1.5.2.3.1 Birding by Park Areas

Nebraska’s state parks, state recreation areas and wildlife management areas offer wonderful birding opportunities. Read on to see what you might find at Nebraska’s state parks.

**Chadron State Park**

This park lies in the heart of the Pine Ridge, which is a landscape of escarpments dominated by ponderosa pines. The landscape boasts a tremendous variety birds including a number of western species whose range barely extends into the state. Resident or summer breeding species which can be found in the park include pygmy nuthatches, violet-green swallows, western tanagers, “Audubon’s” yellow-rumped warblers and mountain bluebirds. Seek out the Black Hills overlook and scan dead snags along the way for these species. The Spotted Tail Hiking Trail extends for eight miles from the park boundary through the Nebraska National Forest, and the Black Hills Overlook trail extends for four miles from the park campground.

**Fort Robinson State Park**

This park is laced with hiking trails offering birding opportunities, including chances of seeing bird species found in the western United States. Search rocky escarpments for nesting rock wrens, golden eagles and prairie falcons. Watch for rufous and broad-tailed hummingbirds from July until September. The “white-winged” subspecies of Dark-eyed Juncos breeds in the Pine Ridge and can be found in the park all year. “Oregon” and “slate-colored” races of Dark-eyed Junco common in the winter. The White River and Soldier Creek pass through the park and are lined with woodlands which attract passerines including Bullock’s Orioles and Lazuli Buntings. Smiley Canyon can be a productive birding area which can be accessed by the old road up the Pine Ridge escarpment just west of Fort Robinson State Park. There was an extensive ponderosa pine burn in this area and cavity nesting species are frequently observed here. Spotted towhees and other understory species can be found in scrubby vegetation that has grown up post fire.

**Gilbert Baker Wildlife Management Area**

This is a reliable location in the Pine Ridge that offers opportunities to see many western species. Look for rock wrens and Say’s phoebes near buttes and rock outcrops. Spring migrants occasionally include green-tailed towhees and MacGillivray’s warblers. White-throated swifts can be found on sheer cliff faces., Lewis's woodpeckers are a possibility, too. Monroe Canyon (part of Gilbert Baker) also supports some distinctly western species, such as Townsend's solitaires (winter), cordilleran flycatchers, western tanagers, plumbeous vireos, violet-green swallows and red crossbill. Golden eagles and prairie falcons nest in the area. Clark’s nutcracker is a rare winter visitor.

**Walgren Lake Wildlife Management Area**

This small lake can attract a variety of migrants and summer resident and also has a track record of generating rarities. Nebraska’s first Black-headed Gull was found here and Sabine’s Gull and Townsend’s Warbler have also been recorded here.

**Box Butte Reservoir State Recreation Area**

This is an outstanding birding area in the Panhandle. Rock wrens, Say's phoebes and ferruginous hawks are among the more interesting western species, and breeders include western kingbird, eastern bluebird, western wood-pewee, and lazuli bunting and wood thrush. This can be a productive are for migrant passerines during spring and fall migration. The lake can be productive for waterbirds such as western and eared grebe during migration. Occasionally lake drawdowns may create mudflats which may be attractive to shorebirds such as American Avocet, Long-billed Curlew and Baird’s Sandpiper.

**Ash Hollow State Historical Park**

This historically interesting park has a wide variety of habitats, such as exposed rocky bluffs that are used by great horned owls, American kestrels and sometimes prairie falcons. Bobolinks and eastern meadowlarks can be found in thewet meadows of the North Platte River valley during spring and summer Blue grosbeaks and spotted towhees can be found in shrubby areas that extend up through narrow canyons. Riparian woodlands can be productive for migrant and resident passerines.

**Chet and Jane Fleisbach Wildlife Management Area**

This wildlife management area preserves one of the best saline marshes in the north Platte River Valley. It is a stopover point for migrant waterfowl and shorebirds during migration. Species such as Cinnamon Teal, Sandhill Crane, American avocets and Wilson's phalaropes nest here on occasion.

**Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area and Buffalo Creek Wildlife Management Area**

The rugged terrain and ponderosa pines provide habitat for western bird species. A stop at the visitor center’s bird feeders is a recommended and is where red crossbill, red-breasted and pygmy nuthatches, Cassin’s Finch and increasingly lesser goldfinch can be seenSpotted Towhees and Blue-gray gnatcatchers are breeding species in the Wildcat Hills areaSteller lays are irregular visitors. Common poorwills can be heard singing after dusk and violet-green swallows are occasionally seen. Several raptors, such as golden eagles and prairie falcons, are good possibilities.

