

May Self-Guided Bird Tour: Class of 1918 Marsh and Picnic Point UW-Madison Lakeshore Nature Preserve

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Green egret, Arlene Koziol photo

Please try this tour of the Class of 1918 Marsh and Picnic Point. Unfortunately, I cannot be with you – but that allows you to spend more time carefully listening and looking. This tour can be done in 45 minutes – but it would be better to slow down and observe. Any time you stay quiet, even for a short time, the birds will become active again and you will get better looks. Two hours should be sufficient on most days – but on a non-migrant day an hour may be too much and, during a “fall out,” a half day

is too little. On a slow day, look for the behavior of the resident birds – you may be surprised to find some bird species feeding young and others building nests.

Birds that nest in the Preserve are noted in bold italics, while birds that migrate through the Preserve are indicated in italics. Some songs of breeding birds are described phonetically, often placed in parentheses.

Preparation/Equipment:

- You may want to listen to some bird calls (www.allaboutbirds.org)¹ or look at the pictures of some of the birds before you start.
- To see the most birds, come in the early morning or in the evening.
- A pair of binoculars and a bird book are useful tools to see and identify birds.

Introduction

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Lakeshore Nature Preserve provides opportunities to view a wide variety of birds in a relatively small area. On the east, the Preserve begins at the Howard Temin Lakeshore Path and Muir Woods and includes the complete shoreline of University Bay. At the west end of Campus, larger sections of the Preserve, connected by trails, include Picnic Point, Class of 1918 Marsh, Frautschi Point, Tent Colony Woods, Wally Bauman Woods, and Eagle Heights Woods. The Lakeshore Nature Preserve provides diverse habitat, allowing it to support diverse populations of birds. The area has woodlands (Picnic and Frautschi Points, Eagle Heights Woods), marshes (Class of 1918 Marsh, University Bay Marsh), open water (Lake Mendota, University and Second Point Bays), and prairie and open lands.

More than 250 bird species have been seen in the Preserve.² Most birds that regularly occur in south central Wisconsin have been found in the Preserve. Birding in the Preserve is best during migration. Migrants can be found anywhere in the area. The Preserve also supports more than 70 breeding species.³

The Lakeshore Nature Preserve is perhaps best known for its passerine (songbird) migration, especially its warbler migration. Between April 25 (some years a little earlier) and May 22 (some years later) 30 or more species of warblers are usually observed in the area, though not all at once.⁴ Rarer warblers such as Hooded, Cerulean, Black-throated Blue, Prothonotary, Mourning, and Connecticut Warblers are reported at least once during most springs. Migrants are not continually present. Migrants arrive with south winds and may stay one or multiple days depending on the weather.

Picnic Point, a mostly wooded point going half a mile east into Lake Mendota, creates University Bay. Picnic Point is widest at the base and gets steadily narrower until the neck, called the Narrows, and then widens again at the tip. The main path goes along the edge of University Bay. This main path is better for migrants when the wind is strongly from the north. The back trail is closer to the lake and Second Point Bay and has more migrants when the winds are strongly from the south. Picnic Point can have a spring passerine migrant “fall out,” when migrating birds run into rain or a cold front and cannot continue their nocturnal migration. These unusual weather events can down hundreds of migrating birds on the Point for several days, allowing visitors to see 20 or more warbler species (and multiple individuals of many species) in a couple of hours in May. During a migrant “fall out” on Picnic Point, migrants usually try unsuccessfully to get around the lake, going east along the Point to the tip and then coming back. As a result, birds move around on Picnic Point. One of the favored migrant feeding and resting places is the Picnic Point Marsh. A warbler found at the Picnic Point Marsh may be at the tip an hour later.

In general, nesting birds on territory will be present from their spring arrival until at least mid-summer, while migrant birds will only be present on favorable days during migration. Some birds migrate earlier (April, usually short-distance migrants) and other migrants arrive later (May, usually long-distance, neotropical migrants, especially bird species that depend on insects). Many migrants like warblers have a preferred time to migrate (*Orange-crowned* and *Yellow-rumped Warblers* are usually early migrants, while *Wilson's* and *Canada Warblers* are usually late migrants).

