

Jenna McElroy: Welcome to Eagle Creek Park Nature Notes, the audio series created to help you plan your next adventure to Eagle Creek Park in Indianapolis, Indiana. I'm Jenna McElroy and I'm the current manager of the Ornithology Center.

I've worked here since 2015 when I started as a part-time naturalist, but I've been actually visiting the park since I was four years old when my parents moved to Indiana.

Aidan Rominger: And I'm Aidan Rominger, the naturalist at the Ornithology Center at Eagle Creek. I remember visiting the old Nature Center before it was converted to the Ornithology Center. After fully narrowing my love for wildlife into a full-on passion for birds by age 8, my parents were eager to bring me to the newly created Ornithology Center. It was there that my entire birding career changed forever.

Jenna: In this episode, we're going to talk about why Eagle Creek Park is such a birding hotspot and which birds you can see and when during bird migration.

Aidan: Have you ever wondered why we have or need an Ornithology Center at Eagle Creek Park?

Jenna: Great question. Well, Eagle Creek is actually designated as an important bird area by the National Audubon Society. We are one of 41 of these sites in Indiana and one of two that are near Indianapolis. The other is Fort Harrison State Park. The reservoir of Eagle Creek, the nature preserves and large patches of minimally recreated land make this a perfect sanctuary for migratory and breeding birds.

Indiana is in the middle of the Mississippi Flyway, an important passage for migrating birds as they travel north in the spring and south in the fall. Having large areas like Eagle Creek Park where the birds can stop, rest, and school is very important, especially this close to an urban center like Indianapolis. Birders from all over the state flock to Eagle Creek, especially during migration, so having a center like the Ornithology Center dedicated to the study and protection of these birds is essential. Aidan, can you give us an overview of spring migration in Eagle Creek?

Aidan: Spring migration is easily one of the most exciting times of year for birders of all experience levels. It is a time when all of the neotropical migrants move from their South American wintering grounds thousands of miles north to breed. Some migrants, including a bird called a Blackpoll Warbler, can travel up to 12,000 miles from as far as northern Bolivia to northern Alaska to breed. Species such as the Blackpoll Warbler and other warbler species can be a common sight for birders in the park during migration.

Since the park was founded, Eagle Creek Park has had over 283 bird species recorded. 164 of those species are migratory, which is pretty impressive.

Over 109 of those species breed in the park. Something that is exciting for local birders in early spring is when the American White Pelicans show up at Eagle Creek.

American White Pelicans migrate from the Gulf Coast to the Great Plains to breed, with Indiana being on their far eastern edge of their migration route. We typically see White Pelicans in the spring at the park around mid-March.

Jenna: Aidan, can you also tell us about why the West Side of the park is important for birds in Eagle Creek Park?

Aidan: Absolutely. The West Side of Eagle Creek is a wide variety of important local habitats for many birds, including tallgrass prairie habitat at Eagle's Crest, cattail marshes, mud flats along Little Eagle Creek, and as well as tons of hilly mature temperate forest habitat that makes up the majority of the West Side.

These habitats are integral for state and danger nesting species. One of those species being the Henslow's Sparrow, which rely heavily on undisturbed Midwestern tallgrass prairie habitats to breed.

The prairie at Eagle's Crest has been one of the most reliable nesting spots for the species within the Indianapolis area, and also is one of the only spots in Indianapolis you can find these species in the summer.

Species such as Blue Grosbeaks and Prairie Warblers also utilize the Crest's prairie habitat to breed. The West Side's mature hilly second-growth forest habitat also provides crucial nesting habitat for many songbird species.

Species such as Wood Thrushes, Kentucky Warblers, Hooded Warblers, Blue-Winged Warblers, oven birds, and potentially Worm-eating Warblers have all bred on the West Side of Eagle Creek.

The West Side of the park has also had its fair share of rarities in past years, such as Indianapolis' first confirmed breeding pair of Mississippi Kites in 2014, as well as the first confirmed breeding pair of Black Vultures in the county this past summer.

The mudflats at Scott Starling Sanctuary have also had tons of rare birds in past years. Species including Sabine's Gull, Least Tern, Black-legged Kittiwake, and many more. Migrating species face many hazards along their migrations route. Jenna is going to talk to us about some of those hazards that each species face during migration.

Jenna: Migration is not easy. Birds are traveling thousands of miles, which is already taxing and dangerous. But when you throw in human-made hazards into the mix, most birds actually don't make it.

According to the National Audubon Society, up to one billion birds die each year in the U.S. alone due to window collisions, and approximately seven million die from striking cell and radio towers.

That's because artificial lights are deadly to migratory birds. Did you know that most songbirds actually migrate at night, and they use the moon and stars to navigate? City lights can disorient, confuse, and attract them, but there is action we can take.

Lights Out Indy, an initiative through the Amos Butler Audubon Society works with partners and building managers in Indianapolis, including our employer, the City of Indianapolis government building downtown to turn off lights during migration.

Aidan: During migration, parks as large as Eagle Creek are dark patches amidst an ocean of artificial lights, creating what is called an island effect. Migrating birds drop down to these large dark patches and hope for necessary cover to refuel on their migration journeys.

Next time you're in the park, stop by the Ornithology Center to learn more about bird migration. Jenna, can you tell us a little bit more about the Ornithology Center?

Jenna: The Ornithology Center is a unique nature center that focuses on the study of birds, which is Ornithology. Our building has one-of-a-kind exhibits in educational areas including a room with over 200 taxidermy or stuffed birds displayed in their natural habitats and an outdoor migration obstacle course to teach kids about the hazards birds face during migration.

We are open year-round so you can learn about birds throughout the seasons and view them from our wildlife observation rooms, one that overlooks the Eagle Creek Reservoir which is a bird sanctuary, and one that looks out at our bird feeders and certified wildlife habitat garden.

The Ornithology Center Building was actually the site of the original Nature Center in the park for 30 years until the Earth Discovery Center was built in 2007.

Rather than tear down this amazing building or completely repurpose the old Nature Center, Kevin Carlson, the former manager, now retired, proposed that it be turned into the Ornithology Center.

With the help of the Eagle Creek Park Foundation and local donors like the Amos Butler Audubon Society and many, many dedicated volunteers, Kevin was able to renovate and reopen the building as the Ornithology Center in 2009. He designed and built all of the displays, the exhibit hall, the migration game, and so much more, all for the education of birds.

We also house and care for eight educational raptor ambassadors that help us teach about birds of prey and their conservation.

Most of these birds are non-releasable due to permanent disabilities and came to us from wildlife rehabilitators after being born in the wild and then injured in some way that keeps them from being able to survive in the wild on their own anymore.

We've completely restructured the way the raptor ambassadors are trained and handled here in the last few years, now focusing on contemporary welfare-based training and choosing the right environment and job for each individual bird so that they can thrive as ambassadors for their species.

Some of them are on public display but not all of them. We train them to do educational programs all while respecting their innate wildness and keeping welfare as the priority in their care and training.

We offer educational programs for all ages and groups here at the Ornithology Center. Schools visit here on field trips and we do a lot of private programs, but we also have public programming and special events throughout the year, where birders and nature enthusiasts of all levels can learn about birds.

To celebrate bird migration, we have Bird Fest, usually the first week of May, and then in October we have a very popular special event called October Owl Festival.

You can check our website and social media for dates and all of our fun program offerings here at the park.

Narrator: To see full episode transcriptions and to learn more, visit eaglecreekpark.org. Subscribe or follow the podcast in Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Audible or wherever you listen to podcasts, so that new episodes will be delivered to you as soon as they're available.