



Yellow-headed Blackbird

North Dakota

Prairie Birding at Its Best!

Tour Leaders: Eric and Rob Ripma

May 26 - June 1, 2026

May 26 – Arrival in Bismarck and Transfer to Dickinson

After picking up most of our group, we headed south to bird along the Missouri River at Sibley Nature Park. This wasn't in our plans, but due to a flight delay for one participant, we had some extra time in Bismarck. It was a hot afternoon, but we enjoyed fantastic looks at Black-headed Grosbeaks, obscured looks at an Ovenbird, many Bank Swallows, and a Hairy Woodpecker at a nesting cavity. Before long it was time to drive back to the airport for our last pickup. Now that we had our whole group together, we started our hour and a half drive west to Dickinson. We made one brief stop at the start of the Enchanted Highway to see their "Geese in Flight" metal sculpture. Of course, we also saw some birds. We added our first Vesper Sparrows, Western Kingbird, and Swainson's Hawks. After checking into our hotel in Dickinson, we enjoyed our first of many dinners together. We were all ready to go out birding the next morning!



Willetts (Western)

May 27 – Little Missouri National Grassland and Roughrider State Park

After an early departure at 5:30 (sunrise here is before 5 am!) we made a short drive to bird along one of many roads through Little Missouri National Grasslands. As soon as we turned onto the road, we started adding many species. A male Northern Pintail and a Wilson's Phalarope were both feeding in a small pond. Slightly further on, we started enjoying the breeding flights and songs of many Lark Buntings. Watching the males flutter up and sing their hearts out is always amazing to watch. Soon after, a Gray Partridge gave our group great views. This introduced species from Europe and parts of Asia can be difficult to see, but we had good luck with this individual. We would eventually see the native Sharp-tailed Grouse along this road too. As we continued, we added several grassland nesting shorebirds such as Upland Sandpiper, Willet, and Marbled Godwit! A Chest-

nut-collared Longspur, one of the targets of this trip, also perched up for nice views. Another specialty, the Baird's Sparrow, was a different story. However, after hearing several, we finally had scope views of a male as it sang its tinkling song.

After a restroom break in town, we visited another section of grasslands north of the interstate. We continued racking up new species. Our first Canvasback and American Wigeon graced one of the ponds. A female Northern Harrier coursed low over the grasslands. And, many Bobolinks sang their bubbly, R2-D2 song. One of two Loggerhead Shrikes we observed during the trip also allowed nice views. As we continued on, we reached our first Black-tailed Prairie Dog town. It's always fun to watch these social mammals and we also enjoyed looks at many Horned Larks! Unfortunately, we couldn't find the Burrowing Owls that typically make this town home. As we continued on through the grassland, we continued having good looks at many of the expected species of the area.

Afterwards, we drove west to Medora for lunch, before driving a short distance to Rough Rider State Park. The wind was really howling at this point in the day, but we tried to make the most of our time. While the park was closed for construction, we picked up most of targets by walking part of the Maah Daah Hey Trail. First up, we had good looks at a Spotted Towhee and then a male Lazuli Bunting perched up and sang for all to see! We also enjoyed good looks at Lark and Chipping Sparrows. Eventually the wind convinced us to wrap up our birding here. After a couple more windy stops, we decided it was time to head back to Dickinson for a break and a delicious dinner.



Lark Bunting

May 28 – Little Missouri National Grassland

As we headed back into the grassland for the morning, we had several targets on our mind. However, the grasslands always provide so many birds that it's difficult to make it to any specific spot. On our first road, we enjoyed good looks at almost 40 species including our first Green-winged Teal, a couple of Upland Sandpipers, lots of Wilson's Phalaropes, many Chestnut-collared Longspurs, gobs of Lark Buntings, and plenty of Bobolinks. Once we reached our destination, we stopped to listen and look for Baird's Sparrow. There was one singing, but it was too distant to see. As we were eating our field breakfast, a Sprague's Pipit began to sing, but unfortunately, it disappeared before we saw it. A little further down the road, we stopped at another prairie dog town and this time we were successful! We enjoyed watching at least 5 Burrowing Owls as they rested and chased each other!

