

Birding in Southern Illinois

In this guide, southern Illinois consists of the 17 southernmost counties in Illinois, between the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Carbondale is the largest city with approximately 22,000 full-time residents, bolstered by some 11,000 students when Southern Illinois University is in session. The city is 600 miles south of Chicago and 100 miles southeast of St. Louis.

Why Southern Illinois?

Southern Illinois has many geographical features which contribute to a wealth of avian attractions. The Mississippi River forms the western boundary of the region, and the fertile Mississippi floodplain forms a swath two to seven miles wide east of the river. Bald Eagles, waterfowl, and migrating shorebirds are all found here. Some of these floodplains contain hardwood and cypress swamps, alive with Wood Ducks, owls, and woodpeckers. The Shawnee Hills are characterized by the bluffs, canyons, and rolling hills which cover the southwestern and southern portions of the area. Much of southern Illinois lies within the protection of the Shawnee National Forest, national wildlife refuges (NWR), state or national recreation areas, state fish and wildlife areas, or one of our state parks. Look for flycatchers, warblers, tanagers, and other passerines in these beautiful natural areas.

The north-central and northwest portions of southern Illinois have active mines and reclaimed lands from past strip-mining activity. This area now sports a good mixture of ponds, fallow fields, agriculture, and woodlots which attract raptors, waterfowl, and sparrows. Specialties here include wintering Short-eared Owl and breeding Henslow's and Grasshopper Sparrows. A bit of exploration may turn up rare wintering Rough-legged Hawk and Le Conte's Sparrow.

Southern Illinois lies in the climatic zone known as "humid subtropical." The summers are hot and humid, and the winters are generally mild. The average high in July is 89 degrees Fahrenheit; the average high in January is 42. The most rainfall comes in the spring; May averages 5.37 inches.

The Mississippi Flyway crosses southern Illinois, resulting in a great migration spectacle every spring and fall. Lowland and upland forests provide outstanding habitat for these migrants to rest and feed, and during late April it's not uncommon to tally 20 species of warblers during a day of birding. During "fallouts" the warbler count has

exceeded 30 species! Spring is the best time to search for these beautiful birds, as they are in their colorful breeding plumage and their migration is more concentrated into a shorter time-frame, especially the last week of April and the first week of May. But don't ignore the fall, as this is the time you may see large mixed flocks of these birds as they move south. During fall it is usually also easier to locate some species, such as Magnolia and Black-throated Green Warblers.

Listed below are two lists of warblers that frequent southern Illinois. Most of these warblers are woodland warblers, and many prefer a special niche. For example, look for American Redstart and Prothonotary Warblers in swampy woods. Search for Prairie and Blue-winged Warblers in emergent woodland and brushy areas. Refer to field guides and on-line references to research the best habitats.

Common Warblers

American Redstart
Black-and-white Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler
Kentucky Warbler
Louisiana Waterthrush
Magnolia Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula
Northern Waterthrush
Ovenbird
Palm Warbler
Pine Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Prothonotary Warbler
Tennessee Warbler
Worm-eating Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-breasted Chat
Yellow-rumped Warbler

Uncommon Warblers

Bay-breasted Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Blue-winged Warbler
Canada Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Cerulean Warbler
Connecticut Warbler
Golden-winged Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Orange-crowned Warbler
Swainson's Warbler
Wilson's Warbler

Seasonal Birding Calendar

- **January** – Look for hawks, owls, finches, and other northern visitors.
 - Raptors are common in some of the agricultural and strip-mining lands. Check the Mississippi bottomlands for Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, and rarely Golden Eagle. Check reclaimed strip-mining areas for Rough-legged Hawk and Short-eared Owl.
 - Check open water for unusual waterfowl and rare gulls, especially at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge and Rend Lake.
 - Eastern Screech-Owl, Barred Owl, and Great Horned Owl call in preparation for breeding.
 - During cold winters, especially after a blanketing snow, look in fallow farm fields for rare Snow Bunting. Lapland Longspur occurs annually. Pyramid State Recreation Area and the Mississippi bottomlands are two good places to search.
- **February**
 - The first Purple Martins return to scout out nesting areas.
 - During wet winters, this is a good opportunity to view waterfowl in the Mississippi bottomlands. If the season has been dry, search the fields and lakes in the strip mining areas north of Murphysboro and De Soto. Keep an eye out for Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, and five species of geese.
 - American Woodcock begin their aerial display flights and start “peenting.”
- **March**
 - Most of the wintering waterfowl start heading north out of the area; look for migrating waterfowl in the bottomlands, on Rend Lake, and at Crab Orchard NWR. Look for Common and Red-breasted Mergansers. An exception is Blue-winged Teal, which only start to arrive back from the south in good numbers at the end of March, and continue north through early May.
 - Early spring migrants like Pectoral Sandpiper, Pine Warbler, Tree Swallow, and Louisiana Waterthrush arrive towards the end of the month.
 - Residents begin to sing and breed. Listen for the first songs of Brown Thrasher and Eastern Towhee in early March.
- **April** – Enjoy a plethora of migrants!
 - Migration is at its peak during the last week of April. Some of the best places to check for flycatchers, thrushes, vireos,

