



## BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 10/2016

Petri Hottola

# HORICON MARSH, WISCONSIN



**Fig. 1.** A Red-winged Blackbird welcomes people to visit the Horicon Marsh.

Horicon Marsh is a vast (130 km<sup>2</sup>) marshland area located in the Dodge and Fond du Lac counties of Wisconsin. It is the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the United States of America. The northern two-thirds of the area is federal land and protected as the Horicon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). It is managed by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The southern section, on the other hand, is owned by the state of Wisconsin and managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, as the Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area (SWA).

There are no entrance fees. The marsh is located south of Fond du Lac, along Highway 151 to Madison, about 220 to 270 km north of Chicago O'Hare International Airport, depending on one's travel route. In other words, it takes about three hours to drive there from Chicago. In the summer, it is a good idea to follow weather information in car radio and the television weather forecasts. Storms and tornados do occur, and may necessitate alternative driving routes.



**Fig. 2.** A rest area map provides a comprehensive overview of the reserve and its roads.

In summer 2016, June 15th to 17th, I stopped at Waupun, Wisconsin, to spend one full day and one morning at the Horicon Marsh, mainly to see the place and enjoy relaxed general birding, while increasing my World Year List while doing so (at the end of the year, just under 1.300). I had already spent four-and-a-half days in North Michigan, driving around Lake Michigan, in my search for missing lifers and few 50 States List species, too.

(The visit in the U.S.A. was the first stop of a private seven-week round-the-world tour, from Finland to USA to Cayman Islands and Peru, and to eight islands in East and Southeast Asia).

As limited materials are available on many birding locations in the States, especially from the viewpoint of an international visitor, I decided to produce the following text. A site such as the Horicon Marsh may not be so exciting for those who have already seen a lot of species in the United States, but it is just great for somebody who is there for the first or second time. Where else in Wisconsin could one spot such a diversity of species with such an ease? There are not many sites of similar diversity in a relatively small area.

About 290 bird species have been recorded at the Horicon Marsh. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, during my long (05.30 – 20.15) and pleasant summer birding day, I observed at least 95 of them, most of the summer season species. Some may have been omitted from my field notes and consequently from this report, too.



**Fig. 3.** One of the many nice observation points around the Horicon Marsh.



**Fig. 4.** A small section of the freshwater cattail marsh, largest in the United States.

## **CAR RENTAL, FLIGHTS**

For international visitors, the natural gateway to Wisconsin is the Chicago International Airport (O'Hare) in Illinois. Even though challenging in terms of traffic (road works), the airport has many international and domestic arrivals, and a good selection of car rental services. One may either visit Illinois and Wisconsin or do as I did, drive around Lake Michigan, with species such as **Kirtland's Warbler** on the way (see a separate North Michigan report).

When returning to the O'Hare airport, however, beware of a ridiculous road toll collection arrangement: There were two toll collection points less than a kilometer apart, and they both charged USD 1.50. Unfortunately, the second one only accepted coins and I did not have enough of them. I therefore had to drive through without paying, knowing that the matter should be settled without delay. There was a time limit, after which I would get a penalty and also problems if entering the U.S.A. again. It did not help that I was on my way to Grand Cayman (on Sunday) and Peru (no computer access), and would soon return to the States, via Dallas/Fort Worth.

At Alamo, a young lady first declined my request to use their computer to pay the money by a credit card, as suggested at an information table at the toll gate (I had taken a photo of the advice). Fortunately, a male member of the staff arrived and instructed the woman to help me. She did that, without reservations. After five minutes, the payment had been made and the stressful situation was over.

To add on the insult, the Internet page did not accept a non-U.S. address and I was forced to choose a home state. I chose Alabama. What a fuss, for USD 1.50, and a collection of double payments instead of a single payment of USD 3.00, which I could have paid at the first toll booth which accepted notes. Add the dysfunctional departure processes of the O'Hare airport... If Illinois thinks that this is the way to say 'welcome back' to departing tourists, somebody should be replaced by somebody with a head on his/her shoulders!

As already revealed, I rented my car at Alamo and was more or less happy with their services. My chosen vehicle was a Chevrolet Impala LTZ, primarily because of its trunk, which the other available choices (e.g. Nissan Versa Note) lacked. I normally prefer Japanese cars, because of their high reliability and low fuel consumption. Gas does cost next to nothing (60 % less) in the USA, if compared to Europe, but the distances are also long there.