**Oliver Reservoir State Recreation Area**

This reservoir is an excellent birding location and has been described as a “migrant trap par excellence.” It attracts many migrants during spring and fall, especially warblers. Wilson's snipe have been reported to nest here (at the west end marshes), and a local population of song sparrows is the only one known for western Nebraska. Dusty flycatchers and Hammond’s flycatchers have been observed during migration. Cassin’s vireo, western and eastern wood pewees, black-headed grosbeaks and common yellowthroat are found. Ruddy ducks, pie-billed and eared grebes and American white pelicans are found with belted kingfishers and yellow-headed blackbirds.

**Merritt Reservoir Wildlife Management Area**

This reservoir attracts migrant waterfowl, pelicans, western grebes and other species. Merritt is a post-breeding staging area for grebes from August into October. Common loons may be seen during migration and occasionally non-breeders are seen in summer. Trumpeter swans may be seen in the winter.

**Smith Falls State Park**

Smith Falls State Park is in the heart of the Central Niobrara River Valley. Five distinct biotas merge in this region, providing birders the opportunity to view birds that find habitats in pine forests, boreal woodlands, deciduous forests and grasslands all in one place. Nearly 270 species of birds have been reported for this area. Eastern species include wood ducks, green herons, black-billed cuckoo and red-eyed vireos. American redstarts and black-and-white warblers nest here. Western species include red-breasted nuthatch and lazuli buntings.

**Lake McConaughy and Lake Ogallala State Recreation Areas**

Lake McConaughy is the state’s largest water body and, together with Lake Ogallala, is one the state’s best birding areas. Lake McConaughy attracts large numbers of waterbirds during migration and in winter. In fall, particulary, western grebes can number into the ten of thousands. Careful observers with spotting scopes might be able to pick out a Clark’s grebe which regularly occurs here. Sandy shoreline are attractive to gulls, terns and shorebirds. The state and federally threatened Piping Plover and the state and federally endangered Interior least tern nest on the sandy shore. Their nests are protected by fencing erected by Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District. Lake Ogallala and the Kingsley Dam spillway attract excellent diversity and number of waterbirds and the potential for rarities is always high. In fall and winter, Trumpeter Swan, Barrow’s Goldeneye, long-tailed duck and all three scoters are possibilities. Eagle and gull watching can be outstanding in winter and early spring. The Lake Ogallala campground can be productive for migrant passerines in spring and fall. The eagle viewing building operated by Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation Distriction is open during winter. Dozens and occasionally more than one hundred bald eagles are present and can be viewed at close distances as they feed in the dam spillway.

**Sutherland Reservoir State Recreation Area**

This reservoir can be productive for waterbirds during migration and winter. Ten gull species have been observed here including rarities such as Thayer's, glaucous, great and lesser black-backed, and even Ross's gull. There are often large flocks of wintering waterfowl and may include red-breasted merganser and Barrow’s goldeneye. American white pelicans, double-created cormorants and great blue herons regularly winter at the Gerald Gentleman’s power plant’s cooling pond located on the east side of the reservoir. During the winter of 2014-2015, a brown pelican winter here. Bald eagles are found in numbers here during winter here.

**Enders Reservoir State Recreation Area**

Enders Reservoir is a large tract of public land that has a combination of woodlands, shortgrass, mixed-grass and sagebrush prairie. Frenchman Creek flows through woodlands above the reservoir and provides opportunities for finding migrating songbirds. Mudflats on the upper end when the water levels are down provide good shorebird habitat. Look for American avocets and white-faced ibis during migration. Rock wrens can be found on rocky outcrops along the trail road. Gulls should be present during migration, as well as eared and western grebes. Golden and bald eagles have been occasionally seen.

**Rock Creek Lake State Recreation Area**

This 54-acre reservoir attracts ducks, shorebirds and other water birds during both spring and fall. It also attracts many passerine migrants, especially in autumn. Burrowing owls have been seen here. The nearby fish hatchery often attracts ospreys.

