

# State of the Birds, 2023

## Park 566



Dan Lory  
March 2024

# Goals of this project

As the Chicago Park District continues the EPA-funded environmental improvement actions in the park, this study's goals are to:

1. Establish a baseline measure of bird activity in the park
2. Attempt to measure impact of environmental improvement actions on bird activity in the park
3. Record the presence of other flora and fauna as observed

**2023 was year 6 of data gathering and analysis**

*(For a summary of years 1-5 data, see the 2022 report)*



Ruddy Duck

# About Park 566

Former site of US Steel South Works. Established as a park in 2004.

70-acre narrow strip along Lake Michigan from 79<sup>th</sup> St to 85<sup>th</sup> St.

Shore is comprised of scrap cement and huge plugs of slag from the former steel mill.

Park is almost entirely flat, with a raised berm along the lake for much of the length.

In 2017 the EPA awarded \$600K for “various environmental improvements.”

Work on those improvements began in autumn, 2017.

Grasshopper Sparrow

All photos in this presentation were taken by Dan Lory at Park 566 in 2023.

# Habitat Features of Park 566



# Environmental Improvements

2017 start	Nov 30, controlled burn of entire northern half of park
2018 key actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cleared small trees and brush, especially area 1</li><li>• Cleared and planted dune area – Burr Oak, Jack Pine, dune grasses, prairie grasses</li><li>• Broadcast a mix of prairie seeds over entire park</li><li>• Sprayed to eliminate invasive plants</li><li>• Mowed to cut back invasives and assist sprouting prairie grasses</li><li>• Planted 400 shrubs and small trees on the berm in Area 1</li><li>• Erected ropeway and split-rail fencing to limit access to planted areas.</li></ul>
Jan 2019	<p>Unlike Jan 2018, when entire park was shaved to 6” and barren, 2019 began with knee-high vegetation over much of park.</p> <p>400 shrubs in area 1 had remarkable survival rate.</p> <p>Same was true for Burr Oak and Jack Pine in area 1.</p> <p>Dune grasses appeared to suffer significant wave and ice damage</p>
April 2019	Work crews tended to new plantings in area 1, clearing undergrowth, repairing fences, etc.

# Environmental Improvements

May 2019	Late May, spot spraying of certain plants in far north end of park
June 2019	6/17, sprayed entire half of park north of elbow to control invasives. 6/28, mowed the entire park to 6". No spraying evident.
July 2019	Noted presence of prairie plants and other native species that the June mowing was intended to assist, including the following: Black-eyed Susan, Purple Coneflower Goldenrod (species unknown), Partridge Pea
August 2019	Mowed entire area from South Shore Drive to the sand piles near middle of park.
September 2019	Mowed the area overgrown with lambs quarters, east of the sand piles and north to where the lambs quarters ceased.
March 2020	Controlled burn of entire park, with small swaths of unburned grasses remaining here and there throughout park

# Environmental Improvements

July 2020	Mowed entire park to about one foot high.
August 2020	Cleared weeds from around the plantings at the NE end of park. Appears to be a very high survival rate on those plantings.
March 2021	Controlled burn of entire park, including between the planted Jack Pine and Burr Oak in the dunes area to the NE and the mid-park sand piles (sparing the mulberry). Did not burn the far south copse of sumac and mulberry, and left the south sand piles untouched. Overall, a much more complete burn than the one done in end 2020.
April 2021	Sprayed entire park with broadleaf-specific herbicide. Followed with spot spraying of thistle and other invasives throughout entire park, including beach area. Weeding and clean-up around hedge plantings, and spot spraying at far north end.
September 2021	To allow better access for birders and walkers to the area around the shrub plantings, Cardno mowed a 3'-wide circle path through the tall grasses.

# Environmental Improvements

December 2021	Selective burn of area north of sandpiles and west of center road. No seeding was done in 2021.
Summer 2022	Low brush cleared around plantings in beach area and NE corner of park. Spot spraying of pockets of various invasives throughout park.
Summer 2023	Systematic spot spraying of invasive broadleaves. Periodic cutting/extraction of certain invasives. Controlled burn of northwest corner of park, with seeding planned for early 2024.





# Results 2023: Bird's-eye Overview

In 2023, 222 bird species were observed

235 birders submitted 811 birding checklists across 230 days.

5 new species were added to the park's cumulative record.

