

Wisconsin Wetlands of Importance to Migrant Waterbirds

by *Mark A. Martin*

This paper, in a series of habitat guides to birding in Wisconsin, does not examine a particular community and its breeding birds but instead focuses on three State Natural Areas where excellent concentrations of migrating waterbirds can be observed.

On most of Wisconsin's State Natural Areas the primary goal is to protect an example of a biotic community. A few areas, however, have been designated mainly for their significance to just a small group of species. Examples are Fourmile Island Rookery—which contains over 1,300 nests of Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Black-crowned Night-heron, and Double-crested Cormorant—and Neda Mine—one of the largest bat hibernacula in the state. Some of these natural areas are not accessible to the public because their unique wildlife populations could be negatively impacted, but others are open for public visitation. Three State Natural Areas that protect wetlands of importance to migrating waterbirds are featured in this article because they are excellent places for the public to view impressive concentrations of migrants

as well as representative examples of the bird populations that breed in wetland habitats.

RED CEDAR LAKE STATE NATURAL AREA

Location.—Western Jefferson County.

Access.—From Cambridge proceed east on U.S. Highway 12 to an access road and parking area south of the highway. The access road is 0.25 miles east of the intersection of County Highway A north and U.S. Highway 12. Access to the lake is by canoe. A ditch runs south of the parking lot and enters the northeast corner of the lake. In years of low water the ditch is difficult to canoe. Much of the land surrounding the lake is in private ownership.

Best Time to Visit.—Mid May to end of July.

Description.—Red Cedar Lake (Figure 1) has a surface area of 370 acres and a maximum depth of six feet, al-

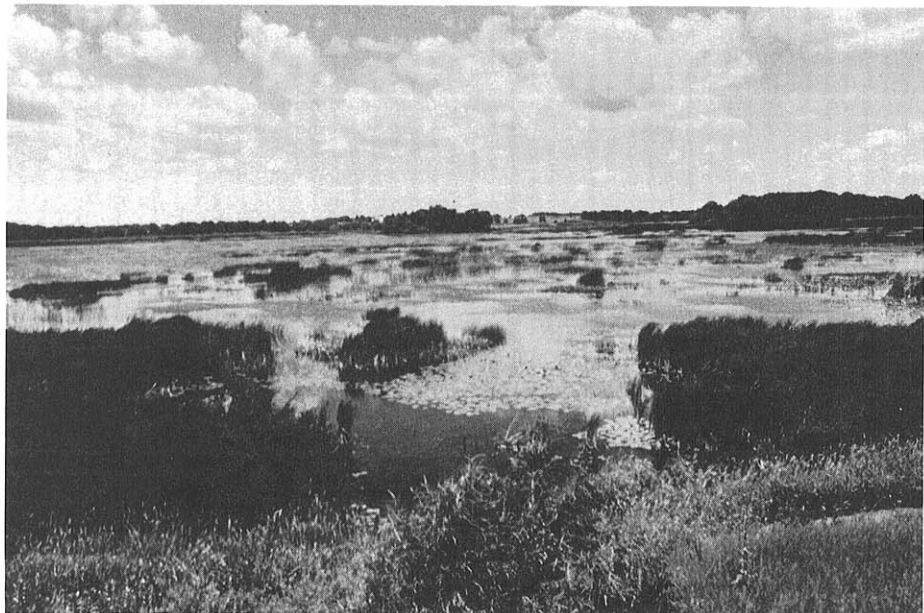


Figure 1. A view of Red Cedar Lake State Natural Area.

though 90 percent is less than three feet deep. The lake is irregularly shaped in east and west halves and has clear water. The drainage area is only two square miles, and the water level fluctuates. The lake and surrounding marsh areas have a diverse submerged and emergent aquatic flora, providing excellent habitat for waterfowl and marsh birds. Dominant emergent aquatic plants include common arrowhead, great bulrush, pickerel weed, and cattail. Periodic "freeze outs" in the past have limited the fishery to perch and bullheads. Surrounding the lake are open bog, old field and southern dry forest habitat.

