
GUIDE TO BIRDING IN TENNESSEE



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GUIDE TO BIRDING IN TENNESSEE



CONTENTS

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 2 | WELCOME
Tennessee: Birding in Perfect Harmony | 18 | MIDDLE TENNESSEE
Middle Tennessee: A Diversity of Birds & Habitats |
| 3 | RESPONSIBLE BIRDING
Code of Birding Ethics | 21 | EAST TENNESSEE
East Tennessee: Scratching the Surface of Birding Diversity |
| 4 | BIRDING & ACCESSIBILITY
Birding & Accessibility At Tennessee State Parks | 24 | SEVEN ISLANDS STATE BIRDING PARK
Restoring Native Ecosystems |
| 6 | WEST TENNESSEE
Birding in the Subtle Beauty of West Tennessee | 27 | SEASONAL BIRD-WATCHING HIGHLIGHTS IN TENNESSEE
Interesting Birds to See Seasonally |
| 10 | REELFOOT LAKE
Reelfoot Lake: A Natural Wonder | 30 | AERIAL INSECTIVORES
Conservation Highlight: More Bugs Equals More Birds |
| 12 | MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY
Mississippi Flyway: North America's Migration & Conservation Corridor | 32 | FESTIVALS
Tennessee Birding Festivals & Events |
| 15 | TENNESSEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
A Haven for Birds; Heaven for Birders | 33 | CONTRIBUTORS |



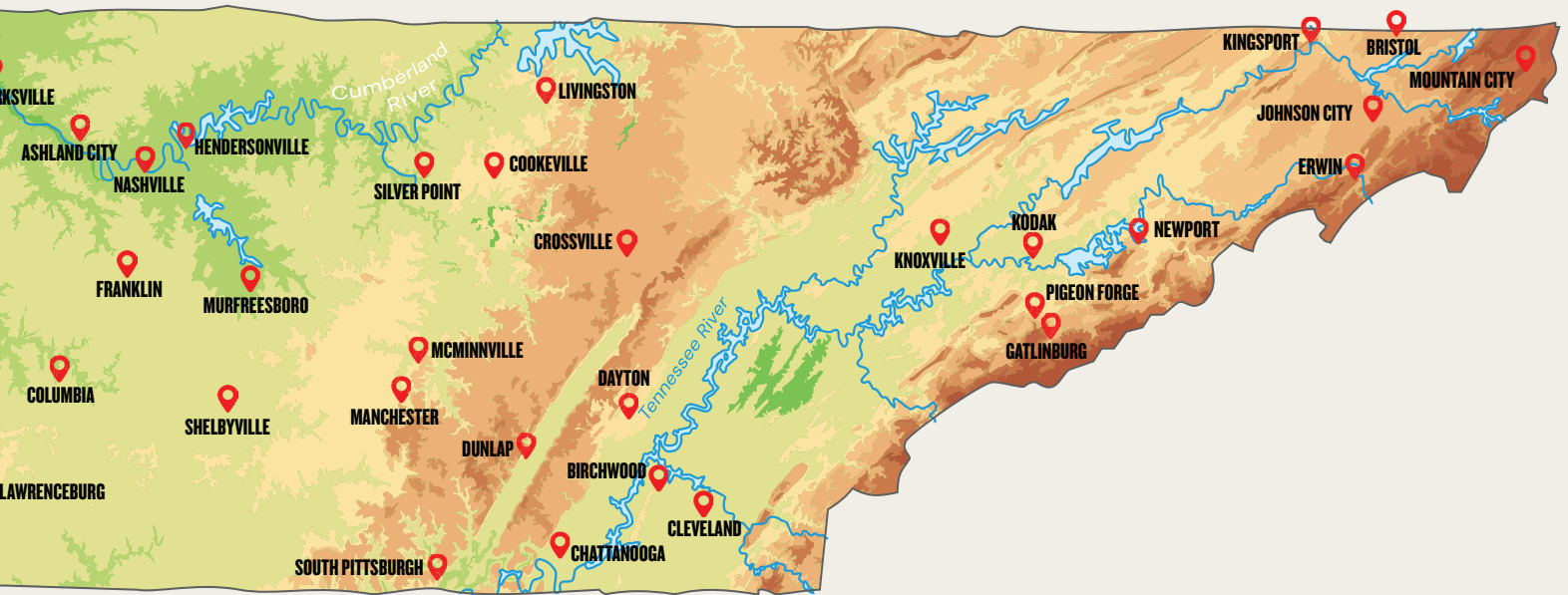


Image by Graham Gerdeman

American Goldfinch



TENNESSEE: BIRDING IN PERFECT HARMONY



Tennessee is a place like no other, and we're thrilled to share our great outdoors with you through this birding guide. Whether you're a seasoned birder or just starting out, Tennessee offers endless opportunities to discover the wonders of bird-watching.

From the wetlands of Reelfoot Lake to the breathtaking views along the Tennessee River, our state is home to diverse wildlife and some of the most sought-after bird species in the country. We're proud to offer off-road wheelchairs in 22 Tennessee State Parks, making birding more accessible than ever and allowing everyone to experience our stunning parks, rivers and nature reserves.

Tennessee's commitment to preserving natural habitats ensures that bird lovers can enjoy an incredible variety of species year-round. Whether

you're exploring the scenic mountain ranges of the Great Smoky Mountains and Cherokee National Forest, venturing along rivers like the Duck River or the mighty Mississippi, or visiting one of our National Wildlife Refuges, there's no shortage of exceptional birding opportunities.

While you're here, we encourage you to soak in the beauty of our state, hike our scenic trails, and immerse yourself in the charm of our small towns and vibrant cities. Tennessee is known for its unmatched hospitality, and we hope you experience that spirit in every corner of the state.

Happy birding, and we look forward to welcoming you to Tennessee — where every season offers a new adventure, and where a trip always Sounds Perfect!

Warm regards,

Mark Ezell
Commissioner
Tennessee Department of Tourist Development

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RESPONSIBLE BIRDING: CODE OF BIRDING ETHICS

Bird-watching is a wonderful activity for people of all ages, backgrounds and lifestyles. To ensure that everyone enjoys birding, follow some simple guidelines for responsible birding, as set out by the American Birding Association.

