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## Birding Horicon Marsh

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Encompassing 32,000 acres, Horicon Marsh is the largest cattail marsh in the U.S. This marsh is a restoration project, having been ditched and drained for agriculture in the early 1900's.

Today, the marsh is divided into 2 units. The southern one-third is a State Wildlife Area managed by the Wisconsin DNR. The northern two-thirds is a National Wildlife Refuge administered by the USFWS. While the marsh is primarily managed as a waterfowl area it hosts a tremendous variety of other birds. This marsh is perhaps best known for the spring and fall migration of Canada Geese which often number more than 200,000 birds.

Over the years, more than 300 species have been sighted here and this marsh regularly attracts some of Wisconsin's rarest birds. Being a National Wildlife Refuge, public access is limited in this portion of the marsh in order to protect the wildlife for which it has been established. Most of the state area is open to the public. One of the best ways to explore this area is by canoe or shallow draft boat. **Please be aware of designated restricted use and closed areas.** For more information, contact the state and/or federal headquarters. The following is a summary of some of the most productive and accessible birding sites.

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## Palmatory St. Overlook

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Taking Palmatory Street north from Hwy. 33 in the City of Horicon brings one to the state hiking trails. From the top of this hill is one of the finest views of Horicon Marsh. A good number of birds can be sighted from the observation deck without having to walk much at all. Scopes are a must to identify species out on the open water. This also provides an excellent view of Four Mile Island, a nesting site for Great Blue Herons.

A 1.5 mile hiking trail loop begins at the bottom of the hill at the parking lot. Interpretive signs provide information on the local wildlife along the "Horicon Habitat Hike". A short walk will lead you through a woodlot, where Great-Crested Flycatchers, Northern Flickers, Eastern Wood Pewee and many spring migrants are abundant. A loop trail along the dike takes hikers out on the marsh where wetland birds are readily seen. Commonly sighted species include a

variety of ducks, Canada geese, Herons, Egrets, Marsh Wrens and Pied-billed Grebe.

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## Horicon Marsh International Education Center

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Located off Hwy. 28 between Horicon and Mayville, is the DNR Service Center and the Horicon Marsh International Education Center. A variety of visitor information can be obtained here during regular business hours. The 200-acre Bachhuber Impoundment has provided enhanced wildlife habitat and wildlife viewing opportunities. A 2.5-mile trail leads one around the flowage. This trail also connects to the Indermuehle Island trail, a small woodlot that usually is full of migrants in the spring, including Blackburnian Warbler, and American Redstart. A variety of wetland birds can be found around the flowage and commonly sighted birds include large numbers of Canada Geese, a variety of waterfowl, Great Blue and Green Herons. The lucky birder may see Common Moorhen, American and Least Bitterns, Sora and Virginia Rails. Under the right conditions many shorebirds can be found on the flowage and Sandhill Cranes are usually seen in the surrounding uplands

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## One Mile Island Trail

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Follow Hwy E through the City of Horicon to the boat landing at the end of Nebraska Street. The .5-mile hiking trail here leads out to One Mile Island and the Main Ditch. The aspen and oak forest on the island offers good birding for passerines in spring and fall including Yellow Warbler, Great-Crested Flycatcher and Eastern Wood-peewee. This is also a good spot to watch for Great Horned Owls and Barred Owls early in the day. The forest here was thinned in 2007 to encourage oak growth.

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## Burnett Ditch Road

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This service road extends out into the marsh about 0.75 miles and now connects with the new Chaya Marsh impoundment. You can park in the small lot near the gate and walk the service road. The

Burnett Impoundment has a typical mixture of open water and cattails, while Chaya Marsh impoundment was built to increase habitat diversity for wildlife.

Common birds include Tree Swallow, Virginia and Sora Rails, Killdeer and a variety of open water birds. During the right time of year, this site has been good for Common Snipe, and Greater Yellowlegs. Boat access is available at this location.

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## Greenhead Road Landing

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Launching a canoe from the Greenhead Landing and following the Horicon Marsh Canoe Trail will take you out into the heart of the marsh and all the way to the town of Horicon. Canoe rentals are available in the City of Horicon. The complete trip will require from 3 to 5 hours. Entering the open cattail marsh you will find many of the birds of the marsh interior, including Great Blue Herons, Cormorants, Black Terns, Marsh Wrens, and there is possibility of seeing Yellow-headed Blackbirds, White Pelicans and many others.

A one-hour paddle will take you out to the Four Mile Island heron rookery. At one time this was the state's largest Heron nesting colony, but a severe storm in 1998 resulted in downed trees and loss of nesting sites. This is State Natural Area and is closed to all access April 1 to Sept. 15 in order to protect the birds and assure their nesting success. Horicon Marsh canoe trail [http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/wildlife\\_areas/horicon/maps/canoe.pdf](http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/wildlife_areas/horicon/maps/canoe.pdf)



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*Revised by Suzanne Roth 2011*

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## Main Dike

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The Main Dike is open to the public year round, weather permitting. The road offers a good chance to view the marsh interior. If birding for an extended time please use the pull-offs so others can enjoy the area also. Three major pools offer open water for Waterfowl, Herons, and Shorebirds while the areas of cattails are home to Rails, Marsh Wrens and Swamp Sparrow. Cormorants, Black and Forster's Tern also can be seen along here. On occasion Shorebirds can be found here in large numbers when water levels are low. Rarities include Black-necked Stilt, American Avocets, both Godwits, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Red-necked Phalarope.