Site History.—The lake has a long history of waterfowl hunting. In 1934 the Wisconsin Marsh Land Survey identified the lake as warranting further study. In the 1960's, 47 acres were

acquired by the DNR's Bureau of Wildlife Management, and in 1974 the United States Fish and Wildlife Service began to acquire Waterfowl Production Areas around the lake to provide upland nesting cover. Beginning in 1984, additional land has been set aside as a State Natural Area. Currently there are 177 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas, 50 acres of upland Natural Area land, and 47 acres of Wildlife Management land. These totals do not include the 370-acre lake which is in public ownership.

Waterfowl use of the lake is extensive. The Bureau of Research conducted a waterfowl study in the 1970's and found an average of 60 pairs of nesting waterfowl, including Mallard, Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Black Duck, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Redhead, and Canada Goose (Petersen et al. 1982).

Marsh birds found on breeding bird surveys conducted in 1985–87 include Great Blue Heron, Green-backed Heron, Least Bittern, Virginia Rail, Sandhill Crane, Marsh Wren, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds (Table 1). The surveys, conducted by canoe, recorded all birds seen or heard but do not total numbers of individuals. Species and their numbers vary according to habitat conditions. Sixty-two species were recorded on the breeding bird surveys. In addition to the birds, green frogs and a few bullfrogs may be found calling in summer.

Diving ducks stop in spring migration and should not be disturbed. In September Blue-winged Teal can be found in migration. With the opening of the waterfowl season, fewer waterfowl use the lake.

COMSTOCK BOG-MEADOW STATE NATURAL AREA

Location.—Eastern Marquette County

Access.—From the intersection of State Highway 22 and County Highway J, which is five miles north of Montello, go east on County J slightly less than one mile; turn north and east on Edgewood Road one mile to a parking lot at the southeast corner of the site. The old beach ridge northwest of the parking lot is an excellent place to view the area.

Best Time to Visit.—Late August to the end of September is the best time to view the Sandhill Cranes that stage at the area.

Description.—Comstock Marsh lies

within a natural wetland basin that covers about 1000 acres. The main community types are southern sedge meadow and northern wet forest. The marsh is permanently wet and relatively free of water fluctuations. The south end is a quaking sedge bog dominated by sedges with many acid-bog plants—including pitcher plant, bladderwort, and sundews—and plants characteristic of calcareous wetlands. Northward and westward the species composition changes to more closely resemble a sedge meadow. Nesting birds are Sora, Virginia Rail, Common Snipe, Wilson's Phalarope, LeConte's Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Bobolink, and Sandhill Crane. In addition, Nashville Warbler and Northern Waterthrush are found in tamarack areas. The original land surveyors described the area in 1851 as a wet and quaking marsh "over which we crossed with not a little danger to our lives."

Site History.—Edges of the marsh have been grazed in the past, and some marsh hay was removed during drought years. Land was first purchased for the State Natural Area in 1975, and 537 acres are currently protected.

Since the 1930's flocks of 100 to 200 Sandhill Cranes have staged at Comstock Marsh (Bennett and Nauman 1978). This was one of the few marshes that cranes used when their population was very low in the 1930's.

Bennett and Nauman studied sandhill crane populations in 1977 and found seven breeding pairs and 20 nonbreeders using Comstock Marsh. By August there were 97 cranes on the marsh, and they increased to 400 by September. Cranes are most abundant in staging areas in September. They

Table 1. Birds found on breeding surveys at Red Cedar Lake (1985–87) and Goose Pond (1979–88).