At end 2023, total cumulative species count is 259.

Park 566 ranks #13 among Cook County's birding hotspots.



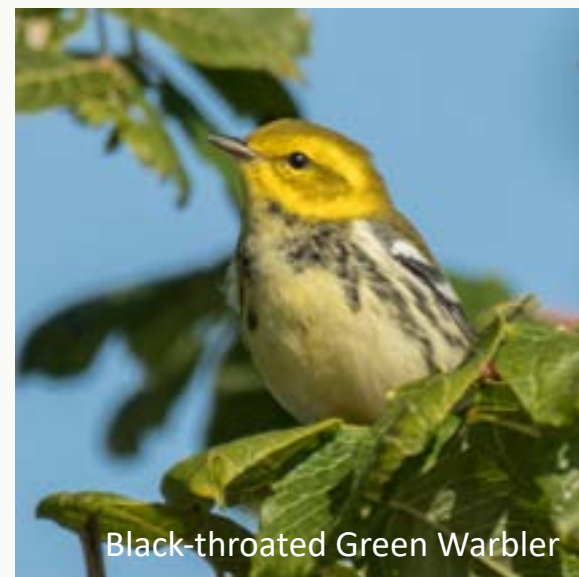
Short-eared Owl

# Review of Procedure

Bird the park consistently, keeping records of all birds sighted

- Species
- Frequency/Count
- Nature of the presence

Data for the study were gathered from:



Black-throated Green Warbler

2018	270 observation walks 202 followed a fixed route, 68 were of varied routes
2019	469 observation walks 217 followed a fixed route, 252 were of varied routes
2020	251 observation walks (low number due to COVID restrictions) 87 followed a fixed route, 164 were of varied routes
2021	538 observation walks 195 followed a fixed route, 343 were of varied routes
2022	646 observation walks 249 followed a fixed route, 397 were of varied routes
2023	811 observation walks 176 followed a fixed route, 635 were of varied routes

# State of the Birds over time

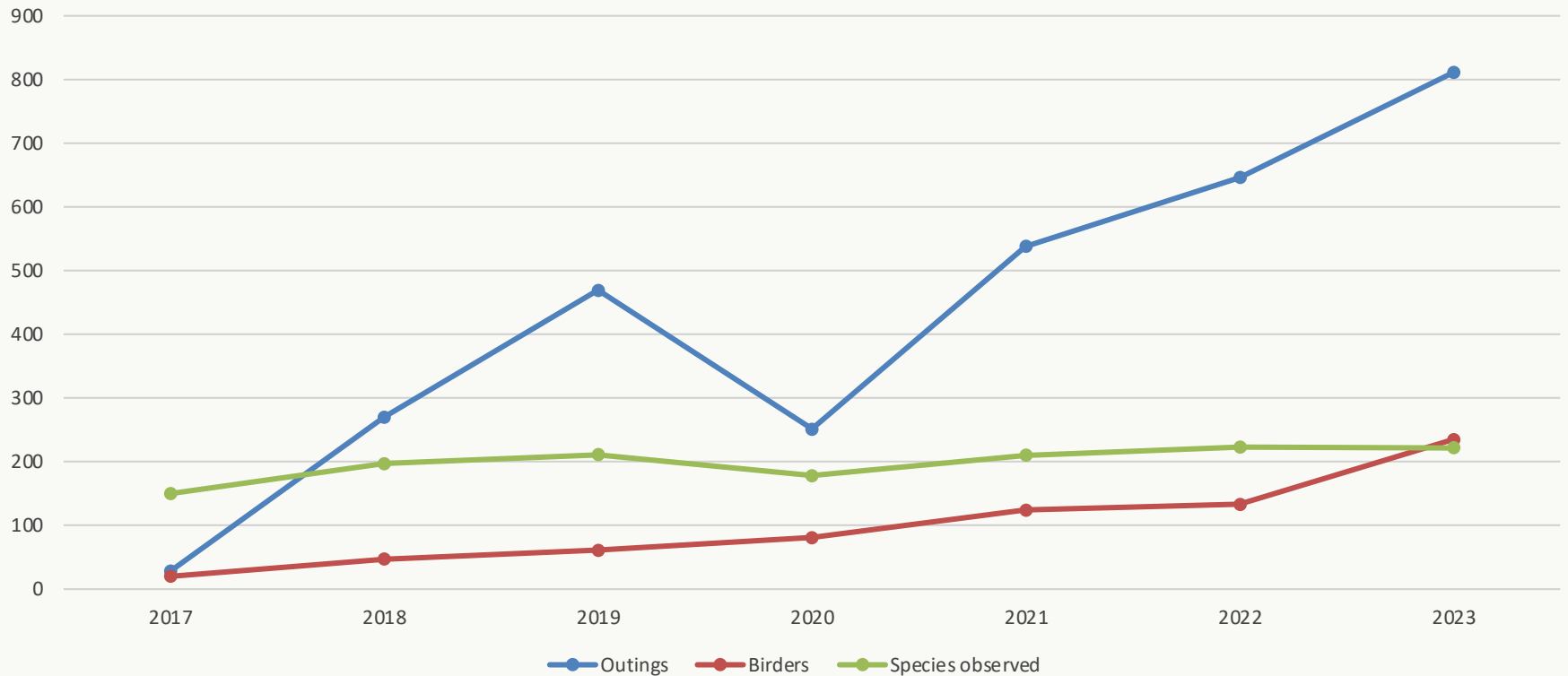
	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020*</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Number of Birding Outings	270	469	251	538	646	811
Number of Birders	47	61	81	124	133	235
Number of Species Observed	197	211	178	210	223	222
Park's Cumulative Species Total	216	233	240	248	254	259