RESPECT AND PROMOTE BIRDS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

- Support the conservation of birds and their habitats. Engage in and promote bird-friendly practices whenever possible, such as keeping cats and other domestic animals indoors or controlled, acting to prevent window strikes, maintaining safe feeding stations, landscaping with native plants, drinking shade-grown coffee, and advocating for conservation policies. Be mindful of any negative environmental impacts of your activities, including contributing to climate change. Try to reduce or offset such impacts.
- Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger. Be particularly cautious around active nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display sites and feeding sites. Limit the use of recordings and other audio methods of attracting birds, particularly in heavily birded areas, for species that are rare in the area, and for species that are threatened or endangered. Always exercise caution and restraint when photographing, recording, or otherwise approaching birds.
- Minimize habitat disturbance. Consider the benefits of staying on trails, preserving snags and similar practices.

RESPECT AND PROMOTE THE BIRDING COMMUNITY AND ITS INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

- Be an exemplary ethical role model by following this Code and leading by example. Always bird and report with honesty and integrity.

- Respect the interests, rights, and skill levels of fellow birders, as well as people participating in other outdoor activities. Freely share your knowledge and experience and be especially helpful to beginning birders.
- Share bird observations freely, provided such reporting would not violate other sections of this Code, as birders, ornithologists, and conservationists derive considerable benefit from publicly available bird sightings.
- Approach instances of perceived unethical birding behavior with sensitivity and respect; try to resolve the matter in a positive manner, keeping in mind that perspectives vary. Use the situation as an opportunity to teach by example and to introduce more people to this Code.
- In group birding situations, promote the group's knowledge of the practices in this Code and ensure that the group does not unduly interfere with others using the same area.

RESPECT AND PROMOTE THE LAW AND THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS

- Never enter private property without the landowner's permission. Respect the interests of and interact positively with people living in the area where you are birding.
- Familiarize yourself with and follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing activities at your birding location. In particular, be aware of regulations related to birds, such as disturbance of protected nesting areas or sensitive habitats, and the use of audio or food lures.


Learn more on the American Birding Association website at aba.org.

BIRDING & ACCESSIBILITY AT TENNESSEE STATE PARKS





Brown-headed Cowbird at Seven Islands State Birding Park

Tennessee State Parks are renowned for their breathtaking natural beauty, preserved historic sites, and stunning scenery, attracting millions of visitors each year. To ensure that Tennessee State Parks serve everyone, park employees are striving to identify and eliminate barriers that limit access to enjoying the natural, cultural, and recreational offerings at the parks.


While you can enjoy birding at any State Park in Tennessee, the following parks offer wheelchair-friendly paved trails and overlooks that provide fantastic bird-watching trail opportunities for individuals with varying types of mobility needs. Parks that offer all-terrain wheelchairs (by reservation) are identified by this icon: 

EAST TENNESSEE


Booker T. Washington State Park (Chattanooga, Tenn.) has an ADA-compliant accessible trail with an accessible viewing platform that offers a great vantage point for bird-watching on Chickamauga Lake. 


Cove Lake State Park (Caryville, Tenn.) has a 3.8-mile paved loop trail around Cove Lake and a wildlife viewing platform, which allows for fantastic viewing of wading birds and waterfowl. 

Red Clay State Historic Park (Cleveland, Tenn.) was the last seat of the Cherokee Nation before the 1838 enforcement of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 by the US military. This historic park includes a paved

interpretive trail and connecting flat, easy trails where you can observe birds in open woods, fields, and wetland habitats and learn about the history of the area. 


MIDDLE TENNESSEE

Cedars of Lebanon State Park (Lebanon, Tenn.) offers great opportunities to see and hear birds in open woods and field habitat along the 0.6-mile Cave Creek Trail and other easily walkable and accessible areas around the Nature Center. During breeding season, Prairie Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats and a plethora of sparrows can be found in the glades and field areas. All three species of nightjars also occur on the park. 


Cumberland Mountain State Park (Crossville, Tenn.) includes the half-mile Byrd Lake Trail with easy views of Byrd Lake. This walk is especially nice during spring migration. 


Edgar Evins State Park (Silver Point, Tenn.) is located on the shores of Center Hill Lake. Visitors may find at least three species of owl, bald eagles and many forest songbird species, including Wood Thrush and Eastern Wood-Pewee. There is lakeshore access to view waterfowl, and pontoon boat tours are offered in the spring through fall seasons.

WEST TENNESSEE

Chickasaw State Park (Henderson, Tenn.) is located on some of the highest terrain in West Tennessee. The Lake Placid boardwalk offers fantastic bird-watching opportunities, and guests can enjoy staying in the park's CCC-era cabins. 

Middle Fork Bottoms State Park (Humbolt, Tenn.) features a 4-mile paved trail with several bridges and viewing platforms, as well as five lakes, multiple wetland and prairie areas, woods, and a restored bottomland habitat.

Paris Landing State Park (Buchanan, Tenn.) offers comfortable accommodations in the lodge with easy views of the Tennessee River, which is dammed to form Kentucky Lake. This park is especially great for winter birding! 

Pinson Mounds State Archaeological Park (Pinson, Tenn.) is a national historic landmark that features 15 historic Native American mounds. The park features three wheelchair-friendly paved trails and a boardwalk that allows visitors to see the native flora and fauna of the cypress swamp and Forked Deer River. 

BIRDING FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED & NEURODIVERSE

Birding is a very inclusive activity; virtually anyone with an interest in bird life can get involved, with various resources and facilities available.

Those with impaired or no vision tend to bird “by ear,” listening for the distinct calls of various species. If vision is low, there are ways to maximize the potential of spotting birds, including your orientation with regard to the sun; staying still and watching for movement; using a digital camera with a zoom instead of binoculars, which create a narrow field of view; and asking sighted birding friends to assist, using things like laser pointers (these must be used responsibly — they are never to be pointed directly at birds) or just standing nearby and following their line of vision.

