Fourth in a Series: Midwest

AUDUBON'S FIELD GUIDE TO BIRDING TRAILS

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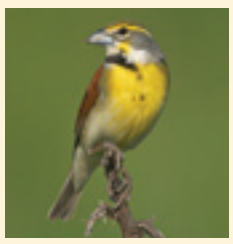
CHICAGO REGION BIRDING TRAIL, ILLINOIS AND INDIANA

Chicago was not founded by birders, but it could have been. Here, where the eastern forest meets the prairies and the Great Lakes, is the heart of an exciting territory for naturalists. This regional trail, sponsored by the City of Chicago, the Bird Conservation Network, and Chicago Wilderness, leads to 58 of the best birding sites in the seven Illinois counties surrounding the city and in two counties in northwest Indiana. On native prairies in summer, rare Henslow's sparrows sing their flat hiccups, while meadowlarks and bobolinks deliver more melodious tunes. Forest preserves host flashy treetop birds like rose-breasted grosbeaks and scarlet tanagers in summer, while remnant marshes still support nesting herons, ducks, and all sorts of water birds. During spring and fall migration, gulls, hawks, and other migrants sweep along Lake Michigan's shoreline when the winds are right. But birders in the know may follow the guide to downtown Chicago, where, in the shadows of skyscrapers, parks along the lakefront provide stopover habitat for thousands of migrant travelers, including everything from **blackburnian warblers** to Virginia rails. **For more information:** Visit www.bcnbirds.org/birdtrail/ or call the City of Chicago at 312-743-9283.

KANSAS BIRDING AND NATURAL HERITAGE TRAILS

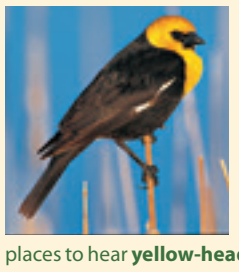


Mountains and canyons are fine for picture postcards, but the prairies' subtle beauty and variety must be experienced to be understood. Follow this trail's four sections—scheduled to be fully completed in 2010—and see for yourself. In the Flint Hills' magnificent tallgrass prairies, breathy whistles of upland sandpipers float down from on high, while chunky little **dickcissels** sing choppy buzzes from the roadsides. Farther west, in sandsage flats near the Colorado border, you may find regal ferruginous hawks and some of the rare lesser prairie-chicken's last remaining populations. The central part of the state's vast wetlands serve as a stopover for tens of thousands of migratory shorebirds, especially in spring, when colorful Hudsonian godwits, American golden-plovers, and others pause here en route to the Arctic. The woods and thickets of southeastern Kansas are brightened in summer by the spectacular colors of painted buntings, indigo buntings, and blue grosbeaks, while these same thickets in winter hold throngs of big, boldly patterned Harris's sparrows. **For more information:** Visit www.kansaswildlifetrails.com/index.html or call Audubon of Kansas at 785-537-4385.

MINNESOTA'S PINE TO PRAIRIE BIRDING TRAIL

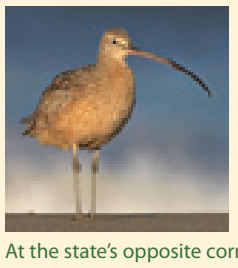
Remarkable bird diversity abounds where northwestern Minnesota's great coniferous forests yield to a narrow band of deciduous woodlands and then the wide-open prairie farther west. This trail, the first established in the state, links 45 prime sites along the transition zone, offering the chance to see almost 300 bird species. If you are visiting from points south, you may be most intrigued by the possibilities in the region's evergreen forest: the powerful **northern goshawk,** the quiet, elusive spruce grouse, and the oddly tame gray jay. The deciduous woods provide a summer home for black-billed cuckoos, brilliant scarlet tanagers, and many other migratory birds, while the grasslands just to the west offer everything from buzzy-voiced grasshopper sparrows to greater prairie-chickens. Some of the best birding is around marshes and lakes, where you may find American bitterns stalking slowly in the shallows and common loons nesting in the wilder and more remote bays. With luck, you might even spot the elusive yellow rail, or hear its odd ticking song. **For more information:** Visit www.mnbirdtrail.com or call the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources at 800-433-1888.

MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY BIRDING TRAIL



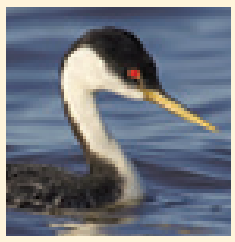
Minnesota may be famous for its 10,000 lakes, but the state's rivers make the best routes for birding trails. This particular one, a project of Audubon Minnesota, follows its namesake river valley from the South Dakota border through the state's southern part to the heart of the Twin Cities area. An expansive trail, it is thoughtfully divided into 11 distinct loops, each of them compact enough to provide a full day of birding. In summer many of the trail's highlights are in the more open habitats. Clay-colored sparrows sing their funny flat buzzes from atop low thickets in the prairie, while bobolinks bubble and chime in flight above damp meadows. Open marshes are the places to hear **yellow-headed blackbirds** attempting to sing, although their hoarse strangled squawks are anything but tuneful. Black terns, graceful and sleek, fly above these same marshes. You might want to try the trail in winter. Your bird list will be shorter than it would be in summer, but it may include such prizes as the golden eagle or the northern shrike. **For more information:** Visit www.birdingtrail.org or call Audubon Minnesota at 651-739-9332.

NEBRASKA BIRDING TRAILS



The state license plate a few years ago featured flying sandhill cranes, and for good reason: Half a million of these regal birds stop over on the Platte River in southern Nebraska every spring, attracting thousands of birders and tourists from around the world. But if you explore this statewide series of 15 trails, encompassing more than 400 sites, you'll realize that Nebraska has a lot of birds besides cranes. With its broad stretch from west to east, the state takes in species typical of areas beyond the Great Plains in both directions. Northwestern Nebraska's pine ridge region has birds straight from the Rockies, like hyperactive pygmy nuthatches and flocks of blue-gray pinyon jays. At the state's opposite corner, bottomland forests ring with the songs of typical southeastern birds, like Kentucky warblers and Louisiana waterthrushes. Visiting birders may be most excited about the grassland species inhabiting the wide-open spaces between these extremes. Among the distinctive denizens waiting to be discovered are droll burrowing owls nodding next to prairie-dog towns, sharp-tailed grouse strutting on their display grounds, and **long-billed curlews** showing off their namesake scimitar beaks. **For more information:** Visit www.nebraskabirdingtrails.com or call 402-471-7755.

BIRDING DRIVES DAKOTA (NORTH DAKOTA)

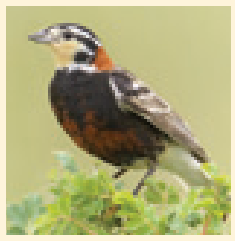


The phrase "birding drives Dakota" is a clever play on words and an optimistic claim about the importance of ecotourism in this state. Plus the "birding drives" themselves make up an excellent trio of birding trails. Centered around several national wildlife refuges in southeastern North Dakota, they take in some of the most beautiful and bird-rich prairies and marshes anywhere. The abundance of birds here in summer may be a shock when you see it for the first time. There are ducks on every pothole and pond, often including pintails, gadwalls, teal, canvasbacks, and many more. Clouds of Franklin's gulls, patterned with black hoods and frosted wingtips, circle and soar over marshes a thousand miles from the coast, firmly putting the term *seagull* to rest. **Western grebes** splash noisily across open lakes in fast-moving courtship dances. At the same time more sedate Wilson's phalaropes pirouette on smaller ponds. The area also holds elusive grassland species that are prize finds for traveling birders: Nelson's sharp-tailed, Baird's, and Le Conte's sparrows all sing from the tops of weed stalks, while Sprague's pipits pour out their liquid songs as they flutter high above the swaying grasslands. **For more information:** www.birdingdrives.com/index1.html or call 888-921-2473.

