

Birds, Wildlife and Dogs in the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area

Why protecting this extraordinary natural area matters

The **Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area (SHNA)** encompasses approximately **173 acres of remarkably diverse Lake Michigan coastal habitat**.

Within a relatively small area are Lake Michigan beach and shoreline, open dunes, globally imperiled interdunal wetlands, Great Lakes marsh, the Oxbow Lagoon, Kalamazoo River shoreline, jack-pine habitat, and hardwood-pine dune forest.

This diversity provides habitat for an exceptional variety of birds and other wildlife—including species that are rare, threatened, endangered, or particularly vulnerable during the breeding season.

Nesting birds of SHNA

Approximately 25 migratory bird species have strong breeding potential within SHNA or are important breeding-season birds in the immediate Saugatuck area.

Bird	Primary SHNA Habitat	Approx. Arrival	Nesting Season*	SHNA Status
Prairie Warbler	Open dunes, scrub, jack pine	May	May–July	Documented population
Yellow Warbler	Wetland edges, shrubs	Apr–May	May–July	Probable
Common Yellowthroat	Marsh, wet thickets	Apr–May	May–July	Probable
American Redstart	Wooded dunes, edges	May	May–July	Probable
Red-eyed Vireo	Mature dune forest	May	May–July	Probable
Warbling Vireo	Trees near water	May	May–July	Probable
Eastern Wood-Pewee	Dune woodland	May	May–Aug	Probable
Great Crested Flycatcher	Mature woodland/cavities	May	May–July	Probable

Eastern Kingbird	Open areas near water	May	May–July	Probable
Willow Flycatcher	Wet shrubs	May	May–July	Possible/Probable
Tree Swallow	Wetlands/cavities	Mar–Apr	Apr–July	Probable
Barn Swallow	Open water/near structures	Apr	May–Aug	Area breeder
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Woodland and edges	May	May–Aug	Probable
House Wren	Woodland edges/cavities	Apr–May	May–Aug	Probable
Gray Catbird	Dense shrubs	Apr–May	May–Aug	Probable
Brown Thrasher	Dune scrub/thickets	Apr	Apr–July	Probable
Wood Thrush	Mature woodland	Apr–May	May–Aug	Possible/Probable
Baltimore Oriole	Tall deciduous trees	Apr–May	May–July	Probable
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	Wooded dunes	Apr–May	May–July	Probable
Indigo Bunting	Open scrub/edges	May	May–Aug	Probable
Field Sparrow	Open scrub	Mar–Apr	Apr–Aug	Probable
Chipping Sparrow	Pine/open woodland	Mar–Apr	Apr–Aug	Probable
Green Heron	Lagoon, marsh, river edge	Apr–May	May–Aug	Documented
Spotted Sandpiper	Shoreline/river edge	Apr–May	May–July	Possible/Probable
Great Blue Heron	Marsh, lagoon, river	Mar–Apr	Mar–July	Regular user; nest site unverified

Bald Eagle	Shoreline, river, wetlands	Year-round	Primarily winter–summer	Documented in area
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*Nesting periods are approximate for southwest Michigan and should not be interpreted as confirmed SHNA nest dates for every species.

Ground-nesting and low-nesting birds deserve special attention

One of the most important considerations in managing dogs within a natural area is that **many bird nests are extremely difficult to see**.

A nest can be only a few inches above the ground—or simply a shallow depression concealed among grasses, shrubs, leaves or sand.

Birds occurring at SHNA that nest on or very close to the ground include:

Bird	Typical Nest Location	SHNA Assessment
Killdeer	Bare sand, gravel or sparsely vegetated ground	Strong candidate
Spotted Sandpiper	Ground near water, concealed by vegetation	Strong candidate
Field Sparrow	On/near ground in grasses or low shrubs	Strong candidate
Vesper Sparrow	Ground in grasses/herbaceous vegetation	Possible
Song Sparrow	Ground or very low in dense vegetation	Likely
Swamp Sparrow	Very low/ground-level wetland vegetation	Possible
Eastern Towhee	Usually on ground beneath dense vegetation	Likely
Common Yellowthroat	On/very near ground in dense vegetation	Likely
Wild Turkey	Ground nest concealed in vegetation	Possible

Other important breeding birds—including **Prairie Warbler** and **Red-winged Blackbird**—typically nest low in shrubs or marsh vegetation rather than directly on the ground.