Neurodiverse individuals are also able to customize their birding experience to make it more comfortable. Things like using headphones that block out background noise make it easier to focus on bird sounds; choosing quieter birding locations; and creating checklists and schedules can help greatly, among other things.

There are several resources available for accessible birding. The [Merlin](#) app is great for those with hearing

and/or visual impairments, and the [Birdability](#) website has a wealth of information and resources.

Discover the accessible features for each state park on the Tennessee State Parks website at [TNStateParks.com](#).

Note: Birding can be done wherever you are; if you are not able to access state parks, look for local parks and waterways where bird life can be seen, or even spend some time in your backyard to catch a glimpse of some local avian friends.

SEVEN ISLANDS STATE BIRDING PARK

Seven Islands State Birding Park is a pristine birding destination with more than 220 species of birds sighted. The park is located along the banks of the French Broad River outside of Knoxville, Tenn. This peninsula of land features more than 9 miles of natural trails, rolling hills, and views of the Great Smoky Mountains.

Seven Islands is located along the migratory path of many bird species, and during the breeding season, birds can be found nesting at the refuge. Easily heard singing in the summer are Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting. In winter, hundreds of sparrows can be found, especially Field, Savannah, Song, Swamp, White-throated and White-crowned. Several old barns on the property offer refuge for Barn Owls.

Accessibility facilities are available to those with mobility needs at Seven Islands State Birding Park. The Interpretive Exhibit at Bluebird Barn offers a wheelchair-accessible experience that explores the diverse bird species within the park. The ADA-compliant Bob White Accessible Trail is also a great feature of Seven Islands, with almost 1 mile of paved pathway that crosses the French Broad River, where you can see wading birds and other wildlife.

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Wood Thrush

BIRDING IN THE SUBTLE BEAUTY OF WEST TENNESSEE

By Bob Ford



A landscape of subtle beauty, delineated by the Mississippi and Tennessee Rivers, West Tennessee provides resident and migratory birds the habitats they need.

MEMPHIS REGION

Downtown Memphis offers a range of birding experiences that include everything from watching the **Mississippi River** to hiking old-growth forest.

Tom Lee Park

Tom Lee Park on the **Mississippi River** offers beautiful art and walking trails, as well as an opportunity to watch for resident or migrating birds. Purple Martins pass through by the thousands, while more unusual birds, such as Black Tern, can sometimes be seen on the way from their nesting areas to their southern wintering grounds. In the spring and summer along the bluffs, Baltimore Orioles and Warbling Vireos fold into the traditional Memphis experience of blues and

barbecue.

Overton Park

Also in Memphis, **Overton Park** offers an opportunity to go birding in old-growth forest. Famously known as the small park that forced Interstate 40 to go around Memphis instead of through it, Overton offers birding that is best during spring and fall warbler migration.

Shelby Farms

Further east in Memphis, **Shelby Farms** is a top birding destination. At 4,500 acres, it is one of the largest urban parks in the country. The trail network in the park and into Memphis is extensive — the **Shelby Farms Greenline** runs 10.6 miles and links to the **Wolf River Greenline** for birding hikes along the Wolf River. Upland forest, grasslands, and an open lake make for great birding any time of year. Sightings include Wood Thrush and Hooded Warbler in summer, plus winter sparrows, waterfowl and all types of

migrants in spring and fall.

BIRD-WATCHING ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

Follow the **Great River Road National Scenic Byway** north from Memphis along the Mississippi River. This 3,000-mile roadway includes 185 miles of designated birding trail in Tennessee.

Meeman–Shelby Forest State Park

Meeman–Shelby Forest State Park has over 12,000 acres of forest lands just 13 miles north of Memphis. Hooded, Kentucky, Prothonotary, and Yellow-throated Warblers blend with Wood Thrush, and Summer and Scarlet Tanagers in the early summer dawn chorus. The park offers views of the



Mississippi Kite

Image by Graham Gerdeman

American Redstart



Image by Mark Greene

Mississippi River as well.

Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge

The **Hatchie Scenic River** enters the Mississippi River between Covington and Ripley. Public lands between Highway 51 and the Mississippi River include the **Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge** in several independent tracts along the Hatchie River. The refuge holds large numbers of waterfowl in the winter; Mallards and Gadwalls, and Snow and White-fronted Geese are among the most common species, although a careful search through large flocks can reveal a rare bird.

Fort Pillow State Park

Nearby, the **Fort Pillow State Park** entrance provides an outstanding overlook of the Mississippi River and extensive bottomland hardwood forest, where birders may see Broad-winged Hawks and Mississippi Kites.

National and State Public Lands

Continuing on the Great River Road, a series of national

and state public lands dot the landscape between the **Hatchie Scenic River** and **Reelfoot Lake**. **Chickasaw National Wildlife Refuge**, **Sunk Lake State Natural Area**, **White Lake Refuge**, and **Moss Island and Thorny Cypress Wildlife Management Areas** have a mix of open water, marsh, and forest that creates opportunity for a diverse bird list at any time of year. Reelfoot Lake in the northwest corner of the state is a mecca for birds and birding; see page 10 of this guide.

BIRDING IN SOUTHWEST TENNESSEE

Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge

East of the Mississippi River near Brownsville is the **Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge**. The refuge is 12,000 acres of mostly bottomland hardwood forest along the Hatchie Scenic River, which harbors Swainson's Warblers from spring into mid-summer, making it one of the best places to see (or at least hear) and photograph this elusive species. **O'Neal Lake**, circled by a walking or driving route of exactly 2 miles, makes this a popular birding destination.

Rusty Blackbird

Image by Graham Gerdeman



In winter, Bald Eagles, Osprey, Tree Swallows and Orchard Orioles, as well as Savannah and Fox Sparrows abound. Waterfowl can be numerous on the lake, and there are occasional large flocks of White Pelicans.

Big Hill Pond State Park

Near the Tennessee and Mississippi state line, **Big Hill Pond State Park** near Selmer has 4,138 acres of upland and bottomland hardwood forests. A variety of forest birds can be observed here at any time of year. A favorite trail is the **Dismal Swamp Boardwalk Trail**; featured birds here include Wild Turkey, Louisiana Waterthrush and, in winter, Rusty Blackbird.

