

New Decade Dawns for Chicago Area Lakefront Birding



Changes on the horizon for Lake Michigan shoreline hotspots could enhance birding in the 21st century

by Christine Williamson

Imagine standing at the Northwestern University Landfill in Evanston, Cook County, on 1 Jan. 2000, looking south toward Chicago. Bend your imagination further and pretend you can see all the way to the Indiana Dunes. Difficult to believe? Well, believe it. The vista and the prospects for migrating birds along Lake Michigan's edge will look quite different at the turn of the century than they do today. From Evanston, Illinois south to Hammond, Indiana, the Lake Michigan flyway, which hosts some of the country's hottest birding spots, will undergo significant land-use changes that will alter the birding landscape, mostly for the better.

A Snowy Owl flies at Montrose Beach, one of the areas being improved along the Lake Michigan flyway to help nature as well as attract humans. Photo taken 7 Nov. 1993 by Kanae Hirabayashi.

If plans go forward as suggested by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and local citizen's advisory groups, public access to the lakefront will be improved and the amount of shoreline green space will be increased by hundreds of acres. Despite enormous pressures to develop and further privatize the lakefront for intensive recreational activities such as gambling boat docks, or to add convention capacity, Chicago's city planners seem inclined instead to add even more green space to the beautiful necklace of parks along Lake Michigan's shoreline.

The Chicago Park District is also adopting a more naturalistic approach to landscaping, using more native species and improving feeding areas for birds. This attitudinal change in land management cannot totally be attributed to the park district's new conservation

ethic. Leaving rougher, grassy areas, such as those allowed to flourish at Montrose Harbor on Chicago's north side, requires less maintenance, and thus less cost to manage. Whatever the reason, rougher vegetated areas provide more cover and food for migrant birds.

Citizens' advisory groups have become active at many points from Indiana up through the north side of Chicago, and they are pushing for conversion of existing industrial sites to green space, better managed for use by people and wildlife. That such groups are seriously considering wildlife needs in tandem with people's needs shows a great movement forward for bird conservation in the city.

The South Shore

The most exciting changes, with the most potential to improve lakefront birding, are happening south of

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