Map of Tour⁵



(Numbers Correspond to Map)

1 **Class of 1918 Marsh**
Stand at the edge of the UW Parking Lot 130 (2003 University Bay Drive) and look toward the Class of 1918 Marsh. Look for bird movement. Listen for bird song and calls. Adjust your location so that you can see the moving birds. Look between the trees into the open water for water birds. Note that there is a berm at the road side of the parking lot (near the evergreens) where you can stand and look into the Marsh.

In the cattails the Red-winged Blackbird males will be calling and chasing. The striped Song Sparrows will be singing (“hip hip hurrah boys, spring is here” is one rendering). Note that the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology has bird calls (www.allaboutbirds.org). Listen for the trill of the rufous capped Swamp Sparrow from the marsh – then look for the songster on the top of cattails.

On the edge, listen for the Yellow Warbler (“sweet, sweet, sweet, I’m so sweet”) flitting in the trees and bushes on the Marsh edge. The masked bandit, the Common Yellowthroat, calls “witchity, witchity, witchity” from the brush or cattail edge. Another small yellow bird, the American Goldfinch, which does not nest until mid-summer, may be feeding on weeds. Barn Swallows (forked tail, nest under platforms and bridges), Tree Swallows (white breast, nest in tree holes) and possibly Cliff Swallows (square tail, they collect mud at the back of the Marsh and nest on Campus buildings) may be swooping over the Marsh and parking lot. Swallows usually fly low in wet weather and high in fair weather.

In the Marsh, there may be resident Canada Geese and Mallards. The beautiful male Wood Duck (a duck that nests in tree holes or houses) may be with (or waiting for) its duller mate. Beautiful male Shovelers may be feeding, either in groups or alone, but females are usually not present. A Pied-billed Grebe may dive in the shallow open water. Look and listen for the resident Sandhill Cranes – a pair usually nests in this Marsh and forages behind it. Killdeer (calling their name) may fly over.

Look for migrants mixing with the resident birds. **Eastern Kingbirds** (“tis, tis, tis”) hawk for insects, chase big birds, or sit on the treetops and may nest on the Marsh edge. Other warblers may flit along the shore.



Eastern Kingbird, Photo Arlene Koziol

2 If you have time, walk along the Marsh path toward the playing fields to the wooden observation platform. Listen for the whinny of the **Sora** and the grunting of the **Virginia Rail**, which often nest in the Marsh. Go slowly and look carefully and you might glimpse these elusive rails which are most active in the early morning and the evening. Stand on the platform and look and listen. By mid-May the **Marsh Wrens** will be calling – watch for them flying between bunches of cattail. Near the platform (or further around the marsh in the bushes along the marsh edge), dull **Willow Flycatchers** will give their “fitz-bew” song later in May.

3 **Picnic Point Entrance**
Cross the road and look toward the big trees near University Bay Marsh. Listen for the **Baltimore Oriole** (whistling “here, here, come right here dear”) and watch for this brilliant orange and black bird. The persistently singing **Warbling Vireos** call from tall trees along the shoreline. The upward turning song, sometimes rendered, “if I could seize you, I would squeeze you till you squirt,” has a ventriloquial quality. This small bird is so confident of its camouflage that it often sings from its nest.

4

Inside the gate, turn left and go into Bill's Woods. At the edge of the Woods by the gate is the **Bird Sightings Board** with a Lakeshore Nature Preserve checklist and the list of recent bird sightings. When the wind is strongly from the north, Bill's Woods (to the left of this road) is the best place to look for insect-eating neotropical migrants who follow the insects and avoid strong winds. Local birds may not call or be as visible in strong winds, but they usually stay in their territories regardless of the weather.