Natchez Trace State Park

The only way to go from here is north. **Natchez Trace State Park** near Lexington is a 9,629-acre park with upland hardwoods and pines, plus three lakes. Typical summer birds include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-eyed Vireo, Acadian Flycatcher and Wood Thrush, while winter birds include Brown Creeper, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Red-breasted Nuthatch. **The Lodge at Natchez Trace, on Pin Oak Lake**, has a resident population of Red-headed Woodpeckers. Night birds in summer include Whippoorwill and Eastern Screech Owl.

TENNESSEE RIVER BIRDING

East of Natchez Trace is the Tennessee River, which spans the state from north to south, connecting Mississippi and Kentucky. The Tennessee is a major waterway for resident and migrating birds.

Pickwick Landing and Paris Landing State Parks

On the west side of the Tennessee River, two state parks anchor birding locations: **Pickwick Landing State Park** in the south and **Paris Landing State Park** in the north. Both state parks are adjacent to large reservoir lakes of the river and are havens for the late summer and fall migration of shorebirds and waterbirds, while in winter large numbers of waterfowl can be seen. A spotting scope is suggested for birding these locations, as many birds can be a long distance from the shore. Birds to be seen include Pied-billed and Horned Grebe, Common Loon, Bufflehead, and Ruddy Duck. However, these areas are most favored

by birders as a spot to catch a rare “storm bird” — a bird that has blown in with a storm from the **Gulf of Mexico** or even the Atlantic Ocean. In 2017, for example, Hurricane Irma blew Black-capped Petrel and Brown Booby inshore to “drop out” of the storm onto Pickwick Lake.

Birding West Tennessee at any time of year offers a unique natural and cultural experience. Take the time to get off the beaten path and enjoy!

Image by Graham Gerdeman



Bald Eagle



Image by Graham Gerdeman

REELFOOT LAKE: A NATURAL WONDER

By Graham Gerdeman

Formed by the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811–1812, 15,000-acre Reelfoot Lake covers flooded forest, and is noted for the many ancient cypress trees still standing in the water. It's a breathtaking landscape, and a unique ecosystem for hundreds of bird, reptile and amphibian species. Reelfoot is the only naturally formed large lake in Tennessee, and it is nationally known for its wildlife viewing and fishing. Today, the lake is part of Reelfoot Lake State Park.

The Ellington Visitor Center at Reelfoot Lake State Park on the southwest corner of the lake is a great place to get started birding in the area, with a boardwalk over part of the swamp and out into the lake. The Keystone Pocket Trail, a short distance from the Center, also offers a boardwalk pier with excellent views of the lake.

BIRDS OF REELFOOT LAKE

Wading and Water Birds, Waterfowl and Gulls

Look for **Prothonotary Warblers** and **Wood Ducks** in the spring and summer. **Great Blue Herons** can be seen skulking in the shallow water year-round, while in the summer, smaller **Green Herons** are also plentiful. **Great Egrets** arrive in such numbers in the summer that they often outnumber the **Great Blues**, and are often more conspicuous.

Winter in this gorgeous habitat brings a diverse array of waterfowl and gulls: **Northern Shovelers**, **American Wigeons**, **Redheads**, and **Canvasbacks** are just a few of the many duck species that occur in large numbers. Scanning through the hundreds of **Ring-billed** and **Bonaparte's Gulls**, one can find fair numbers of **American Herring Gulls**, the occasional **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, and sometimes rarities such as **Little Gull**, or **Black-legged Kittiwake**.

American White Pelicans are also present in large numbers, especially during migration, and there is now also an annual Pelican Festival in fall to celebrate them.

Raptors

Once uncommon in Tennessee, diving **Ospreys** are now regular residents. In fact, pontoon-boat Osprey tours are offered every weekend in July.

Eagles, eagles, eagles! If Reelfoot Lake is known for anything, it is for being one of the best places in the eastern United States to view large numbers of **Bald Eagles**. It is possible at any time of the year to get lucky and see one of these huge iconic raptors soaring overhead or snatching a fish out of the water. For 20 years, the park has hosted an annual Eagle Festival in winter, when they are most abundant, featuring bus and boat tours to view the birds, and all kinds of other events. This is also a time of year when Reelfoot Lake is one of the best locations in Tennessee for spying the Bald Eagle's cousin: a migratory **Golden Eagle**.

ACCESS TO BIRD-WATCHING

Black Bayou Trail is one of several access points along the western side of the lake for hiking trails and additional birding opportunities. Virtually all of the state's warbler species can be found here during migration, and **Swainson's Warbler** is possible in the nesting season. The adjacent Black Bayou Refuge can offer splendid numbers of shorebird species during migration, as well as chances for cryptic marsh species like **Virginia Rail**, **Sora**, and **Least and American Bittern**. While driving these roads during winter, the birder will be treated to flocks of tens of thousands of **Snow Geese** and **Greater White-fronted Geese**, as well as less numerous **Ross's Geese**. Seeing — and hearing — these massive flocks as they take flight is one of Tennessee's most awe-inspiring birding experiences!

Continuing north a short way, there is the old Reelfoot Lake State Park Airpark and North Campground. Trails here offer yet another location for woodland birding,



REELFOOT LAKE

Great Horned Owl

Image by Graham Gerdeman

as well as decent grassland birds around the airpark. Overnight visitors are likely to hear **Great Horned Owl**, **Barred Owl** and **Eastern Screech Owl**. In the winter, **Short-eared Owls** are also annual visitors in the fields west of the lake. This is also one of the best locations in the state for **American Tree Sparrows** in winter. You never know what might show up. Multiple records of rare **Vermilion Flycatchers** have even occurred in this area.

Reelfoot Lake is a huge area offering days' worth of exploration. Visitors are highly encouraged to contact the State Park office for more precise details on these and other locations. Areas in the Wildlife Management Area outside of the state park are active hunting areas, so please also visit the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency website for information on hunting seasons and necessary precautions to take when birding in hunting areas.

