

Chicago Urban Birding: Site Guide for A Dynamite Downtown Hot Spot

by Christine Williamson

Chicago is one of the few cities in the U.S. where birding mixes easily and unobtrusively with business and shopping, two of the most common reasons people visit the Windy City.

Here is a site guide to a downtown hot spot area close to the business hotels and world-class shopping. The Water Tower area consistently attracts and holds excellent migrating bird species, everything from Connecticut, Mourning, and Hooded Warblers to a good variety of sparrows to vagrants such as Bewick's Wren to unexpected Northern Saw-whet Owls.

Leave your car behind, walk, and enjoy the birding as well as luxurious amenities such as multiple Starbucks locations, a Ghiradelli's Ice Cream Parlour just feet away from Connecticut Warbler Heaven and the posh Ritz-Carleton Hotel (with very nice bathrooms, indeed).

In two hours, you have the chance to see a wide range of migrating species concentrated in narrow patches and strips of green along Chicago's lakefront. Because feeding and resting habitat is so scarce in this part of downtown Chicago, birds are more likely to stay in these pockets of green space all day than they are at other lakefront birding sites. While birding is better in the morning, as it always is, these two spots remain productive all day.

The Water Tower area is best for birding within major migration periods – primarily the end of March to the beginning of June and mid-August through the beginning of November. Outside of migration, it is usually the domain of House Sparrows, although White-throated Sparrows are to be found most of the winter in the vicinity. One White-throated Sparrow was still singing in the Streeterville neighborhood on 9 June 2000.

So toss your binoculars into your brief case and follow these steps to excellent birding before the first session of your business conference. Don't worry, you'll probably be finished by the time Neiman Marcus opens its doors onto Michigan Avenue. But do beware. If you happen to be lucky enough to bird this area on a "fall-out" day, when weather and calendar transpire to deliver a morning when birds literally drip from the trees, you might be late to your meeting.

The Water Tower Area

The route begins at the north end of what's known as the Magnificent Mile, the stretch of Michigan Avenue north of the river that is home to the world's most exclusive fashion designers. Amid Gucci, Chanel, Lauren, and all the top designers, is one of the Chicagoland area's best migrant spots. The Water Tower area encompasses a section north of the Chicago River, south of Oak Street, and centering around Chicago Avenue.

Start at the park, which hugs the curve of Lake Shore Drive's familiar "S" Curve, across from the Drake Hotel (where Princess Diana once stayed), just east of the intersection of Oak Street and Michigan Avenue. The 151, 145, and 146 Chicago Transit Authority buses run along Michigan Avenue north to south. The 125 bus services Michigan Avenue from both Metra train stations (Union Station and



The combination of tall trees and low ground cover make Water Tower Park a magnet for migrants. A Northern Saw-whet Owl was found in the tree above the Borders sign.