The Spotted Sandpiper is a good example

Spotted Sandpipers place their nests in shallow depressions on the ground, generally near water and often concealed beneath shrubs, weeds or other vegetation.

The shorelines and wetland areas surrounding the **Kalamazoo River, Oxbow Lagoon and SHNA wetlands** provide the type of habitat in which these birds may breed.

To a person walking through the area, a nest may be virtually invisible.

Rare wildlife makes SHNA especially important

The importance of SHNA extends well beyond common migratory birds.

The **Land Conservancy of West Michigan** identifies exceptionally sensitive habitat within the natural area, including **globally imperiled interdunal wetlands** and rare plants and animals.

Two particularly significant species documented in SHNA are:

Prairie Warbler — Michigan endangered

The Land Conservancy specifically identifies a Prairie Warbler population at SHNA. Its open-dune, shrub and young-forest habitat makes this natural area particularly valuable for the species.

Blanchard's Cricket Frog — Michigan threatened

This small frog is also specifically documented at SHNA and is associated with the area's wetlands.

Michigan DNR materials concerning this dune and wetland ecosystem also identify other species of conservation concern associated with these habitats, including **spotted turtle, eastern hog-nosed snake, Fowler's toad and piping plover**.

Piping Plover deserves special clarification. Lake Michigan beaches provide appropriate habitat for this federally endangered migratory shorebird, but **a current SHNA nesting population should not be claimed without a confirmed recent nesting record**.

Why dogs matter

The issue is not whether an individual dog is friendly, obedient or well behaved.

The conservation concern is that wildlife does not make that distinction.

Birds and other animals respond to the presence and movement of potential predators. During nesting season, wildlife may be especially vulnerable because adults are protecting territories, incubating eggs, feeding young or caring for recently fledged birds.

The risk is particularly important for **ground- and low-nesting species**, because their nests and young may be almost impossible for visitors to see.

SHNA combines several characteristics that make wildlife protection especially important:

Rare species. Sensitive wetland and dune habitat. Ground- and low-nesting birds. Migratory birds. Lake Michigan shoreline. Oxbow Lagoon. Kalamazoo River habitat.

These resources occur together within a relatively small natural area.

The purpose of the dog restriction

The restriction on dogs within sensitive portions of SHNA should therefore be understood in its proper context:

It is a wildlife and habitat protection measure.

SHNA management material states that dogs are prohibited from the interior north of Oxbow Lagoon and along the lagoon shoreline because of the potential for damage to rare wildlife populations and habitats.

The City of Saugatuck's public information likewise emphasizes that SHNA contains rare Michigan species and identifies protection of those species as a reason dogs are not permitted within the Natural Area.

The Land Conservancy of West Michigan may permit leashed pets at some preserves, but it also recognizes that **sensitive natural areas require exceptions and that some preserves prohibit pets entirely.**

That distinction is important.

Not every park is the same, and not every natural area should be managed the same way.

SHNA was preserved in significant part because of the extraordinary natural resources found there. Protecting those resources sometimes requires restrictions that would not be necessary in an ordinary municipal park.

A simple principle

Visitors can enjoy SHNA while also recognizing that wildlife has only one habitat.

Keeping dogs out of areas where they are prohibited helps protect nesting birds, rare wildlife, wetlands and sensitive dune habitat—and helps preserve the qualities that make the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area exceptional in the first place.

Protect the habitat.

Protect the nesting birds.

**Protect the rare species.
Preserve SHNA for the future.**

Sources

- Land Conservancy of West Michigan — Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area
- City of Saugatuck / local SHNA information
- Michigan Department of Natural Resources
- National Audubon Society
- eBird / Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- Martin Blagburn — Holland Audubon Board Member
- Keith Charak — Birder, Holland Audubon Member
- John Fleming — Birder, Holland Audubon Member

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