

# BIRD FINDING GUIDE



*LeConte's Sparrow.*  
*Drawing by Denis Kania.*

## Race Street Flyway

An early November day, I searched for late migrants in the University of Illinois' Forestry Plantation in Urbana. A Solitary Vireo as well as a few Yellow-rumped Warblers and Hermit Thrushes lingered. I crossed the street to Meadowbrook Park on Race Street where a LeConte's Sparrow had been seen for the past two weeks. As I found the sparrow, suddenly a large raptor headed straight for me at a low altitude. I noticed the distinct falcon shape, the pale tan upper parts, the faint facial markings, and the dark axillaries as a Prairie Falcon passed 15 feet over my head. It was just another day along the "Race Street Flyway."

The city of Urbana is in the last remnant of the pre-settlement "Big Grove." It lies at the north end of Yankee Ridge, a shallow moraine which had a second prairie grove, "Lynn Grove," at its southern terminus. In pre-settlement days, these isolated groves provided oases of woodland habitat in the vast prairie for

migratory land birds. Today, Urbana still serves as an oasis in the open farm country, giving birders an opportunity to see a variety of rare species such as the LeConte's Sparrow and Prairie Falcon.

Urbana is anchored by Meadowbrook Park and the University Forestry along Race Street on its southern edge and by Crystal Lake Park/Busey Woods, where Race Street ends on the north side of town. Locals know it as the "Race Street Flyway."

During fall or spring migration, birders might see virtually any land bird, even a few water birds out of habitat. Local birders recall the day when a resident called the Audubon Society telling them how he thought some children had placed an artificial bird on his lawn. But when he went to move the bird, it flew into a hedge where it spent the rest of the day. The bird turned out to be an American Bittern.

Another local birding tale con-

by Robert Chapel

cerns a Virginia Rail that decided to spend an afternoon in a flower bed in front of a downtown bookstore. Yet another story was told by a commuter who was stopped at a traffic light early one morning when a coot crossed the street in front of him.

More typically, birders will find warblers, vireos, thrushes, and flycatchers in any large tree and in any residential neighborhood. When a good wave of migrants is in, though, the best places to be are Meadowbrook Park, the Forestry, and Busey Woods.

## Meadowbrook Park

Though Meadowbrook Park lacks real woods, 180 species have been spotted there. Its main features include two streams lined with willows, and a prairie and secondary succession areas between the two streams. Birders should look here for sparrows and other open-field passerines, upland game birds, woodcocks, and raptors. The Urbana Park District sponsors an annual "Woodcock Walk" in March to observe the woodcock courtship display. Walnut trees and an old orchard near the old farm house often contain a number of warblers and vireos during migration.

In the spring, Willow and Alder Flycatchers, Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, and occasional herons can be found along the two streams. Various sparrows can be discovered in the prairie restoration area in the spring and especially in the fall. Look where the prairie is still overgrown by foxtail, or in an old field growth along the eastern edge of the prairie. LeConte's Sparrows

Meadowlark