and warblers are Oakwood Bottoms, Atwood Ridge, LaRue Swamp/Pine Hills, Giant City State Park, Rim Rock, and Bell Smith Springs.

- Look for north-bound shorebirds at Rend Lake, the Big Muddy Wetlands and in flooded farmlands close to Jacob and Neunert. The best locations vary yearly based on precipitation and flooding.
- Summering Wood Thrush, Scarlet Tanager, and Worm-eating Warbler return to rich woodlands; check Little Grand Canyon, Pomona/Natural Bridge, Clear Creek Wilderness, and Dixon Springs State Park.
- The first Mississippi Kites return to breed and are regularly spotted from the Big Muddy Levee bordering Oakwood Bottoms or from Hickory Ridge Road. Look for them soaring or perched on dead snags.
- **May** – Migration is still going strong.
 - Continue to check parks, tree-filled neighborhoods, and the Shawnee National Forest for warblers and flycatchers.
 - Beginning the first or second week of May, watch for slightly later-arriving migrants. These “late” warblers include Mourning, Magnolia, Wilson’s, and Canada. Late flycatchers to look for include Alder, Willow, Least, and rarely, Yellow-bellied. Extremely rare Black-billed Cuckoo also passes through in late May.
- **June** – Search for lingering spring migrants, vagrants, and a wealth of breeding birds in the Shawnee National Forest.
- **July to August** – Shorebirds fly south—the first of the fall migrants.
 - Continue to search for breeding birds; many of them are still singing and calling at dawn and in the early morning. This is especially true of grassland birds.
 - The first of the southbound migrants start to show up, especially among the shorebirds and terns. Usually in the middle of August you’ll find the first warblers, some in very drab plumage compared to their spring garb.
 - Fledglings are common and may resemble nothing at all found in your field guide.
 - Sedge Wrens show up in tall grasses, sometimes along the sides of unmowed levees, or in wet marshy areas at Union County SFWA.
 - Look for northward-dispersing vagrants like Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling Ducks, Anhinga, Neotropical Cormorant, Roseate Spoonbill, all three ibis species,

Scissortail Flycatcher, Brown Pelican, and rare waders in agricultural areas and flooded bottomlands.

- **September** – Fall migration is in full swing.
 - Look for migrating passerines throughout the area. Warblers are often part of mixed feeding flocks, and “pishing” is a good way to attract them.
 - Shorebirds are still streaming through in good numbers; check for Marbled Godwit, Buff-breasted and White-rumped Sandpipers, and American Avocet.
 - The first Blue-winged Teal and geese return to the area.
 - Look for all the terns, rare gulls like Laughing and Sabine’s, and wandering Parasitic Jaeger, especially at Rend and Crab Orchard Lakes.
- **October** – Keep looking for southbound migrants, vagrants, and the first returning winter residents
 - Watch for late passerine migrants, who are still passing through, especially at the beginning of the month. These birds include Yellow-throated and Blue-headed Vireos, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Lincoln’s Sparrow.
 - Sapsuckers, sparrows, and other wintering birds start to return, taking up residence in towns, old strip-mining lands, and in forests throughout southern Illinois. Wintering sparrows to look for include newly-arrived Swamp, Fox, White-crowned, and White-throated.
 - The first waterfowl show up or pass over, including Northern Shoveler, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, and White-fronted Geese.
 - Look for rare and unusual waterfowl such as loons and scoters on larger lakes. Franklin’s and Laughing Gulls are often seen at Crab Orchard and Rend Lakes.
- **November**
 - Snow and Ross’s Geese, and other waterfowl are heading south; many overwinter at Pyramid State Recreation Area, other strip mines, Baldwin and Rend Lakes, and in the Mississippi bottomlands. Thousands of Mallards and Northern Pintail pass through or winter at Oakwood Bottoms.
 - Rare and unusual gulls, and waterfowl, continue to be regularly spotted at both Rend and Crab Orchard Lakes.
 - By the end of November, most of the wintering passerines have returned. Look for Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, American Tree Sparrow, and rarities like Harris’s Sparrow.

