

# Birds of the Western Prairie

The prairie is a beautiful, open stretch of land that once covered over fifteen million acres which is now the western prairie land of Minnesota. Over ten thousand years ago the Wisconsin Glacier covered Minnesota with a huge slab of ice. It moved across Minnesota taking with it rocks, trees and soil. The glacier dug huge holes in the earth's surface and as the glacier melted the holes were filled with ice cold water forming our many lakes and potholes. As the glacier melted it left behind glacial till, which became a wonderful base for plants to grow.

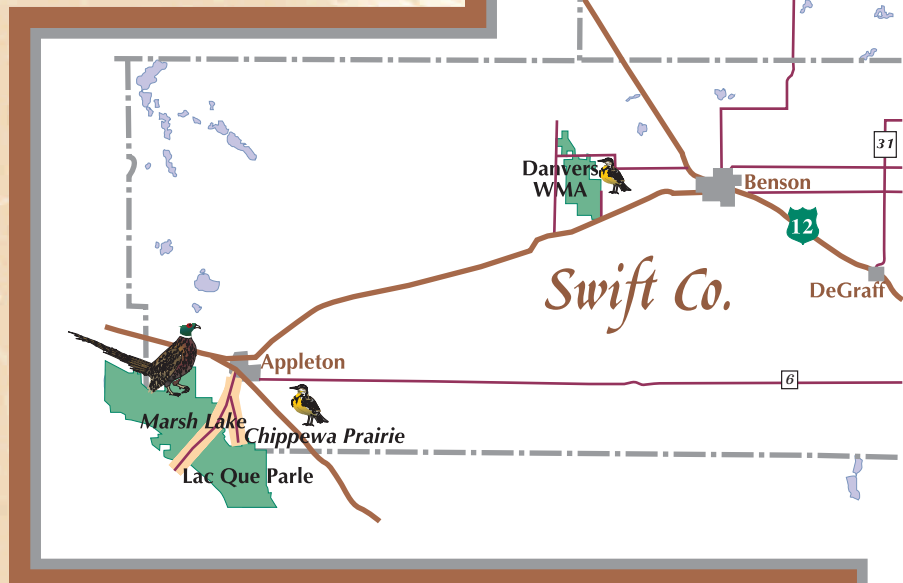
For thousands of years the plants grew and died, leaving behind a soil rich in nutrients. The thick, black soil became a base for an incredible variety of wild plants and animals.

This incredible variety of plants, supports wild animals that thrive in open spaces and a specific variety of birds who prefer the open prairie, to raise their young and survive.

The prairie has a very harsh environment with winds that blow away just about anything that isn't tied down. So the prairie plants send their roots deep and anchor themselves against the harsh weather. Some of the plants grow roots up to ten feet deep into the rich soil, and some grow fine hairs to protect them against the winter cold. These plants are particularly suited for prairie life and they produce a wide variety of plant seeds to feed the birds that come here to live.

Some birds of the prairie are particularly well adapted to survive on the prairie all year long, while others stop off on their annual migration. The birds that call the prairie home are well adapted to the changes in weather and will grow a coat of additional feathers when winter comes. Birds, like the goldfinch, have learned how to survive on the prairie by feeding in flocks and moving around like grasshoppers, flitting from one field to another to outwit their predators. Other birds, like the Killdeer, actually fly south in the winter, but nest on the prairie. They are a real joy to observe as they lure predators away from their nest and young with a dramatic broken wing act.

State parks and wildlife habitats, along the Glacial Ridge Trail, offer birders wide open prairie vistas and some of the best birding in the state.



The Glacial Ridge Trails offer an abundance of locations to enjoy the birds of the western prairie. Birds like the Goldfinch, Grasshopper Sparrow, Dickcissel, Boblink, Horned Lark, American Kestrel, Eastern Kingbird, Killdeer, Meadowlark, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Greater Prairie-Chicken, and the Ring-necked Pheasant.



# Glacial Ridge Birding Trails

The best way to find the birds of the prairie is to spend some time in the area and just follow the birding trails laid out for you on the Minnesota River Valley Birding Trails system (on line: [www.birdingtrail.org/PrairieWatersRegionOverview.htm](http://www.birdingtrail.org/PrairieWatersRegionOverview.htm)). The four county area has long been known for its hospitality and its scenic birding sites.