The Impala may be considered a compact car by U.S. car rental standards, but it really is a full size family car by European standards. For birding purposes, there is no need to rent a large vehicle or a 4x4 in this part of the world, where roads are wide and in a fine condition. The rental cost €355 for the week (a Priceline.com price) in Michigan and Wisconsin, with unlimited kilometers and full insurance, excluding PAI, which I did not need.

## **ACCOMMODATION**

Personally, I prefer to avoid chain motels and hotels, if possible. The privately owned ones tend to be more economical and usually have more character (sometimes, too much!), with special attention to their customers, too. For me, there were two main options close to the Horicon Marsh, in the towns of Horicon and Waupun. They are both small towns, with 3.600 and 11.300 inhabitants, respectively, who are predominantly employed by John Deere Horicon Works and two correctional institutions (Dodge and Waupun).

In the motel category, in my mind the best suited for traveling birders, Horicon has the Royal Oaks Motel (rooms USD 45?) and Waupun the Inn Town Motel (USD 54). All the prices in this report include taxes, as they should always do. A bit further away from the marsh, Beaver Dam has USD 60 motels such as Grand View Motel and Super 8.

I tried to reserve a room at the Royal Oaks, but failed to get a response. I guess it is one of those places which need to be called in person. No working email, not in Booking.com; a bit difficult situation because the room rate could only be guessed and there was a need to make an early booking. June is, after all, already high season in Wisconsin.

The Inn Town Motel was, however, available both at Agoda.com and Booking.com. I made an Internet reservation for June the 16th, and received a personal email confirmation. In practice, I arrived a day early, on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Fortunately, that was not a problem, because they happened to have a vacant room. In fact, the manager graciously gave me a more expensive room for the same Internet rate, because I stayed for two nights instead of one.

Well, the place was almost fully booked and the smallest budget rooms had already been sold out. As could be expected, the room was a nostalgic one, with some attractively dated features, which fit well into the peaceful neighborhood in this old (1839) town with character.



**Fig. 5.** The Inntown Motel, my room on the left and the Alamo Impala in the front.

Unlike Horicon, Waupun has one supermarket and it happens to be a local branch of Piggly Wiggly. Piggly Wiggly was the first shop to introduce a supermarket as we know it, in 1916, with lines of cashiers and every item with a price tag. There are also gas stations and the E Main St has an easy

access from the highway. Well, it normally has. In summer 2016, the main street was cut half way, because of road works, just like so many main streets and highways in Illinois, Michigan and the rest of Wisconsin. The locals said it is always like that in summer.

From Waupun, the northern section of the Horicon Marsh, the Horicon NWR, may be accessed in five minutes. It is possible to drive around the marsh in the east, via Kekoskee to Horicon, and access the wetland at various entry roads and viewpoints. The headquarters of the NWR may be visited by leaving the Z Road to Headquarters Road. In the south, the Horicon Marsh SWA is best accessed by driving to the headquarters, well visible north of the Highway 28, between Mayville and Horicon. The western side of the marsh appeared to have little to offer, with the exception of the above-mentioned north(western) section of the NWR.



