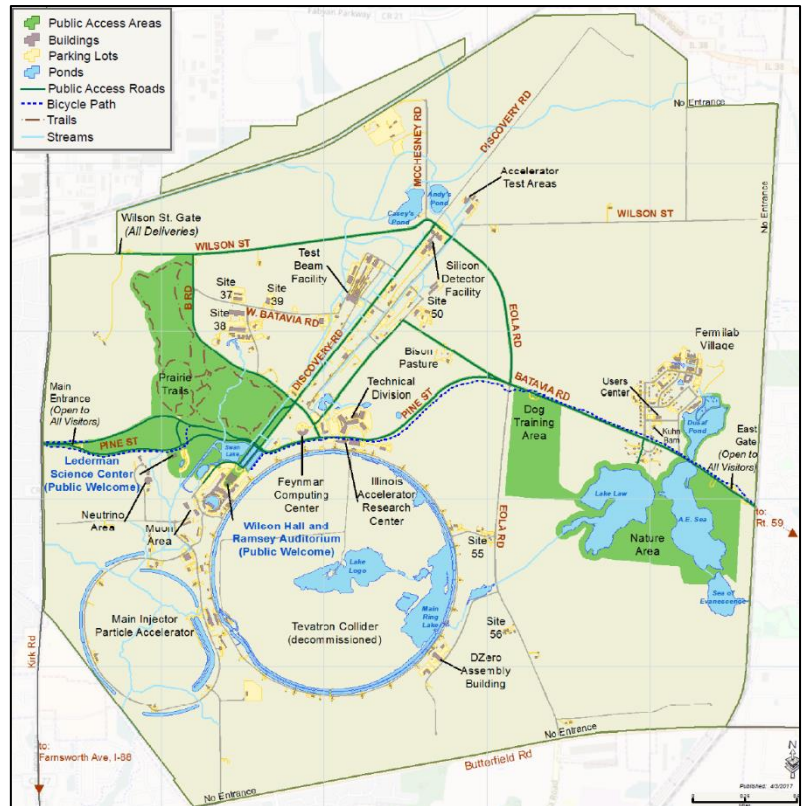


Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory

(Fermilab), Batavia

Fermilab, or just “the Lab,” is the 6,800-acre site of the nation’s particle physics and accelerator laboratory. Its natural areas encompass most major habitats found in the region, and an impressive 291 species of birds have been seen on the site.

The Lab is situated in the west central portion of DuPage County. In fact, the Lab straddles the DuPage/Kane County line. Note that if you are a county list keeper, the Big Woods is split almost down the middle by the county line. Therefore, the Prairie Trail and the Ed Center Feeders are also in Kane county. Most every other public access area is in DuPage County. Access from the DuPage side is via Batavia Rd. easily found from Rt. 59, between Roosevelt Rd. (Rt. 38) and Butterfield Rd. (Rt. 56). The Kane County or west entrance is on Pine Street accessed from Kirk Rd, again between Roosevelt Rd. (Rt. 38) and Butterfield Rd. (Rt. 56).



Habitat type/site overview

Because Fermilab is a National Accelerator Lab, public access is restricted to certain areas and several roads. Refer to the location map above for areas open to the public (Green areas and Roads).

Restricted areas are included in this site description as they may be accessible during organized field trips. They are otherwise completely off limits. See “Access” below for the link to a printable map.

One of the strengths of Fermilab is the wide range of habitats for birds. **Grasslands** are found in several moderate size plots throughout the Lab, but only have viewing access from the public access roads. Most of these plots contain nonnative grasses, but plans have been made for more controlled management in the future. During the summer months, most of the expected grassland birds breed in these areas. A restored **prairie** is also available on the west side of the Lab accessible near the Pine St. entrance. The largest **shrubland** area in the Lab, the Sparrow Hedge, is a great birding location from spring migration through fall migration.

Water features, mostly manmade, are a major draw for birders most of the year. The majority of the accessible water features are in the same area as the Sparrow Hedge, cumulatively referred to as the Lakes/Sparrow Hedge Region. These lakes include Lake Law, A.E. Sea, the Sea of Evanescence and DUSAF Pond. Other water highlights include Casey’s and Andy’s Ponds in the north end of the Lab at the

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intersection of Wilson St. and Eola Rd. During wet periods, several low areas produce fuddles which also attract water birds.

The main **woodland** habitat is the Big Woods on the Lab's west side across from Wilson Hall (the unmistakable 16-story tower seen from practically anywhere in the Lab). Another accessible woodland is Owl's Nest Woods at the end of the trail to the Sparrow Hedge.

