North Dakota
Prairie Birding at its Best

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma
May 26 - June 1, 2024
May 26 – Sweet Briar Lake, 100th Avenue SW, Patterson Lake Recreation Area

After the arrival of our group and a stop for lunch in Bismarck, we started our drive west towards Dickinson and made a couple of birding stops along the way. Our first stop at Sweet Briar Lake found us watching our first American White Pelicans, Eared Grebes, and Cedar Waxwings. A small grassland on the edge of the lake provided our first good looks at a pair of Bobolinks. We continued west and stopped off the interstate again to bird another grassland area. Storms were approaching, but we were able to skirt around them for the most part. Our first Western and Eastern Kingbirds, Grasshopper Sparrow, and a pair of Gray Partridges as we were leaving made for a great stop! After checking in to our hotel, we made a stop at Patterson Lake before heading to dinner. The birding was a little slow, but we had good looks at a vocal Alder Flycatcher, all the expected swallows, and our only Eastern Bluebirds of the trip. You don’t usually think of Mexican food when you think of North Dakota, but we had a great meal in town at Los Cabos before heading back to our hotel for the night.

May 27 – Little Missouri National Grassland, Sully Creek State Park

Our first morning of the tour started early (at 5:30) since sunrise at this time of year is before 5! We spent the whole morning birding several different areas in Little Missouri National Grassland. As soon as we exited the interstate, we found our first Wilson's Phalaropes! As we continued through the grassland, we picked up many of the common grassland species such as Swainson’s Hawks, Horned Larks, Grasshopper and Vesper

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American Badger

Chestnut-collared Longspur
Sparrows, and Brewer’s Blackbirds. A little further in we saw our first Sharp-tailed Grouse right next to the road and heard our first Baird’s Sparrows, one of the biggest targets for this trip. The Baird’s was too distant to see, so when we heard our next one a little further down the road, we took a short walk through the grasslands and had great views! While watching the sparrow, a pair of Marbled Godwits flew overhead; a classic scene while birding the prairies of western North Dakota. As we continued through the grasslands, the wet areas produced Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, and our first Wilson’s Snipe and Willet. Chestnut-collared Longspurs had been hard to come by, so after a restroom break in town, we headed south to another area of the grasslands. On the way in we had our first great looks at a pair of Upland Sandpipers. Once we reached our destination we heard many Chestnut-collared Longspurs and while looking we had good views of two Burrowing Owls! Eventually we had good views of the longspurs as well. I had mentioned that there was a badger burrow in the field we were birding, but we probably wouldn’t actually see one. However, as we continued driving a badger ran into the field from the side of the road. Luckily, it turned back and watched us while we were watching it.

After lunch we visited Sully Creek State Park and birded in the riparian habitats along Sully Creek and the Little Missouri River. Not long after we got out of the vehicle, Cathy spotted an oriole, and it turned out to be our only Bullock’s Oriole of the trip. We added good looks at American Redstart, Ovenbird, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Lark Sparrows. As we were getting back to the car, we finally had some views of Violet-green Swallows and a close Lazuli Bunting. It had been a great day and we headed back to town, but not before having close views of an American Bison to end the day!
**May 28 – Little Missouri National Grassland**

We made a longer drive to start this day to make it to the very southwestern part of North Dakota. As we were reaching our destination, we came across our first close Black-billed Magpies. Not much further down the road, we came across a couple of Sharp-tailed Grouse and while watching we noticed two Long-billed Curlews. As we kept watching, 3 curlew chicks also came into view! Watching this Long-billed Curlew family was one of the highlights of the trip! We added several new species as we banded the grasslands and sagebrush habitats. Our only Red-headed Woodpecker of the trip perched on one of the fence posts, a couple Loggerhead Shrikes hunted from exposed perches, and Brewer’s Sparrow and many Lark Buntings sang and displayed in the sagebrush. On our way back to Bowman, we stopped near some of the badlands formations along the road and saw our first Rock Wren. There aren’t many places to eat in Bowman, but we enjoyed the Coca Cola memorabilia while we ate at Eats N Treats.