▪ **December**

- Check for geese, dabbling ducks, diving ducks and scoters, loons, and mergansers along the Mississippi River, Carbon-dale Reservoir, and at all the area lakes: Baldwin, Big Lake (Pyramid State Recreation Area), Rend, Kinkaid, and Crab Orchard.
- Especially during very cold winters, or during poor pine cone crops up north, look for Purple Finch and Pine Siskin at area feeding stations, and Red-breasted Nuthatch and Red Crossbill in pine plantations. Historically, extreme northern finches such as Common Redpoll and Evening Grosbeak have visited southern Illinois, so always be on the lookout.
- Join a Christmas Bird Count to look for wintering regulars and rarities.

Target Birding in Southern Illinois

Visitors to a new area often wish to know where and when they can find a particular species. For example, where can I see a Pileated Woodpecker or a Kentucky Warbler, and when is the best season to look for them?

The chart below indicates likely locations and seasons to find some of the more sought-after target species in southern Illinois.

This checklist is in American Ornithological Society’s order (7th Edition, 61st supplement, dated June 30, 2020). This ordering of species places the most primitive birds first and the most recent species to evolve last.

Status codes are:

C Common – present and widespread; usually seen 3 out of 4 visits

FC Fairly common – often present; usually seen 2 out of 4 visits

U Uncommon – occurs regularly, but may be absent or in low numbers, and usually seen only 1 out of 4 visits

R Rare – occurs infrequently, or in a very limited range, and may be absent some years

SPECIES	LIKELY LOCATION(S)	BEST SEASON	STATUS
Hooded Merganser	Knight Hawk Mine	summer	FC
Northern Bobwhite	Grasslands: Crab Orchard NWR and reclaimed strip mines	late spring	C

Wild Turkey	Big Muddy Levee Pomona Area Extensive woods	early spring	C
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Oakwood Bottoms Bell Smith Springs Forests	early summer	C
Chuck-will's-widow	Ferne Clyffe State Park	late spring	FC
Eastern Whip-poor-will	Ferne Clyffe State Park Crab Orchard NWR	late spring	FC
Black-necked Stilt	Mississippi Bottomlands	spring and late summer	C
American Golden Plover	Mississippi Bottomlands	early spring	C
Pectoral Sandpiper	Flooded bottomland fields and wetlands	migration	C
American Woodcock	Oakwood Bottoms Strip mine areas Wet fields next to woods	early spring (Feb-Mar)	FC
Least Tern	Mississippi Bottomlands Willard area	late spring- summer	U
Anhinga	Oakwood Bottoms Big Muddy River Levee Cache River Wetlands	summer	R
American Bittern	Oakwood Bottoms	spring	R
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	Oakwood Bottoms	spring	U-R
Black Vulture	Mississippi Bottomlands Cache River	all year	C
Bald Eagle	Crab Orchard NWR Mississippi Bottomlands	winter	C
Mississippi Kite	Big Muddy Levee Union County SFWA	summer	C
Red-shouldered Hawk	Oakwood Bottoms Swampy woodlands	all year	C
Rough-legged Hawk	Knight Hawk Mine Pyramid State RA	winter	U
Eastern Screech-Owl	Hickory Ridge Road	spring	U
Barred Owl	Oakwood Bottoms	summer	C
Red-headed Woodpecker	Union County SFWA	all year	C
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Giant City State Park	winter	FC
Pileated Woodpecker	Giant City State Park Union County SFWA Shawnee National Forest	all year	C
Great-crested Flycatcher	Giant City State Park	summer	C
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	Oakwood Bottoms	spring	R

