

# Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Alabama

*With the Tennessee River as a centerpiece,  
this is northern Alabama's birding showcase*

*C. Dwight Cooley*

**Location:** Morgan, Limestone and Madison Counties, northern Alabama.

**Description:** Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge (hereafter, N.W.R.), occupies roughly the middle third of Wheeler Reservoir in the Tennessee River Valley of northern Alabama and stretches 15 miles along the Tennessee River. The 34,500 acres, divided equally between land and water, includes the backwaters along both sides of the river, the adjacent strip of upland, the former river channel and many sloughs and embayments. The land consists of hardwood bottoms, pine plantations, agricultural farmlands and pastures. The refuge is divided into two large sections by the Tennessee River. The northern section is dominated by the oak-hickory climax community on dryer parts, and the willow-marsh grass community in the wetland areas. Marshes and small ponds and lakes are prevalent

in this area. The southern section is dominated by the oak-hickory climax community and to a lesser extent pine plantations. On both sides of the river there is limited agricultural activity.

**Access:** The nearest major airport at Huntsville, Alabama, is 10 miles east of Decatur on Alabama Highway 20. The refuge headquarters is located on Alabama Highway 67, 1.5 miles east of its junction with U.S. 31, near Decatur. Interstate 65 crosses the refuge 2 miles east of headquarters. A network of gravel roads, mainly open for year 'round travel, permits easy access to nearly all parts of the refuge.

**Accommodations:** Full accommodations are available year 'round in Decatur, Huntsville and Athens. Although camping on the refuge is prohibited, except to supervised youth groups, private camp-

grounds offering complete facilities are available at Point Mallard Park, just north of refuge headquarters.

**Birdwatching:** The diversified habitat of Wheeler N.W.R., is attractive to a wide variety of resident, as well as transient bird species. Along the north side of the river between Blackwell Swamp and Limestone Bay, are some of the best areas for locating woodpeckers, wrens and sparrows. Red-bellied, Red-headed, Pileated, Hairy and Downy woodpeckers as well as Common (Yellow-shafted) Flicker are present year 'round. Carolina, Winter, Long-billed and Short-billed Marsh wrens should be looked for in the spring and fall. Carolina Wren is a common breeding species. Resident sparrows include Grasshopper, Field and possibly Chipping and Song Sparrow. Vesper, Chipping, White-crowned, White-throated, Swamp and Song sparrows are common, during the winter. Look also along this side of the river for Le Conte's, Henslow's, Lark and Lincoln's sparrow.

The Limestone Bay area provides an important feeding and resting place for numerous water birds. Geese and ducks winter here in dense concentrations. Ten species of surface feeding ducks are common in fall, winter and spring. Three of these: Mallard, Black and Wood ducks remain to nest. Diving ducks congregate and include Redhead, Canvasback, Greater and Lesser scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Hooded, Common and Red-breasted mergansers. There are even a few summer records of Canvasback, Ruddy Duck and Red-breasted Merganser here.

The mudflats north of Limestone Bay provide ideal habitat for migrating shorebirds. The list is impressive and includes Black-bellied and American Golden plovers, Willet, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Pectoral and White-rumped sandpipers, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper, Sanderling and even Hudsonian Godwit. Osprey, Bald Eagle, Double-crested Cormorant and White Pelican are often seen. Both Mississippi Kite and Peregrine Falcon have been recorded here. Progressing around Limestone Bay into the White Springs area, look for Great Blue, Green, Little Blue, Louisiana, and Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned



*One of many wetland areas suitable for various breeding ducks. Photo/Courtesy of Wheeler N.W.R. personnel.*



A heavy concentration of wintering Canada Geese at Wheeler N.W.R. Photo/C. D. Cooley.

night herons as well as Great Egret. Least Bitterns nest in this area and American Bitterns can be seen in spring and fall. Also nesting along here are King and possibly Virginia rails. The heavy woodland bottoms along the river attract large numbers of woodland birds. Red-eyed Vireo, Prothonotary Warbler, Common Yellowthroat and Yellow-breasted Chat nest commonly. During both migrations Swainson's and Gray-cheeked thrushes, Veery, Philadelphia and Warbling vireos can be expected. Warblers, notably Swainson's, Tennessee, Nashville, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted and Northern Parula occur here as well as approximately sixteen other warbler species.

In winter, the mudflats and sloughs east of U.S. 31 along White Springs Road should be checked carefully for Whistling Swan, White-fronted Goose, Greater Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper,

Dunlin and Glaucous Gull White winged and Surf scoters have been found along U.S. 31 near the Decatur boat harbor:

Along the south side of the river, Flint Creek and Garth Slough provide abundant and varied habitat ideally suited for a wide range of species. Almost all of the migrating passerines that occur in northern Alabama can be found here. Most notable are House Wren, Hermit



Typical habitat between Blackwell Swamp and Limestone Bay. Photo/C. D. Cooley.

Thrush, Philadelphia and Solitary vireos, Black-and-white, Blue-winged, Tennessee, Black-throated Green and Black-poll warblers, Scarlet and Summer tanagers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Along Garth Slough in fall and spring look for Black-billed Cuckoo, Ovenbird, Northern and Louisiana waterthrushes. Wintering species here include Common Loon, Rough-legged Hawk, Bald and an occasional Golden eagle, Herring, Ring-



Typical habitat along Flint Creek and Garth Slough excellent for transient birds. Photo/C. D. Cooley.

billed and Bonaparte's gulls, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden and Ruby-crowned kinglets along with Vesper, Fox and Swamp sparrows. During the nesting season one can easily find Rough-winged, Cliff and Barn swallows, Purple Martin, Hooded Warbler, American Redstart and possibly Chipping and Song sparrows.

Approximately 300 species have been identified on the refuge with over 80 of these known to breed commonly. A checklist of the birds of the Wheeler N.W.R., is available upon request from: Refuge Manager, Wheeler N.W.R., Box 1643, Decatur, AL 35601.

**Ratings:** Spring★★★★, Summer★, Fall★★★★, Winter★★★.

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