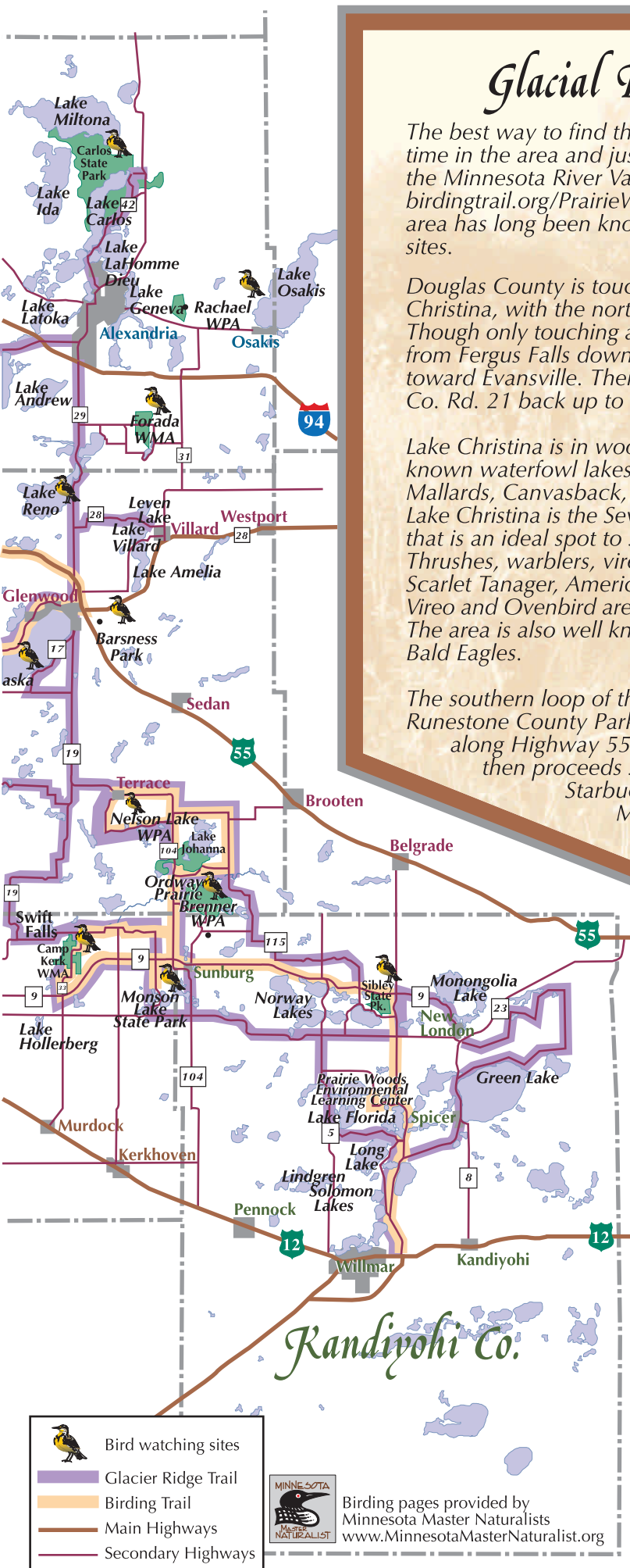
Douglas County is touched on its northwest corner, around Lake Christina, with the north loop of the Pomme de Terre Birding Trail. Though only touching a corner of Douglas County, it can be traveled from Fergus Falls down to Dalton, on to Ashby and farther south toward Evansville. Then it loops west on Co. Rd. 79 and north on Co. Rd. 21 back up to Fergus Falls.

Lake Christina is in wooded, hilly country and is one of the best known waterfowl lakes in the area. Large flocks of Canadian Geese, Mallards, Canvasback, Grebes and Coot live on the lake. Adjoining Lake Christina is the Seven Sisters Prairie Preserve, hilly, virgin prairie, that is an ideal spot to search for open country, grassland birds. Thrushes, warblers, vireos and even Lark sparrows nest in this area. Scarlet Tanager, American Redstart, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireo and Ovenbird are often found here during the summer months. The area is also well known for its owls, Red-shouldered Hawks and Bald Eagles.

The southern loop of the Pomme de Terre Birding Trail starts at the Runestone County Park. Drive south to Kensington, then southeast along Highway 55 to Glenwood and Barsness Park. The trail then proceeds southwest along Lake Minnewaska to Starbuck, south to Co. Rd. 18, west all the way to Morris, north to Co. Rd. 20, then east on 20 to Co. Rd. 3, then north, which completes the loop to Kensington.

The south loop of the Pomme de Terre trail starts in Glacial Lakes State Park, south of the city of Starbuck. Ponds, marshes and several large lakes are scattered among the grassland hills in the 1,800 acre park. You can see ducks and swans, Willow Flycatchers, Nashville Warblers and LeConte Sparrows. One hundred and ten species were recorded in this park during a recent fall bird inventory, including 13 species of warbler and vireo and 14 species of sparrow. Tundra Swans have been seen in late October. As the birding trail continues to meanders around prairie potholes and grassland habitat. You may see Grasshopper, Savannah and Vesper sparrows and the river valley is a natural corridor for migrating raptors, vultures, ducks and geese.

Kandiyohi County has a truly unique place for birders. Sibley State Park had the first Yellow-throated Warbler nesting, recorded in the state. Red-shouldered Hawks also nest there, along with hundreds of other bird species.