Acadian Flycatcher	Pomona Natural Bridge Little Grand Canyon Bell Smith Springs	spring and summer	C
Bell's Vireo	Pyramid State Park Sahara Woods SFWA	spring and summer	C
Yellow-throated Vireo	LaRue Swamp Forested stream sides	spring	F
Sedge Wren	Big Muddy Levee Union County SFWA	July-August	U-R
Wood Thrush	Giant City State Park Pomona area Garden of the Gods	summer	C
Grasshopper Sparrow	Knight Hawk Mine	summer	U
Fox Sparrow	Shrubby woodlands	winter	FC
American Tree Sparrow	Shrubby strip mine areas	winter	U
Henslow's Sparrow	Pyramid SRA Sahara Woods SFWA	early sum- mer	U
Swamp Sparrow	Oakwood Bottoms	winter	C
Orchard Oriole	Big Muddy Wetlands Evergreen Park	spring	C
Rusty Blackbird	Bottomland forests Oakwood Bottoms	winter	FC
Ovenbird	Pomona Natural Bridge Lusk Creek Wilderness Bell Smith Springs	spring	U
Worm-eating Warbler	Lusk Creek Wilderness Clear Springs Wilderness Shawnee National Forest	spring	C
Louisiana Waterthrush	Giant City State Park Rocky forested streams	early spring	C
Prothonotary Warbler	Oakwood Bottoms Mermet Lake Cache River	spring	C
Kentucky Warbler	Little Grand Canyon Giant City State Park	spring and summer	FC
Hooded Warbler	Clear Springs Wilderness Lusk Creek Wilderness	late spring	U
Pine Warbler	Crab Orchard NWR Lake Glendale RA Pine plantations	spring	C
Summer Tanager	Giant City State Park Lake Murphysboro SP Woods and forests	spring and summer	C
Scarlet Tanager	Little Grand Canyon Lake Murphysboro SP Mature forests	spring	FC

Blue Grosbeak	Pomona area Big Muddy Wetlands Brush and grasslands	summer	FC
Indigo Bunting	Pyramid SRA Big Muddy Levee Hedge- rows and grasslands	spring and summer	C
Dickcissel	Big Muddy Levee, Fallow fields and grass- lands	spring and summer	C

Birding on Private Land

Some of the sites listed in this book border private property. Please do not trespass without permission of the property owner. Being courteous and asking first will smooth the way for continued access to many of these productive sites.

Southern Illinois Birding References

The best and only really comprehensive reference is *Southern Illinois Birds: An Annotated List and Site Guide*, by W. Douglas Robinson, 1996, The Southern Illinois University Press. In February 2018 Dr. Robinson released an updated, online version of this book at: <https://sites.google.com/view/birds-of-southern-illinois/home>. It includes species synopses, distribution, and status for 353 birds found in the area since 1900. Use the “Home” menu icon at the top right of the screen to navigate between chapters of this great web book. Much of the recent information comes from eBird records. The “site guide” included in the 1996 version of the book has not been updated; the author preferring instead to rely on eBird hotspots for up-to-date information. These hotspots are invaluable for finding out what birds have been seen at a location on specific dates, but lack information about the habitat, geography, accessibility, or lay-out of the area. Hence this guide, which offers advice on where to find the birds you’re looking for, and how best to navigate the site once you arrive.

Another reference which covers all of the state is *Birding Illinois*, by Sheryl De Vore, 2000, Falcon Publishing, Inc. This book provides a fine introduction to some of the same sites I cover, and the overall maps are very useful. The book gives a detailed history of most locations, but the current information has become dated for many areas. I would also classify the expected “key bird” sightings in each of these chapters as quite optimistic; if you find even half of the birds they list as targets you’ll be doing quite well.

As previously mentioned, the most current information on the occurrence of southern Illinois bird species can be found on eBird at: <https://ebird.org/home>. Use the “Explore” menu option to peruse sightings for specific birds and locations in southern Illinois (and the rest of the U.S. and the world). For example, entering “Jackson, Illinois” in the “Explore Regions” entry box will bring up a list of up-to-the-minute sightings from Jackson County. The “Help” menu option offers tutorials and advice on navigating eBird.

I have a previously published guide to Finding Birds in Jackson County, Illinois, from 2016. This work has several additional birding sites in Jackson County which have not been included in this guide. It is available at www.southwestbirders.com.

If you have any suggestions or comments about this guide, please send them to the author at: henrydetwiler@earthlink.net. Since this guide is self-published, it is simple to put out new revisions as birding sites and species diversity change.