**Swanson Reservoir Wildlife Management Area**

Swanson Reservoir attracts many migrant and wintering waterbirds. When lake levels are low, the upper end of the reservoir can be productive for shorebirds. Snowy and Piping Plover and Buff-breasted Sandpiper have recently been seen here. Shrubby thickets around the lake can be reliable for Field Sparrow, Bell’s Vireo and Blue Grosbeak. **Keller School Land WMA and Keller Park State Recreation Area**

Keller Park State Recreation Area serves as an excellent headquarters for birding the central Niobrara Valley. These areas consist of native prairie, wooded canyons, creeks and ponds. The ponds attract ducks, eagles, and other water birds, the prairies support grassland sparrows, and the mixed wooded habitats have a variety of both coniferous and deciduous forest birds including wild turkeys, scarlet tanagers and American redstarts.

**Calamus Reservoir State Recreation Area and Wildlife Management Area**

The north end of the lake has a pull off to watch bald eagles. A pair has consistently nested for several years. Additionally, look for puddle ducks, especially during spring migration. Wading birds such as great blue herons, black-crowned night herons and American bitterns are present during warmer months. Wetland-edge passerines such as yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds, marsh wrens, common yellowthroats and swamp sparrows can be found. When water is standing on the meadows, look for willets, yellowlegs and other shorebirds feeding. Western Grebes, Ospreys and American white pelicans are common during migration.

**Fort Kearny State Recreational Area**

This state recreation area is a great place to view sandhill cranes in the spring. The hike/bike trail is a mile east of the Fort and is a well maintained, handicapped-accessible trail across the Platte River on a former railroad bridge. Cranes can be watched arriving and leaving the river in the early morning and late evening, late February through early April. From the bridge over the river, there are opportunities to see many bird species throughout the year including bald eagles, geese and ducks in the winter. Woodland habitats provide opportunities for passerines.

**Johnson Lake State Recreational Area**

Another large reservoir with small park areas. The best birding is in late fall, winter and early spring. It can be productive for for gulls, waterfowl, cormorants, eagles, loons and grebes.

**Mormon Island State Recreational Area**

This area is just off I-80 and attracts large concentrations of waterfowl and shorebirds during the spring migration, primarily March through June. Because of its depth, the main lake sometimes hosts loons, pelicans, mergansers and a variety of grebes. Sandhill cranes will be in the area from March through April. The slough running through the SRA is a good place to search for Wilson snipe and many other birds. The nature trail in the northeast portion of the SRA can be productive for migrant passerines in spring and fall.

**Ashfall State Historical Park**

The area is mostly range country, with an opportunity to view many grassland species. Listen for the “wolf whistle” of the upland sandpipers.

**Gavin's Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake State Recreation Area.**

Birding from the dam and near the dam spillway should offer views of gulls, waterfowl and other birds including numerous bald eagles during migration and winter. Some rarer gull species such as Iceland, lesser black-backed, Sabine’s, mew and Thayer’s have been sighted from October through December. Rarities such as harlequin duck, red-necked grebe, Ross’s Gull, black-legged kittiwke, pomarine jaeger and red-breasted merganser have been found here.

**Niobrara State Park**

A bird list encompassing the park and surrounding areas includes nearly 300 species. Several vistas overlook the Missouri and Niobrara rivers, providing opportunities with a spotting scope. Wooded rolling hills provide habitat for bird such as the whip-poor-wills, woodpeckers and warblers. Both bald eagles and ospreys are seasonally present. Sandbars along the Missouri River provide foraging and nesting habitat for shorebirds.

**Ponca State Park**

A bird list of nearly 300 species is reported for the park and surrounding area. In the spring, woodlands come alive with sounds and sights of migrant and resident songbirds. During peak migration (late April and early May) the park attracts both amateur and experienced bird watchers. Warblers, scarlet tanagers, northern orioles, red-breasted grosbeaks, indigo buntings and ruby-throated hummingbirds are just a few of the highlights. Look for tree swallows or eastern bluebirds using bluebird nesting boxes, bank swallows on river banks and cliff swallows on the limestone cliffs at the boat ramp. In the woods look for black-billed cuckoos, red-bellied woodpeckers, eastern wood pewees, ovenbirds and Carolina wrens. In fall, migrating ducks, geese and other birds are found. In winter, the park is home to bald eagles seen roosting and soaring over the river. Here the Missouri River is still unchanneled so sandbars offer refuge for shorebirds, including the state and federally threatened Piping Plover. A Missouri National Recreational River Resource and Education Center provides information on river ecology and associated animal life. The park offers some guided birding outings, particularly during the spring waterfowl migration.