For more information:

Reelfoot Lake State Park:
tnstateparks.com/parks/reelfoot-lake

Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency:
www.tn.gov/twra.html

USFWS Reelfoot Lake National Wildlife Refuge:
www.fws.gov/refuge/reelfoot

American White Pelicans



Image by Graham Gerdeman

NORTH AMERICA'S MIGRATION & CONSERVATION CORRIDOR: THE MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY

By Bob Ford

The Mississippi Flyway is the largest bird migration route in North America, following the Mississippi River from Canada to the Gulf Coast. Tennessee is bordered by “The Big Muddy” on its western border, making it an important state for both birds and bird-watchers.

Billions of birds rely on this corridor for food and rest, so conservation efforts to maintain it are vital.

MIGRATION ON THE FLYWAY

Each spring and fall, billions of birds pass above the Tennessee landscape, answering a deep genetic drive to migrate. Many birds, especially songbirds, migrate at night. As a result, we see only a small fraction of those flying overhead when they stop to rest and refuel. For other birds, migration is a bit more obvious to us. The first cold days of October bring to us the distant calls of geese or the sight of “new” ducks settling onto flooded fields and marshes.

These great migrations across North America often follow predictable continental paths. Ducks, geese, and shorebirds, for example, migrate along four flyways distinguished by their major geographic features: Pacific (coastal), Central (grasslands and Central Plains), Mississippi (the Mississippi River and tributaries), and Atlantic (coastal). **Many migratory birds in Tennessee are traveling the Mississippi Flyway.**

At least 40 percent of all of North America’s waterfowl and shorebirds use the Mississippi Flyway. Ecologically and geographically, the importance of this flyway stretches from Hudson Bay in Canada to points south in Mexico and the Caribbean.

BIRDS OF THE FLYWAY

Waterfowl are the crown jewels of the flyways; in the Tennessee portion of the Mississippi Flyway, many duck and goose species spend the winter months, arriving in large numbers in November and leaving by late February. The majority are “dabbling ducks” — those that feed mainly in shallow water with their head underwater and their body above the surface.

In Tennessee, Mallard is by far the most abundant duck observed. Other dabbling ducks, including Gadwall, Wood Duck, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal and Northern Pintail are also common. “Diving” ducks — those that dive underwater for their food — are common in large, deep bodies of water across the state, especially the reservoirs and lakes in middle and east Tennessee. Commonly seen diving ducks include Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead.

Geese of the Flyway include Snow Goose, Canada Goose and Greater White-fronted Goose.

Winter is not the only time that flyways are important for birds. In the shallow water fields and mudflats during early spring and late summer, shorebirds pass through Tennessee by the tens of thousands and more. Least, Western, Stilt, and Solitary Sandpipers

Gadwall



Image by Tricia Vesely

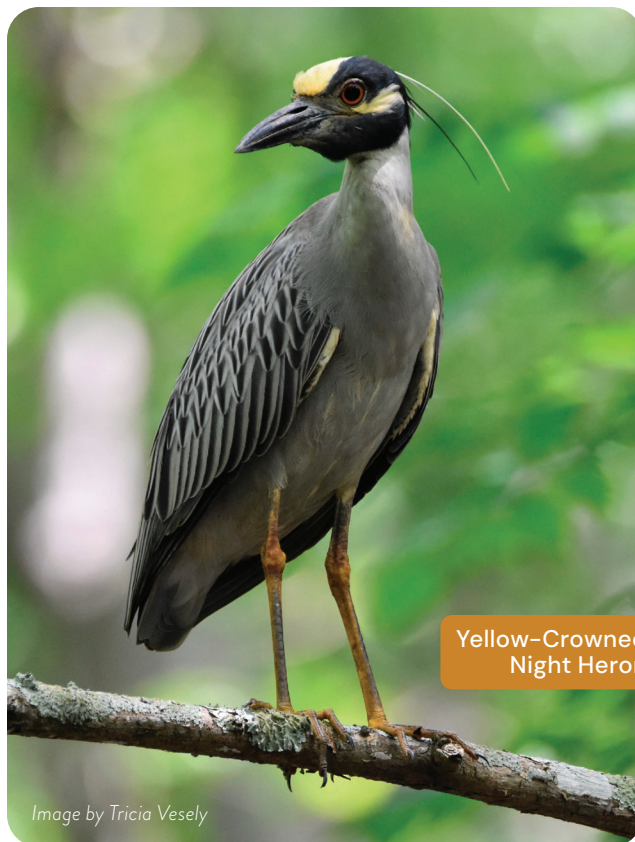
are species often observed, along with a host of others, including a variety of plovers, yellowlegs and dowitchers. Herons and egrets, including Green Heron, Little Blue Heron and Great Egret, frequent these same habitats. Other migrating birds to look for along the Mississippi Flyway include large flocks of Tree Swallow or Purple Martin, sometimes numbering in the thousands in the fall.

CONSERVATION

Form follows function; so it is with flyways. Flyways function as natural and ecologically important pathways for migratory birds. Bird conservation actions form around flyways to deliver coordinated, international conservation.

Flyway Councils

Flyway Councils are conservation planning and implementation partnerships for conservation that include federal governments and state or provincial governments of Canada and the United States. Partners in the Flyway Councils set science and research priorities, help determine optimal population objectives for birds, and collaborate to prioritize land and habitat conservation. In the case of waterfowl, Flyway Councils and state wildlife



Yellow-Crowned
Night Heron

Image by Tricia Vesely

Image by Tricia Vesely

Greater White-fronted Geese



agencies collaborate with federal agencies to set an annual framework for hunting regulations for migratory game birds.

