One of many Lark Buntings we enjoyed watching!

North Dakota
Prairie Birding at Its Best

Tour Leaders: Eric and Rob Ripma
June 5-11, 2021
June 5 – Patterson Lake

After arrival and pickup at the Bismarck airport, our group headed west to Dickinson where we would be staying for the next three nights. We spent the first afternoon, which was rather hot, birding around Patterson Lake and picking up some of the more common birds we would be seeing much more of in the coming week. We enjoyed watching Western and Eared Grebes, a Swainson’s Hawk, Western and Eastern Kingbirds, and a variety of swallows. It was a nice way to start our tour!

June 6 – Little Missouri National Grassland and Sully Creek State Park

After an early wake up (sunrise is at 5 am in western North Dakota!) we headed for the grasslands of Little Missouri National Grassland. This is the largest national grassland in the country, encompassing over 1,000,000 acres. We were soon enjoying views of Sharp-tailed Grouse, Wilson’s Snipe, Swainson’s Hawk, Horned Lark, Grasshopper Sparrow, Bobolink, and Western Meadowlark, among others. It wasn’t long before we heard our main target, the Baird’s Sparrow. After a couple minutes, we were all able to enjoy scope views of one singing its tinkling song! It had become rather windy by mid-morning making it more difficult to locate passerines, but we did get brief views of a Prairie Falcon “playing” in the wind. By mid-morning we headed south into other areas of the grassland. Before too long, we were hearing another Baird’s Sparrow and watching a few Chestnut-collared Longspurs! While driving a loop through the grassland we also had great views of Black-billed Magpie, Marbled Godwit, and Burrowing Owl. After lunch, we drove west into the “badlands” to bird in the riparian zones that are associated with
June 6 – Continued

the Little Missouri River. We stopped at the Medora Water Treatment Plant where we had a good study of five species of swallows, Spotted Sandpipers, and a couple species of ducks. A Bullock’s Oriole gave brief views while we were leaving but left most of us wanting a much better look. However, it didn’t take long once we arrived at Sully Creek State Park before we were enjoying great views of a male Bullock’s Oriole. We also ended up with great views of Western Wood-Pewee, Pine Siskin, Lark Sparrow, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Black-headed Grosbeaks. We were also able to get good flight views of Violet-green Swallows which we had missed earlier in the day. It was great birding, but we were also disappointed we hadn’t seen a Lazuli Bunting or Spotted Towhee despite hearing both. Luckily, as we were driving out of the park a Lazuli Bunting was perched up singing his warbling song! After a few minutes, the bunting dropped down into the vegetation, but a Spotted Towhee soon popped up onto the same perch! It was a great way to end our birding for the day.

June 7 – Camp Crook Road and East River Road

After driving down to the southwest corner of North Dakota, we began our birding in the dry grasslands and sage brush that is characteristic of this region. We started out with great looks at Sharp-tailed Grouse and quickly built up a list that included Upland Sandpiper, Brewer’s Sparrow, Say’s Phoebe, and Loggerhead Shrike. The many “skylarking” Lark Buntings were also a blast to watch. We also flushed a Gray Partridge from the edge of the road, but better looks were desired by all. We crossed over the Little Missouri where we saw our first Wood Ducks and were soon making our way through some more grassland habitat. Before long we
June 7 – Continued

were enjoying great views of more Sharp-tailed Grouse, a small flock of Long-billed Curlews, a couple Rock Wrens, and a Golden Eagle! After lunch in Bowman, we drove north along the Little Missouri River where we enjoyed the scenic views that the badlands offer. Birds also offered some highlights along this route. A singing Red Crossbill that allowed long scope views was definitely the highlight! Violet-green Swallow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler were some of the other highlights. It was a great day of birding in the southwestern corner of North Dakota.

