

Birds of the Upper Mississippi River

Follow the Great River Road to Great Birding!

Imagine how the bird habitat and bird life along the Mississippi River must change as the river changes from a small stream running through the pine forests of northern Minnesota, then through what was once tall-grass prairie and oak savanna of central Minnesota. Then it changes again as it cuts through the bluffs of southern Minnesota, northeast Iowa, southwest Wisconsin and northwest Illinois. Finally, the river habitat and bird life reflects the big, wide river of southern Illinois and Missouri, where the Missouri, Illinois and Ohio rivers join in.

You can now take a self-guided birding tour along what is likely one of America's longest birding trails. The "Great River Birding Trail" parallels both sides of the Mississippi River from the headwaters, down 1,366 miles to the confluence with the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois. The trail is named after the already well-known federally-designated scenic drive called the Great River Road that goes from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The birding trail is also under development to extend along the states bordering the Lower Mississippi River, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, making it a true "Headwaters to Gulf" trail.

The Upper Mississippi River: A Globally Important Bird Area and Migratory "Flyway" for Birds

The mighty Mississippi flows through the heart of our nation. It draws millions of visitors each year from all over the world, who come to experience the mystery and magnificence of this old river valley, rich in history, culture, habitat, and recreation. But they aren't the only visitors passing through—40% of all North American waterfowl use the river as a migratory flyway, and 326 bird species (35% or about 1/3 of all species in North America) use the river corridor as a globally important flyway in their spring and fall migrations.

Through southwest Illinois and southeast Missouri, the Mississippi River flows through the **Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge**, which was established in 1958 to protect and enhance habitat for migratory birds. The refuge grew to encompass 45,000 acres of riverine and floodplain habitat scattered along 340 miles of the Mississippi River corridor between Muscatine, Iowa and Gorham, Illinois. In 2000, Mark Twain was re-organized into a Complex of separate refuges (Port Louisa, Great River/Clarence Cannon, Two Rivers, and Middle Mississippi River NWRs). Wetlands, open water, bottomland forests, and prairies on the Complex provide habitat for numerous mammals, amphibians, reptiles, fish and hundreds of bird species that use the river corridor in their spring and fall migrations, or as year-round residents.

Success Stories

Conservation and reintroduction efforts have benefited several bird species in the Upper Mississippi River. The Bald Eagle is one of the greatest success stories in the recovery of an endangered species. While a few hundred eagles used to winter along the Mississippi River, there are now thousands, and Missouri boasts the highest number of wintering eagles in the lower 48 states. Peregrine Falcons, once extirpated from their entire eastern range the U.S., have been successfully reintroduced and now nest on buildings, towers, and bridges along the river. They were recently removed from the federally endangered species list, but are still on the state endangered species list in Missouri. Red-shouldered Hawks, a species of conservation concern in Missouri and many other states, nest in large tracts of mature or medium-aged, floodplain forests along the Mississippi River. Their diet varies but includes frogs, crayfish, salamanders, snakes, small mammals, and birds. Red-shouldered Hawks are uncommon in many parts of the Upper Mississippi River, but are relatively common in appropriate habitats in both Illinois and Missouri.

Species of Concern

Neo-tropical migrants such as the Cerulean Warbler and the Prothonotary Warbler breed along the Upper Mississippi River while wintering in more suitable climates such as Central America and the northern rim of South America. Populations for both of these warblers have been in decline, but are still common along the Upper Mississippi. Red-headed Woodpeckers bore nest cavities in dead trees, fence posts, or utility poles in open woods, savannas, farmlands, and bottomlands. They feed on acorns, nuts, and berries, storing them in caches they defend vigorously. They also catch flies and forage among leaves and on the ground for insects when nesting and feeding their young. This widespread and common woodpecker's numbers have declined in the past decade due to loss of woodlands and competition with the European Starling. The Upper Mississippi River area is an important refuge for this handsome bird.

Connecting People to the Mississippi River

The Great River Birding Trail was developed to help educate citizens about the ecological significance of the Upper Mississippi River as an important flyway for birds and to encourage citizens to explore the Upper Mississippi River region through a form of hands-on, low-impact, and non-consumptive recreation.

