

**Avian Survey of Mike Metz (Duff Lake) Fen  
Pine Knob County Park  
LaGrange County Parks Department  
2024**



## **Introduction**

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An avian survey of the Mike Metz (Duff Lake) Fen was conducted during spring, summer, and autumn months of 2024. The purpose was to ascertain the birds present, species and numbers, of this unique natural area that has undergone extensive restoration in recent years.

## **The site**

Pine Knob County Park in northern LaGrange County, near Howe, Indiana, is a natural history gem. Its origin is that of a conservation club by the same name. It was the melding of two conservation clubs in the 1940s, the first with roots back to the 1930s. Membership in the Pine Knob Conservation club waned in the early 2000s and in 2004 there was a vote of the remaining 77 members to gift the property including woodlands, marshlands, and the glacial, kettle-hole Meteer Lake to LaGrange County Parks.

The property now totals 254 acres. Post conservation club acquisition in recent years added 229 acres including Duff Lake, surrounding wetlands, and agricultural fields used primarily for grazing livestock. Once acquired, a massive restoration effort began, work spearheaded by Blue Heron Ministries, a local land trust and land restoration and resource management nonprofit organization.

Drainage ditches were removed, restructured, and rerouted, resulting in the re-establishment of over 200 acres of wetland fen. The Duff Lake Fen has become a model of wetland restoration returning much of the land to a very high-quality fen. Fen components, flora and fauna, were already present in small, protected areas. With several years of restoration those remnant areas and populations have expanded to create over 200 acres of habitat type that was once more common in the "lakes region" of northeast Indiana.

The fen is now named the Mike Metz Fen honoring the stellar career of the recently retired LaGrange County Parks Director. Following restoration came low impact recreation and accessibility for park visitors to discover, explore, study, and appreciate this unique environment. A state of the art boardwalk, replete with decks, benches, wheelchair pull-offs, and a mid-trail comfort station allow full participation and exploration. The site is a destination for hikers and nature enthusiasts. It is of prime importance to botanist and animal lovers, birders in particular.

## **Method**

I visited the site twice a month from April to November. I started at the southeast corner, which offers an overview of the fen wetlands and lakes in the distance. From that overview, I could see most birds on the open water and those were identified and recorded using a spotting scope. I then walked the nearly three-mile loop trail that both goes through and encircles the fen. The west side of the trail goes up into an open woodland and skirts along a restored prairie. Looking to the interior of the trail offers views of the fen and lake. Looking to the exterior of the loop offers views of the property perimeter featuring woodlands and agricultural fields.

Birds were identified by site, aided by binoculars, and sound. A slow pace was walked allowing for birds present to be located.

## **Results**

Over the 16 visits, 75 species were recorded. The greatest number on any one day was 34 on July 31. Birds at that time of year are breeding species. The second greatest daily total was 32, recorded on

May 16, May 29, and October 25. Those days would correspond with spring and fall migrations when larger numbers could be anticipated.

The greatest number of individuals at any one day was 125 Canada geese observed on October 25. October 12 saw the second highest number of geese at 120.

Song sparrow was the only species recorded on all 16 visits. Red-headed woodpecker was recorded on 15 visits. Five species were recorded on 12 visits (mallard, sandhill crane, American crow, red-winged blackbird, and American goldfinch).

On the less frequent end of the spectrum, 17 species were recorded just two times and 13 species were recorded on just one visit. All other species were recorded on 3 to 11 of the 16 visits.

#### **Species associated with water and wetlands:**

Of the 75 species, seven could be classified as waterfowl (Canada goose, mute swan, wood duck, mallard, blue-winged teal, green-winged teal and ring-neck duck).

Non-waterfowl, water birds and birds associated with lakes: Six species (great-blue heron, great egret, green heron, osprey, bald eagle, and king fisher.)

Wetland, fen, and fen/prairie associated birds: Eleven species (northern harrier, sandhill crane, killdeer, purple martin, tree swallow, sedge wren, Carolina wren, common yellowthroat, yellow warbler, swamp sparrow, and red-winged blackbird).