Species	Red Cedar Lake		Goose Pond	
	Years Present	Average Number Present Per Year	Years Present	Average Number Present Per Year
Pied-billed Grebe	1/3	<1	9/10	3
Double-crested Cormorant	1/3	<1		
Least Bittern	3/3	2		
Great Blue Heron	3/3	6	6/10	1
Green-backed Heron	3/3	6	5/10	1
Black-crowned Night-heron			1/10	<1
Canada Goose	2/3	20	1/10	<1
Wood Duck	3/3	12	8/10	4
Green-winged Teal			2/10	<1
American Black Duck			1/10	<1
Mallard	3/3	21	10/10	25
Northern Pintail			3/3	1
Blue-winged Teal	2/3	2	10/10	14
American Wigeon			1/10	<1
Redhead			3/10	1
Ring-necked Duck			2/10	<1
Lesser Scaup			1/10	<1
Hooded Merganser			2/10	<1
Ruddy Duck			2/10	1
Red-tailed Hawk	1/3	1		
American Kestrel			2/10	<1
Ring-necked Pheasant	2/3	1	3/10	<1
Northern Bobwhite	2/3	1		
Virginia Rail	2/3	1		
American Coot	1/3	<1	7/10	7
Sandhill Crane	3/3	3		
Killdeer	2/3	2	9/10	6
Lesser Yellowlegs			2/10	1
Spotted Sandpiper	1/3	<1	8/10	1
Common Snipe			1/10	<1
Black Tern			8/10	6
Rock Dove	1/3	2	5/10	1
Mourning Dove	3/3	8	10/10	8
Black-billed Cuckoo			2/10	<1
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	1/3	1		
Great Horned Owl	1/3	<1	1/10	<1
Chimney Swift	2/3	1	6/10	1
Belted Kingfisher	3/3	2	4/10	1
Red-headed Woodpecker			1/10	<1
Downy Woodpecker	1/3	<1		
Northern Flicker	2/3	2		
Eastern Wood-Pewee	2/3	1		
Willow Flycatcher	2/3	2	9/10	4
Great-crested Flycatcher	1/3	1	1/10	<1
Eastern Kingbird	3/3	4	2/10	<1
Horned Lark			1/10	<1
Purple Martin			3/10	<1
Tree Swallow	3/3	8	8/10	2
Northern Rough-winged Swallow			2/10	<1
Barn Swallow	3/3	15	10/10	10
Blue Jay	2/3	3	1/10	<1
American Crow	3/3	3	2/10	<1

Table 1. *continued*

Species	Red Cedar Lake		Goose Pond	
	Years Present	Average Number Present Per Year	Years Present	Average Number Present Per Year
Black-capped Chickadee	3/3	3		
White-breasted Nuthatch	3/3	2		
House Wren	2/3	4		
Sedge Wren			2/10	<1
Marsh Wren	3/3	20	7/10	10
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	1/3	<1		
American Robin	3/10	8	9/10	5
Gray Catbird	3/3	4	5/10	1
Brown Thrasher	2/3	1	1/10	<1
Cedar Waxwing	2/3	4		
European Starling	1/3	23	6/10	5
Yellow-throated Vireo	2/3	1		
Warbling Vireo	2/3	2	2/10	<1
Red-eyed Vireo	1/3	<1		
Yellow Warbler	2/3	3	1/10	<1
Common Yellowthroat	3/3	14	9/10	5
Northern Cardinal	3	4		
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	1/3	1		
Rufous-sided Towhee	1/3	<1		
Chipping Sparrow			1/10	<1
Field Sparrow	1/3	1		
Savannah Sparrow	1/3	<1	1/10	<1
Song Sparrow	3/3	12	9/10	8
Swamp Sparrow	3/3	20	9/10	2
Red-winged Blackbird	3/3	109	10/10	25
Western Meadowlark			2/10	1
Yellow-headed Blackbird	2/3	3	8/10	7
Common Grackle	3/3	14	10/10	16
Brown-headed Cowbird	1/3	1	10/10	6
Northern Oriole	1/3	1		
American Goldfinch	3/3	5	9/10	4
House Sparrow	1/3	3	6/10	1

usually depart Wisconsin in early October with the opening of the waterfowl season. Cranes using the staging areas in Wisconsin are local breeders and birds from northeast Wisconsin and Upper Michigan.

