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LOCAL NEWS

For the birds — and Jefferson County

> *Hellbender Preserve launches county birding trail*

By **LINDA HARRIS** September 18, 2026 4 min read



Contributed TRAIL – A pileated woodpecker is among the many bird species that can be spotted in Jefferson County. The county's first birding trail site will be dedicated Saturday at Hellbender Preserve, where visitors can take part in a guided bird walk.

BLOOMINGDALE -- The first Jefferson County birding trail site will be dedicated Saturday at Hellbender Preserve.

Jefferson Soil & Water Conservation District Project Manager Aaron Dodds said they'll unveil new "Jefferson County Birding Trail" signage, then take visitors on a guided tour of the 2-mile trail site. Hellbender is the first of what county leaders hope will be about 25 sites that together will form a birding trail spanning Jefferson County.

The event will begin at 8 a.m.

“We are very fortunate to have Jefferson County resident Scott Albaugh to lead the bird walk,” Dodds said. “His knowledge is astounding, but most importantly, no matter what skill set you may have he can teach you something. Several of us are very much the novice as far as birding, and Scott has a unique ability to connect with people and teach them the basics, yet he also has the ability to ‘get deep in the feathers’ and talk serious birding with very dedicated birders.”

Albaugh, a volunteer and Jefferson County resident, has been an avid birder for more than 30 years. He holds a bachelor’s degree in environmental science and a master’s degree in wildlife biology and has worked throughout his career in environmental education, wildlife conservation and ecotourism. A former college instructor in wildlife conservation, he has led hundreds of bird walks and nature programs and “especially enjoys helping people of all experience levels discover the birds and natural world around them,” Dodds said.

Participants will learn about birds and birdwatching, from the basics to more detailed identification tips and ecology. Dodds said the bird walk will be educational and informative, “perfect for birders of all experience levels, first-timers or avid birders.”

Dodds said they have unofficially counted about 75 different bird species in the park, and with fall migration underway, participants may catch a glimpse of even more.

“This spring as we have been developing the Preserves of Jefferson County, we recognized that there is a need to provide places for all natural resources hobbies,” he said. “Birding is a fast-growing component of natural resources and it’s an economic driver.”

“Birding is more than people standing in the woods with binoculars,” Dodds said. “It’s a major outdoor economy, and Jefferson County has an opportunity to capture a piece of it-the birds are already here, the habitat is already here. What we need to do is turn those natural assets into destinations, and that is our goal with the Preserves of Jefferson County. Conservation, Education, Recreation, Preservation ....and a touch or economic revitalization. Jefferson County’s mix of forested hills, deep stream valleys, wetlands, reclaimed grasslands, farmland, and the Ohio River creates an incredible variety of habitats within a relatively small area. That diversity gives people a reason to visit in every season, but especially during spring and fall migration when thousands of birds are moving through eastern Ohio.”

Dodds also pointed out that when birders come to a community, “they don't just spend money on birding-they buy breakfast, fill their gas tanks, grab lunch, shop locally, and sometimes spend the night.”

“That means a morning of birding can translate into real dollars for a restaurant in Wintersville, a shop in Richmond, a business in Dillonvale, or a stop along the river in Brilliant,” he said. “Our smaller communities don't have to build a multimillion-dollar attraction to participate in the outdoor economy—they can capitalize on the natural attractions that already surround them. With well-marked birding locations, community maps, local events, guided walks, partnerships with businesses, and coordinated marketing, we can encourage visitors to stay longer and explore more of the county. Every additional hour we can keep a visitor in Jefferson County is another opportunity for that visitor to spend money in Jefferson County and fall in love with this amazing place.

Dodds said they’re looking at incorporating other JCSWCD sites, county-owned properties and parks into the birding trail. They’re also looking for “willing participant sites that are open to having public access, whether it be trails, viewing areas-pull-offs, overlooks, blinds or whatever.”

“It’s a great opportunity to push people through the county to visit villages and outdoor spaces,” he said.