Chapter Layout

Each chapter is organized in the same way, with descriptions of the most common habitats, target birds you might wish to search for, a general description of the area, one or more maps of the area with numbers and letters that pinpoint birding locations, descriptions of the birding locations themselves, driving directions, and specific site notes for the area.

Under the “Target Birds” heading will be a list of birds which frequent this location that you may wish to search for. Specialty birds (**in bold**) are the more interesting species often sought after by visitors to this area. Winter covers the months of December through February; spring is March through May; summer is June through August; fall is September through November. *Resident* means the bird is likely to be found at the location year-round, and usually breeds there. *Migration* means the bird is found at the site during the northern migration in March, April, or May, and/or during the southward migration in September, October, and November. *Winter* means the bird winters in the area from December through February.

Under the “Birding Suggestions” are GPS coordinates to the individual sites. If you plug these coordinates into the search box for Google Maps, you’ll be taken directly to a map of the area. The descriptions offer ideas on how to bird the individual sites, and the kinds of birds that frequent the sites in the different seasons.

Under the “Driving Directions” I’ve tried to be as specific as possible, and get you to the birding location in the most direct fashion. However, it is good practice to consult an official road or topographical map, use a car-based navigation system, or use a GPS. Google Maps and other mapping applications are quite useful. A few of the forest and levee roads are prone to washouts and flooding during storms, as are some of the bottomland farm roads.

Under the “Site Notes” I’ve sometimes identified specific locations where gas, food, or other services may be available. Please don’t take these as endorsements of fine dining or good service (I’ve only visited a few of them); they are mentioned here solely as a convenience.

Safety

Many of the sites described in this book are on the Shawnee National Forest or Illinois Department of Natural Resources state land holdings. Almost all of these are open to hunting. There are multiple hunting seasons (archery, black powder, rifle, youth, etc.) for deer, turkey, quail, and waterfowl, so exercise caution when birding in these areas, especially if you go off-trail.

Cell phone coverage is good in urban areas, but is spotty or totally unavailable in some rural areas of southern Illinois.

Southern Illinois is home to three venomous snakes: water moccasin (cottonmouth), copperhead, and timber rattlesnake. Be cautious where you step, especially in lowland forest areas like Oakwood Bottoms and Heron Pond, and when going cross-country. If you are bitten, seek immediate medical attention.

Deer ticks may carry Lyme disease and other maladies. Check for ticks after all warm-weather birding adventures. Less serious but quite unpleasant are the chiggers. Staying on trails and avoiding areas with tall grass keeps most chiggers off of you. Mosquitoes are also a problem, especially during a warm, wet spring, and during a wet summer. They have the potential to infect humans with West Nile and other diseases. Liberal application of a repellent containing DEET helps with all of the above insects.

Thunderstorms and high winds may be an issue at any time of the year. Flooding can be a problem in some areas, especially during spring. Exercise good judgment at fords. Keep in mind that it takes only 6” of flowing water to sweep a man off his feet, and just 24” of water to move a car

off its tracks. Stay out of slot canyons at Giant City State Park and Little Grand Canyon during thunderstorms.

Finally, if you're birding here in the summer, keep the high heat and humidity in mind. Heat exhaustion and heat stroke are serious matters. Especially in the summer, birds are most active early in the morning before it gets really hot, so it's best to do your birding then.

Abbreviations

- Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR)
- State Fish and Wildlife Area (SFWA)
- State Recreation Area (SRA)
- State Park (SP)
- National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)
- National Forest (NF)

Thanks

Special thanks to Rhonda Rothrock and Don Mullison for reviewing, editing, and providing suggestions to improve both this book's content and the southern Illinois bird checklist!



Immature Bald Eagle & Turkey Vultures feeding on a coyote carcass at the Knight Hawk Coal Mine

Southern Illinois Birding Sites

The following maps and location information outline where the described birding sites. The first map and accompanying list identifies in which county these sites are located; the second map shows the general area of the sites within southern Illinois. More detailed location maps are included in the individual site chapters.