5

Return to the clearing inside the entrance. Look for the small, hyperactive **Blue-grey Gnatcatcher** with its high-pitched calls. Frequently there are migrants in this open area, such as the butterfly-like **American Redstart**, *Chestnut-sided Warbler*, or *Magnolia Warbler* which prefer the low and mid-sized shrubs. The clearing provides an opportunity to see birds easily on the sunny edges. On cold days the insects and birds favor the sunny edges. The songbirds mentioned for the Marsh edge also occur on the Picnic Point edge of the Bay Marsh beside the main trail.

Main Picnic Point Path

Return to the main Picnic Point path and walk along it toward the tip. Anywhere along the shoreline you may hear the rattling of the Belted Kingfisher, which spends long periods sitting still on perches over the water and nests in holes in the banks of the shoreline. Enormous Great Blue Heron may feed from the shorelines. Osprey, the fish hawk, may fly over. Rough-winged Swallows, which nest on banks, fly by or sit on snags. Listen for the harsh "wheep" of the Great Crested Flycatcher, the only flycatcher that nests in holes in trees. Catbirds sing their squeaky song and scold with their cat-like "meow" while skulking in the low bushes.

As you continue down the Point, listen for the flute-like call of the Wood Thrush ("ee-o-lay"), which has nested here in recent years. Like the other four migrant thrushes, it frequently feeds on the ground in the spring, while eating mainly berries in the fall. Often the migrant birds flock with the local resident birds, such as Black-capped Chickadees. In May, four species of Woodpeckers should be nesting in holes (these holes are used in subsequent years by other birds) in the Preserve.

Continue down the main trail, past the Native American Mounds on the left (north), fenced off by a metal chain.

6

Fire Circle #2

Just beyond the mounds, opposite Fire Circle #2, a diagonal path goes between the mounds and the Picnic Point Marsh. When the oaks bloom this area often has migrants. Look for the tree-top warblers, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, and Blackburnian, in the oaks and taller trees. Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeak often feed in these blooming oaks. Red-headed Woodpecker is often found in this area. When the winds are from the north, this area near the mounds may have most of the Picnic Point Marsh migrants. When the wind is strongly from the north, they will be low on the Bay edge and difficult to see.

Return to the main path and continue toward the tip. The Picnic Point Marsh will be on your left, but it is best seen from the lake side.

7

The Narrows

Continue to the Narrows, where there is a sandy area on the lake side that was formerly a beach. Look for late waterfowl on the lake. If you want a longer walk, the birds at the very tip of Picnic Point can sometimes be interesting.

Return by the sandy trail on the lake edge of Picnic Point Marsh. Note that this may be flooded when the lake is extremely high and will have few birds when the wind is strongly from the north. The rustic toilets near the beginning of this path are the only bathrooms on the Point.

8

Picnic Point Marsh

The Picnic Point Marsh, located on the lake side of the Point just west of the Narrows beach, is probably the most interesting birding area of Picnic Point. It is actually a wooded swamp with a sedge meadow/marsh in the middle, separated from Lake Mendota by a sand ridge. Generally (unless the winds are strongly from the north (in which case Picnic Point is a suboptimal place to bird)), the sandy path from the rustic toilets to the locked stone building is the best area to see migrants on Picnic Point, although the Marsh can be difficult to see when the leaves are out.

In the Marsh, look for the multiple Wood Ducks (either pairs or males waiting while their females incubate), Canada Geese, Mallards, and camouflaged Blue-winged Teal. Spend time looking carefully – the longer you look, the more you will see. A Sandhill Crane pair may nest here. Occasionally the local Green Heron can be glimpsed hunting from a dead snag on the far side. In many years a Prothonotary Warbler pair nests here, either in the boxes or a tree hole. The Warbler’s loud “sweet, sweet, sweet” rings through the swamp. It feeds low on the water’s edge, sallying for insects or picking them off surfaces. However, in the intense competition for holes the abundant Tree Swallows and House Wrens often win. Along the lakeshore look for Spotted Sandpipers. The larger female Sandpiper defends the territory while one or more male partners sit on her eggs.