The Great River Birding Trail is a project of the Audubon -Upper Mississippi River Campaign. To learn more about the Audubon - Upper Mississippi River Campaign and the Great River Birding Trail, go www.audubon.org/campaign/umr

IBA's Take Flight: Identifying and Conserving Essential Habitat for Birds

Important Bird Areas, or IBAs, are defined as sites that provide essential habitat for one or more species of birds that are a high priority within a state, such as birds that are threatened, endangered, or have been in population decline. The IBA Program helps birds by setting science-based priorities for habitat conservation and promoting positive action to safeguard vital bird habitats. In 1995, Audubon launched an IBA initiative in the United States, working to establish IBA programs in all 50 states. IBAs include sites for breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds, and are selected using standardized, science-based criteria. You can help identify and conserve Important Bird Areas in your state or region. For more information on the Audubon IBA Program, go to: www.audubon.org/bird/iba/. This site includes the addresses of state IBA coordinators as well as information about many other Audubon bird conservation projects.

Birds of the Upper Mississippi River Refuge Checklist

Provided below is a checklist that highlights the bird species that have been observed within the Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. It is not a comprehensive checklist for the entire Upper Mississippi River. Be sure to bring along a birding book for reference, or contact the appropriate state Department of Natural Resources or state Ornithological Union for a more specific birding list to the region you are visiting. Certain refuge lands within the Complex may be closed to serve as a sanctuary for the wildlife found there. Please contact the appropriate Refuge Office to learn more about open areas and birding opportunities.

Legend

The following list contains more than 290 species that have been observed on the Complex refuges. Those species marked with an asterisk (*) have nested on Complex lands. Birds found on one refuge and not on others are identified by the first letter of the refuge following the bird name.

- (G) - Great River NWR
- (T) - Two Rivers NWR
- (P) - Port Louisa NWR
- (M)-Middle Miss River NWR
- a - abundant, very numerous
- c - common, certain to be seen in suitable habitat
- u - uncommon, present but not certain to be seen
- o - occasional, seen only a few times during the season
- r - rare, seen only at intervals of 2 to 4 years
- (En) - Endangered
- (Th) - Threatened
- S - March-May
- s - June-August
- F - September-November
- W- December-February