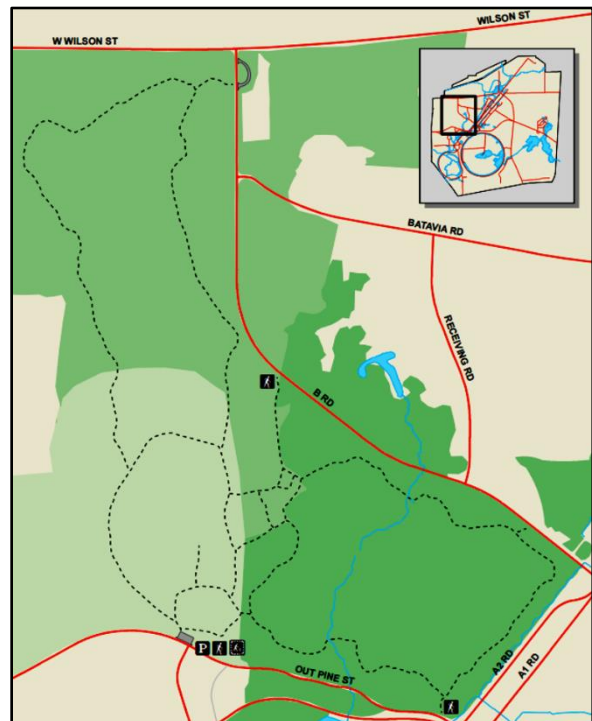
Topography

Fermilab was created from several farm properties and therefore is quite flat throughout. Two thousand acres of the Lab are still farmed, but now it is leased by commercial farmers. The income from these leases helps to provide funds to upkeep the natural areas of the lab. There are two trail systems in the Lab. Most of these trails are mowed grass or, as in the case of the Big Woods, cleared woodland floor. This being the case, wet weather may require boots in some areas to prevent wet feet.

The first and most popular birding trail system is in the Lakes/Sparrow Hedge Region. The trail begins at the Red Barn, follows the Lake Law Berm, then fans out into three arms all ending at the Sparrow Hedge. The second trail system is on the far west side of the Lab and includes both prairie and woodland habitats. The parking area is on the north side of Pine St. and is marked by the "Interpretive Trail" sign. The eastern portion of this area is called the Big Woods and is circumnavigated by a rustic, mostly dirt trail. The western portion of the system is prairie. The south half of this area is a high quality restored prairie while the north half is a prairie being converted into a savannah.

Birds

Because of Fermilab's wide range of habitats, many bird species may be found as shown by the impressive 291 species on the site list. The birds found during any one visit will be greatly affected by the time of year, the seasonal conditions and the current weather.



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Waterfowl

The high seasons for waterfowl are spring migration (February-April) and fall migration (September-November). The eastern lakes of the Lakes/Sparrow Hedge Region are the key location for waterfowl, with both Casey's and Andy's Ponds also productive at times. During any year, as many as 23 to 28 or more species of waterfowl can be found. Some of the notable species expected every year include Greater White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose, Tundra Swan, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Redhead, Hooded Merganser and Ruddy Duck. Less predictable but occasionally found are Ross's Goose, Trumpeter Swan, Mute Swan, Greater Scaup and Red-breasted Merganser. In addition, occasionally one of the three scoter species may show up. Winter waterfowl can usually be found as open water permits; Casey's and Andy's usually stay open longer. Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers are the common finds, but each winter usually provides other lingering surprises.



Shorebirds

As with any other location in DuPage County, shorebirds are mainly found during spring and fall migrations. In addition, their presence in the Lab is greatly dependent upon water levels with some years much better than others. During migration, check the water levels in the Lakes Region and possible puddles in fields along the public access roads. Note: sometimes the Sea of Evanescence can be good, but a scope is required. When conditions are favorable, species found can include Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Stilt Sandpiper, Dunlin, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpiper, both Dowitchers, Wilson's Snipe, Spotted Sandpiper and both Yellowlegs. Again, surprises can show up with favorable conditions.



Marsh birds

During recent years, the Lab has been trying to manage A.E. Sea to be more favorable for marsh birds. Recent breeding success has been shown with Pied-billed Grebe, Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Gallinule, American Coot, Least Bittern and Green Heron. Sandhill Cranes breed in other remote areas of the Lab but will feed in A.E. Sea along with a rare American Bittern. Let us not forget the tiny Marsh Wren. The best place to start looking for these birds are the "slots" cut into the cattails at the north end of A.E. Sea, along Batavia Rd.



Grassland birds

The best public access spot for grassland birds is along North Eola Rd. (must stay on the road). Another location to try is the Dog Training Area. Use the parking area on the south side of Batavia Rd. just east of Eola. You can walk these fields but be aware of the off-leash dogs in this area. Key species to look for include Sedge Wren, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow (least abundant species), Henslow's Sparrow, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark and Dickcissel. Other areas along the roads, like the Bison Fields, can also produce many of these species.

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Shrubland birds



Besides being the best location in the Lab for migrating sparrows and other species, the Sparrow Hedge is the largest and the best shrubland area in the Lab. Follow the path from the Red Barn south to the Hedge. The west and north edges of the Big Woods will also produce shrubland birds. Breeding species to be found in these areas include Willow Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Bell's Vireo, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Eastern Towhee, Field Sparrow, Orchard Oriole, Common Yellowthroat and Yellow Warbler.



