the state-endangered yellow monkey flower growing on the site. Central Illinois' only Yellow-headed Blackbirds issued their riotous, raucous songs, occasionally flying across their cattail territories displaying their brilliant, white wing patches. Male and female Ruddy Ducks swam in the deeper waters. Coots cackled. Common Moorhens called. Pied-billed Grebes whinnied and a Least Bittern hurried from one cattail border to another in plain view.

Five years ago, had you driven to where we were canoeing, you would have seen a sea of corn and soybeans growing next to the Illinois River. Here, more than a century ago, this floodplain along the Illinois River provided habitat for thousands of migratory waterfowl. By building a drainage levee district, the farmers staved off the Illinois River and created the fertile farmland, chasing away the waterfowl and other species that used these backwaters.

In 2001, the Wetlands Initiative acquired land from nine owners with a huge restoration project in mind — converting the fields back to their original glory. Just by turning off the pumps that kept the water out of the fields, restorationists had invited myriad bird species back to their historical migrating and nesting grounds.

Today, 1000 acres of wetlands, lake, seeps, sedge meadows, bottomland forest and restored prairie attract more than 235 species of birds, including a rare, breeding pair of Northern Pintail, which successfully raised young on the property.

During the restoration, some of Illinois Ornithological Society's members and board members, including Doug Stotz and Cindy and John McKee, have been documenting bird life at Hennepin Hopper. Stotz is also a board member of The Wetlands Initiative. They belong to a contingency of employees and volunteers working to restore and maintain these lands as much as possible to provide homes for rare plants and animals. Much work lies ahead, including the decision on whether to drain the wetlands and start all over again to get rid of the carp that threaten to disturb the ecosystem. Then there's the non-native Eurasian watermilfoil creeping into the lakes. It's a complicated story; but there's a simple message: If we work together, we can help birds and the ecosystems in which they live. And as the well-worn, but also ever-so-true saying goes: If you build it, they will come.

Meadowlark will feature a bird-finding guide to this rare treasure in a future issue. In the meantime, visit <http://www.wetlands-initiative.org/HennHopper.html> to learn more about this exciting restoration project. And see this issue for a story about another Important Bird Area: Pyramid State Recreation Area.

Sheryl DeVore

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About Our Cover:

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