

A Birder's Guide to the Pascagoula River Marsh

Malcolm Hodges	and	Judith Touns
9 Arbor Circle		4 Hartford Place
Ocean Springs, MS 39564		Gulfport, MS 39501

The area which birders have designated the Pascagoula River Marsh is, in fact, only a small portion of the estuarine system of the Pascagoula River in Jackson County, Mississippi.

For purposes of this discussion, the Pascagoula River Marsh (hereafter PRM) is limited to that area south of U.S. Highway 90 in Pascagoula at the turnoff to Ingalls West Bank Shipyard, where it is bordered both east and west by branches of the Pascagoula River, to the south by the shipyard, and to the north by Highway 90.

It is an area of diverse habitats. Salt marsh and mud flats predominate. Roadside ditches and sloughs are fresh/brackish. There are a large freshwater pond, sand flats, and extensive salt marsh scrub. Two large, manmade diked-in areas periodically receive the spoils from dredging of the Pascagoula River. When the spoil settles and the water levels in these diked "ponds" are low, shorebirds use them as feeding areas.

Prime conditions for birds are not constant at PRM; at times when drought conditions prevail, the diked ponds may be totally dry, and although many species may be present on the mudflats to the west, they are often too distant to be seen well. But regardless of conditions at the diked ponds, PRM is always worth a birder's time.

Upwards of 186 species have been recorded; virtually all of Mississippi's marsh birds, ducks, shorebirds, gulls, and terns, as well as an interesting variety of raptors and small passerines.

Breeding birds include Mottled Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Wood Duck, King and Clapper rails, Purple and Common gallinules, Wilson's Plover; Willet, Black-necked Stilt, Gull-billed, Common, and Least terns, and Black Skimmer.

A number of first Mississippi records have also come from PRM: European Wigeon, Hudsonian Godwit, and Bronzed Cowbird. In addition, rare, or rarely seen, species have been recorded at PRM, some of them to the exclusion of any other locality on the Mississippi coast: Eared Grebe, Brown Pelican, Reddish Egret, Least Bittern, American Bittern, White-winged Scoter, Bald Eagle, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, American Oystercatcher, American Golden Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Whimbrel, Red Knot, White-rumped, Baird's, and Buff-breasted

sandpipers, Marbled Godwit, American Avocet, Wilson's and Northern phalaropes, Franklin's Gull, White-winged Dove, Groovebilled Ani, Bobolink, Yellow-headed Blackbird, LeConte's, Henslow's, and Lincoln's sparrows.

Unfortunately, this highly productive area is not always easy to bird. It is industrialized, dominated by the shipyard, a commercial grain elevator, and an attendant maze of railroad tracks which are heavily trafficked. The undeveloped acreage is designated "future industrial" and is under the management of the Jackson County Port Authority.

Birders who are discreet are tolerated, and an occasional security patrol may inquire one's business in the area. In the vicinity of the shipyard, cameras (and suspicious looking spotting scopes) are frowned upon.

When to visit: Birding is good year round, but March through September is most productive. Weekends afford greater opportunity for close scrutiny of the area, which during workdays, especially during shift changes, is essentially a traffic-clogged freeway.