The uplands around the entrance to the Main Dike are a good place to see Northern Harrier, Eastern Kingbird, Sedge Wren and Henslow's Sparrow. Another good passerine area is along Northern Rd which extends south from Dike Rd. dead-ending at the east Branch of the Rock River. During May, it can be an especially worthwhile side trip

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## Point and Ledge Road

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These roads afford fine views of the eastern section of the marsh. On the nearby farmlands you can find Savannah Sparrows, Bobolinks, Meadowlarks, Sandhill Cranes and occasionally Wild Turkeys. An excellent area is Ledge Road that parallels Strooks Ditch near the marsh. Here, the first state record of White-faced Ibis occurred in 1987 and a good variety of marsh birds can be found along the lower portion of the road. Watch for all four Rail species (King is occasional, Yellow is rare), plus Herons, Egrets, Waterfowl, and Grebes.

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## Highway 49

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This is one of the most popular roads to watch birds from and is the only public road, which crosses the marsh. Keep in mind that this is a state highway and commonly traveled by trucks and heavy traffic at high speeds. Be sure to pull completely off of the road and watch from the broad shoulders. **BE SAFE!**

A number of pools and impoundments offer some good bird watching from the road. Water levels on several pools along Hwy. 49 are managed for a variety of habitat types and are currently in a rotational basis. The deeper pools are good places to view most any variety of ducks both puddle ducks as well as divers. Coots will join in by the hundreds and there is always a chance of seeing Least Bittern, Common Moorhen, Black and Forster's tern and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. When water levels are low during spring and fall migration, Shorebirds can be found in great numbers and variety. Rarities observed along 49 include Little Blue and Tri-colored Herons, Snowy Egret, Glossy Ibis, Peregrine Falcon, Black-necked Stilt, Greater White-fronted and Ross's Goose, Eared and Red-necked Grebes and American Avocet. The public viewing area off of Cty. Z on the east side of the marsh provides a place to watch birds away from the highway. Here there is a parking lot, toilet facilities and an overlook of the marsh where the geese and other birds such as Baltimore Oriole, Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawk can be observed.



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## Bud Cook Trails

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The Bud Cook Hiking Area usually provides good looks at Sandhill Cranes, Bobolink, Northern Harrier, and if you are lucky, you might catch a glimpse of a Short-eared Owl, Henslow's or Clay-colored Sparrow. Here are two loop trails; The Deer Track Trail which is an easy .5 miles, and the

longer 1.6 mile Two Hawks Trail. The trails pass mostly through managed grasslands. Small sections of forest and riparian habitats are encountered as well.

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## Refuge hiking trails

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The Horicon National Wildlife Refuge Hiking Trails and Auto Tour are located off Hwy. 49 on the northwest end of the marsh. The Auto Tour is open to the public year round, weather permitting. Here there are 6 miles of hiking rails allowing access to both upland and lowland habitat and a 3 mile Auto Tour that gets you out to the floating boardwalk. This is the best place to experience the marsh interior and see wildlife up close. Rarities sighted here include Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Snowy Egrets, and Tricolored Heron. Watch and listen for American Bittern, Sora and Virginia Rails. Be on the look out for Shorebirds during water level draw downs in the spring or fall.

The uplands consist of old fields, shrubs and restored prairie. This a good place to watch for grassland birds such as Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks and Grassland Sparrows. Among the shrubs are Cardinals, Catbirds, Willow Flycatchers and Yellow Warblers. Forested habitat is found along the hiking trails and the banks of the Rock River. These sites are good for Indigo Buntings, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and migrant passerines, (Warblers, Vireos, Flycatchers and Cuckoos) which are drawn to these islands of trees among the vast open marsh.



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## Visitor Information

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Horicon Marsh not only offers many opportunities to observe common marshland birds, but is often a lure to some of the rarest bird sightings in Wisconsin. Besides the aforementioned rarities other sightings have included Horned Grebe, Glossy Ibis, Brant, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Cinnamon Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Golden Eagle and Tufted Titmouse. To help visitors experience Horicon Marsh and understand its wildlife, natural history and management, naturalist programs are offered to the public weekends during spring and fall. For more information visit the DNR Service Center on Hwy. 28 or call 920-387-7860.

[http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/wildlife\\_areas/horicon/](http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/wildlife_areas/horicon/)

Horicon National Wildlife Refuge Office also provides public information and education programs. The Visitors Center is open Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. for information, call 920-387-2658. More information is available at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/horicon/>.



One of the best ways to experience the rich birdlife of the area is during the annual Horicon Marsh Bird Festival, held on the second weekend of May. Additional information and a full schedule of events are available by contacting the above offices or checking the Horicon Marsh Bird Club webpage. For more birding information, see Wisconsin's Favorite Bird Haunts, published by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology or see the Bird Club.

This brochure was produced by the Horicon Marsh Bird Club. For more information on local activities, events, or recent sightings check out the webpage <http://www.horiconmarshbirdclub.com/>. Or write to [pres@horiconmarshbirdclub.com](mailto:pres@horiconmarshbirdclub.com)