National Wildlife Refuges

National Wildlife Refuges are often located in a strategic way in the **Mississippi Valley** based on the needs of waterfowl. Collaborating across international boundaries and state lines, wildlife conservation leaders coordinate a scientific approach through Flyway Councils to “stairstep” waterfowl and other birds through the flyway with refuges, so the birds have food, shelter and a place to rest. In West Tennessee, for example, the proximity of **Reelfoot** and **Chickasaw National Wildlife Refuges**, combined with **Bogota Wildlife Management Area** and **White Lake Refuge**, help move birds through the Mississippi Valley in Tennessee. Other public lands help birds move up the tributaries of the Mississippi River — areas like **Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge** and **Horn’s Bluff Refuge**. Though originally designated for waterfowl,

these public lands provide tremendous benefit to all types of birds and support the ecological value of wetlands, such as floodwater retention and clean water.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE FLYWAY

For in-depth information about the importance of flyways and the art, culture, and conservation of waterfowl in the Mississippi Flyway, visit **Discovery Park of America** in Union City, about 40 minutes from Reelfoot Lake. The park has a permanent exhibit, “Duck, Duck, Goose: Waterfowl of the Mississippi Flyway,” that uses hands-on experiences, state-of-the-art technology, and beautiful wildlife photography to explore the biology, identification, and habitats of ducks, geese, and other waterfowl. Visitors will discover how a combination of federal and state land protections plus private land conservation have united government, landowners, birders, hunters, and scientists in protecting and restoring waterfowl populations and habitats.

TENNESSEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE: A HAVEN FOR BIRDS; HEAVEN FOR BIRDERS

By Graham Gerdeman



Ring-necked Duck

Image by Graham Gerdeman

For many local birders, the Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge is the best place for bird-watching in the state. Visitors to Middle or West Tennessee with even a passing interest in birding owe it to themselves to plan a visit.

The Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1945 as a refuge and wildlife management area for migratory birds and other wildlife. It consists of 65 miles of seasonally flooded land along the Tennessee River, most notably giving safe harbor to huge numbers of migratory waterfowl in winter, but also providing a diverse variety of habitats for birding all year long. The refuge contains three main units: Duck River, Big Sandy and Busseltown.

DUCK RIVER UNIT, NEW JOHNSONVILLE

The Duck River Unit is located at the mouth of the Duck River as it feeds into the Tennessee River, and is accessed from Highway 70S in New Johnsonville. It can be worth a stop at the entrance sign to add upland forest species to your list, especially during

migration season. Expect singing resident **Yellow-throated Warblers**, **Northern Parulas**, and **Scarlet and Summer Tanagers** here, along with many possible migrants passing through. If you arrive at dawn, you might hear a trilling **Eastern Screech Owl** or the “Who Cooks For You?” call of a **Barred Owl**. But the real show here is further down the road.

Further into the refuge, the road branches, continuing straight or turning right up to the refuge headquarters. Be prepared to pull over at any point on Refuge Road to scan the fields, treetops and distant mudflats. In winter, thousands of geese are present: **Snow Geese** and their smaller cousins **Ross’s Geese**, **Greater White-fronted Geese**, and **Canada and Cackling Geese**. One can spend hours scanning through ducks (a spotting scope is highly recommended!): **Green-winged Teal**, **Northern Shovelers**, **Northern Pintails** and **Gadwall** are abundant. Flocks of **American Wigeon** may even contain a rare Eurasian Wigeon, which occur every few years and may even be annual here.

In spring, the “Blue Goose Loop” opens up, offering a nice one-way drive past pools containing many



Blue-winged Teal

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Image by Graham Gerdeman

species of heron and egret, nesting **Ospreys** and **Bald Eagles**, and exposed muddy pools that may contain many species of migratory shorebirds. You may hear secretive marsh birds such as **Sora** or **Virginia Rail**, especially early in the morning. A large heron rookery can be viewed with a scope from Refuge Road south of the entrance to the Blue Goose Loop. During the breeding season, the rookery contains **Great Egrets**, **Western Cattle Egrets**, **Great Blue Herons** and **Double-crested Cormorants**. Smaller numbers of **Snowy Egrets** and **Little Blue Herons** are also here, as well as a few rare **Neotropic Cormorants** and possibly **Anhinga**. This location is the best in the state for wandering waders in the post-breeding period from July to September. Though never common, species including **White**, **White-faced**, and **Glossy Ibis**, **Roseate Spoonbill**, and **Wood Stork** can occur. For the serious sparrow fan, the grassy fields in winter become havens for countless winter resident **Swamp**, **Savannah** and **Leconte's Sparrows**. Nowhere else in Tennessee offers more year-round diversity than the Duck River Unit of the Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge.

Not far into the Refuge you'll find a bird-watching blind, which can be very good viewing in winter, depending on water levels. In summer, most of these impoundments are planted with corn, the stalks of which are often adorned with singing **Dickcissels**, **Blue Grosbeaks** and **Red-winged Blackbirds**.

BIG SANDY UNIT, PARIS

About 4 miles east of Paris, in Henry County, is the Big Sandy Unit, located at the confluence of the Big Sandy and Tennessee Rivers (Kentucky Lake). **Red-headed Woodpeckers** are abundant here and can be seen and heard easily. An elevated platform on Benton Creek Road overlooks a cove of the river, and is a good place to scan for ducks in the winter. Raptors, too — be sure to scan the trees and the skies for **Golden Eagles**, at least one of which winters here annually.

At the end of the peninsula is Pace Point. This location offers expansive views into the mouth of the Big Sandy River and Kentucky Lake. In winter, an overwhelming number of birds can be present.

Red-headed Woodpecker

Scan the hundreds of **Common Loons** for rare **Red-throated** and **Pacific Loons**. **Horned Grebes** can be present in the hundreds. Thousands of **Ring-billed** and **Bonaparte's Gulls** will likely contain some **Herring** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, with rarer species possible. And waterfowl are present in the tens of thousands. **Common Goldeneye**, **Bufflehead**, **Lesser** and **Greater Scaup**, **Ring-necked Duck**, and **Redhead** are among the species to pick out from the crowds. Don't forget to look up for the occasional **Bald Eagle** or **Peregrine Falcon**.

BUSSELTOWN UNIT, PARSONS

Further north up the river is the least visited of the Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge units. Busseltown contains around 700 acres of planted bottomlands adjacent to Kentucky Lake. The main attraction here is waterfowl in the winter. **Mallard**, **Gadwall**, and **American Wigeons** can be seen in large numbers. **American Black Ducks** are also present. While not as large as the other units of the NWR, you never know what might be here!