Common Name	Sp	Su	F	W	Common Name	Sp	Su	F	W	Common Name	Sp	Su	F	W
Pied-billed Grebe*	c	u	c	u	Caspian Tern	u	o	u	-	Palm Warbler	c	o	c	-
Horned Grebe	o	-	o	o	Common Tern	o	r	o	-	Bay-breasted Warbler	o	r	u	-
Eared Grebe	r	-	-	-	Forster's Tern	u	o	u	-	Blackpoll Warbler	u	-	u	-
Western Grebe	-	-	o	-	Least Tern (En)	-	r	o	-	Cerulean Warbler*	o	r	r	-
Double-crested Cormorant*	o	o	o	-	Common Loon	o	-	o	r	Black-and-white Warbler	c	u	c	-
American White Pelican	c	u	c	-	Rock Dove	o	o	o	r	American Redstart*	c	c	c	-
Ruddy Duck	c	r	o	r	Mourning Dove*	c	c	c	c	Prothonotary Warbler*	c	c	u	-
Tundra Swan	r	-	r	-	Black-billed Cuckoo	o	r	o	-	Worm-eating Warbler	r	r	r	-
Trumpeter Swan	r	-	r	r	Yellow-billed Cuckoo*	u	u	u	-	Ovenbird	u	o	u	-
Greater White-fronted Goose	u	-	u	o	Barn Owl (G) *	r	r	r	-	Northern Waterthrush	c	o	c	-
Snow Goose	c	-	c	c	Eastern Screech-Owl*	u	u	u	u	Louisiana Waterthrush	o	r	r	-
Ross's Goose	-	-	-	r	Great Horned Owl*	c	c	c	c	Kentucky Warbler*	o	r	r	-
Canada Goose*	a	a	a	c	Barred Owl*	c	c	c	r	Connecticut Warbler (P)	r	-	r	-
Wood Duck*	a	c	a	r	Long-eared Owl	-	-	r	r	Mourning Warbler	o	r	r	-
American Wigeon	a	-	a	r	Short-eared Owl	r	-	r	o	Common Yellowthroat*	c	c	c	-
Gadwall	c	-	c	r	Common Nighthawk*	u	u	c	-	Hooded Warbler	r	r	r	-
Green-winged Teal	a	-	a	r	Chuck-will's-widow	o	r	-	-	Wilson's Warbler	o	o	o	-
Mallard*	a	a	a	c	Whip-poor-will*	u	o	o	-	Canada Warbler	o	o	o	-
American Black Duck	u	-	u	o	Chimney Swift*	c	c	c	-	Yellow-breasted Chat*	r	r	r	-
Northern Pintail	a	-	a	r	Ruby-throated Hummingbird*	c	c	o	-	Lapland Longspur	o	-	o	o
Blue-winged Teal*	a	-	a	-	Belted Kingfisher*	c	c	c	o	Snow Bunting	r	-	o	o
Northern Shoveler	a	-	a	r	Red-headed Woodpecker*	a	a	a	o	Fox Sparrow	u	-	u	r
Canvasback	u	-	c	o	Yellow-billed Woodpecker*	c	c	c	c	Song Sparrow*	c	c	c	c
Redhead	o	-	o	-	Yellow-billed Sapsucker*	u	r	u	u	Lincoln's Sparrow	u	o	u	-
Ring-necked Duck	a	-	a	o	Downy Woodpecker*	c	c	c	c	Swamp Sparrow*	u	o	u	u
Greater Scaup	o	-	o	r	Hairy Woodpecker*	u	u	u	u	Harris's Sparrow	r	-	r	-
Lesser Scaup	a	-	a	o	Northern Flicker*	c	c	c	u	White-crowned Sparrow	u	-	u	o
Common Goldeneye	a	-	c	a	Pileated Woodpecker*	u	u	u	u	White-throated Sparrow	a	-	a	o
Bufflehead	u	-	o	r	Olive-sided Flycatcher	o	r	o	-	Dark-eyed Junco	a	-	a	a
Hooded Merganser*	c	u	c	r	Eastern Wood-Peevee*	u	u	u	-	Savannah Sparrow*	u	o	u	-
Yellow-breasted Merganser	u	-	o	-	Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	u	u	u	-	Grasshopper Sparrow	u	o	u	-
Common Merganser	a	-	a	a	Acadian Flycatcher	r	r	r	-	American Tree Sparrow	a	-	a	a
Little Blue Heron	o	o	o	-	Alcian Flycatcher	r	r	r	-	Chipping Sparrow*	c	c	c	-
Snowy Egret*	r	-	-	-	Willow Flycatcher	o	o	o	-	Clay-colored Sparrow	r	-	r	-
Great Blue Heron*	c	c	c	u	Least Flycatcher	u	u	u	-	Field Sparrow*	u	u	u	r
Great Egret*	c	c	c	-	Eastern Phoebe*	u	u	u	-	Vesper Sparrow	u	u	u	-
Cattle Egret**	o	o	o	-	Great Crested Flycatcher*	u	u	u	-	Lark Sparrow	o	o	o	-
Green Heron	u	u	u	-	Eastern Kingbird*	u	u	u	-	Eastern Towhee*	u	u	u	r
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron*	u	u	u	-	Blue Jay*	a	a	a	a	Summer Sparrow	r	-	r	-