Wetland shrub/brushy species: Three species: (song sparrow, Lincoln's sparrow, blue grosbeak)

Of the 75 species recorded, 27 are species associated with water and wetlands.

#### **Species associated with upland prairie, agricultural fields, and woodlands:**

These would be the remaining 48 species of the 75 total. Those species occasionally enter the fen for feeding or use as a corridor to get to cover and nest sites.

#### **Cavity nesting birds near and in the fen:**

Some birds are woodland and shrub-land by nature and utilize cavities. Through fen restoration, nonnative and some non-fen species of trees were girdled, but left standing. The dead trees and snags provide homes for the following eleven species observed in the survey: All four woodpecker species recorded, American kestrel, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch, house wren, bluebird, starling, and house sparrow.

#### **Uncommon species of note:**

Most noteworthy of the survey would be the blue grosbeak. It was in the fen prairie on the east side of the survey area, inside the boardwalk, in the taller more robust plants. The species was present both July 16 and September 4. On July 16, an adult male and first year male were observed and photographed. The time of year and age of the birds would indicate nesting is occurring. This is not a common bird in northern Indiana.

Also not common is sedge wren, observed on three visits. As the name implies it is a sedge wetland endemic and not common every year. Small populations are sometimes nomadic but in 2024, some



found a home at Mike Metz Fen.

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Also not common in the region, but does exist in some open woodlands is the red-headed woodpecker. At Mike Metz Fen, the species was recorded on 15 of 16 visits. They were often in the standing dead trees on the west end of the fen and in open woodlands on the southwest side.

### **Conclusion.**

On all 16 visits to the fen I was never alone, often encountering hikers on the boardwalk. Naturalists who visit comment on its unique and expansive features. Birders will find it to be a destination. The uncommon species were highlighted in the results. Not uncommon but offering a thrill as they once were non-existent in northeast Indiana were sandhill crane, osprey, and bald eagle. The former is a common nesting bird in the fen and the latter two will patrol the air above the water looking for food. The habitat there is also perfect for the harrier hawk and though not very common is often spotted at Mike Metz Fen.

Other species I have noted on visits before this survey year were dickcissel on the east prairie edge, sora and Virginia rail, woodcock, other species of waterfowl and shorebirds. More frequent visits would turn up these species and years of certain water levels will affect shorebird populations. The wooded edges will provide both nesting and stopover habitat for neotropical birds, warblers, vireos, flycatchers, tanagers, and others not recorded in this survey, but typical to those habitat types at the Fen and surrounding woodlands.

Three non-native species, rock pigeon, European starling, and house sparrow were recorded, but not abundantly present on any days. House sparrow was recorded just ones. This speaks to the high quality of the habitat and the lack of nearby human dwellings.

The Mike Metz Fen will be a dynamic site for birding and all nature study and appreciated for years to come.