Visitors to north-central Tennessee should also consider visiting Cross Creeks National Wildlife Refuge, which is considered a part of the Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge Complex. When taken as a whole, the Tennessee River National Wildlife Refuge offers incredible birding a short drive from just about any location west of Nashville and east of Memphis. Birding these areas also shows critical support for maintaining wildlife refuges for more than just game species.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE: A DIVERSITY OF BIRDS & HABITATS

By Graham Gerdeman

Middle Tennessee is bordered on the west by the Tennessee River and extends eastward to the Cumberland Plateau. Most of the region is part of what's known as the Nashville Basin, a geologic dome that is surrounded by the Highland Rim. The area, characterized by hills, ridges, and valleys permeated with many streams, and by porous, limestone soil, contains a diversity of bird habitats that rivals any inland state in America.

NASHVILLE

Nashville is Tennessee's most-visited city, and visitors with an interest in bird-watching have the option of several large metropolitan parks that offer excellent birding opportunities.

SHELBY PARK

A short car (or bike!) ride from downtown is Shelby Park, which features several miles of greenway and mulched trails through bottomland forest and reclaimed farmland. Resident species like **Northern Cardinal**, **Eastern Towhee** and **Field Sparrow** may be found here year-round. In summer, singing **Prairie Warbler**, **Yellow-breasted Chat** and **Indigo Bunting** are abundant. If you listen around the excellent Nature Center, you may hear the calls of **Fish Crows**, which have recently nested here.

EDWIN & PERCY WARNER PARKS (THE WARNER PARKS)

Together, these two parks form one of the largest urban parks in the eastern United States. Miles of hiking trails here are excellent for resident **Barred**

Image by Graham Gerdeman



Common Nighthawk

Owls, Pileated Woodpeckers, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, and breeding warblers such as Yellow-throated, Hooded and Northern Parula.

RADNOR LAKE STATE PARK

Just south of downtown Nashville, Radnor Lake State Park is a top hot spot in Tennessee for migratory warblers during spring and fall migration. Almost all of the eastern warblers are seen here during migration, and it's one of the best places anywhere to see brilliant yellow **Prothonotary Warblers** during the breeding season. Along with many year-round resident species, these colorful gems are frequently seen down low along the spillway and lake trail, affording eye-level looks. You may also see **River Otters or Beavers**. Go early for assured parking — Radnor Lake is also popular with people.

BEAMAN PARK

In the northwest corner of Nashville, Beaman Park offers steep, wooded ridges and pristine streams. It is home in the summer to breeding **Louisiana Waterthrushes, Worm-eating Warblers** and **Yellow-throated Vireos**.

J. PERCY PRIEST LAKE

This large reservoir east of downtown Nashville covers parts of Davidson, Wilson and Rutherford Counties. There are numerous camping and day use areas along its shores, as well as more than 10,000 acres of Wilderness Management Areas (WMA). Birding is especially good in winter for species like **Horned Grebe** and high numbers of waterfowl such as **Bufflehead, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler** and others. This lake is perhaps the best in the state for viewing **Common Loons** in winter. **Red-throated and Pacific Loons** are annual in small numbers.

CEDARS OF LEBANON STATE PARK

The geology of the Nashville basin creates, in places, one of the most unique habitats in the entire world. These are Cedar Glades — areas where the limestone bedrock is so close to the surface that there is virtually no soil. Eastern Red Cedar trees thrive here, as do dozens of endemic wildflowers found nowhere else, like the beautiful Tennessee Coneflower.



Tennessee Warbler

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Nightjars nest in this habitat. Visit the Cedars of Lebanon State Park in Wilson County in mid-to-late spring and stay until dark for the iconic singing of **Common Nighthawks, Eastern Whippoorwills** and **Chuck-will's-widows**. Better yet, consider camping in one of three camping areas and be serenaded all night long!

MURFREE SPRING WETLANDS

Murfree Spring Wetlands in Murfreesboro is a great family-friendly location with a boardwalk over flooded willow swamps and the Discovery Center, a children's museum offering a variety of programs. The trails over the wetlands are good for close looks at **Wood Ducks** and **Yellow-crowned Night Herons**. Occasionally, more cryptic birds like **Soras, American Bitterns**, or even **Virginia Rails** can be found.

MONTGOMERY BELL STATE PARK

To the west of Nashville, Montgomery Bell State Park is a great place for day hikes and camping alike. The hardwood forested trails here are great for species like **White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-eyed Vireo** and **Hairy Woodpecker**. A newly renovated lodge on Lake Acorn is a great place to see **Red-headed Woodpeckers**, which are otherwise scarce in the area.

Scarlet Tanager



Image by Graham Gerdeman

LAND BETWEEN THE LAKES NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Backpackers and campers considering a vacation in Tennessee should look into Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area, a massive natural area covering 170,000 acres in Tennessee and Kentucky (64,000 in Tennessee). Virtually any of the state's bird species can be seen here, and the roughly three hundred miles of shoreline along Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley offer viewing of huge numbers of waterfowl in winter, as well as **Bald Eagles**, **Hérons** and more. The southern entrance to Land Between the Lakes is in Dover, only about an hour north of Nashville.

DUCK RIVER UNIT OF THE TENNESSEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Further south in Middle Tennessee, the Duck River begins in the eastern Highland Rim and continues west for more than 280 miles before emptying into the Tennessee River. This scenic waterway, entirely in Middle Tennessee, is recognized as the most biodiverse river in the entire nation. The river flows through the city of Manchester, where there

are several boat access points, as well as kayak outfitters offering rentals. Look for river specialists like **Belted Kingfishers**, **Great Blue Herons**, and **Ospreys** along the banks. The river ultimately feeds into the Tennessee River at the Duck River Unit of the Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge — one of the state's top birding locations, located in New Johnsonville. When water levels are low during fall migration, mudflats in the mouth of the river can host large numbers of shorebirds: **Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers**, **Dunlin**, **Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs**, and **Semipalmated Plovers** can all be abundant. Scanning the flocks can yield less common species like **Baird's and Buff-breasted Sandpipers**, or even rarities like **Whimbrel**. **Great Blue Herons**, **Great Egrets**, **Cattle Egrets**, and **Little Blue Herons** are all common summer residents, as are **Ospreys** and **Bald Eagles**. **Peregrine Falcons** can be found harassing the shorebirds at the river mouth in fall.