Birding Sites by County



Randolph County:

- Kaskaskia Island
- Randolph County State Recreation Area
- Baldwin Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area

Perry County

- Pyramid State Recreation Area

Franklin and Jefferson Counties

- Rend Lake

Jackson County

- Carbondale area
- Giant City State Park
- Pomona area
- Little Grand Canyon
- Cedar Creek and Hickory Ridge Roads
- Oakwood Bottoms
- Mississippi bottomlands
- Lake Murphysboro State Park
- Knight Hawk Coal Mine

Williamson County

- Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge

Hamilton County:

- Hamilton County State Fish and Wildlife Area

Saline County

- Saline County State Fish and Wildlife Area
- Sahara Woods State Fish and Wildlife Area
- Garden of the Gods Recreation Area

Gallatin County

- Pounds Hollow and Rim Rock Recreation Areas

Union County

- Giant City State Park (southern portion)
- LaRue Swamp
- Pine Hills
- Union County State Fish and Wildlife Area

Johnson County

- Ferne Clyffe State Park
- Cache River State Natural area

Pope County

- Bell Smith Springs Recreation Area
- Dixon Springs State Park
- Lusk Creek
- Lake Glendale Recreation Area
- War Bluff Valley Audubon Sanctuary

Hardin County

- Cave-In-Rock State Park
- Garden of the Gods Recreation Area (southern portion)

Alexander County

- East Cape Girardeau area
- Horseshoe Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area

Pulaski County

- Cypress Creek NWR

Massac County

- Mermet Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area

Birding Site Locations



These sites correspond with chapter numbers as listed in the Table of Contents, and at the beginning of each site description. Detailed directions to each site are included in the chapters which follow.

1. Kaskaskia Island (Randolph)
2. Randolph County SRA
3. Baldwin Lake (Randolph)
4. Pyramid SRA (Perry)
5. Rend Lake (Franklin/ Jefferson)
6. Knight Hawk Coal Mine (Jackson)
7. Lake Murphysboro SP (Jackson)
8. Mississippi River Bottomlands
9. Oakwood Bottoms (Jackson)
10. Little Grand Canyon (Jackson)
11. Cedar Creek/Hickory Ridge (Jackson)
12. Pomona Area (Jackson)
13. LaRue Swamp & Pine Hills
14. Carbondale Area (Jackson)
15. Crab Orchard NWR (Williamson)
16. Giant City SP (Jackson)
17. Atwood Ridge (Union)
18. Union County SFWA (Union)
19. East Cape Girardeau Area (Alexander)
20. Horseshoe Lake (Alexander)
21. Ferne Clyffe SP (Johnson)
22. Cypress Creek NWR (Pulaski)



- 23. Cache River State Natural Area (Johnson)
- 24. Mermet Lake (Massac)
- 25. Sahara Woods SFWA (Saline)
- 26. Saline County SFWA (Saline)
- 27. Rim Rock/Pounds Hollow (Pope)
- 28. Garden of the Gods (Pope)
- 29. Bell Smith Springs (Pope)
- 30. Lusk Creek (Pope)
- 31. Lake Glendale (Pope)
- 32. Dixon Springs State Park (Pope)
- 33. War Bluff Valley Sanctuary (Pope)
- 34. Cave-In-Rock State Park (Hardin)

1. Kaskaskia Island

County: Randolph

Nearest Town: Marysville, Missouri

Habitat

- Hedgerows
- Agriculture
- Fallow fields
- Oxbows and ponds
- Bottomland forest

Target Birds

*(Specialty birds in **bold face**)*

- Geese (winter): Snow, Ross's, Greater White-fronted, and Canada
- Yellow-billed Cuckoo (summer)
- **Whooping Crane** (winter)
- Plovers: Black-Bellied, American Golden-, and Semipalmated (migration)
- Sandpipers: Least, Western (rare), Spotted, Solitary, Semipalmated, White-rumped, Pectoral, and Stilt (migration). Greater Yellowlegs (migration and winter)
- Herons: Great Blue (resident), Green, Little Blue, and Black-crowned Night (summer)
- Egrets: Great and Snowy (summer)
- Northern Harrier (winter)
- Bald Eagle (resident)
- Mississippi Kite (late summer)
- Great Horned Owl (resident)
- Horned Lark (resident)
- Swallows (migration and summer): **Bank**, Northern Rough-winged, Tree, Barn, and Cliff
- Eastern Bluebird (resident)
- Sparrows: Field (resident), Savannah (resident), American Tree (winter), Song (resident), White-crowned (winter), White-throated (winter), and Fox (winter)
- **Rusty Blackbird** (winter)
- Orioles: Baltimore and Orchard (summer)
- Warblers: Prothonotary and American Redstart (summer)
- Grosbeaks: Blue (summer) and Rose-breasted (migration)

General Description

Most of Kaskaskia Island is intensively farmed, predominantly with corn and soybeans. As with much of southern Illinois, flooding (whether by rain or high Mississippi River run-off) transforms the low farmland areas into seasonal wetlands attractive to shorebirds, waders, and waterfowl. Since January 2016, the combination of wet areas and spilled grain has attracted up to four Whooping Cranes during the fall and winter months. In the winters of 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 two of these stately cranes wintered here. The seasonal ponds are also attractive to five species of swallows, which pass through by the hundreds.