Black-crowned Night-Heron	o	u	o	-	American Crow*	a	a	a	a	Scarlet Tanager*	u	u	u	-
Least Bittern*	o	o	o	-	Fish Crow	o	-	-	-	Dickcissel*	c	c	c	-
American Bittern*	u	o	o	-	Bell's Vireo	o	o	r	-	Rose-breasted Grosbeak*	u	o	c	-
Glossy Ibis (G)	-	r	-	-	White-eyed Vireo*	o	o	r	-	Northern Cardinal*	c	c	c	c
White-faced Ibis (G)	r	-	r	-	Blue-headed Vireo	u	r	u	-	Indigo Bunting*	c	c	c	-
Turkey Vulture	c	c	c	-	Yellow-throated Vireo*	c	c	c	-	Baltimore Oriole*	c	c	c	-
Osprey	u	u	u	-	Philadelphia Vireo	o	r	o	-	Orchard Oriole*	u	o	o	-
Mississippi Kite	o	o	-	-	Red-eyed Vireo*	c	u	c	-	Yellow-headed Blackbird (P&G)	a	a	a	u
Bald Eagle (Th)*	c	c	c	a	Warbling Vireo*	c	c	c	-	Red-winged Blackbird*	a	a	a	u
Northern Harrier	u	r	u	u	Loggerhead Shrike*	r	r	r	-	Eastern Meadowlark	c	c	c	r
Sharp-shinned Hawk	u	-	u	u	Cedar Waxwing*	c	u	u	u	Western Meadowlark (P)	c	c	c	r
Cooper's Hawk*	u	u	u	u	Eastern Bluebird*	u	u	u	o	Common Grackle*	a	a	a	u
Northern Goshawk	r	-	r	r	Veery	o	o	o	-	Great-tailed Grackle (G)	r	-	r	-
Red-shouldered Hawk*	o	o	o	r	Gray-cheeked Thrush	u	u	u	-	Rusty Blackbird	u	-	u	r
Broad-winged Hawk	o	o	o	-	Swainson's Thrush	u	u	u	-	Brewer's Blackbird	r	-	r	-
Red-tailed Hawk*	c	c	c	-	Hermit Thrush	u	u	u	-	Brown-headed Cowbird*	c	c	c	u
Rough-legged Hawk	u	-	u	u	Wood Thrush	o	o	o	-	Bobolink	u	o	o	-
Golden Eagle	-	-	r	r	American Robin*	a	a	a	o					
American Kestrel*	c	c	c	c	Gray Catbird*	c	c	c	-					
Merlin	r	-	r	-	Northern Mockingbird*	o	o	o	r					
Peregrine Falcon	o	r	o	-	Brown Thrasher*	c	c	c	r					
Ring-necked Pheasant (P) *	c	c	c	c	European Starling*	a	a	a	a					
Wild Turkey*	c	c	c	-	Red-breasted Nuthatch	u	o	u	o					
Northern Bobwhite*	u	u	u	u	White-breasted Nuthatch*	c	c	c	c					
King Rail*	u	u	u	u	Brown Creeper*	u	o	u	u					
Virginia Rail*	o	o	r	-	Sedge Wren*	o	o	o	-					
Sora*	u	o	o	-	Marsh Wren*	u	u	u	-					
Yellow Rail (G)*	r	-	-	-	Carolina Wren	u	u	u	o					
Common Moorhen*	r	r	r	-	Winter Wren	u	-	u	o					
American Coot*	a	u	a	r	House Wren*	c	a	c	-					
Sandhill Crane	r	-	-	-	Blue-jay Grackle*	u	u	u	-					
American Woodcock*	u	o	o	-	Tree Swallow*	c	a	a	-					
Common Snipe*	u	r	u	o	Purple Martin*	u	u	u	-					
Upland Sandpiper	r	r	r	-	Northern Rough-winged Swallow*	c	a	c	-					
Greater Yellowlegs	u	u	u	u	Bank Swallow	u	u	u	-					
Lesser Yellowlegs	c	c	c	-	Barn Swallow*	c	c	c	-					
Red Knot (T)	-	o	o	-	Cliff Swallow*	u	u	u	-					
Solitary Sandpiper	c	c	c	-	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	c	-	c	r					
Spotted Sandpiper*	c	c	c	-	Golden-crowned Kinglet	c	-	c	o					
Willet	r	r	r	-	Black-capped Chickadee*	a	a	a	a					
Short-billed Dowitcher	u	u	u	-	Carolina Chickadee (T&G) *	c	c	c	-					
Long-billed Dowitcher	u	u	u	-	Tufted Titmouse*	c	c	c	c					
Sanderling (P)	-	-	r	-	Horned Lark*	c	c	a	u					
Semipalmated Sandpiper	c	c	c	-	House Sparrow*	a	a	a	a					
Western Sandpiper	o	-	r	-	Eurasian Tree Sparrow (T)*	c	c	c	c					
Least Sandpiper	o	-	c	-	American Pipit	r	-	r	-					
White-rumped Sandpiper (T)	o	-	c	-	House Finch*	c	c	c	c					
Baird's Sandpiper (P & G)	o	o	o	-	Pine Siskin*	o	-	o	o					
Pectoral Sandpiper	c	c	c	-	American Goldfinch*	c	c	c	c					