In the afternoon, we birded our way north along the Little Missouri River. Our first stop produced our only Golden Eagle and Western Wood-Pewees of the trip. At our next stop we came across a late, White-crowned Sparrow as well as many other species such as Wild Turkey, Least Flycatcher, Lark Sparrows, Spotted Towhees, Orchard Orioles, and Lazuli Buntings. As we continued north, we had one main target, the Mountain Bluebird. As we were looking for this electric-blue bird we came across another pair of Rock Wrens. After a lot of searching, we finally spotted a female Mountain Bluebird and soon after a male swooped up and perched in the open. As this was one of the most-wanted birds for the group, this was a great way to end the day!
May 29 - Sibley Nature Park, Kimball Bottoms, Menoken Lake, McKenzie Slough, Dewald Slough

The previous day had been a long one and we had to bring our luggage with us, so we started a little later on this morning. After breakfast at the hotel, we made an hour and a half drive to bird along the Missouri River south of Bismarck. The winds had kicked up throughout the morning and we would have to deal with strong winds for most of the next two days. We added quite a few species at our first stop including Common Merganser, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, and Baltimore Oriole, but our two targets (Least Tern and Piping Plover) weren’t around. So we headed a little further south along the river to the Kimball Bottoms. A Piping Plover provided good scope views across the river and two distant Least Terns were also seen. We moved further down the river, but the terns always stayed at a distance. Afterwards, we enjoyed a delicious lunch at Walrus Restaurant in Bismarck before heading east and into the prairie potholes!

On our way to McKenzie Slough, we came across a wet field with many shorebirds. We had our best looks at White-rumped, Semipalmated, Pectoral, and Baird’s Sandpipers! McKenzie Slough was our first real taste of the prairie potholes, and it didn’t disappoint! Lots of Redhead, Ruddy Ducks, Eared and Western Grebes, Franklin’s Gulls, Black and Forster’s Terns, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds made for a great visit. After checking in to our hotel in Steele, we had dinner at Wolff’s Grill and Bar, one of the few restaurants in this area and made a short visit to the nearby Dewald Slough. However, the windy conditions made birding rather difficult, so we headed back to our hotel.
May 30 - Horsehead Lake, Sink Lake, Tappen Slough, Dewald Slough

Storms were moving our way on this morning, but we had some time with calm winds before the weather would arrive. So, we headed up to an area that is good for Nelson’s Sparrow. Many birds on the way slowed us down, but that is a good problem to have! We had our first American Bittern, Clay-colored Sparrow, Willow Flycatcher, and Ferruginous Hawk. We made it to the sparrow spot just before the rain started. Luckily it didn’t take long for the sparrow, and we had great views of one perched up on the fence! We spent the rest of the morning birding from the vehicle while it was raining and spending short periods out of the vehicle when the rain would pause. We had great views of a surprisingly tame American Bittern, several Red-necked Grebes, an up-close Wilson’s Snipe, Marsh Wrens, and many others. After lunch in Pettibone, we birded our way south through the potholes and back towards our hotel. On our way, we found some nice shorebird habitat at Sink Lake and picked up a flock of 35+ Ruddy Turnstones among other shorebirds. We also saw several more Red-necked Grebes and found our only Ring-necked Ducks of the trip.

After a break at the hotel, we went to dinner and then back to Dewald Slough (where we had tried to bird the previous evening). The winds were much calmer, but it didn’t seem to help much in our search for a LeConte’s Sparrow. Luckily, as we were walking back to our vehicle, one started singing! We had long, albeit somewhat distant, scope views of this beautiful sparrow!
Our morning started off with a drive north to one of the best grassland areas in central North Dakota. On our way we couldn't help but stop for a few birds. We finally had a Sedge Wren that cooperated for great looks, happened upon some lekking Sharp-tailed Grouse, and had another American Bittern. Once we arrived at the grassland, we heard a Baird’s Sparrow (rather rare in this area) singing and had a couple Marbled Godwits pass close overhead. At the same time, Chestnut-collared Longspurs displayed nearby and there were two Ferruginous Hawks perched on one fence and one Sharp-tailed Grouse perched on another. We eventually counted three Baird’s Sparrows and had good scope views of one individual. Needless to say, the birding on this morning was great! The rest of our morning was spent unsuccessfully searching for Clark’s Grebe. This species is not typically too difficult to locate, but for some reason we were only seeing Western Grebes. During our search, we did have our best looks at two Red-necked Phalaropes, added another American Bittern, and enjoyed many of the typical pothole species.

After lunch, we started heading back west towards Bismarck, but made a stop at Long Lake NWR to spend more time looking for a Clark’s Grebe. There were many Western Grebes and finally, one Clark’s! We had great looks at quite a few species and added a few new birds for our trip including Bonaparte’s Gull and Bald Eagle.

All in all, we ended our trip with 156 species and had great looks at most of the specialty species of the region. We also had great views of many breeding displays including lekking Sharp-tailed Grouse, rushing Western Grebes, and flight displays of Chestnut-collared Longspur. We also ended up with some great mammal sightings including American Bison, many Pronghorn and White-tailed Deer, American Badger, Black-tailed Prairie Dog towns, and Richardson’s Ground Squirrels on our last evening before checking into our hotel. I’m already looking forward to visiting North Dakota next year!