

# The Endangered, Threatened, and Rare Birds of Sand Lake, an Unusual Ephemeral Wetland in West-Central Illinois

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One of the best-kept secrets of central Illinois birders is the abundant and diverse avifauna of Sand Lake in Mason County, west-central Illinois. This wetland has long been a stopping point for birders on their way to Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge. High waters at Sand Lake in 1993-1994 resulted in even more attention being given to the avifauna. This paper presents the most detailed information available on the avifauna of the wetland. Of particular significance is the unusually high number ( $n = 15$ ) of endangered and threatened bird species that utilize the wetland at various times of the year. Furthermore, recent threats by humans to drain (and hence destroy) the wetland add some urgency to the communication of this information to persons concerned about the conservation of avifaunas and their habitats.

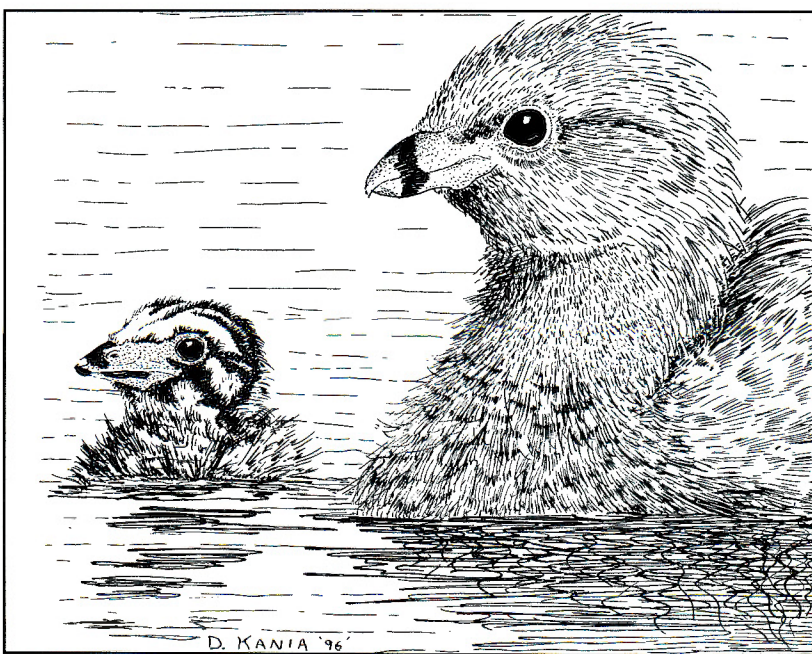
## The Wetland Environment

Sand Lake is located about one mile (1.6 km) southeast of Havana in Sections 7, 8, 17, and 18, T.21N., R.8W., Havana Township, Mason County (Fig. 1). The wetland is on the Manito Terrace which is composed of highly erosional, fine to medium sand and gravel (Labotka and Hester, 1971). The landscape is rather flat but low dunes occur to the southwest and northwest of the wetland. The underlying aquifer is composed of Sankoty Sand

(Kansan) and overlying outwash of Wisconsin sand and gravel (Walker et al., 1965). The water table in the area is rather high and heavy rains result in flooding and expansion of Sand Lake well beyond its usual size. When the water table is low (e.g., late summer) or in periods of drought (e.g., the late 1980s), Sand Lake becomes nearly or completely dry. Rodgers' (1978) study of the pre-settlement vegetation (ca. 1823) of Mason County indicated that the area around Sand Lake was prairie.

## The Avifauna

The keen interest of birders and professional ornithologists has resulted in more being known about the birds of Sand Lake than any other group of organisms. Table 1 presents a list of the 15 endangered and threatened bird species which have been observed using the wetlands. Of those, nesting and/or young have been observed for the Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*), King Rail



The state-threatened Pied-billed Grebe has nested at Sand Lake in Mason County. Drawing by Denis Kania.