

An Important Illinois Bird Area: Lost Mound Unit of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

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Photos by the authors unless noted otherwise.

If you wish to see Grasshopper Sparrows and Western Meadowlarks, the Illinois guide books will direct you to several sites where you may find a few of these birds. But if you really want to see these species in abundance and in largely native prairie vegetation, than no place in Illinois is better than the Lost Mound Unit of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge in Carroll and Jo Daviess Counties in the northwestern corner of the state. Here you will find if not the largest, almost certainly the densest, concentrations in Illinois of these and several other grassland species in addition to shrubland and savanna species, Bald Eagles, waterfowl, wading birds, and cavity-nesters. All told nearly 250 species have been recorded at Lost Mound, including about



The state-threatened Loggerhead Shrike often nests in red cedar and impales prey on honey locust thorns. Both of these plant species quickly invade grazed sand prairie in the absence of fire. Photo by Dan Kirk.

120 species during the breeding season. Nearby sites have high-quality forest with many prized Neotropical-Nearctic migrants. Other parts of the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge have nice wetlands for rails, bitterns, cranes and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. With a little luck and a few rarities one should be able to find about 280 species in the region over the course of a year.

Origin and description of habitats

As the Wisconsinian glaciers melted and receded about 10,000 years ago periodic meltwater floods deposited vast amounts of sand on the edges of the ancient river basin. Prevailing winds from the west piled most of this sand on the east side of the river in large sand terraces above

*Duck's-eye view of sand dune
along edge of Mississippi River.*

