

Birding Paradise on the Ice Age Trail by Bill Beers

The Lodi Valley area segments of the Ice Age Trail offer excellent chances to see many of the 328 species of birds native to Wisconsin. There are people who walk these exceptional trails, however, who would like to see or hear something more than the sandhill cranes in the marsh or the Eastern Towhee singing 'drink your tea' near the twin pines. It's one thing to see a Red-tailed Hawk soaring over Gibraltar Rock, quite another to discover a nesting pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, their delicate mossy nest no bigger than a golf ball.

Many people want to get into birding, but are discouraged by the difficulty in seeing unfamiliar feather things weighing less than three ounces. The good thing about birding on the IAT is that you start and end in beauty, no matter what you see, and it only gets better as the birds become more obvious. Here are some tips to help you get over the first few bumps on the trail to birding.

One reason people quit birding is that they never see the less obvious birds well enough to try to puzzle out their identity. Inexpensive binoculars are often the cause, so try out a pair of \$225 binoculars. You'll be amazed by the clarity. Pick up a field guide that has color drawings, not photographs (Peterson's or Sibley's). Now let's get on the trail by the ferry and move south, and start thinking like a bird. (Look for the Baltimore Oriole and Warbling Vireo that often nest in the cottonwoods down along the river.)

Food and nesting occupies birds nearly all the time. Food: find it and avoid being it for a predator. As you enter the woods pay particular attention to transitional areas between two habitats, like edges of woods or scrubby areas with different heights of vegetation. Here birds can look for insects and other invertebrates while also being able to keep an eye out for a cooper's hawk. You may hear the Ovenbird (the one yelling teacher!) in the deeper part of the woods, or towards evening the "eolay" of the Wood Thrush or the fluting "veed, veed, veer, veer" of its cousin the Veery, but most birds will be found in the transition zones.

At the top of the trail, rest on the Leopold bench and let the birds get used to you. Now listen: Northern Cardinal, Towhee, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager. In late spring and early summer, these will be feeding and nesting, raising their young.

Up further along the trail there might be Indigo Buntings, Brown Thrashers, and as the summer wears on the seemingly endless call of the Red-eyed Vireo. I've also seen Blue-headed and Yellow-throated Vireos in the woods north of the Slack Road trailhead. Gibraltar offers excellent habitat for most of the Wisconsin woodpeckers. There are also Brown Creepers, Eastern Wood-pewees, and Eastern Phoebes nesting in any number of places along the way.

The Blue-winged Warbler and Chestnut-warblers nest around the transitions zones of the trail, and finding them is a real joy. More common in the open and low brushy areas out by the marsh are the Common Yellowthroat and the Yellow Warbler, both preferring to be closer to water. Many of the other Wood-Warblers nest much further north, so you'll only

see the Black-throated Blue Warbler and the Cape May Warbler and my favorite, the Blackburnian Warbler as they pass through early in May. For the migratory Warblers, early in the morning, after they have travelled all night, is a good time to see more than a few. They will be very hungry. Look high up in the leafy trees as they glean caterpillars and other insects from under the leaves.

In March out on the prairie above the marsh early in the evening you might be lucky enough to see a Woodcock doing his arial mating display. But, whatever you see (or hear), know that your support of the trail will ensure that Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Whip-poor-wills, and the Common Nighthawk will have food, shelter, and life enough to share with you as you hike and bird and enjoy the treasure that is the Ice Age Trail.