

Birding little-known spots in Jackson County

By Rhonda Monroe Rothrock

Pomona-Cave Creek Valley, Giant City State Park, and the Oakwood Bottoms Greentree Reservoir are recognized birding spots in Jackson County, located in southernmost Illinois. These places are considered sure things when it comes to spring migrating warblers and certain other bird species. They have a documented species history. Birding success at any of these locations is quite predictable.

Many lesser-known but equally rich birding areas exist in Jackson County, places that offer a variety of birding opportunities depending on the season. In Jackson County, the Southern Till Plain, the Shawnee Hills, the Ozarks, and the Lower Mississippi River Bottomlands come together. The county is bisected by the Big Muddy River and bounded on the west by the mighty Mississippi. Nearly one-third of the county falls within the Shawnee National Forest boundary.

Birdable public lands in Jackson County include Little Grand Canyon Ecological Area and Recreation Site, Pomona Natural Bridge and Picnic Area, and Clear Springs Recreation Site which are all under U.S. Forest Service management (Shawnee Forest Service Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District). State-owned lands in the county include Piney Creek Ravine, Lovets Pond, Fern Rock Nature Preserve, Giant City State Park, Lake Murphysboro State Park, Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area and Glen Schlimpert Recreation Area.

Devil's Backbone Park in Grand Tower provides access to the Mississippi River. Carbondale's Reservoir Lake, Cedar Lake Dam Picnic Area, and Southeast Water Treatment Plant offer most of the county's best waterfowl viewing with



the latter being nearly the only open water during unusually cold winters. Murphysboro's Riverside Park lies on the banks of the Big Muddy River and is a place where the canoeing birder can put in for a trip south through Red-headed Woodpecker land to Oakwood Bottoms.

In northeast Jackson County is Consolidated Coal Company's Burning Star #5 reclaimed surface coal mine. These 8,400 acres of grasslands, farm fields, ponds, and lakes are now being managed for wildlife. The lakes attract migrating waterfowl species including Trumpeter Swans. Its grasslands and scrub/shrub habitats attract Bell's Vireos and Short-eared Owls "in season." Birding is allowed on the property only with prearranged permission but several roads skirt the property offering roadside birding along its perimeter.

Need a Red-headed Woodpecker on the Birding Blitz in April? Rhonda Monroe Rothrock tells you where to find one in this article. Mary Kay Rubey took this photo 31 July 2005 in Whiteside County.

Here are two of my favorite off-the-beaten path places to bird in Jackson County.

Mississippi Bluffs Birding Trail

Northwest of Kinkaid Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, nestled in Shawnee Forest Service's Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District, is one of the many obscure but fruitful birding trails in Jackson County. The area and its trail doesn't have a formal name, rather it's a little-used Forest Service road. In a hike of approximately 0.35 mile (one way) along this Forest Service road trail, the adventurous birder will experience a wooded creek bottom, lowland and upland deciduous woodlands, pine stands, and a large open wildlife food plot.

To get there, from Ava take IL Highway 151 south 0.6 miles to Little Kinkaid Road. Follow Little Kinkaid Road west approximately 1.75 miles to McClure Road. Take McClure Road south until it meets a concrete and grated bridge. Park along the road side. Across the bridge is the forest service road/trail.

Barred Owls and Whip-poor-wills will sound their greetings to those who arrive just prior to sunrise in spring and summer. The spring