Woodland birds

The major woodland habitat is found in the Big Woods, which can be accessed from the Prairie Interpretive Trail on Pine St. In the summer, these woods can be infested by mosquitos, so bring repellent. Another woodlot, Owl's Nest Woods, found at the southeast corner of the Sparrow Hedge area, can be productive at times. Both locations can be productive during migration as well. An exciting find in migration is a breeding plumage Scarlet Tanager. Several vireo, flycatcher and warbler species also pass through. Possible breeding species include Great Horned Owl, several woodpecker species, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Great Crested Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, White-breasted Nuthatch, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Baltimore Oriole, and Indigo Bunting. Note some species will be found more readily near the edges of the woodland.



Winter specialties

Besides the winter waterfowl mentioned above, there are several other winter residents to be found. The Education Center Feeders located on the west side just south of the guard's station on Pine St are a good starting point. If the feeders have not been cleaned out from their last filling, some interesting birds may be found. Highlights could be all common woodpeckers, Red-breasted Nuthatch, American Tree Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco. Winter raptors include Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk (occasional winter resident), Rough-legged Hawk (not consistent in recent years) and Bald Eagle. Most can be found patrolling the fields while the eagle will be over open waters. Short-eared Owls have made a comeback in recent years and are usually found along North Eola Rd. **(do not venture off the road)**. Finally, Northern Shrikes can be found in open areas of the Sparrow Hedge area.



Breeding specialties

Over the last several years Fermilab has added a couple of breeding specialties to its list (see "Amenities" for list access) starting with the Lab's most successful species, the Osprey. The first four years the original nest produced seven fledglings. Now there are three active nests which have produced a total of 43 fledglings over the 11 years up to and including 2019. Unfortunately, only one of these nests is visible within a public access area. The location is Nepese Marsh which is just north of DUSAF Pond. **Entry to**

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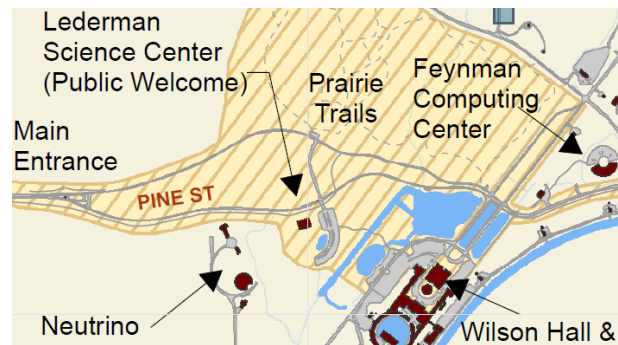
the marsh is closed during breeding season. With a scope, the nest can be viewed from Batavia Rd. Another more recent breeding highlight is the Bald Eagle. Two eaglets were fledged in 2019, the first year of their attempted breeding. This nest is again in a closed area. Both these species can often be seen patrolling the Lab's lakes looking for food. Most years will find Bell's Vireos breeding in the Sparrow Hedge area, but they are very shy. Do not forget the breeding marsh birds mentioned above.

Best time to go

There is no question, as it is with most DuPage area birding locations, spring and fall migrations are the best time to find the most species in the Lab. Summer provides less variety, but the thrill of finding and watching breeding birds feeding young can be rewarding. With repeated trips one can watch the young mature and, in most situations, prepare for the upcoming fall migration. Winter can be noticeably quiet but finding one of the winter specialties or a late migrant can also be a thrill.

Amenities

There are no bathroom facilities in the Lab's natural areas although Wilson Hall does have bathroom facilities. Access is from the front entrance at the parking loop. Beware, parking can be hard to find at times, especially during lunch time. Bathroom facilities are also available at the Lederman Science Center (Ed Center) south of Pine St., across from the feeders. The Center is just south from the West Entrance Guard Post.



One amenity is the wonderful Fermilab Bird List created by Peter Kasper; it can be accessed at: <https://www.fnal.gov/ecology/wildlife/list.shtml>

Access

There are four parking lots available to birders within Fermilab.

Starting from the East Entrance, the first allows access to the east side of A.E. Sea. It is approx. 330 yards past the guard station.

The second is the Red Barn providing access to the Lakes/Sparrow Hedge Region. From the entrance turn left (south) at Sauk Blvd. (the first stop sign from the entrance).



The next parking area is for the Dog Training area. It is approx. 1.2 miles from the East Entrance, just before the Eola Rd. intersection, and is south of Batavia Rd.

The final parking area on the far west side of the Lab is at the Margaret Pearson Interpretive Trail. From the East Entrance follow Batavia Rd. to just past Eola Rd, then veer left to Road D. Follow Road D around and past Wilson Hall where the road changes to Pine St. Continue onto Pine street. Just past the Big Woods the parking area will be on the right.

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A printable map for Fermilab can be found at: <https://news.fnal.gov/wp-content/uploads/site-map.pdf>

Site contributor

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