



Chestnut-collared Longspur

North Dakota

Prairie Birding at Its Best!

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June 1-7, 2025

June 1 – Arrival in Bismarck and Transfer to Dickinson

After our last pickup at the Bismarck airport, we began our tour by driving west for an hour and a half to Dickinson. On the way, we made a stop for some roadside grassland birding. We enjoyed watching our first Upland Sandpipers and Wilson's Phalaropes at the first pond we came across. Many Eastern and Western Kingbirds lined the roadside, and several Horned Larks joined in. It was great to see the namesake "horns" on a couple of the larks! We also enjoyed seeing our first Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows, Bobolinks, and Western Meadowlarks. By the late afternoon, we continued our drive to Dickinson.

June 2 – Little Missouri National Grassland, Medora WTP, Roughrider State Park

Our first morning started off with storms on the horizon. Throughout the morning, we had to deal with a mix of rain and wind, but we were still able to see some great birds while staying in or very close to our vehicle. After turning off the main highway south of Belfield, it didn't take long until we came upon a breeding colony of Lark Buntings. It's always such a joy to watch and listen to these birds as they perform their display flights! A little further in, we came across our first Sharp-tailed Grouse. Our only Long-billed Curlew of the trip also provided nice views, before taking flight to harass a Swainson's Hawk that was passing overhead. Eventually, we made it to our destination, a nice section of grassland habitat. We saw our first Chestnut-collared Longspurs and heard our first Baird's Sparrow. After hearing a couple of Baird's, one finally vocalized closer to the road, and we were able to have nice scope views of this specialty species!



Chestnut-collared Longspur

By mid-morning, we headed back towards Belfield and eventually to the northwest and into another part of Little Missouri National Grassland. It was still cold and windy with some off and on rain, but again, we were able to find quite a few of the grassland species we were looking for. As we drove along the property line of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, we came across some of the park's "wild" horses and our first American Bison. Our first Lark Sparrows flitted along the fence line with a few Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows mixed in. A little further up the road, we came upon our first Loggerhead Shrike. Eventually we reached a large prairie dog colony. Not only did we get to watch the Black-tailed Prairie Dogs, but we also had a couple of Burrowing Owls. On our way out of the grassland, we saw several other species that were new to the list and were able to watch and listen to a Wilson's Snipe as it displayed overhead.



American Pronghorn

After lunch, we spent some time birding around Medora. Our first stop was at the water treatment plant where we had great views of 6 species of swallows including a handful of Violet-greens. Also, an adult male Bullock's Oriole perched out in the open for brief, but good views. Our visit to Roughrider State Park was a little quiet compared to normal, but we did have great looks at a couple of Western Wood-Pewees, our first Red-headed Woodpecker, a curious Red-eyed Vireo, nesting Black-billed Magpies, a couple of American Redstarts, and several other species. It was a great first day of birding, but it was time to head back to Dickinson and get ready for another day of birding in the special grassland habitat of Little Missouri National Grassland.

June 3 – Little Missouri National Grassland

It was a beautiful morning as we headed back west and into the grasslands. As soon as we turned off the highway, we started to spot many of the grassland specialties, but there was one we were still

missing, Sprague's Pipit. As we continued our search for the pipit, many Upland Sandpipers allowed for close views. Our first Mountain Bluebirds kept ahead of the vehicles, all of which were females. Plenty of Chestnut-collared Longspurs and Lark Buntings were also to be seen. As we headed south into another section of the grasslands, we found a place that looked good for pipits. Within a minute of getting out of the car, there it was! We heard one as it performed its flight display and a couple of us were able to watch it as it circled high above us. Better views were desired, but this species is difficult to see well while on the breeding grounds, so being able to watch and listen to it was much appreciated. A little further on, we heard a Baird's Sparrow singing and were able to have better scope views than the previous day. Another Black-tailed Prairie Dog town entertained us, and we enjoyed nice views of several Burrowing Owls.



Upland Sandpiper

After a great morning of grassland birding, we drove to Burning Coal Vein Campground where the somewhat wooded habitat provided a different suite of birds. Another Mountain Bluebird, Yellow-breasted Chat, and a flyover Bald Eagle were among the highlights. We eventually spent some time birding in the Ponderosa Pine habitat nearby and mostly heard but briefly saw a small flock of Red Crossbills and our only Red-breasted Nuthatch of the trip. Throughout the morning, we had seen large flocks of Cedar Waxwings and this area also produced a flock of more than 50.

After another lunch in Belfield, we spent the rest of the afternoon in a different section of the grasslands. More grassland species were seen well, and we saw our first Common Nighthawks of the trip, but one of the main highlights was seeing a Bullsnake! On the last stretch of road we were covering for the day we had great looks at Red-headed Woodpecker and a brief look at a Rock Wren. There was no good habitat around for the wren, so it was interesting to watch it perch on the fence and work its way between open ground patches. It was a great way to end the day!

June 4 – Sibley Nature Park, Kimball Bottoms, MacLean Bottoms, Menoken, McKenzie Slough

After a little later start to the morning and losing an hour (due to a change in time zones) we arrived at Sibley Nature Park. This park protects some great forested habitat along the bank of the Missouri River, just south of Bismarck. As soon as we pulled into the parking lot, we had good views of Eastern Wood-Pewees and Black-capped Chickadees. As we walked through the woodlands out to the river, we picked up many new species for the trip. Chimney Swifts zipped overhead, a Belted Kingfisher rattled as it flew over, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers worked the large cottonwood limbs while Blue Jays perched in the open for nice views. Once we reached the river, we spotted a very distant Piping Plover on one of the sandbars. We could barely make out the details, but it's the only one we saw the whole trip. We added several more species on our walk back and once we arrived in the parking lot we were treated to great views of a Baltimore Oriole.