**Fig. 6.** The Waupun Piggly Wiggly, a great place to stock up with food and drinks.

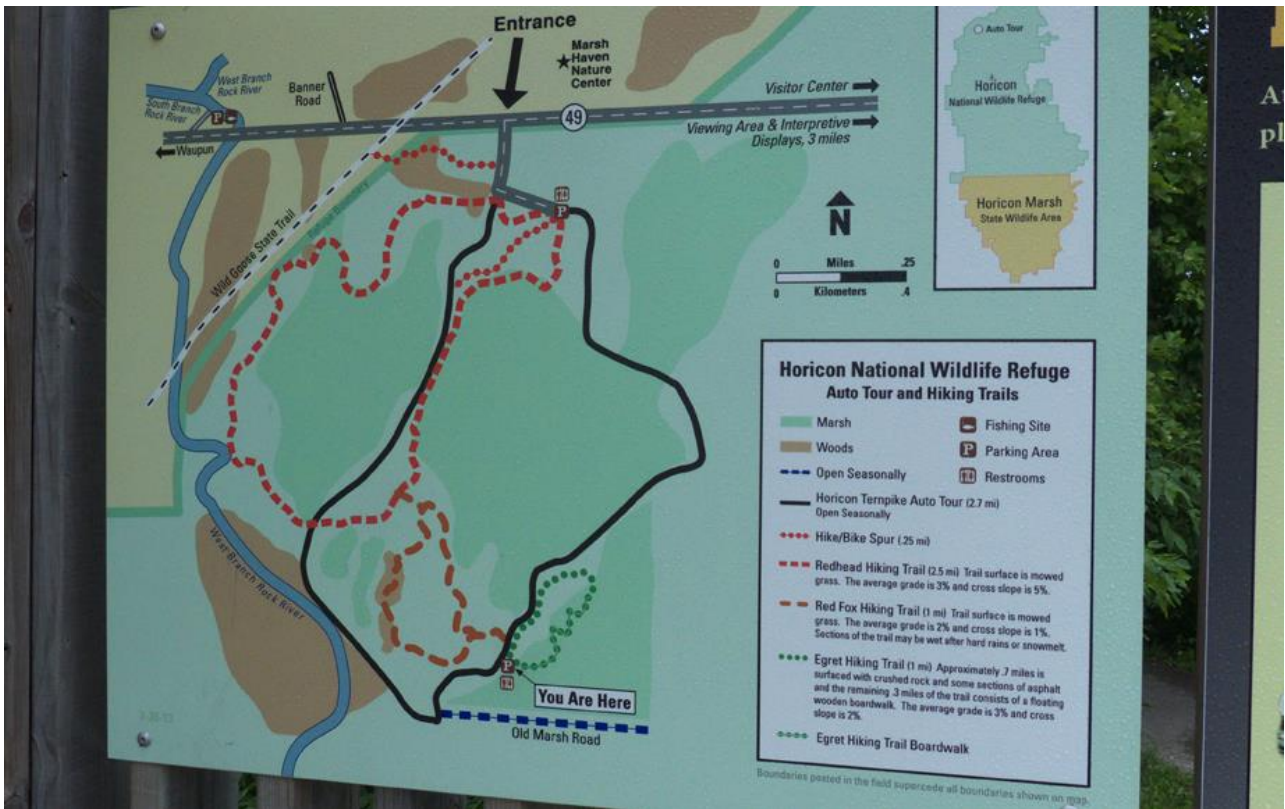
## **BIRDS, MAMMALS AND SITES**

The best area for waterfowl, geese and herons was the northern end of the NWR. It certainly was a good idea to make several stops along the Wild Goose State Trail, the Road 49 which crosses the marsh in the north, and particularly along the western section of the road, looking south. That is where the **Trumpeter Swans** and **Redheads** are, for example, at ponds partly obscured by lines of trees.

Also the ponds along the Horicon Marsh Auto Tour, at the NW corner, were productive, just like the small pond right behind the NWR headquarters, and the channels along the Ledge Rd in the northeast. Unfortunately, the bird observation tower along the Auto Tour road was closed for renovation.

The pelicans and cormorants, on the other hand, favored an inlet in the center of the marsh, roughly opposite of the NWR headquarters, making visits to the northern section from there. In regard to shorebirds, the migration was over and the mudflats were either submerged or grew

grass, with the exception of a small area off the Auto Tour road, south of the closed tower, which could be reached by walking in on the Old Marsh Rd between the Auto Tour road and Point Rd.



**Fig. 7.** The northwestern Auto Tour route, and the Old Marsh Road.



**Fig. 8.** At Legde Rd, one needed sharp eyes to spot all the birds which hid in the reeds; an eclipse drake **Blue-winged Teal**. I have found a similar bird in Finland, the third record for the nation.

A particularly potential area for migratory birds, next to empty in June, was located within the SWA in Horicon. Follow the N. Palmatory St. up to a ridge with an observation point with great scope views to ponds and pools around Quick Point. Close by, the SWA headquarters had a good variety of birdlife in front of the building.

Also the area west of Rockvale Rd was productive, even though the Dike Rd (almost) across the marsh was almost not worth the trouble. I also went to the Breakneck Waterfowl Production Area, with little success. The passerines were mostly recorded along the Auto Tour road (both forest and lush meadows, with smart **Bobolinks**, for example), at the eastern section of the Old Marsh Rd across the marsh, to the Point Rd, and by the NWR headquarters. In the east, the farmland added to my daily list of records. The numbers in the following bird list are approximate numbers, when in full tens or hundreds, or 25, for example. I was, after all, not doing a scientific survey!