Birding pages provided by  
Minnesota Master Naturalists  
[www.MinnesotaMasterNaturalist.org](http://www.MinnesotaMasterNaturalist.org)



Two hundred and six bird species have been recorded in Sibley Park. Thrushes, flycatchers, vireos, woodpeckers, swallows and a wide variety of sparrows migrate through this 3,000 acre park.

Sibley's green, wooded hills, grasslands and wetlands are the perfect habitat for a variety of birds. Mount Tom, at 1,375 feet, is one of the best spots in the park for watching migrating hawks.

Moving south on Co. Rd. 71 will take you to the Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center. 186 bird species have been noted, including, though not recently, Common Moorhens and a Northern Saw-whet Owl.

Moving west on Co. Rd. 9, from Sibley State Park, the birders trail will take you to Swift County and Monson Lake State Park. Monson isn't as well known and is much smaller, but has extensive brushy woodlands and is a great place to observe the migration of waterfowl. Over 116 species of birds were recorded in the park during a recent autumn bird inventory. As you go along the trail west, you will find yourself at Camp Kerk wildlife management area and further north, Brenner Lake waterfowl production area, both great sites for birding. As you go north along Co. Rd. 104, into Pope County, you will come to the observation area for Ordway Prairie. It not only provides you with a wonderful panoramic view of the entire area, but it is one of the best places in the area for watching migrating raptors.

From Ordway find Co. Rd. 84 and go a little east to Co. 37 and take that north to Lake Johanna waterfowl production area. Lake Johanna has a large heron rookery. Its woodlands, surrounding the lake, are great for spotting migrating warblers.

Just to the west of Lake Johanna is Nelson Lake waterfowl production area. It also has rolling hills, lakes, marshes and woodlands, which provide habitat for migrating and resident birds.

The southwest corner of Swift County boasts one of the longest birding trails in the area, running along the Minnesota River north into Big Stone County and south into Chippewa and Lac Que Parle Counties. Just south of Appleton in Swift County is Marsh Lake. It has the largest breeding colony of American White Pelicans. Also just south of Appleton is Chippewa Prairie. Many birds rare to Minnesota have been spotted along this part of the Minnesota River Valley Birding Trail. For more maps and specifics about the Minnesota River Valley Birding Trail, go on-line to [www.birdingtrail.org/PrairieWatersRegionOverview.htm](http://www.birdingtrail.org/PrairieWatersRegionOverview.htm)

## A sampling of Glacial Ridge Birds

### Clay-colored Sparrow

Preferred habitat includes brushy grasslands and prairie. Medium sparrow with black-streaked, brown upper parts and buff underparts. The face is pale with finely streaked crown, crisp brown cheek patch, white eyestripe and gray nape. Short flight, alternates several rapid beats with wings pulled to sides.



### Belted Kingfisher

The Kingfisher is an excellent angler. They sit watching the waters for anything that moves. Frogs, fish and crayfish are its favorite foods. Once spotted the Kingfisher moves like an arrow, stabbing the fish and carrying the quarry back to their perch.



### American Bittern

The Bittern is a chunky bird that loves the wetlands, bogs and marshes where it feeds on amphibians, insects, snakes and fish. The Bittern blends well with its environment 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.



### Northern Harrier

The Harrier seems to be able to hear as good as he can see. He can hear a nest full of baby mice before he can see the nest. The male will swoop down and grab a nest full of mice, shake them out and call his mate. She will swoop under the male, turn over and catch the mice in midair, returning to her young with a tasty meal. The Harriers' nest is typically on the ground in a pile of sticks and twigs.







## Wood Thrush

The male Wood Thrush has one of the most beautiful songs of all the birds in North America. They are known to feed on soil invertebrates and larvae, but will also eat fruit. They are territorial, and will defend their territory, which normally is approximately 800 - 28,000 square meters.



## 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 bill and swallow the fish whole.

## American Kestrel

American Kestrel need wooded habitat to build their nests. Nesting boxes are provided in some areas and 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.



## Red-headed Woodpecker

The Red-Headed Woodpecker is known to catch insects on the fly and also finds insects in the bark of trees. They will eat seeds, nuts, berries and occasionally even other bird eggs. They like to nest in the cavities of dead trees at least eight feet off the ground.



## Savanna Sparrow

The Savanna Sparrow likes open habitat, including open prairies and marshland. Its range is from temperate coastlines to tundra. They eat seeds off the ground and under bushes and will eat insects while mating.



## Meadowlark

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

## Scarlet Tanager

The Scarlet Tanager needs large deciduous forests to feed its family. They like caterpillars, ants, beetles, moths and berries. You will often find them along rivers in our wildlife refuges. They typically feed in the early morning and late afternoon.



## Barred Owl

The Barred Owl likes to inhabit dense forests. It usually nests in large tree crotches. They hunt usually 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 hunting during daylight hours.