Along the trail, look for flocks of migrants and try to pick out as many species as possible. Warblers, vireos, thrushes, and flycatchers form mixed flocks. Spend time with these flocks watching as they move back and forth. On a good migrant day, multiple different species may be identified. Look for migrant *Northern Waterthrush* (the most likely waterthrush after May 1) walking on the Marsh shore edge and on downed logs. Commoner migrant warblers like *Black-throated Green* and *Black-and-White Warbler* are often seen, but any of thirty warbler species can be found, including *Wilson’s* and *Golden-winged Warblers* which prefer low brush.

Back Picnic Point Trail and Old Orchard

When you reach the stone building at the end of the sandy trail, if you have time, return by the back Picnic Point trail. Turn left at the stone building and go between the Marsh and the building to the four-way intersection and turn right and then almost immediately left. (You can return to the main trail by going straight and turning right at the main trail, or, to look again for birds in the oaks, go left along the Marsh past the mounds and turn right at Fire Circle #2). This quieter back trail has fewer people. When the wind is from the south, this path will have more migrants than the main Picnic Point trail. After walking a while, turn right onto the paved path to the open areas and Biocore Prairie.

9

On the rise on the left is the site of the old Edward Young house. Look right for migrant *Cape May* and *Blackburnian Warblers* in the larger evergreens. Once you get to the open area, the orchard is to the left above the trail. Beyond the orchard is the restored Biocore Prairie. The Biocore Bird Banding Station uses mist nets to catch and band birds on some nice weekend mornings.

10

In the open area, look for *Eastern Bluebirds*. Listen and look for the large *Brown Thrasher* (a mimic thrush with a very variable set of calls, each repeated twice). Watch Cedar Waxwing eating the apple blossoms. Look and listen for the migrating *Blue-winged Warblers* (“bee-buzz”) and dull *Least Flycatchers* (“che-bek”). Resident ***Baltimore Orioles***, ***Common Yellowthroats***, ***Northern Flickers***, ***Indigo Buntings***, and ***Eastern Kingbirds*** (learn their calls) hang around the edges. Look at the bottom and side of the orchard. When you get to the Biocore Prairie sign, turn around and return to the Picnic Point back trail (Or, if you have extra time, continue around the open areas. Resident and migrant birds may be more visible on these edges (including the Eagle Heights Community Gardens) than they were on Picnic Point. Another option is to go beyond the open areas into Frautschi Point).

11

Return to the Entrance

When you get to the Picnic Point back trail, turn right and continue a short distance to the three-way intersection. After rains, there is a puddle to the right and beyond this intersection that can provide interesting views of birds, including migrants. Turn left to return to the parking lot.

12

Be sure to keep your eyes and ears open as you go beside the restored Bill’s Woods with its spring wildflowers on the right. Tufted Titmouse and Yellow-throated Vireo are frequently found in this area. For several years a Barred Owl nested in this area – the owls can be located by their daytime calls or the mobbing of crows. Before reaching the gate, be sure to write your interesting sightings on the Bird Sightings Board.

Take time to look at the Class of 1918 Marsh again before you leave to see birds you missed when you arrived and anything new – *American Bittern*, *Black-crowned Night-heron*, and *Solitary Sandpiper* and other unusual birds have been seen here in May.

I hope that this tour was helpful. Hopefully next year we can walk together. **Roma Lenehan**

References:

1. The Cornell Lab All About Birds Online Guide to Birds and Bird Watching, at www.allaboutbirds.org
2. For the comprehensive bird checklist I made for the Lakeshore Nature Preserve (2006) that includes those that nest in the Preserve, see https://www.friendslakeshorepreserve.com/uploads/2/6/9/3/26931781/bird_preserve_checklistmonth.pdf
3. For my portable checklist, which includes annotation of the birds that breed in the Preserve (2006), see https://www.friendslakeshorepreserve.com/uploads/2/6/9/3/26931781/bird_checklistseasonletter.pdf
4. For a warbler ID cheat sheet, that includes multiple warblers not in our area, see The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s Bird Academy, at https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Warbler_cheatsheets.pdf
5. Thanks to Sonia Dubielzig Haeckel for making the tour map.