Black-capped Chickadee

Afterwards, we stopped by Kimball Bottoms where you have great views up and down the river. After a bit of scanning, we found several Least Terns and eventually one perched for scope views. Unfortunately, they were a long way down the river. We also had great views of a Field Sparrow in the same area. A brief stop at the MacLean Bottoms, just a little further south, yielded our only Lazuli Buntings, a singing Blue Grosbeak, and a calling Alder Flycatcher.

After lunch in Bismarck, it was time to continue east into the Prairie Pothole Region! This is one of those regions where every birder should visit at least once. Breeding birds abound and almost everywhere you look, there is something interesting to see. As we made our way toward McKen-

zie Slough on backroads, we picked up our first White-faced Ibis, Franklin's Gulls, lots of Wilson's Phalaropes, and our first White-rumped and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Many Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds and Marsh Wrens were in the cattail marshes along the road. As we arrived at McKenzie Slough we enjoyed many good looks at Eared Grebes, Ruddy Ducks, and Black Terns. A small flock of gulls provided our only California Gulls of the trip. After hearing a Virginia Rail nearby and with some patience, we eventually had good views of one. Afterwards, as we were heading out of the marsh, we heard and then saw our first Sedge Wren of the trip as well. It was time to head to Steele, where we would be staying for the next two nights.



Yellow-headed Blackbird

June 5 – Horsehead Lake Area

After a hotel breakfast, we headed out into the potholes and grasslands close to our hotel. We had a specific location we were planning on visiting first to look for a couple of the specialty breeding sparrow species, but as usual, many other birds slowed us down. The first bird to stop us in our tracks was a singing Dickcissel. We enjoyed great views of one as it belted out its song. Our first Black-crowned Night Herons and Snowy Egrets showed well. Next up were Marsh Wrens, White-rumped Sandpipers, and many Yellow-headed Blackbirds. We eventually had to pull ourselves away and head to our "sparrow spot". Within a couple minutes of arriving, we heard our first LeConte's Sparrow. It took some scanning, but we eventually had great scope views. We were able to spend the next 10 minutes watching two birds; one of which popped up close to us for great looks. While we were watching the LeConte's we started to hear a couple of Nelson's Sparrows singing. We eventually had great scope views of this species as well and on a couple of occasions one perched up right next to the road! Marsh and Sedge Wrens also showed extremely well in this area. On our way back out of this area, we also came across a couple of American Bitterns chasing each other, our only Snow

Goose of the tour, and a surprise Olive-sided Flycatcher! We spent the rest of the morning birding the west side of Horsehead Lake and had our only Long-billed Dowitcher. We were still missing quite a few migrant shorebirds, so when we came across a flooded field on our way back to town, we were happy to add several Pectoral Sandpipers and good looks at many more White-rumped Sandpipers.



LeConte's Sparrow



Marsh Wren

After lunch, we continued birding on the east side of Horsehead Lake. As soon as we arrived at Tappen Slough a couple of Red-necked Grebes showed themselves nicely. And as we drove north, we continued seeing loads of Bobolinks, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and more Red-necked Grebes. At one point, while we were out of our vehicle, we were surrounded by longspurs and a couple perched up very close for amazing views by all. As we continued our loop through the potholes, we continued adding new species. Next up were Common Terns. It was great to be able to compare this species to the nearby Forster's Terns. And, at the next lake we came to, we finally added our only Clark's Grebe of the trip. A couple of male Common Goldeneyes and a Sanderling feeding along the shoreline were also nice bonus birds! By now it was late afternoon and time to head back towards our hotel, but on the way, we added our last bird of the day, a pair of Ring-necked Ducks. As it always is in the Prairie Pothole Region, it was a great day of birding!

June 6 – Horsehead Lake Area and Chase Lake Area

This was our last day of birding on the tour, so we hoped to make the most of it. Unfortunately, when we all met in the lobby for breakfast, we could see it would be an interesting day. Fog had set in and the visibility was very low. Despite the fog, we found many species along the first road we drove and had great looks at Sedge Wren. We had not had great looks at Clay-colored Sparrows at this point, so when we heard a couple, we took some time to get good looks at them. Once we reached the main destination for the morning, we heard a Baird's Sparrow. It didn't take long to spot the bird as it sang from an exposed perch. We had great, albeit foggy, views of this bird for about 10 minutes! A little further on, we came across another Nelson's Sparrow and had nice scope views of this hard-to-find species.



Clay-colored Sparrow

After a great lunch in Pettibone at Harvester's Cafe, we continued birding around the Chase Lake area. We didn't add any new birds throughout the afternoon, but we did have more good looks at many species. One of the highlights was watching a Black Tern on a nest. It's always fun to be able to observe behavior and this tour provided many chances! We eventually added a new species to our trip list when we pulled into our hotel in Bismarck and a House Finch was singing. We ended the tour with a great dinner in Bismarck.

All in all, we recorded 157 species of birds, with great looks at most of them. We also had a long list of mammals and other wildlife and enjoyed seeing American Bison, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Richardson's Ground Squirrel, Franklin's Ground Squirrel among so many others! Birding North Dakota in early June is always a special experience and this year was as good as it gets!



Black Tern