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June 8 – Little Missouri National Grassland, MacLean Bottoms, and Dewald Slough

Since we hadn’t seen Sprague’s Pipit up to this point and there were some major storms in central North Dakota we decided to spend the morning in Little Missouri National Grassland again. After a short walk, we heard one displaying pipit and eventually had views of it as it displayed and then “plummeted” to the ground. We enjoyed more views of many grassland species on our way through the grassland. When we were almost back to the highway we came across a pair of Gray Partridges that provided spectacular looks!

June 8 – Continued

In the late morning we drove east to Bismarck where we had a great lunch and then headed south along the Missouri River. Unfortunately, a large system was hanging over the area with high winds, rain, and plenty of lightning. We attempted to bird from the safety of our vehicles, but it eventually became apparent that we should continue east to our hotel where we would be staying for the next couple nights. As we drove east the weather greatly improved so we made one birding stop after dinner for our first prairie pothole birding experience! Birds were everywhere and we quickly saw many species! We enjoyed nine species of ducks, lots of Wilson’s Phalaropes and Franklin’s Gulls, and many flyover White-faced Ibis. However, the stars of the show, the LeConte’s and Nelson’s Sparrows showed well and allowed all to have great scope views as they were singing their sizzling songs.

Brewer’s Blackbird
June 9 – Horsehead Lake Area and Lake Isabel

The whole morning and early afternoon were spent birding the many lakes, marshes, and grasslands in this region. Early in the morning, we began driving north to Horsehead Lake with many birding stops on the way. Before long we had great scope views of our first Ferruginous Hawk and Clay-colored Sparrows. Many Marsh Wrens, a couple Sedge Wrens, an American Bittern, Black Terns, and many other marsh birds were seen. Once we reached the lake, we enjoyed a large colony of Western Grebes with a couple Clark’s mixed in, many shorebirds including White-rumped and Baird’s Sandpipers, Red-necked Phalaropes, and our only Bald Eagle and Caspian Tern of the tour.

June 9 – Continued

After a great lunch in Pettibone we headed back south through the potholes. We enjoyed great views of our first Red-necked Grebes, Ferruginous Hawks, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Loggerhead Shrike, and many more ducks and other marsh species. After a break at the hotel in the late afternoon and a stop for dinner we began birding around Lake Isabel. We enjoyed some great studies of Least Flycatchers and Yellow Warblers as we tried to pick out any odd species. A little way down the trail we flushed (accidentally) a Great Horned Owl out of one of the cottonwoods and a couple minutes later we were watching an Olive-sided Flycatcher which is an uncommon migrant through this area! We ended the evening with a flyover of our first Snowy Egret of the tour.
June 10 – Big Muddy Lake, Chase Lake, and Sibley Nature Park

We began our day with a short hike down to Big Muddy Lake. As usual, this lake was quite birdy and we enjoyed views of many ducks and shorebirds including Sanderling, Baird’s and White-rumped Sandpipers, and Red-necked Phalaropes. Quite a few Dickcissels also perched up nicely where we were able to enjoy some great looks. After birding at the lake, we slowly made our way towards Chase Lake with many stops along the lake. During these stops we saw our only Horned Grebe and Snow Geese of the tour. Once we reached Chase Lake, we enjoyed more Red-necked Grebes, a Black Tern colony, many nesting Marsh Wrens, and the largest colony of American White Pelicans in the United States. After another good lunch in Pettibone, we stopped at a small pond to look for a previously reported Cinnamon Teal. We only got brief views of the bird before it took off with a Blue-winged Teal but at least we got a look! Since we hadn’t been able to spend as much time along the Missouri River earlier in the tour (due to storms) we drove back east to look for Least Terns and Piping Plovers. It was a hot afternoon but after a short walk to an overlook of the Missouri quickly resulted in a few Least Terns and one Piping Plover! It was a fantastic ending to a great tour to North Dakota!

We ended up seeing 159 species of birds including specialties such as Baird’s, Nelson’s, and LeConte’s Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and Sprague’s Pipit. Mammals also provided many highlights with 14 species including a couple of Red Fox kits.