*\* COVID restrictions*



Long-tailed Duck

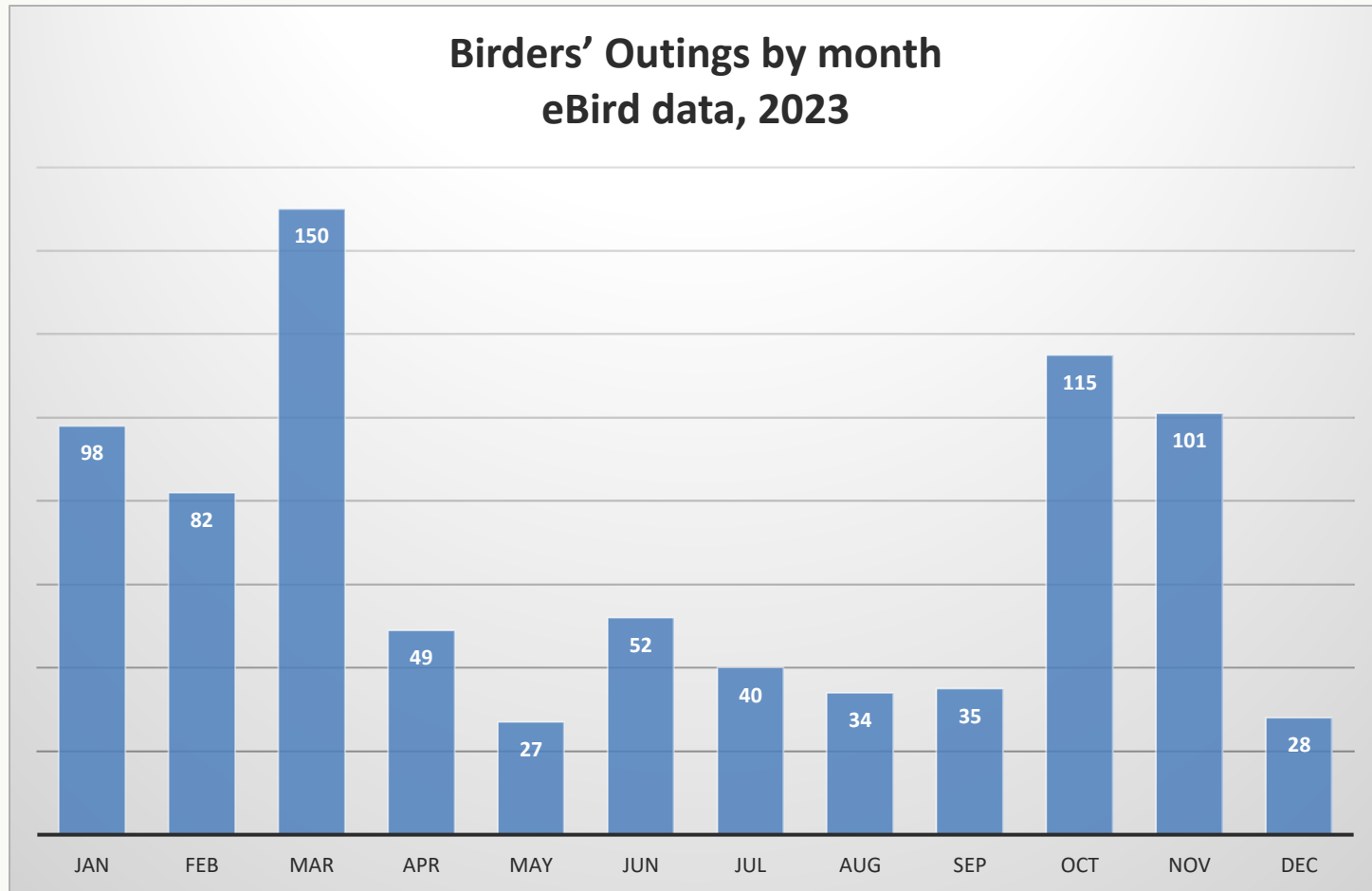
# Park Utilization (by birds and birders) over time



