

Scenic Byway Birding Sites

The Glacial Ridge Trails offer many locations to enjoy the birds of the western prairie. State parks, Wildlife Management Areas and Public Lands along the Glacial Ridge Trail offer birders wide open prairie vistas and some of the best birding in the state. Some birds live on the prairie all year long and others travel through during their annual migrations, so you can expect to see an ever-changing variety of birds in this area.

The beautiful landscape you see in western Minnesota was created by glaciers. The last of them melted over ten thousand years ago. It covered this area and much of Minnesota with a thick slab of ice. It moved slowly across Minnesota like a giant bulldozer scraping vast quantities of rock and soil before it. As it melted, the ground-up rock and soil, called glacial till, were deposited as the soil of the farmland and the interesting hills of this area. The numerous lakes here were also created by the glacier. Many of them were formed by blocks of ice left behind as the ice sheet retreated. Glacial till was deposited around them and when the ice blocks melted they left depressions that filled with water and are the lakes you see today.

Once the ice was gone, plants grew and died in the glacial till for thousands of years, eventually creating a thick, nutrient rich soil that supports an incredible diversity of wild plants. The prairie environment can be harsh - the plants have to survive wind, cold, heat and drought. They have adapted by having deep roots, which may go down over ten feet and some grow fine hairs to protect them against the winter cold. These plants provide habitat and food for wild animals that thrive in open spaces and also a specific variety of birds who prefer the open prairie to live and raise their young.

An excellent resource with information about the birds found in this area is the Minnesota River Valley Birding Trails Guide from Audubon Minnesota (it is accessible and automatically formatted on any mobile device).

<http://gis.audubon.org/Minnesota/MRVT/>

The Glacial Ridge Trail passes through an interesting variety of habitats and has many great birding locations. Some of the best places for bird watching are listed in the next column. Take time to explore the four-county area which has long been known for its hospitality and scenic birding sites.

The sites listed to the right are excellent for birding. Look for this symbol on the fold-out map on page 6.



A. Carlos State Park is a good place for viewing waterbirds and marshbirds on the lake and wetlands, as well as woodland and grassland species along the park's many miles of trails.

B. Rachel Waterfowl Production Area

C. Forada Wildlife Management Area

D. Lake Reno

E. Kensington Runestone County Park has hiking trails that pass through a variety of habitats where many resident and migrant birds can be found.

F. Lake Minnewaska is the thirteenth largest lake in Minnesota. Waterfowl, including diving ducks, grebes, geese, loons, pelicans, seagulls, herons and bald eagles can be seen here.

G. Barsness Park has a hiking trail where birds can be found in woods, thickets and parkland habitats.

H. Glacial Lakes State Park has ponds, marshes and several lakes scattered among its woods and grassland hills. 110 species were recorded in this park during a recent fall bird inventory.

I. Nelson Lake Waterfowl Production Area has rolling hills, lakes, marshes and woodlands providing habitat for migrating and resident birds.

J. Lake Johanna Waterfowl Production Area has a large heron rookery.

K. Ordway Prairie has a wonderful panoramic view of prairie hills from a scenic lookout and is a great place to watch migrating raptors.

L. Brenner Lake Waterfowl Production Area has woods, grasslands, wetlands and native prairie that provide habitat for nesting waterfowl and a variety of other birds.

M. Camp Kerk Wildlife Management Area is a great birding site, with grasslands, wetlands, woods and thickets.

N. Monson Lake State Park has hiking trails that access its lake, wetlands, hardwood forest and prairie. 116 species of birds have been recorded here.

O. Sibley State Park is an excellent place for birders. 206 species of bird have been recorded in this 2,500 acre park. Sibley's Mount Tom is a prime spot for watching migrating hawks.

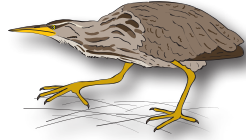
P. Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center has woods, wetlands and grasslands with hiking trails and excellent birding opportunities.

A Sampling of Glacial Ridge Birds

American Bittern

The American Bittern is a chunky bird that lives in wetlands, bogs and marshes, where it feeds on amphibians, insects, snakes and fish.

The Bittern is well camouflaged and if it senses that it has been seen, it will point its bill to the sky and try to blend in with its environment, sometimes even moving back and forth with the wind.



crown, crisp brown cheek patches, white eyestripes and gray nape. Its short flight alternates several rapid beats with wings pulled to its sides.

Meadowlark

The Meadowlark prefers grasslands, prairies and abandoned fields. It eats primarily insects, but will eat seeds and berries. It has a very melodious call. The Meadowlark likes to build its nest on the ground, including a little roof of weeds and grasses to protect its eggs.



American Kestrel

American Kestrels need wooded habitat to build their nests. Nesting boxes are provided in some areas and old woodpecker holes are another favorite place to nest. They eat insects, mice, snakes, lizards, crickets, beetles and dragonflies. Look for them along country roads and railroad tracks.



Northern Harrier

Northern Harriers have keen eyesight and excellent hearing. They can hear a nest full of mice before they can see the nest. The male will swoop down, grab the nest, shake it and call his mate. She will swoop under the male, turn over and catch the mice in midair, returning to their young with a tasty meal. The Harriers' nest is typically on the ground in a pile of sticks and twigs.



American White Pelican

American White Pelicans work together while fishing; they form a semicircle and herd fish into the shallow waters. They will eat salamanders and crayfish, as well as fish. They scoop the fish up, drain the water out of their bills and swallow the fish whole.



Red-headed Woodpecker

Red-headed Woodpeckers catch insects on the fly and also find insects in the bark of trees. They will eat seeds, nuts, berries and occasionally the eggs of other birds. They like to nest in cavities in dead trees at least eight feet off the ground.



Barred Owl

Barred Owls inhabit dense forests, often nesting in large tree crotches. They usually hunt around dusk or dawn and will eat mice, rabbits, chipmunks, squirrels, grouse, nuts and an occasional fish. They are one of the few owls that may be seen during daylight hours.



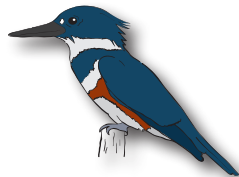
Savanna Sparrow

The Savanna Sparrow likes open grassy areas such as marshes and meadow. Its range is from temperate coastlines to tundra. It eats insects and spiders in summer and seeds during winter. The Savanna Sparrow has a buzzy song that starts with 2 chips and ends with 2 trills.



Belted Kingfisher

The Belted Kingfisher is an excellent angler, sitting and watching the water for anything that moves. Frogs, fish and crayfish are its favorite foods. Once it spots its prey, the Kingfisher moves like an arrow, stabbing its meal and carrying it back to its perch.



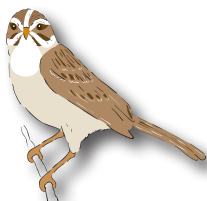
Scarlet Tanager

Scarlet Tanagers need large deciduous forests to feed their families. They like caterpillars, ants, beetles, moths and berries. You will often find them along rivers in wildlife refuges. They typically feed in the early morning and late afternoon.



Clay-colored Sparrow

The Clay-colored Sparrow prefers brushy grasslands and prairie. It is a medium-sized sparrow with black-streaked, brown upper parts and buff under parts. The face is pale with a finely streaked



Wood Thrush

The male Wood Thrush has one of the most beautiful songs of all the birds in North America. This thrush feeds on soil invertebrates and larvae, but will also eat fruit. It will defend its territory from other males.