**Pelican Point State Recreation Area**

This is a good place to see migratory and breeding bird species including warblers, vireos, thrushes, orioles, flycatchers, woodpeckers and other passerines, as well as larger birds that tend to follow the river during migration.

**Schramm Park State Recreation Area and Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium**

The oak-hickory forests which cover the platte river bluffs provide excellent opportunities to see migrant passerines in spring and fall. Schramm is one of the better areas during warbler migration, with the peak in May. Schramm Park offers five miles of trails, as well as an educational center with an aquarium of native fishes. Whip-poor-wills can be heard here, and the otherwise rare Kentucky warbler is a regular summer resident.

**Branched Oak Lake State Recreation Area**

This large reservoir attracts common waterbirds but also is a hotspot for rare loons, grebes, ducks and gulls. Some of the more notable rarities found here include Yellow-billed, red-throated and pacific loons, red-necked grebe and black-headed and ross’s gull. Vast flocks of snow geese visit in early March, as well as Canada and greater white-fronted geese. Bald eagles are common during the spring when the ice is breaking up and ospreys may also be seen on migration. Shorebirds can occur in numbers when the lake is low. The brushy vegetation supports wintering American tree sparrows and Harris's sparrows among many others. Look for tree swallows and eastern bluebirds at the bluebird boxes.

**Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area**

This WMA has both a lake and good quality upland prairie. Greater prairie-chickens are local residents, and two permanent blinds are located on the hilltop around a traditional lek. Mid-March to mid-April is the best time to view prairie chickens, but plan to be in the blind at daybreak to avoid flushing the birds. Be prepared to watch their mating dance and listen to their loud booming calls. Observers are encouraged to contact the Commission for the latest information on whether prairie-chickens are being regularly sighted.

**Eugene T. Mahoney State Park**

This park overlooks the Platte River, and is primarily covered with riparian deciduous forest. There is a tall observation tower built among a stand of bur oaks that overlooks the river, as well as a six-mile network of trails perfect for birding. This park is a good site for eastern woodland species such as eastern flycatchers, blue-gray gnatcatchers, ruby-crowned kinglets and eastern wood-pewees. This park offers opportunities to view migrating warblers during migration, primarily in May. It has an excellent population of eastern bluebirds and both scarlet and summer tanagers may be found in th park in summer.

**Indian Cave State Park**

This park boasts the Nebraska’s largest public tract of oak-hickory forest. It is not uncommon for an experienced birder to see or hear 100 species in one day in the spring. The park borders the Missouri River, which serves as a migration corridor. This park is known for the warbler migration occurring principally in May. Breeding species include summer and scarlet tanagers, Acadian flycatchers, Northern Parula, Kentucky warbler and chuck-will's-widows. Cerulean and Yellow-throated Warblers are very rare, here. Pileated woodpeckers have nested here in recent years, and this is one of the few places in Nebraska to find them..

**Pawnee State Recreation Area**

This large reservoir attracts many waterbirds during migration and into winter until it freezes. Like Branched Oak Lake just a few miles north, Pawnee Lake has a history of producing rarities.

**Pawnee Prairie Wildlife Management Area**

Only two miles from the Kansas border, this wildlife management area has prairie, woodlands, ponds and creeks. It is a place to find northern mockingbirds and Carolina wrens. This is also a great location to find upland sandpiper, loggerhead shrikes and greater prairie-chickens. Listen in early mornings or late evenings from mid-March to mid-April to locate prairie-chicken leks. There are no permanent blinds at this location.

**Platte River State Park**

This park offers opportunities to see woodland species. The trail along Stone Creek is the most reliable place in Nebraska to hear and see Louisiana Waterthrush. During May, migrant warblers are numerous. Both scarlet and summer tanagers are regularly found in this park. There are 10 miles of hiking trails and two observation towers.

**Medicine Creek State Recreation Area**

This reservoir and surrounding area attracts mallards and Canada geese and other waterfowl year round. Bald eagles and ospreys are occasionally found here. Pelicans and cormorants are expected seasonally. Exposed mudflat during low water periods attracts shorebirds. Look for songbirds in the woodlands around the campground. Grasslands around the reservoir will have a variety of grassland birds like dickcissels and lark sparrows.