## 2023 compared with previous years:

- The number of birders increased by 77% compared to prior year.
- In 2017, Park 566 was not even in the top 100 of Cook County birding hotspots. At end 2023 it was #13 as measured by number of species observed.

# State of the Birders by Season



Key points of chart above:

- Heavy utilization in Oct and Nov is typical. Park 566 has become known as a haven for migrating rare sparrows.
- Jan-Mar was unusually popular thanks to the presence of two rare visitors.

# Rare Visitors

## Western Meadowlark

On January 1, 2023, the park was visited for the first time by a Western Meadowlark, quite far from its normal range.

It decided to stick around until the Ides of March.



Western Meadowlark

# Rare Visitors

## Ross's Gull

The Bird of the Century, so far....

This tiny gull of the Alaskan North Slope, that rarely visits anywhere in the lower 48, decided to spend time at Park 566. On three days in early March hundreds of bird enthusiasts from around the country thrilled at this intrepid little traveler.



Ross's Gull

# Rare Visitors

## Ross's Gull



The Ross's Gull was viewed from Park 566 (south slip and north beach area) as well as from Steelworkers' Park.



# Threatened and Endangered Species\*

1 of the 6 species listed as **Threatened Species** was observed:

Osprey

5 of the 23 species listed as  
**Endangered Species** were observed:

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Short-eared Owl

Northern Harrier

Forster's Tern

Upland Sandpiper



Osprey

\* *Checklist of Illinois Endangered and Threatened Animals and Plants, 2020*

# Birds of Concern\*

## **Grassland Habitat** Birds of Concern observed at Park 566:

All 6 of the species listed by BCN (LVL 1, LVL 2)

Grasshopper Sparrow (nested)

Bobolink

Upland Sandpiper

Sedge Wren (nested)

Henslow's Sparrow

Eastern Meadowlark (nested)



Eastern Meadowlark

\* Refers to species of declining populations (in IL and elsewhere) for which conservation efforts can have significant impact-- as per Bird Conservation Network

# Birds of Concern\*

## Shrubland Habitat Birds of Concern:

3 of the 5 species listed by BCN

Brown Thrasher (nested)

Willow Flycatcher

Field Sparrow (nested)



Willow Flycatcher



Field Sparrow

\* Refers to species of declining populations (in IL and elsewhere) for which conservation efforts can have significant impact-- as per Bird Conservation Network

# Birds of Concern\*

## Woodlands Habitat Birds of Concern observed:

5 of the 7 species listed by BCN

Red-headed Woodpecker

American Woodcock

Chimney Swift

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Wood Thrush



Chimney Swift

\* Refers to species of declining populations (in IL and elsewhere) for which conservation efforts can have significant impact-- as per Bird Conservation Network

# Birds of Concern\*

**Wetlands Habitat** Birds of Concern observed:

2 of the 9 species listed by BCN

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Wilson's Snipe



\* Refers to species of declining populations (in IL and elsewhere) for which conservation efforts can have significant impact-- as per Bird Conservation Network

Black-crowned Night-Heron

# Nesting Species

Evidenced by territorial behavior, nest with eggs or young,  
carrying food, juvenile birds present

Grasshopper Sparrow

Spotted Sandpiper

Killdeer

Dickcissel

Eastern Kingbird

American Kestrel

Field Sparrow

Song Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Sedge Wren

American Robin

Warbling Vireo

Yellow Warbler

Common Yellowthroat

Brown Thrasher

Gray Catbird



# Species reported for the first time: 5

Western Meadowlark


Ross's Gull

Red Phalarope

Smith's Longspur

Red Crossbill





2018 - 2023: Six Years of Data  
Four Key Take-aways

At the risk of sounding like a broken record,  
the key take-aways remain as follows.