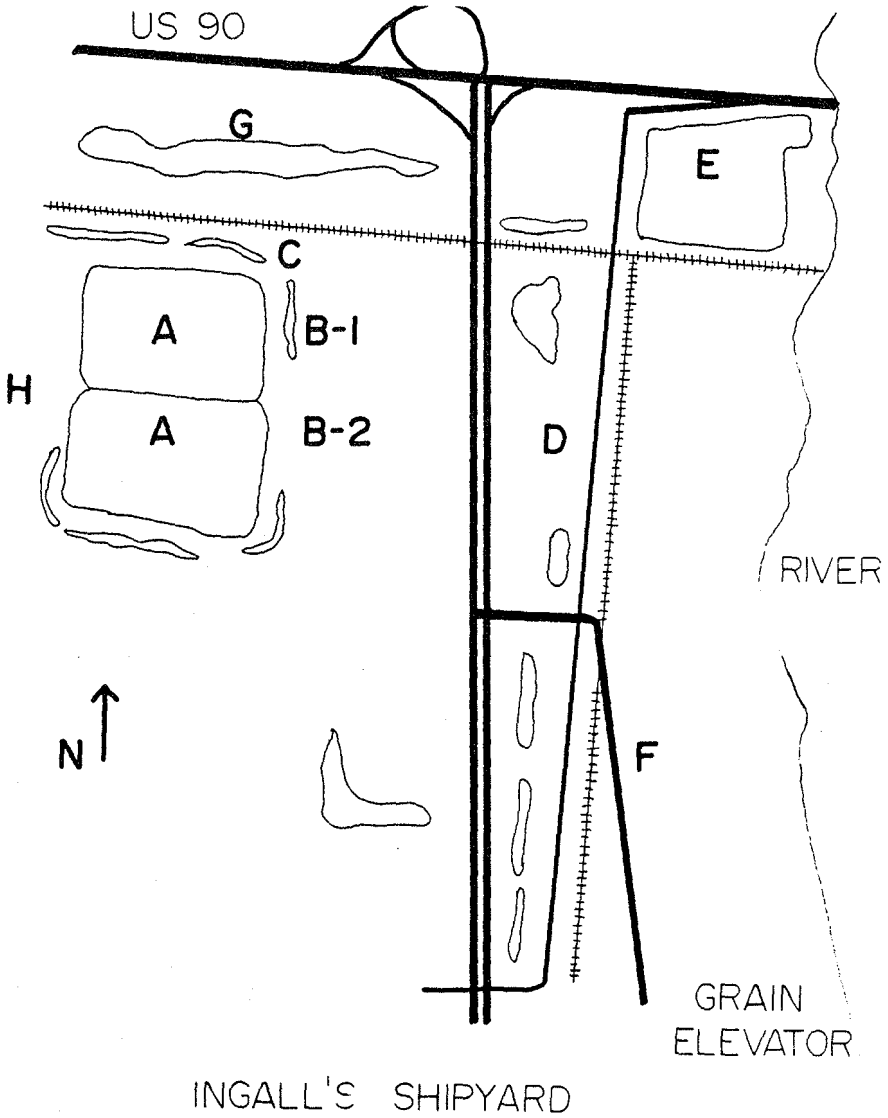
Time of day: One should make every effort to bird PRM only on weekends. If one must bird on a weekday, avoidance of the 7-8 A.M. and 3-4 P.M. traffic is suggested. One should try to time any visit to coincide with the high tide at Pascagoula. High tides serve to concentrate shorebirds in the diked ponds.

Caution: Summer heat can be intense; there is no shelter in the area. If one can arrange to arrive at dawn there is time enough to bird the entire area before the extreme heat of late morning. Late afternoons can also be more comfortable.

How much time: If one is merely listing, give PRM a minimum of three hours. If birding is good, six hours may not be long enough.

How to get there: PRM is at the Ingalls West Bank turnoff from U.S. Highway 90 on the western outskirts of Pascagoula, and may be approached from east or west on U.S. 90. One coming east on Interstate 10 should take the Gautier exit south to U.S. 90, making a left (east) turn onto the highway. One coming west on Interstate 10 should take the exit to State Highway 63 south to U.S. 90 in Pascagoula, turn right (west) through the city and over the Pascagoula River Bridge to the Ingalls West Bank turnoff just beyond.

To begin the PRM loop, from west overpass and east ramp, drive over the L & N Railroad overpass and signal right turn. Watch for a dirt road (usually passable) and follow it west as far as possible. The diked ponds will be directly ahead.



INGALL'S SHIPYARD

Figure 1. Pascagoula River Marsh. Distance from U.S. 90 to Ingall's Shipyard is approximately 1 mile. See text for explanation.

Fig. 1, A-Diked ponds: At their best, the diked ponds are a birder's dream. It is possible to see as many as 50 species from one vantage point (when water level is ideal during migration). By walking along the center dike separating both ponds, one can usually survey both ponds adequately. One should not walk out onto the surrounding mud flats without great caution; even if they appear to be cracked and dried one may still sink up to the ankles in sludge. Because of the large variety of birds attracted to these ponds, one should expect almost anything in shorebirds, gulls, terns, herons, and egrets. Even the Mississippi Sandhill Crane makes an occasional appearance.

A walk around these ponds, especially the south pond, may produce a few more species on the outer sides of the dikes. At the west end of the center dike, in morning light, it is possible to look out over the mudflats of the west Pascagoula River (Fig. 1, H) and see avocets, stilts, both pelicans, various herons (look for Reddish Egret) and rarely, an American Oystercatcher. In winter the surrounding marsh grass and salt marsh brush teems with sparrows, especially Savannah and Swamp sparrows, possibly Seaside, Sharp-tailed, LeConte's, and Grasshopper sparrows, as well as Marsh and Sedge wrens. During migration, it is often attractive to vireos, warblers, orioles, grosbeaks, and buntings.

Fig. 1, B-Upland area: Upon leaving the diked ponds one should note the dry grasses and dry sand flats of Fig. 1, B-1 and B-2. In winter the dry sedge grass in B-1 is productive of sparrows, including Savannah, Swamp, Song and White-throated, all rather easily seen. If intent on flushing grass sparrows, this is a good place, especially for LeConte's and Grasshopper. Sedge Wren is likely to be common. In late spring, Ground Dove and Bobolink have been seen. In the B-2 area, watch for Wilson's Plover in spring and summer, and for Buff-breasted and Upland sandpipers in migration.