**Fig. 9.** A smart **Bobolink**, one of several along the Auto Tour road.



**Fig. 10.** Four of the ten **Wild Turkeys** discovered on a field by the Z Rd, in the east.

The best record probably was a **Yellow Rail**, of which I had just recently made four observations in North Michigan, during the previous four days (Houghton Lake & Trout Lake). It could have been either a bird on migration or a territorial one. In early June, one may expect to see both breeding birds and late migrants to the far north, not to mention migratory birds not fit enough to reach



their breeding areas, such as the male **Lesser Scaup**, I presume. I was also impressed by the breeding **Trumpeter Swans**, so far south, and the good numbers of **American White Pelicans**, **Redheads** and **Black Terns**.

### Bird list (95 species)

<b>Pied-billed Grebe</b>	10, at northern and southern ends of the marsh.
<b>Double-crested Cormorant</b>	170, at the center of the marsh.
<b>American White Pelican</b>	90, likewise, and in the north.
<b>Great Blue Heron</b>	25, here and there.
<b>Great White Egret</b>	25, here and there, and especially in the north.
<b>Snowy Egret</b>	1, in Waupun.
<b>Western Cattle Egret</b>	1, in Waupun.
<b>Black-crowned Night Heron</b>	25, roost at the N section of the NWR.
<b>American Bittern</b>	1, at the northern end.
<b>Least Bittern</b>	1, at SWA headquarters.
<b>Canada Goose</b>	1.500, especially at SWA headquarters.
<b>Trumpeter Swan</b>	1 pair with 5 chicks, at the northern end of the NWR.
<b>Wood Duck</b>	60, widespread.
<b>Mallard</b>	50, widespread.
<b>Gadwall</b>	15, in the north.
<b>American Wigeon</b>	2 drakes, in the north.
<b>Green-winged Teal</b>	1 pair at NWR headquarters.
<b>Blue-winged Teal</b>	25, mostly in the north.
<b>Redhead</b>	70, at the northern end of the NWR.
<b>Ring-necked Duck</b>	2 males and a female.
<b>Lesser Scaup</b>	1 drake, at the northern end of the NWR.
<b>Ruddy Duck</b>	30, at the northern end of the NWR.
<b>Ring-necked Pheasant</b>	1
<b>Wild Turkey</b>	11, one at the northwest corner, a party in a field at Z Rd.
<b>Turkey Vulture</b>	3
<b>Red-tailed Hawk</b>	2
<b>Northern Harrier</b>	1 adult male & 5 females/juveniles.
<b>American Kestrel</b>	1
<b>Yellow Rail</b>	1 calling at the NW section of the NWR.
<b>Sora</b>	1
<b>Common Gallinule</b>	1
<b>American Coot</b>	n15
<b>Sandhill Crane</b>	30, including several chicks.
<b>Killdeer</b>	10, along the Auto Tour road (see text).
<b>Spotted Sandpiper</b>	1, likewise.
<b>Wilson's Snipe</b>	1, likewise.

<b>Ring-billed Gull</b>	2
<b>Forster's Tern</b>	8
<b>Black Tern</b>	250, surprisingly numerous at N section of the NWR.
<b>Rock/Feral Pigeon</b>	4
<b>Mourning Dove</b>	25
<b>Yellow-billed Cuckoo</b>	1, along the Auto Tour road.
<b>Chimney Swift</b>	2
<b>Belted Kingfisher</b>	1
<b>Northern Flicker</b>	7
<b>Eastern Wood Pewee</b>	3
<b>Eastern Phoebe</b>	1
<b>Acadian Flycatcher</b>	1
<b>Willow Flycatcher</b>	3
<b>Least Flycatcher</b>	2
<b>Great Crested Flycatcher</b>	1
<b>Eastern Kingbird</b>	12
<b>Warbling Vireo</b>	20
<b>Red-eyed Vireo</b>	5
<b>Blue Jay</b>	2
<b>American Crow</b>	10
<b>Purple Martin</b>	60, mostly at the headquarters, at nest boxes.
<b>Tree Swallow</b>	>500
<b>American Cliff Swallow</b>	1
<b>(American) Barn Swallow</b>	250
<b>Northern Rough-winged Swallow</b>	2
<b>Black-capped Chickadee</b>	5
<b>Northern House Wren</b>	20
<b>Sedge Wren</b>	6
<b>Marsh Wren</b>	50, widespread.
<b>Blue-grey Gnatcatcher</b>	1 male.
<b>Eastern Bluebird</b>	1, close to Waupun.
<b>American Robin</b>	100, widespread and common.
<b>Brown Thrasher</b>	1 pair.
<b>Grey Catbird</b>	20, here and there.
<b>European Starling</b>	30
<b>Cedar Waxwing</b>	1
<b>Yellow Warbler</b>	20
<b>Yellow-rumped Warbler</b>	1; accidental in summer?
<b>American Redstart</b>	1 2 <sup>nd</sup> calendar year male.
<b>Ovenbird</b>	2
<b>Common Yellowthroat</b>	60, widespread.
<b>Chipping Sparrow</b>	2