- #1 Baseline: 210 species per year
- #2 Impressive variety
- #3 Clear impact of restoration work
- #4 Increase in park utilization



# #1: Baseline: Number of species hosted

## 222 species in 2023

Six years of observations tell us that about 210 species can be expected in any given year.

- 2018-2023 the species count ranged from 197 to 223
- About 80% of these 210 are seen every year without fail
- The remaining 20% is a hodgepodge of birds that appear one year but not the next. Often some surprising rarities.
- The park's total species life list at end 2023 was 259.

For reference, species counts at other parks in 2023:

Jackson Park – 195

Steelworkers' Park – 186

Rainbow Beach – 205

Montrose Point - 270

#2: Impressive Variety, from grassland regulars to migrant warblers, with no scarcity of rarities.

Vibrant presence of virtually every grassland species:

- 20 sparrow species, with 4 species nesting

- 10 oriole and blackbird species (Bobolink frequent, but not nesting)

- Northern Harrier and Short-eared Owl

The expansive lakefront serves as an important stopover for songbirds migrating between the neotropics and Canada:

- 25 warbler species (Yellow Warbler and Common Yellowthroat nesting)

Vagrants (outside their typical range)

- Notables: Western Meadowlark, Ross's Gull

Lake attracted over 70 species of waterfowl, gulls, terns, shorebirds.

- Species' presence varies by season

# #3: Positive impact of restoration activities

## Open space (majority of park)

Six years is too short a period to attribute increases in bird activity or numbers to specific conservation actions.

Northwest section of park is showing some oddly unusual flora, possibly due to the imported topsoil (mud-to-park program)?

Still, the trend appears positive. Continued observation is important.

## Plantings in NE corner of park

There is **clear evidence** of the positive impact of these plantings.

With the stand of large locust as a shaded anchor, the newly planted shrubs, jack pine, burr oak and prairie flowers are developing into a small enclave welcoming to birds of woodlands and shrub areas.

## #4: Increase in park's popularity and use

Birding outings increased 3-fold since 2018.

Number of birders increased 5-fold since 2018.

It's not just the birds. One of the appeals of the park is its feeling of expansive isolation, with stunning views of downtown Chicago. Good for humans and for plants and animals!



Song Sparrow on Wild Bergemot

# Conclusion

The data summary portion of this presentation ends here.

The following pages are brief snapshots of various bird groups and other flora and fauna as observed in 2023.

It could go on for a hundred pages, but I hope these pages can show at least a bit more of the beauty and the diversity of the animal and plant life of Park 566.



Grasshopper Sparrow

# Sparrows

20 species were observed in 2023, 12 with great regularity.

Evidence of nesting:

Song Sparrow

Field Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow



Grasshopper Sparrow



Savannah Sparrow

# Sparrows

Significant frequency (more than 21 days in the year)

Savannah, Lincoln's, Dark-eyed Junco,  
White-crowned, White-throated, American Tree, Swamp, Song,  
Field, Grasshopper

Occasional (8-21 days)

Clay-colored, Fox,  
Eastern Towhee,  
Chipping, Vesper

Rare (1-7 days)

LeConte's, Nelson's,  
Lark Sparrow  
Henslow's, Harris's

2023 no-shows

Lark Bunting



American Tree Sparrow

More sparrows,  
because Park 566 is definitely a sparrow's park

*Birds of Park 566, 2023*



Lincoln's Sparrow



Lark Sparrow



Clay-colored Sparrow



# Warblers

- 25 species were observed in 2023
- Evidence of nesting by Yellow Warbler and Common Yellowthroat



Nashville Warbler



Ovenbird

# Warblers

Frequent (10 days or more)

Palm, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-rumped,  
Yellow, Magnolia, Tennessee, Cape May,  
Nashville

Occasional (3-9 days)

Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided, Canada,  
Blackpoll, Orange-crowned, Black-and-white,  
Blackburnian, Ovenbird,  
American Redstart,  
Bay-breasted, Wilson's

Rare (1 or 2 days)

Connecticut, Mourning,  
Black-throated Blue,  
Northern Parula, Pine,  
Northern Waterthrush



Cape May Warbler on Elderberry



Connecticut Warbler

# Raptors, Birds of Prey

## Hawks, Vultures

- Red-tailed Hawk
- Red-shouldered Hawk
- Broad-winged Hawk
- Rough-legged Hawk



Northern Harrier



Turkey Vulture

## Hawks, Vultures

- Northern Harrier
- Sharp-shinned Hawk
- Cooper's Hawk
- Osprey
- Bald Eagle
- Turkey Vulture

# Raptors, Birds of Prey

## Falcons and Owls

Frequent:

American Kestrel, Merlin

Peregrine Falcon

Short-eared Owl

2023 No-shows:

Snowy Owl, Great Horned Owl



Merlin



American Kestrel

# Shorebirds, Rails, Sandpipers

*Birds of Park 566, 2023*

## Frequent

Killdeer (nested), American Coot  
Spotted Sandpiper (nested)

## Occasional

Wilson's Snipe, Greater Yellowlegs,  
American Woodcock, Virginia Rail,  
Lesser Yellowlegs, Dunlin,  
Black-bellied Plover

## Rare

Least Sandpiper  
Sanderling  
Upland Sandpiper  
Semipalmated Plover  
Red Phalarope  
American Golden Plover  
American Avocet  
Semipalmated Sandpiper  
Sora



Spotted Sandpiper



Dunlin

# Cranes, Herons

*Birds of Park 566, 2023*

## Occasional

Great Blue Heron

Green Heron

Great Egret

## Rare

Sandhill Crane

Black-crowned Night-Heron



Great Blue Heron

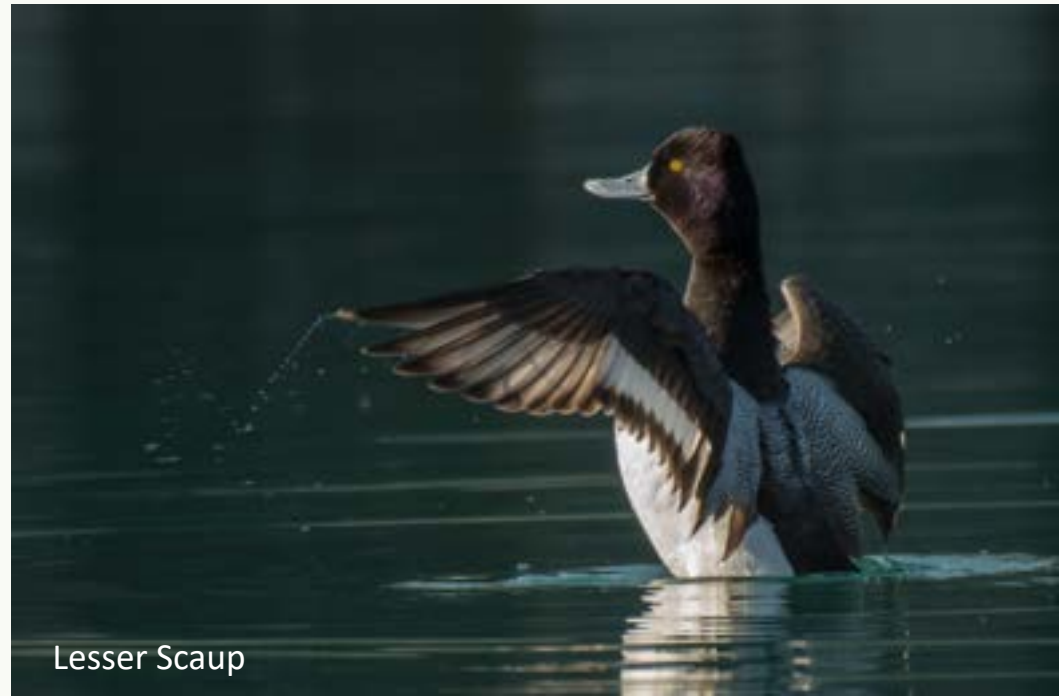
# Waterfowl, Grebes, Loons

## Frequent

Canada Goose, Mallard  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Common Merganser  
White-winged Scoter  
Greater Scaup  
Lesser Scaup  
Double-crested Cormorant  
Common Goldeneye  
Horned Grebe  
Redhead  
Wood Duck  
Bufflehead  
Blue-winged Teal