As we started our drive through the grasslands to a patch of Ponderosa Pines we would be birding, Susan spotted a very large raptor. A Golden Eagle! We had great views of this subadult as it struggled to fly into the strong winds. Our first Red-headed Woodpecker also showed along our drive to the pines. No matter how often you see this bird, it's always a stunning sight. Once we reached the pines, we added several new species including Western Wood-Pewee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a heard only Red Crossbill. A nearby campground provided us restrooms and some good birds - always a good combo! A pair of Mountain Bluebirds were a beautiful sight, a singing, Yellow-breasted Chat was much appreciated, and good looks at Northern Yellow Warblers were among the highlights. As we were driving out of the campground, a Red Crossbill began to call, but this time, we had scope views of a young male at the top of a pine. The wind had really kicked up at this point (the theme of our trip), so we began driving toward Medora where we would have lunch. On the way, after a couple of attempts, we came across our only Rock Wren of the trip, but due to the wind, it didn't stick around too long.

With the strong winds, we decided to head back to our hotel for an afternoon break. After our break, we made a stop at Patterson Lake before heading to dinner. The wind was even stronger at this point, but we did find several new species for our trip. Watching Bank Swallows landing on the ground to avoid the wind was a highlight. And, we added Western Grebe, Purple Martins, and our only Eastern Bluebird of the trip. Afterwards, we enjoyed another delicious dinner.

May 29 – Sibley Nature Park, Kimball Bottoms, MacLean Bottoms, Menoken, McKenzie Slough

After an hour and a half drive east, we made it to Bismarck where we had a quick breakfast before continuing onto our first birding stop, Sibley Nature Park. The birding was a bit slow, but we still added several good birds. Our first White-breasted Nuthatches were seen briefly, calling Pine Siskins zipped overhead, and a young male American Redstart flitted through the branches. Once we made it to the river, we had good views of a Clark's Grebe. This was the first time I had seen this species here! Our next stop along the river at Kimball Bottoms didn't produce our hoped-for Piping Plover or Least Tern (we did have a distant sighting), but we had great views of a female Common

Merganser with 10 chicks! As we were watching the mergansers, two Bald Eagles made low passes over the chicks, but when the chicks dove, the eagles continued on their way. We were all happy to see the family stay intact!



Common Merganser with Chicks

Our last stop of the morning was at MacLean Bottoms, just a little further south along the Missouri River. We finally had success on our main targets along the river. As soon as we arrived, we spotted our first Least Tern of the trip resting on a sandbar. After enjoying the Least Tern and spending more time scanning, we spotted our first Piping Plover too! We eventually counted two Piping Plovers and three Least Terns. After a stop at The Walrus for lunch, we continued east towards Steele where we would be spending the next two nights. On the way, we birded around Menoken and McKenzie Slough. Around Menoken we saw our first American Avocet and a pair of Hooded Mergansers. At the flats south of town, we enjoyed a large flock of Franklin's Gulls! We estimated over 450 of these beautiful prairie-breeding gulls resting in a small marsh. As we were heading over towards McKenzie Slough, we came across our first White-rumped and Semipalmated Sandpipers - it was a great view for distinguishing these two similar species! We also enjoyed our first bit of prairie pothole birding and enjoyed many Yellow-headed Blackbirds and some American White Pelicans. McKenzie Slough was also quite productive for our group, and we had great views of many species of ducks, Eared and Western Grebes, White-faced Ibis, and much more! However, it was time to head to our hotel and have dinner before preparing for our full day of birding this magical area!

May 30 – Horsehead Lake Area

Our first morning in central North Dakota started out rainy and windy. Due to the weather, we chose to skip looking for a couple of sparrows and look for waterbirds that are less affected by the

weather, instead. Despite the weather, we ended up having a great morning! As we drove north towards Horsehead Lake, the largest lake in the area, we made many roadside stops for an assortment of birds. First up, we stopped at a flooded field that had a number of shorebirds including many White-rumped Sandpipers, several Semipalmated Sandpipers, a couple of Wilson's Snipes, and a few Wilson's Phalaropes. As we continued north, we started counting all of the Ring-necked Pheasants we were seeing. Almost every field had at least a few! Plenty of ducks and lots of Yellow-headed Blackbirds kept us entertained at every marsh. Once we reached the western side of Horsehead Lake, we picked up a very cooperative American Bittern in one of the marshes. It stuck around for over five minutes and serenaded us with its "thunder pumping" vocalization. It was incredible to watch!



American Bittern

As we continued birding the marshes north of Horsehead Lake, the birds continued to put on a show. Our first Red-necked Grebes allowed for nice views. This species breeds in a limited range in the lower 48, so seeing breeding pairs is always a highlight. We continued watching many marsh species and while we were driving out, Susan spotted something different. A Least Bittern! This species is rather rare in this area, so it was great to watch and for Judy to get photos of. Afterwards, we made a brief stop to look for Nelson's Sparrows, but the weather was unrelenting and we headed for lunch at Harvester's Cafe instead.