Between the levees which protect Kaskaskia Island from severe river flooding are oxbow ponds, a small channel, and a fine swath of bottomland woods. A portion of these woods comprises a part of the Middle Mississippi National Wildlife Refuge; other portions are private, so please observe posted signs. Typical bottomland species like Red-bellied Woodpecker, Prothonotary Warbler, and American Redstart breed here.



Kaskaskia Island

Birding Suggestions

1) Bridge and Levee

GPS Coordinates: 37.891409, -89.950260

From St. Mary, Missouri, follow signs to Kaskaskia, and take the Old Channel Road (County 15) bridge northeast. As you drive over this bridge connecting Missouri to Illinois, scan the oxbow for cormorants, kingfishers, and eagles. At the end of the bridge is a “T” intersection; turn left onto Kings Highway here. At approximately 0.6 miles northwest of the “T” intersection, park at a dirt/gravel road leading downhill into the oxbow. The permanent standing water here is a good place to check for herons and egrets, the most common of which are Great Blue Heron and Great Egret. Resident Wood Duck is joined by teal, wigeons, and other dabblers during the fall and winter.

2) Oxbow Pond and Bottomland Forest

GPS Coordinates: 37.905593, -89.957136

At the point where North Kings Highway dips down off of the levee and heads east, drive straight onto the jeep track a few more feet (at the top of the levee) and park. Walk the old track that crosses the channel to the west, scanning the pond (on the north side) and the forest (on the south side) for waders, seasonal shorebirds, breeding Yellow-billed Cuckoo, resident woodpeckers (Pileated, Downy, Hairy, and Red-bellied), Northern Parula, Yellow-throated and White-eyed Vireo, and American Redstart. During winter check the blackbird flocks for Rusty Blackbird, a regular visitor. Winter also brings Swamp, White-throated, and White-crowned Sparrows.

Directions

1.4 miles northwest of the “T” intersection, veer left to stay up on the levee. Park in the grass, and then walk a bit north and west onto an earthen dam to view bottomland forest and an oxbow of the old Mississippi River channel.

3) Fields and Flooded Areas

GPS Coordinates: 37.912722, -89.931320

As you drive east down off of the levee into the agricultural fields, look for breeding Horned Lark, Eastern Meadowlark, Indigo Bunting, and Song Sparrow. Watch for vagrant Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in the late summer. In the winter, flooded



Whooping Crane

fields attract Greater White-fronted, Canada, Snow, and Ross's Geese, in addition to numerous other waterfowl and Whooping Crane (2016-2020). The Whooping Cranes usually favor old corn stubble fields. Also worth watching for in the winter are vagrant Western Meadowlark, fairly common Lapland Longspur, and rarely, Snow Bunting. Birding here is all from the edge of the roads.

Directions

From Area 2

- Follow N. Kings Highway as it turns east and drops down off of the levee.
- Drive east 2.6 miles to La Grande Rue, stopping at standing water or whenever you see any flocks to scan for good birds.

4) Kaskaskia

GPS Coordinates: 37.921683, -89.914450

The settlement of Kaskaskia dates back to the early 1700s, and in 1818 became the first capital of Illinois. Several historical buildings from the 19th century remain, as do many beautiful, large trees, and lots of grassy lawns. Here the bird life is typical of neighborhoods throughout southern Illinois, with plenty of jays, mockingbirds, robins, titmice, and chickadees. Since this area is in the heart of the Mississippi Flyway, the large trees are worth checking during spring and fall for warblers, flycatchers, vireos, grosbeaks, and other migrants. Good birds during a November 2018 visit included a Great Horned Owl and a late Palm Warbler.

Another good spot to try for the Whooping Cranes is Cemetery Lane, which can be accessed from the northern side of the town site. Drive west on this lane towards the cemetery, keeping an eye out for the cranes in low or flooded areas.