Fred Wooley

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Species and dates observed	4.8	4_30	5.16	5.29	6.15	6.27	7.16	7.31	8.9	8.25	9.4	9.28	10.12	10.25	11.7	11.24
Canada Goose (11)*	18	48	44	20		4					18	25	120	125	33	
Mute Swan (6)		2	2	2	2							3			6	
Wood Duck (3)	2	1								1						
Mallard (12)	4	2	4	2	2		2	2				2	25	50	68	26
Blue-winged Teal (1)														5		
Green-winged Teal (1)																10
Ring-necked Duck (1)	3															
Great Blue Heron (9)			1	1	1	1	1	3		1	1		1			
Great Egret (1)										1						
Green Heron (2)					1			1								
Turkey Vulture (7)	6		1					1	5		2		3	4		
Osprey (2)		1					1									
Bald Eagle (2)				1										2		
Northern Harrier (2)														1		1
Red-tailed Hawk (8)				1	1	2	1	1			1	1		1		
Sandhill Crane (12)	7	4	1			2	2		6	4	7	2	3	5		2
Killdeer (10)	4	4	7		7	5		1		1		3	3	4		
Rock Pigeon (6)		2						2	7	10			1			
Mourning Dove (10)	2		2	3	1	2	3	5	2	3	1					
Chimney Swift (1)											1					
Ruby-thd Hummingbird (2)								1	1							
Belted Kingfisher (2)			2											1		
Red-headed Woodpecker (15)	1	3	2	3	5	4	2	6	2	4	5	6	1	5	1	
Red-bellied Woodpecker (9)	1		2	4				2	1	3		1		2	1	
Downy Woodpecker (7)					1			1				1	2	2	1	1
Northern Flicker (6)	1	2						1		4		1		1		
American Kestrel (6)						2			1	1	1	1		1		
Eastern Wood-Pewee (6)			1	1		1		1	1	1						
Eastern Phoebe (6)		1		1	3		3		1			1				
Great-crested Flycatcher (2)			1				1									
Eastern Kingbird (7)		2	2	2		2	1	3	1							
Yellow-throated Vireo 3)			1	3	2											
Warbling Vireo (3)			1	1	1											
Blue Jay (9)	1	1			1	2				4		10	7	5		7
Species and dates observed	4.8	4_30	5.16	5.29	6.15	6.27	7.16	7.31	8.9	8.25	9.4	9.28	10.12	10.25	11.7	11.24
American Crow (12)	3	2	2		1	1	2	7		9	2	3	8	4		
Purple Martin (1)								15								
Tree Swallow (11)	1	14	5	7	17	15	19	30	13	3	8					
Northern RW Swallow (3)								15	10		14					
Barn Swallow (5)				3	1			8	1	3						
Tufted Titmouse (2)		1				1										
White-breasted Nuthatch (3)								1		1				3		

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House Wren (2)								1		1						
Sedge Wren (3)							1	3						2		
Carolina Wren (2)													6		1	
Eastern Bluebird (9)		5		3		1	2		1			3	1	21		9
American Robin (11)	7	20	18	15	7	13	5	4				2	1	3		
Gray Catbird (8)		1		3	3	3	1	1	1		1					
Northern Mockingbird (1)											2					
European Starling (9)	2		4	40	60	16	20		9	3				5		
Cedar Waxwing (2)						1								1		
Orange-crowned Warbler (1)														1		
Common Yellowthroat (6)		3	13	12	6	5	14	9								
Yellow Warbler (6)		1	6	5	3	2	1									
Yellow-rumped Warbler (1)												3				
Eastern Towhee (1)	1															
American Tree Sparrow (2)															1	2
Chipping Sparrow (2)						1					1					
Field Sparrow (5)			1	2	1						2	6				
Song Sparrow (16)	8	18	16	21	22	22	20	16	15	9	2	8	17	10	4	3
Lincoln's Sparrow (3)				1				1				1				
Swamp Sparrow (9)		2	2	4		2	6	3	2			1	2			
White-throated Sparrow (1)														1		
White-crowned Sparrow (3)											1	8	2			
Dark-eyed Junco (2)															9	1
Northern Cardinal (7)		2	2	2	1	1				2				2		
Rose-breasted Grosbeak (1)									1							
Blue Grosbeak (2)							2				1					
Indigo Bunting (6)			2	1		4	1	5	4							
Species and dates observed	4.8	4_30	5.16	5.29	6.15	6.27	7.16	7.31	8.9	8.25	9.4	9.28	10.12	10.25	11.7	11.24
Red-winged Blackbird (10)	10	31	18	24	19	17	16	4	10			3	2	26		
Common Grackle (1)				2												
Brown-headed Cowbird (5)	3	8								1		15	12			
Orchard Oriole (2)			1		1											
Baltimore Oriole (3)			1	3	1											
American Goldfinch (12)				1	2	2	10	19	15	10	20	25	16	17	3	
House Sparrow (1)											3					
Total species each visit	20	27	32	32	26	28	27	34	21	23	19	24	21	32	10	11
* Number in parenthesis is total number of visits of 16 that species was observed.																