After lunch, we continued birding through the marshes and grasslands just east of Horsehead Lake. We continued enjoying many ducks and marsh birds including several Wilson's Snipes perched on fence posts, more Red-necked Grebes, our first Common Tern, and a roadblock of American White Pelicans (in addition to several other species). As we birded our way south towards the interstate, we spotted a Least Tern flying over. Luckily, it stuck around and fed in a pond next to the road, so

we all had good views. This species is rather rare in this county, so it was great to be able to get a few photos! Further south, we made a check of McPhail Slough which had a little bit of shorebird habitat. The birding was difficult in the 35+ mph wind, but we were able to add several shorebirds including Pectoral Sandpiper and Dunlin among the more numerous White-rumped Sandpipers and Wilson's Phalaropes. Afterwards, we made a stop at Tappen Slough as we made our way back to the interstate and to our hotel. We added more good looks at Red-necked Grebes, including a pair displaying! A good number of Western Grebes with some on nests and many Eared Grebes made for a good, quick stop. With the wind still howling, we headed back to our hotel for a short break before another dinner at Lakeside Family Bar & Grill, one of only a few restaurants in this area of North Dakota.



Wilson's Snipe

May 31 – Horsehead Lake Area, McKenzie Slough, Menoken Area

This was our last day of birding on the tour, so we started out by looking for a couple of the hard-to-find sparrows of the region. Once we made it to our first stop and got out, we knew it was going to be difficult. The wind was blowing even harder this morning. We heard both of our targets, Nelson's and LeConte's Sparrows, but with the strong wind, we barely got a glimpse of the LeConte's and didn't have any visual of the Nelson's. However, thanks to the positive attitude of our group, we made the most of our morning. A presumably nesting American Avocet didn't back down from our vehicles and we didn't linger long, but it was interesting to watch its distraction display! A little further on, we had our best looks of a pair of Buffleheads and many Orchard Orioles. As we got up to some more open water, we enjoyed watching 5 Black-crowned Night Herons feeding and flying alongside the road. A Clark's Grebe also popped up nearby and allowed our closest views of this species on the trip.



American Avocet

The wind seemed to be calming down a little - it was still windy, but not nearly as strong as earlier in the morning, so we drove over to another good spot for the sparrows. On the way, we were lucky to watch another American Bittern “thunder pumping”! We had a great trip for American Bitterns. As soon as we reached the sparrow spot, a Nelson’s started vocalizing. After partial views by a few in the group, one eventually perched up for wonderful views. As we were celebrating our success, a LeConte’s started singing nearby. With a little coaxing, it eventually popped up on a nearby bush!



Nelson's Sparrow



LeConte's Sparrow

We continued birding more grasslands and marshes for the rest of the morning with plenty more good looks at the many species in the area. We even saw another Nelson's Sparrow and heard another LeConte's. After lunch, we birded our way back to Bismarck. While we didn't add many species, we did enjoy more looks at many of the same species. Loads of ducks, some Snow Geese, hundreds of Franklin's Gulls, and a couple of American Bitterns in flight were the highlights. We arrived back in Bismarck in the mid-afternoon for a break before our final dinner together. Luckily, everyone had afternoon flights the following day, so we set another meeting time and had one final morning of birding!

June 1 – MacLean Bottoms

We only had a couple of hours for birding on this morning, and we still hadn't seen a Sedge Wren, so we headed down to MacLean Bottoms. On our way down into the bottoms, we stopped in a small draw and picked up many breeding passerines. The highlight was a hybrid Indigo x Lazuli Bunting! It's always fun to see this hybrid combo. Slightly further down the road, we heard several Sedge Wrens and within a minute of getting out of the vehicles, we had good views of a couple of individuals. Our next stop was along the Missouri River which was quite productive. We had good looks at five Least Terns and three Piping Plovers! We spent the rest of the morning birding from the vehicles as we drove through the rest of the property. We enjoyed seeing our last Bobolinks, Grasshopper Sparrows, Red-headed Woodpecker, Northern Harriers, and many other species. Unfortunately, it was time to get into flight mode and make sure everyone arrived at the airport with plenty of time.

All in all, we recorded 155 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, Rich-

ardson's Ground Squirrel, Pronghorn, and Red Foxes among so many others! Birding North Dakota in the late spring is always a special experience, and while the weather wasn't cooperative this year, the birding was great! Also, a big thanks to our group! Everyone had such a positive attitude and were such delightful people to spend a week of birding with!



Blue-winged Teal



Wilson's Phalarope