<b>Field Sparrow</b>	1
<b>Savannah Sparrow</b>	5
<b>Song Sparrow</b>	>100, common and widespread.
<b>Swamp Sparrow</b>	n30, widespread.
<b>White-throated Sparrow</b>	1 male.
<b>Scarlet Tanager</b>	1 female.
<b>Northern Cardinal</b>	3 males and 1 female.
<b>Indigo Bunting</b>	1 male.
<b>Bobolink</b>	20, at the NW corner of the NWR.
<b>Brown-headed Cowbird</b>	20, close to Waupun.
<b>Red-winged Blackbird</b>	>500
<b>Yellow-headed Blackbird</b>	40
<b>Common Grackle</b>	120
<b>Baltimore Oriole</b>	2 males.
<b>House Finch</b>	1 female at Inntown Motel.
<b>American Goldfinch</b>	8
<b>House Sparrow</b>	13, at Inntown Motel, for example.



**Fig. 11.** An adult and a juvenile **Tree Swallow**, at their nest box by the marsh. The needs of these swallows and Purple Martins had been well attended by the local nature-lovers.

In regard to mammals, the following six species were seen: **White-tailed Deer** (4), **American River Otter** (3), **Eastern Cottontail** (1), **Eastern Grey Squirrel** (1), **Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel** (1) and **Eastern Chipmunk** (7). The otters favored the marsh next to the Horicon Marsh SWA headquarters. The ground-squirrel had its burrow under some ornamental flowers, right next to the stairs of the Horicon Marsh NWR headquarters.



**Fig. 12.** A male **Purple Martin**, at the 'doorstep' of its condo in a block of apartments, at the SWA headquarters. See the shape of the entrances, specifically designed for the large martins!

## FINAL WORDS

The second morning (17<sup>th</sup> June) at Horicon Marsh was shortened by a surprising incident with my Samsonite hardtop suitcase. I somehow managed to lock it while simultaneously accidentally changing its number code. As a result, I could not open the bag. Trying to guess the code would not necessarily have solved the problem soon enough. I knew that from experience, because once the same problem occurred at home and I had to spend several hours systematically trying one code after another, until the suitcase was open. Now, I was traveling and my time was limited, with the next international departure in the next morning in Chicago.

Well, it was a TSA approved lock... If they would open it for me, I could perhaps find out if only one or two numbers had changed, and thereby be able to reduce the time needed to find out the new code. Hmm... Chicago would not be the best place to do that. It had to be a smaller, local airport, with easy access and more convivial security staff than the O'Hare had. After some insightful local advice, I opted for Madison Airport. As predicted, the local TSA helped me to open the bag with their master key and, even more importantly, in finding out the current code. The issue was solved in 20 minutes. Thank you, TSA!

In any case, I had not seen any new species in the few hours of the second morning at Horicon Marsh. The rest of the day was spent driving down to Chicago, with the stop in Madison. Towards the end of the journey, road works made orientation difficult again and I had the incident with

road tolls, as described in the beginning. The night was spent at Quality Inn O'Hare International Airport, not really a welcoming motel and with security problems.

At least the motel had comfortable bed and a shuttle to the airport, and there were no ants in my room (a problem endemic to the area). What a rude, dysfunctional airport O'Hare was! A flight delay was not a surprise, after I had seen the strange ways they mismanaged the security checks and the attitude of the check in personnel.

If possible, avoid departures in Chicago and transits in Miami! Most of the other U.S. airports are fair to fine, including major hubs such as LAX and Dallas/Fort Worth.

**Good luck with your visit at the Horicon Marsh!**



**Fig. 13.** The troublesome Samsonite... a scope, toilet paper, some water and a few cans of Diet Dr. Pepper in the trunk. In other words, the basic possessions of a traveling birder. In the U.S.A., people seldom buy their drinks by cans or bottles. They prefer boxes!

