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 wide, slow-moving river in southern Minnesota, then through what was once tall-grass prairie and oak savannas of central Minnesota. Then it changes again as it flows through farmland and woodlands of southern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois. Finally, the river habitat and bird life reflects the big, wide river of southern Illinois and Missouri, where the Mississippi and Illinois rivers join in.

You can now take a self-guided birding tour near the northeastern reaches of what likely were America’s largest birding tracts. The “Great River Birding Trail” parallels both sides of the Mississippi River from the headwaters, down 1,360 miles to the confluence with the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois. The trail is named after the already well-known federal-designated scenic drive called the Great River Road that goes from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

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. It’s a spring and fall migration.

The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge stretches southwest for 261 miles along the Mississippi River from just above Wabasha, Minnesota, nearly to Rock Island, Illinois. The refuge and the entire Upper Mississippi River offer fabulous opportunities for birding among extensive marshlands, wooded bottom lands, open water, sand prairies, and wooded bluffs. The river environment serves as a migration corridor not only for waterfowl, but also for many other species such as sparrows, hawks, and non-geographic migratory songbirds. In the spring and summer, the river provides important nesting habitat for many species. Even in the colder months, the area serves as a wintering ground for northern bird populations, in addition to year-round residents.

Success Stories

Conservation and restoration efforts have benefited several bird species in the Upper Mississippi. The Bald Eagle is an example of a success story in the recovery of an endangered species. While a few hundred eagles used to winter along the Mississippi River, there were only a few species. Peregrine Falcons, once extirpated from their entire range, the U.S., have been successfully reintroduced and now nest on cliffs, roosts, and bridges along the river. They were recently removed from the endangered species list, but are still endangered in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Red-shouldered Hawks nest in large tracts of mature or mid-stories, highland forests along the Mississippi River. Their diet varies but includes frogs, crayfish, salamanders, snake, small mammals, and birds. They are listed as endangered in Iowa and Illinois, and a species of concern or threatened as Wisconsin and Minnesota. Red-shoulders are still uncommon in many parts of the Upper Mississippi River. This research has indicated relatively stable populations between McGregor, IA and Caswell, WI, and on the Illinois side from East Dubuque to Savanna, IL.

Species of Concern

Non-typical 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 South America. Populations for both of these warblers have been in decline, but they are common along the Upper Mississippi. Red-headed Woodpecker once nested in dead trees, fence posts, or utility poles in open woods, swamps, farmlands, and hemlocks. They feed on acorns, nuts, and berries, moving them in caches they defend vigorously. This widespread and common woodpecker’s numbers have declined in the past decades due to loss of woodlands and competition with the European Starling. The Upper Mississippi River area is an important refuge for these and other bird species of concern.

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-consumerist experience. The Great River Birding Trail is a project of 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/mississippi.

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 Bird Conservation Regions to identify the most important areas for birds across the region. The Great River Birding Trail is a part 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/mississippi.

American Birding Association Code of Ethics

1. Follow the rules set by those who do not endanger the value of birds or their habitat.
2. Observe and photograph birds without harassment or disturbance of any kind.
3. Never chase or repeatedly feeding birds.
4. Use minimal and non-invasive methods of flushing birds.
5. Keep all equipment to a minimum and avoid disturbing habitat.
6. Use animals, pets, and tools in a responsible manner.
7. Keep all equipment and activities to a minimum and avoid disturbing habitat.
8. Always follow the rules of the property while birding.
9. Respect the privacy and property of others.
10. Always follow the rules of the property.
11. Do not feed birds.
12. Do not intentionally harm or kill birds.
13. Do not illegally possess birds.
14. Always follow the rules of the property.
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