Many cranes spend much of the day in upland fields and return to the staging marshes at dusk to roost in areas with standing water. Flocks of cranes can be found by driving roads in the local area. At Comstock you can walk along the old beach ridge on the east side of the marsh and observe cranes. Due to the wet conditions—

and also so the cranes are not disturbed—one should not venture into the wetland.

There are a number of other crane staging areas in Marquette and Green Lake Counties where cranes can be observed. Germainia Marsh Wildlife Area, about two miles northeast of Comstock is an excellent place to visit. Other staging areas are White River and Grand River Wildlife Areas in Green Lake County, near Muir County Park in Marquette County, and French Creek Wildlife Area in Columbia County.

AUDUBON GOOSE POND STATE NATURAL AREA

Location.—South Central Columbia County.

Access.—From Arlington go south and east on Highway 51 and 60 for 0.5 mile, then south on Goose Pond Road 1.5 miles. Birds can easily be observed from Goose Pond Road or south of the pond on Prairie Lane. There is an information board on Prairie Lane. Stay on the roads. Bird watchers should not walk around the pond and disturb the wildlife.

Best Time to Visit.—Late March to mid-November.

Description.—Goose Pond (Figure 2) is a small, isolated prairie pothole in a marshy basin in ground moraine. Be-

fore European settlement the surrounding area was a 60-square-mile mesic prairie. Wetlands were scarce in this prairie, and Goose Pond was a wetland island in the sea of grass. The site was designated a preserve because of the high number of bird species sighted on the property (242 species). Water levels fluctuate due to runoff conditions, and in years of very high or very low water, shorebirds congregate on exposed mudflats. Arrowhead and river bulrush are the dominant wetland plants. The pond lacks extensive stands of cattail which are usually found around similar ponds. Some upland fields have been restored to prairie or planted to cool season grasses to provide nesting cover.

Site History.—Madison Audubon Society began purchasing property at the pond in 1967 and currently preserves

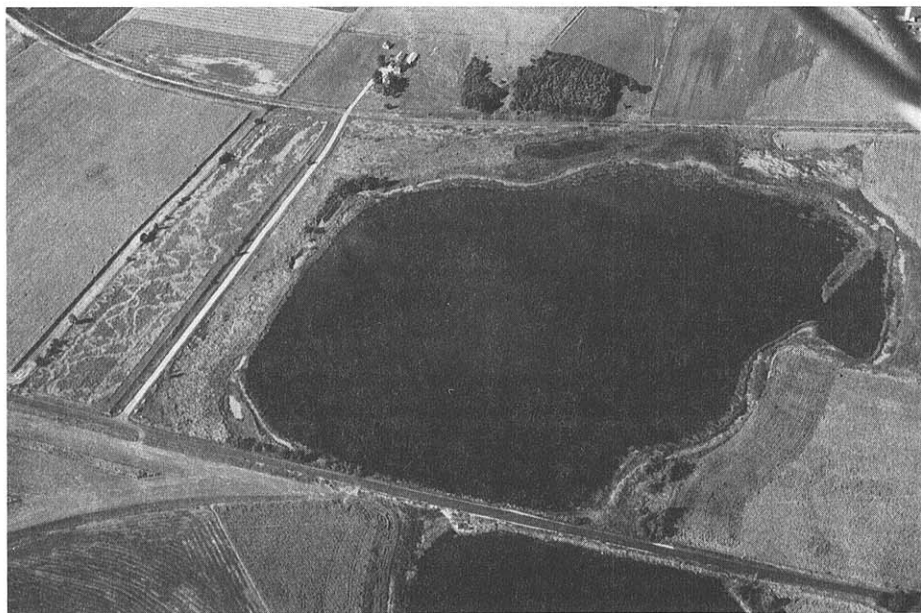


Figure 2. An aerial photograph of Audubon Goose Pond State Natural Area.

100 acres. The site was designated a State Natural Area in 1970.