HOCKING VALLEY BIRDING TRAIL, OHIO

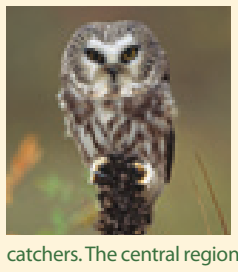
Mention of Ohio may evoke images of flatland and farms, but take a trip through Hocking Hills in the state's southeastern quadrant, and prepare to be surprised. Here steep cliffs tower above clear rushing streams and waterfalls, hemlocks stand tall in rocky glens, and profusions of ferns grow in the shadows of forested ravines. Birding is good all year here, with permanent residents like pileated woodpeckers and barred owls lurking in the dense forests and **red-headed woodpeckers** drumming in the open oak groves. Still, summer is the most exciting season, because the mix of habitats supports such a wide variety of nesting birds. In the cool shade of the conifers in narrow canyons, many birds typical of Canadian zones have southern outposts, and you may find hermit thrushes, Canada warblers, blue-headed vireos, and others. Just a few miles away, in swamps and sycamore groves along the larger rivers, you can see many birds of southern affinities: the yellow-throated vireo, with its rich colors and husky voice, and the beautiful cerulean warbler, patterned in sky-blue and white—a declining species that may be more common here than anywhere else. **For more information:** www.birdhocking.com or call 740-385-8003.

SOUTH DAKOTA GREAT LAKES BIRDING TRAIL



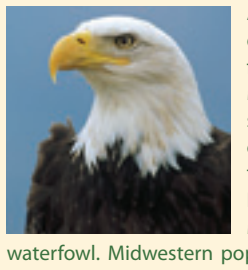
The first birders to follow this trail were Lewis and Clark, journeying up the Missouri River in 1804. They wouldn't have called it a "great lakes" trail then—the name comes from three large reservoirs behind modern dams on today's river. Other aspects of the landscape have changed as well, but it is still rich with habitats. East meets west here, with eastern bluebirds and western meadowlarks singing alongside the same fields, and eastern and western kingbirds nesting in the same cottonwood groves. Visitors from afar may be most fascinated in the grasslands. Marbled godwits, big cinnamon-tinged sandpipers, nest around prairie marshes in summer, sharing the skies with colorful little **chestnut-collared longspurs** and an array of other open-country species. Local birders are more likely to check out the reservoirs' edges, especially during migration, when rare water birds may drop in. On the Missouri's undammed stretches, piping plovers and dainty least terns nest on the sandbars, while many other shorebirds stop over on migration. Search along this trail's byways and you'll agree that the area remains, even two centuries after the first explorers, a fabulous region for discovery. **For more information:** Visit www.travelsd.com/_downloads/brochures/guides/GLbirdingbooklet.pdf or call 800-732-5682.

GREAT WISCONSIN BIRDING AND NATURE TRAIL



Read the slogans and you might not associate this state with anything but dairy farms and cheese. But by looking through their binoculars, birders will see that Wisconsin is a microcosm of the entire Midwest. Typical habitats and birds from all compass points are represented among this statewide birding trail's 368 sites. To explore the spruce and pine forests in the trail's northern section is to evoke an ineffable sense of the great north woods, and you might find nesting pine siskins, boreal chickadees, or **northern saw-whet owls.** A full complement of eastern North America's woodland birds may be found in eastern Wisconsin's hardwood forests, with everything from ruffed grouse to tiny blue-gray gnatcatchers. The central region's damp meadows are the places to hear the chatter of fidgeting sedge wrens by day and the bubbly aerial flight songs of American woodcocks at dusk. The edge of Lake Michigan produces concentrations of migrating hawks and songbirds plus a chance to see rare water birds. Great flocks of ducks and geese gather on small lakes in the state's interior. **For more information:** Visit www.wisconsinbirds.org/trail/index.htm or call the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources at 608-266-0545.

GREAT RIVER BIRDING TRAIL



America's greatest river is the centerpiece of this ambitious birding trail, designed by National Audubon to follow the mighty Mississippi all the way from its headwaters near the Canadian border to its delta on the Gulf of Mexico. When completed, the trail will include county-level maps of birding sites all along the river's course, with the Midwest portion covering parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri. Appropriately, many of the birding highlights along this section of the big river involve large birds. In summer great blue herons and other long-legged waders are common. Migration seasons bring a surge of snow geese, Canada geese, and other waterfowl. Midwestern populations of American white pelicans have been increasing, and flocks of these huge birds now follow the river in spring and fall, pausing on backwaters or wheeling in ponderous flight overhead. In the cold months, much of the Upper Mississippi Valley becomes a major wintering area for **bald eagles,** as these magnificent birds gather around the river's locks and dams. You may find dozens together in some locales, a spectacle that has inspired several towns and cities to establish eagle festivals. **For more information:** Visit www.greatriverbirding.org/index2.php.

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