Directions

From St. Mary follow the signs to Kaskaskia

- From 2nd Street, turn onto County Road 15 (Old Channel Road) and drive northeast over the bridge for 0.6 miles to a "T" intersection.
- At the "T", turn left onto Kings Highway and drive 1.5 miles.
- Continue to follow the road as it turns to the right and crosses the levee. You're now on North Kings Highway. Follow North Kings Highway to the east for 2.6 miles to La Grande Rue.
- Turn left on La Grande Rue and drive 0.2 miles into the town site of Kaskaskia.

5) Swampy Area

GPS Coordinates: 37.948568, -89.925456

As you drive along this rough gravel levee road to the north, watch for good habit on both sides of the track. Fallow fields and hedge-rows provide prime habitat for orioles and buntings in the summer and a host of sparrows in the winter. American Tree-Sparrow and Swamp Sparrow are two of the target birds here. This is also a good place to find raptors like Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks year-round, and Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks in the colder months.

Directions

From Kaskaskia (Area 4)

- Drive 0.6 miles northwest, birding along the gravel road.

6) La Grande Rue Fields

GPS Coordinates: 37.901034, -89.903497

This area is usually flooded, especially after rains or when the river is high. Look for shorebirds and early waterfowl during the late summer. In 2018 an immature White Ibis spent several weeks here. It is a good place to find a variety of herons and egrets. Continue west along La Grande Rue, looking for other ponds and depressions along the way.

La Grande Rue and both North and South King Highways are paved. But there are also several gravel or dirt roads that cut through Kaskaskia Island that have seasonal water-filled depressions. Some of these can be quite good, but may require high clearance or four-wheel drive if they are muddy. One of these tracks is Grabe Road, which joins North and South Kings Highway.

Directions

From the "T" intersection at the east end of the bridge

- Turn right onto Kings Highway and follow the levee road 0.2 miles southeast, watching the water on your right, and stopping to view any birds.

- After 0.2 miles veer left and head north to remain on Kings Highway. Stop at flooded areas or any bird concentrations.

- After 2.3 miles, turn left onto La Grande Rue, site of the largest of the seasonal ponds.

- At 1.3 miles you'll reach the intersection of N. Kings Highway. Go straight ahead to visit the town site of Kaskaskia, or turn left to head back to Marysville and check out more flooded areas and ponds. The wet area just west of this intersection is good for a variety of swallows during migration and late summer, including Bank Swallow.

7) East Bottomlands

GPS Coordinates: 37.889416, -89.897894

Depending on the water level in the fields and bottomlands, you can usually drive over the levee here and park in grassy area on the east side. Bird the ponds and lowland forests in search of woodpeckers, flycatchers, vireos, Prothonotary and Yellow Warblers, and both Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. This location and all of the bottomland forest is a great place to bird in the spring, when it is possible to find numerous species of migrating flycatchers, vireos, and warblers. This is a popular hunting area in the fall, so exercise caution at that time.

Directions

From the "T" intersection at the east end of the bridge

- Turn right onto Kings Highway and follow the levee road 0.2 miles southeast, watching the water on your right, and stopping to view any birds.
- Veer left and head north to remain on Kings Highway; drive 0.8 miles.
- Turn right onto Barrow Road and drive 0.4 miles southeast back up to the top of the levee road and park. Explore the oxbow on the other side (southeast) of the levee.

Site Notes

Best Time to Visit

- Winter is the peak season, when you'll find many varieties of waterfowl, raptors, sparrows, and hopefully a Whooping Crane.

Ownership

- Farm fields are private, but easily viewed from the roads.
- Portions of the old Mississippi River channel and bottomlands are part of the Middle Mississippi NWR.

Vehicle Access

- Most roads are paved or well-graded gravel, and accessible by passenger car.
- A few of the dirt roads which border or cut across the fields may require high clearance or 4x4 at various times depending on rainfall and seasonal flooding.

Fees

- None

Restrooms

- At Kaskaskia village and at the gas station/convenience store in St. Mary

Food

- St. Mary, Missouri (0.6 miles southwest)
- Chester, Illinois (13 miles east)

Gas

- St. Mary, Missouri (usually the best price within miles)
- At the Missouri-Illinois border (gas prices in Missouri are usually much cheaper than in Illinois)



Tree Swallows