Goose Pond is an excellent place to observe marsh birds spring, summer, and fall. At this prairie pothole one finds many of the species that nest at the prairie potholes of North Dakota such as Ruddy Duck, Northern Pintail, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

In spring the main attraction is waterfowl. Twenty-eight species of waterfowl have been observed at the pond and in many years 23 species are seen in spring (Table 2). It is possible on many days to see twelve or more species of waterfowl at the pond.

Many bird watchers make an annual visit looking for hundreds of Tundra

Swans which stop on their spring migration (last week of March to first two weeks of April) and feed on the arrowhead tubers. About 2,500 Canada Geese are usually present from the third week of March till April 20th. The area is one of the best places in the state to find White-fronted Geese. Diving ducks, especially Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck, are abundant in most years.

Water levels fluctuate greatly and in some years there are 100 acres of standing water in addition to the 60 acres of permanent water. In those years with large exposed mudflats, concentrations of shorebirds can be found from later April through mid-May. Thirty-four species of shorebirds have been observed, and some of the common ones include Black-bellied and Lesser Golden Plovers, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Short- and Long-billed Dowitchers, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Dunlin.

An average of 40–45 pairs of ducks nest each year. Blue-winged Teal and Mallard are most common. Other species of puddle ducks include Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler. The Ruddy Duck is the only diving duck to nest at the pond. Ruddy's nest overwater and are late nesters since the arrowheads which provide nesting habitat do not appear until June. This colorful duck can usually be seen in courtship most of the summer. From June through August broods of ducks are frequently seen.

In the last ten years 63 species have been found on breeding bird surveys (Table 1). Marsh birds found most years include Black Terns, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds, and Marsh Wrens. In August, Great Egrets and Black-crowned Night-herons fish at the

Table 2. Waterfowl recorded at Goose Pond during spring migration.

Species	Status
Tundra Swan	Common
Mute Swan	Rare
Greater White-fronted Goose	Common
Snow Goose	Common
Canada Goose	Common
Wood Duck	Common, nests
Green-winged Teal	Common, nests
American Black Duck	Common
Mallard	Common, nests
Northern Pintail	Common, nests
Blue-winged Teal	Common, nests
Northern Shoveler	Common, nests
Gadwall	Common, nests
Eurasian Wigeon	Rare
American Wigeon	Common
Canvasback	Common
Redhead	Common
Ring-necked Duck	Common
Greater Scaup	Rare
Lesser Scaup	Common
Oldsquaw	Rare
Surf Scoter	Rare
Common Goldeneye	Common
Bufflehead	Common
Hooded Merganser	Common
Common Merganser	Common
Red-breasted Merganser	Common
Ruddy Duck	Common, nests

pond along with Green-backed Herons and Great Blue Herons which are found all summer.

Blue-winged Teal are the first waterfowl to stop at Goose Pond in fall migration during the month of September. Waterfowl find refuge at Goose Pond during the waterfowl season, and the birds are quick to learn where they are safe. The lack of variety in fall migration is made up in numbers with mallards making up over 90 percent of the waterfowl numbers. In October it is not uncommon to find 2,000 mallards, and their numbers increase until freeze up. In two of the past ten years over 9,000 mallards have been counted. Black Duck numbers may number over 300 and usually are about two percent of the mallard numbers.

Mallards and Black Ducks find excellent feeding in the nearby picked corn fields. What a sight to see a flock of 2,000 Mallards and Black Ducks coming back from feeding.

Tundra Swans stop about November 12 and usually stay a couple of weeks. Swan numbers in the fall rarely reach 50. After the Tundra Swans leave, only Mallards and Black Ducks remain and they stay until the picked corn is covered by snow or the weather is very cold and pond freezes over.

Goose Pond is an excellent place to

see a wide variety of birds, and with all the bird watchers that stop, a number of rare species are usually seen each year. Other wildlife can frequently be seen or heard. Six species of frogs, four species of turtles and a variety of mammals such as mink and red fox reside in the area.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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