Fig. 1, C-Sloughs: The sloughs which more or less surround the diked ponds are often good for herons and ducks (Mottled Ducks often seen with young). The tall grass edging is good for Least Bittern in spring and summer, American Bittern in fall and winter. When water level is low, rails may often be seen.

While in the vicinity of the diked ponds one should be particularly aware of birds in flight; look for Osprey, Bald Eagle (winter), Plegadis ibises, Marsh Hawks, etc. Return to the main road via the dirt road and proceed to the south for about one thousand yards. Turn left onto a short connecting road, and turn left again (car will be facing north).

Fig. 1, D-Roadsides, fresh/brackish sloughs: Immediately after the second left turn, stop at the shallow pond on the left. This

humble puddle may host Baird's Sandpiper in late summer (look for it in the short wet grass) and any of the other peeps. Yellowlegs of both species are often found as well as Solitary Sandpiper, especially during spring migration. Soras often are seen on the edges. Just across the road, where the spur line of the L & N Railroad may be seen, is the site of previous sightings of Yellow-headed Blackbird, Bronzed Cowbird (look in any areas of spilled grain), as well as an occasional White-winged Dove (all, winter and spring). In late April and May, Bobolinks may be found. The marsh grass and roadside brush should be checked for sparrows, wrens, blackbirds, and other small passerines, especially during migration. Proceed north along road to Fig. E.

Fig. 1, E-The Gallinule Pond: So named for its abundance of Common Gallinules in all seasons, this freshwater pond is productive all year. In summer one may find several species with young (Mottled and Wood ducks, Least Bittern, both gallinules, Green Heron). In winter it often attracts a good variety of ducks (19 species) as well as Virginia Rail, Sora, coots and gallinules. Bonaparte's Gulls and Forster's Terns feed here in winter. When water level is low, shorebirds may be seen on the mud edges. One should check the reeds bordering the pond for bitterns and gallinules. Various herons and egrets are common visitors. Directly across the road from the gallinule pond (west) one may find a Clapper Rail on the mudflat next to the railroad bulkhead, or one or both night herons among the cordgrass. To continue the loop, turn car around and return past Fig. 1, D, keep the railroad tracks on your left as you continue on to Fig. 1, F.

Fig. 1, F-Freshwater sloughs, roadside brush, railway siding: In the sloughs to your right, check for King Rail and Blue-winged Teal (both found breeding in the vicinity) as well as various shorebirds (at low water levels). Henslow's Sparrow has been found in low brush. A Peregrine Falcon favors the area of the grain elevator in winter. Grain spills often attract hordes of blackbirds. Boat-tailed Grackles are especially numerous. If time allows, walk the railroad tracks. The easement areas, dank ponds and low brush, have yielded a surprising variety of passerines during migration. Continue south until reaching Ingalls shipyard, make an immediate right turn, heading north. End of loop.

The six stops mentioned here cover a great deal, but not all, of PRM. The birder with plenty of time may wish to explore further. A walk down the main L & N tracks, which run west from the gallinule pond (Fig. 1, E) and traverse salt marsh, sloughs, and hidden tidal flats can be rewarding. When birds are absent in the diked ponds, this walk is a good alternative for finding wanted species, but it is rough going and not for the faint-hearted.

Besides the extreme temperatures in summer, other problems likely to be encountered at PRM are universal to the birder (mosquitos, gnats, chiggers) and the ever-present possibility of meeting a real snake in the grass. During hunting seasons, one should stick to the loop as outlined.

A pared-down list of the more outstanding species to be found at PRM at the proper season follows. The code letters correspond to the figures in the map, indicating where these species have been seen in the past.

White Pelican	H
Brown Pelican	H
Reddish Egret	A, H
B/C Night Heron	A, C, E
Least Bittern	B, C, D, E
American Bittern	C, E, H
Plegadis sp.	E
White Ibis	A, E, G
European Wigeon	E
Greater Scaup	E
White-winged Scoter	E
King Rail	F
Purple Gallinule	E
American Oystercatcher	H
Wilson's Plover	A, B
Whimbrel	A
Upland Sandpiper	A, B
Red Knot	A
W/R Sandpiper	A, D
Baird's Sandpiper	D
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	A, B
Marbled Godwit	A, H
Hudsonian Godwit	A
American Avocet	A, E, G, H
Black-necked Stilt	A, D, E, F, H
Wilson's Phalarope	A, E
Northern Phalarope	A
White-winged Dove	D
Bobolink	B, D
Yellow-headed Blackbird	B, D, E
Bronzed Cowbird	D, F
Grasshopper Sparrow	B, H
LeConte's Sparrow	B, C, H
Henslow's Sparrow	F
Lincoln's Sparrow	B