

Introduction to Birding in Jackson County

Why Jackson County?

Jackson County is situated in southern Illinois, between the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. It is 600 miles south of Chicago and 100 miles southeast of St. Louis. Carbondale is the largest city with 26,000 full-time residents, bolstered by 17,000 students when Southern Illinois University is in session.

Jackson County has many geographical features which contribute to a wealth of avian attractions. The Mississippi River forms the western boundary of the county, 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 Duck, owls, and woodpeckers. The Shawnee Hills are characterized by the bluffs, canyons, and rolling hills which cover the southwestern and southern portions of the county. Much of this area lies within the protection of the Shawnee National Forest, state parks, and other recreation areas. Look for flycatchers, warblers, tanagers, and other passerines in these beautiful natural areas.

The north-central and north-east portions of the county have 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 Grasshopper Sparrow. A bit of exploration may turn up breeding Henslow's Sparrow and rare wintering Le Conte's Sparrow, too.

Jackson County 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 Jackson County, 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 typical day. During "fallouts" the warbler count has exceeded 30 species!

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
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
Yellow-throated Warbler

Less Common 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
Magnolia Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Orange-crowned Warbler
Swainson's Warbler
Wilson's Warbler

Seasonal Birding Calendar

- **January** – Look for hawks, owls, and other northern visitors
 - Raptors are common in the agricultural and strip-mining lands. Check the Mississippi bottomlands for Northern Harrier and Bald Eagle. Check reclaimed strip-mining areas for Rough-legged Hawk and Short-eared Owl.
 - 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 Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting.

- **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 from the levees south of Grand Tower and north of Gorham. 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 Cedar and Kinkaid Lakes, and on the Carbondale Reservoir. Look for Common and Red-breasted Mergansers. An exception is Blue-winged Teal, which only start to arrive in good numbers at the end of March, and continue northward through early May.
 - Early spring migrants like Pectoral Sandpiper, Pine Warbler, Tree Swallow, and Louisiana Waterthrush arrive from the south.
 - Residents begin to sing and breed. Listen for the first songs of Brown Thrasher and Eastern Towhee in early March.
- **April** – Height of migrant activity
 - 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, Little Grand Canyon, the Pomona area, and Giant City State Park.
 - Look for north-bound shorebirds at the Big Muddy Wetlands and in flooded farmlands close to Jacob and Neunert.
 - Summering Wood Thrush, Scarlet Tanager, and Worm-eating Warbler return to rich woodlands; check Little Grand Canyon and Clear Creek Wilderness.
 - The first Mississippi Kites return to breed and are often spotted from the Big Muddy Levee or from Hickory Ridge Road. Look for them soaring or perched on dead snags.
- **May** – Migration 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 Adler, Willow, and Least. 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 and early August** – Shorebirds fly south
 - Continue to search for breeding birds; many of them are still singing and calling at dawn and in the early morning.
 - The first of the southbound migrants start to show up, especially among the shorebirds.
 - Fledglings are common and may resemble nothing at all found in your field guide.
 - Look for northward-dispersing vagrants like Scissortail Flycatcher, Brown Pelican, and waders in agricultural areas and flooded bottomlands.
- **Late August and September** – Fall migration in full swing
 - Look for migrating passerines throughout the area.
 - Shorebirds still streaming through in good numbers; check for rarities like Marbled Godwit, White-rumped Sandpiper, and American Avocet.
 - The first ducks and geese return to the area.
- **October** – Look for fall vagrants and returning winter residents
 - Sapsuckers, sparrows, and other wintering birds return, taking up residence in towns, old strip-mining lands, and in forests throughout the county.
 - Wintering sparrows to look for include Swamp, Fox, White-crowned, White-throated, and rarely, Harris's.
- **November**
 - Snow, Ross's, and White-fronted Geese are heading south; many overwinter in the Mississippi bottomlands.
 - Thousands of Mallards and Northern Pintail will pass through or winter at Oakwood Bottoms.
- **December**
 - Check for unusual gulls along the Mississippi River, Kinkaid Lake, and at Carbondale Reservoir.
 - Especially during cold winters, look for Purple Finch and Pine Siskin at feeding stations. Historically, other northern finches also came south, so always be on the lookout.
 - Join a Christmas Bird Count to look for wintering regulars and rarities.

Target Birding in Jackson County

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

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

The checklist is in American Ornithological Union order (7th Edition, 57th supplement, July 6, 2016). This ordering of species places the most primitive birds first and the most recently evolved species last.