Horned Grebe



Lesser Scaup

# Waterfowl, Grebes, etc

## Occasional

Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal  
Mute Swan, Ruddy Duck, Canvasback  
Common Loon, Surf Scoter, Gadwall  
Hooded Merganser, Black Scoter,  
Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Loon  
Blue-winged Teal



Red-throated Loon

## Rare

Snow Goose, Tundra Swan,  
Greater White-fronted Goose,  
Trumpeter Swan, Northern Pintail  
Pied-billed Grebe  
Red-necked Grebe  
Trumpeter Swan, Ross's Goose,  
American Wigeon,  
Ring-necked Duck,  
American White Pelican  
Neotropic Cormorant



American White Pelican



# Gulls, Terns

## Frequent

Ring-billed Gull

Herring Gull

Caspian Tern

## Occasional/Rare

Great Black-backed Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Bonaparte's Gull

Forster's Tern

Black-legged Kittiwake

Iceland Gull

Sabine's Gull

## Extremely Rare

Ross's Gull



Ross's Gull



Great Black-backed Gull

# Flycatchers, Vireos

## Frequent

- Eastern Phoebe
- Warbling Vireo (nesting)
- Eastern Kingbird (nesting)
- Least Flycatcher
- Eastern Wood-Pewee

## Occasional

- Great Crested Flycatcher
- Willow Flycatcher
- Red-eyed Vireo
- Philadelphia Vireo

## Rare

- Alder Flycatcher
- Blue-headed Vireo
- Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
- Yellow-throated Vireo



# Thrushes

## Frequent

American Robin

Hermit Thrush

Swainson's Thrush

## Rare

Wood Thrush

Eastern Bluebird

# Wrens

## Frequent

House Wren, Sedge Wren

## Occasional

Marsh Wren, Winter Wren

(Carolina Wren has never been reported)



Marsh Wren



Sedge Wren

# Finches, etc

## Frequent

American Goldfinch

Pine Siskin

House Finch

## Occasional/Rare

Red Crossbill

Purple Finch

Common Redpoll



Pine Siskin



House Finch

# Blackbirds, Field and Meadow Birds

## Summer

Red-winged Blackbird (nested)

Eastern Meadowlark (nested)

Dickcissel (nested)

Brown-headed Cowbird

Common Grackle

Baltimore Oriole, Bobolink

Orchard Oriole, Rusty Blackbird



Baltimore Oriole



Bobolink

# Blackbirds, Field and Meadow Birds

## Occasional Winter

Snow Bunting

Lapland Longspur

Smith's Longspur

Horned Lark

Western Meadowlark



Lapland Longspur



Western Meadowlark

# Woodpeckers, Creepers, etc

## Frequent/Occasional

Northern Flicker, Brown Creeper, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Downy Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Red-headed Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch

## Rare

Red-breasted Nuthatch  
Hairy Woodpecker



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

# Swallows, Nightjars, Swifts

## Frequent

Chimney Swift  
Northern Rough-winged Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Tree Swallow  
Purple Martin  
Common Nighthawk

## Occasional

Bank Swallow  
Cliff Swallow



Northern Rough-winged Swallow



# And assorted others



# Other Flora and Fauna of Park 566

*Birds of Park 566, 2023*

Following is a tiny sampling of the beautiful plant and animal life that can be enjoyed at Park 566. All photos are from 2023.



Lance-leaved Coreopsis with Pearl Crescent

# Plants of Park 566



Snow on the Mountain



Prairie Rosinweed



Great Plains Ladies' Tresses

# Plants of Park 566



# Plants of Park 566



# Butterflies Moths



Common Buckeye



Orange Wing

# Butterflies Moths



Red-spotted Purple, *L. a. astyanax*



Salt Marsh Moth

# Butterflies Moths



Wild Indigo Duskywing



Monarch





Twelve-spotted Skimmer

## Dragonflies



Four-spotted Skimmer

# Other Creatures



Plains Garter Snake



Common Five-lined Skink nest

# Other Creatures



Coyote



Virginia Opossum



White-tailed Deer



Meadow Vole