Status codes are:

C – Common, usually found 3 out of every 4 visits

U – Uncommon, usually located only 1 out of every 4 visits

R – Rare, usually not seen, and may be absent some years

V – Vagrant, usually seen only once or twice in a decade; often a lost “visitor” from the eastern or western United States

| SPECIES | BEST LOCATION(S) | BEST SEASON | STATUS |
|----------------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------|
| Hooded Merganser | Knight Hawk Mine | summer | C |
| Northern Bobwhite | Reclaimed strip mines | late spring | C |
| Wild Turkey | Big Muddy Levee Pomona Area | early spring | C |
| Yellow-billed Cuckoo | Oakwood Bottoms | early summer | C |
| Chuck-will's-widow | Cedar Lake | late spring | U |
| Black-necked Stilt | Mississippi Bottomlands | spring | 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 | early spring (Feb-Mar) | C |
| Least Tern | Mississippi Bottomlands | late spring | R |
| Black Vulture | Mississippi Bottomlands | all year | C |
| American Bittern | Oakwood Bottoms | spring | R |
| Yellow-crowned Night Heron | Oakwood Bottoms | spring | U |
| Mississippi Kite | Big Muddy Levee | summer | C |
| Bald Eagle | Big Muddy Levee | winter | C |
| Red-shouldered Hawk | Oakwood Bottoms | all year | C |
| Eastern Screech-Owl | Hickory Ridge Road | spring | U |
| Barred Owl | Oakwood Bottoms | summer | C |
| Yellow-bellied Sapsucker | Evergreen Park Giant City State Park | winter | U |
| Pileated Woodpecker | Giant City State Park Oakwood Bottoms | all year | C |
| Red-headed Woodpecker | Thompson Woods Lake Murphysboro State Park | all year | C |

| SPECIES | BEST LOCATION(S) | BEST SEASON | STATUS |
|--------------------------|---|----------------------|---------------|
| Acadian Flycatcher | Pomona Natural Bridge Little Grand Canyon | spring and summer | C |
| Great-crested Flycatcher | Giant City State Park | summer | C |
| Carolina Chickadee | Evergreen Park | all year | C |
| Carolina Wren | Evergreen Park | spring | C |
| Sedge Wren | Big Muddy Levee | August | R |
| Wood Thrush | Giant City State Park | summer | C |
| Worm-eating Warbler | Pomona Area Clear Springs Wilderness | spring | C |
| Louisiana Waterthrush | Giant City State Park | early spring | C |
| Prothonotary Warbler | Oakwood Bottoms | spring | C |
| Kentucky Warbler | Little Grand Canyon Giant City State Park | spring and summer | C |
| Hooded Warbler | Clear Springs Wilderness | late spring | U |
| Ovenbird | Pomona Natural Bridge | spring | U |
| Grasshopper Sparrow | Knight Hawk Mine | summer | U |
| Swamp Sparrow | Oakwood Bottoms | winter | C |
| American Tree Sparrow | Shrubby strip mine areas | winter | U |
| Summer Tanager | Giant City State Park Lake Murphysboro State Park | spring and summer | C |
| Scarlet Tanager | Little Grand Canyon Lake Murphysboro State Park | spring | U |
| Blue Grosbeak | Pomona area Big Muddy Wetlands | summer | C |
| Indigo Bunting | Giant City State Park Big Muddy Levee | spring and summer | C |
| Dickcissel | Big Muddy Levee Grassy strip mine fields | spring and summer | C |
| Orchard Oriole | Big Muddy Wetlands Evergreen Park | spring | 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.

Birding References

The best reference, which includes information on Jackson County, is *Southern Illinois Birds: An Annotated List and Site Guide*, by W. Douglas Robinson, 1996, The Southern Illinois University Press.

If you have any suggestions or comments about this guide, please send them to Henry Detwiler at: henrydetwiler@earthlink.net

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 birds that you are likely to find at this location. Winter covers the months of December through March; 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 probably breeds there. *Migration* means the bird is found there during either the northern migration in March, April, or May, or during the southward migration in September, October, and early November. *Winter* means the bird winters in the area from December through February.

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 and use a GPS. A few of the forest and levee roads are prone to washouts and flooding in 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 food or good service—they are mentioned here as a convenience.

Safety

Many of the sites are on or around the Shawnee National Forest, which is open to hunting. There are multiple seasons (archery, rifle, etc.) for deer, turkey, quail, and waterfowl, so exercise extreme caution when birding in areas open to hunting.

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. If you are bitten, seek immediate medical attention.

Deer ticks may carry Lyme disease and other maladies. Check for ticks after all your 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 the summer. In the past, some of these mosquitoes carried West Nile disease, and perhaps they still do. Liberal application of a repellent containing DEET helps with all of the above insects.

Especially if you traverse narrow trails or wander through the forest, try to keep clear of our ubiquitous poison ivy, which can cause a painful rash.

Thunderstorms and high winds may be an issue at some times of the year. Flooding can be a problem in some areas. Exercise good judgment at fords. Stay out of canyons at Pomona, 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. The birds are most active early in the morning, before it gets unbearably hot. It's best to do your birding then.

Thanks

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