These are just a few of the places for visiting bird-watchers to enjoy while exploring the scenic natural beauty of Middle Tennessee.

EAST TENNESSEE: SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF BIRDING DIVERSITY

By Graham Gerdeman



Blackburnian Warbler

Image by Graham Gerdeman

East Tennessee encompasses the broad river plains of the Tennessee Valley to the high peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The region's geographic diversity leads to an extraordinary number of animal species for a landlocked state, including an exceptional diversity of North American birds. An entire book could be written on birding east Tennessee — what follows merely scratches the surface.

BIG SOUTH FORK

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area encompasses 125,000 acres of the Cumberland Plateau and contains some of Tennessee's most brilliant outdoor landscapes, including the largest number of natural stone arches in the eastern United States. The park has multiple visitor centers, where visitors are encouraged to check in for advice on itineraries and what to do. There are multiple camping areas and hiking trails through mature forest. Many neotropical bird species nest here, including elusive **Swainson's Warblers**. The area is also exceptional in Tennessee for having nesting **Sharp-shinned Hawks** and **Blue-headed Vireos**.

CHATTANOOGA REGION

In the southeast corner of the state, the area in and around Chattanooga contains many birding areas of interest. Standifer Gap Marsh is a cattail marsh just a short distance from Exit 5 on Interstate 75. It is an excellent place to find cryptic marsh species such as **Virginia Rail** and **Least Bittern**, which both nest here, and **American Bittern** on migration. Just a short distance west, Brainerd Levee also offers some marsh habitat, seasonal mudflats and ponds. Walking out on the levee here and scanning, one can find herons and egrets throughout the year. It is a good place for finding the occasional rarities such as **White or Glossy Ibis**, **Common Gallinules** or **Rails**. More than 20 species of shorebird have been documented here. Booker T. Washington State Park and Chester Frost Park are both great locations for nesting **Brown-headed Nuthatches**, and are excellent vantage points for scanning Chickamauga Lake in winter for waterfowl and loons.

CLEVELAND REGION

Driving north on I-75 from Chattanooga near Cleveland, Tennessee, is the Hiwassee Refuge. Open year-round with an observation deck, this is the home of the Sandhill Crane Festival in winter, organized around viewing the largest wintering flock

Image by Graham Gerdeman



Sandhill Crane

of **Sandhill Cranes** in the state. Some years, an endangered **Whooping Crane** may be among them.

KNOXVILLE REGION

In the Knoxville area, Ijams Nature Center is a 175-acre wildlife sanctuary featuring an abundance of habitats and a discovery trail. It is one of the best locations in the area for migratory warblers like **Nashville, Blackburnian and Cape May Warblers** in the spring. **Bald Eagles** are also frequently seen here. East of the city in Sevierville, the Seven Islands State Birding Park (featured on page 24 of this guide) is the only state park dedicated to birding in Tennessee.

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

To the southeast of Knox county, Blount and Sevier counties are gateways to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park — the most visited national park in the United States and a designated International Biosphere Reserve. More than 100 species of birds breed here, including specialties like **Blackburnian, Magnolia and Black-throated Blue Warblers**. Cades Cove is a popular tourist destination for animals like **Black Bear and Elk**, but it is also a spot for seeing **Short-eared Owls** in the winter. Visiting birders should also listen for the drumming of **Ruffed Grouse** in the spring along the roads leaving the



Black-throated Blue Warbler

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Swainson's Warbler




Image by Graham Gerdeman

cove. The Little River, which flows through the town of Townsend, is where you can find **Common Mergansers**, which have colonized the area in just the past decade and are increasingly abundant. They can often be viewed from bridges right in town.

The “Smokies” are part of the much larger Blue Ridge Mountains, itself a province of the Appalachian Mountains, that extend from Georgia all the way up into Pennsylvania. This uninterrupted mountain chain climbs to a height of 6,643 feet at Kuwohi (previously Clingman’s Dome), the highest peak in Tennessee, and contains many miles of ridges over 5,000 feet of elevation. Numerous bird species that have evolved for life in colder, northern climates find a comfortable home at these high elevations, and they breed nowhere else in our state. **Common Ravens** soar on thermals in the high mountains. **Chestnut-sided Warbler**, **Canada Warbler**, **Hermit Thrush**, and **Least Flycatcher** are local breeders. Kuwohi is a great place to find **Black-capped Chickadees** in Tennessee — a year-round resident species that replaces otherwise statewide **Carolina Chickadees** over about 4,500 feet of elevation. **Red Crossbills** are another fantastic species here, with their unique crossed bills evolved for prying open evergreen cones.

ROAN MOUNTAIN STATE PARK

From the small town of Roan Mountain in northeast Tennessee, take Highway 143 to Roan Mountain State Park. The Peg Leg Mine Trail behind the visitor center offers good birding (**Ovenbird** is a local nester here), but plan on continuing up the mountain and making stops at the various picnic shelters and pull-offs. Here, too, one encounters species that are restricted in Tennessee to higher elevations. A pull-off just past Picnic Shelter #1 is known locally as “**Golden-winged Warbler Curve**.” Can you guess why? Definitely try to spot this threatened species here. As you climb to the top of the mountain at Carver’s Gap, **Dark-eyed Juncos** become abundant. **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, **Golden-crowned Kinglets** and **Winter Wrens** can be heard singing. **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** also nest here, and it is one of the best places in the state for high numbers of **Black-throated Blue Warblers**. Alder trees all the way up at Carver’s Gap host nesting **Alder Flycatchers** in fairly small numbers. After dark, the Carver’s Gap trailhead to the Appalachian Trail is a reliable spot to listen for the “toot, toot, toot” call of **Northern Saw-whet Owls** looking for a mate.

Many, many more birding opportunities in the towns and natural areas of beautiful East Tennessee can be found in the “Where to Watch” pages of the [TN Birding Trails](http://TNBirdingTrails.org) website at TNBirdingTrail.org.

RESTORING NATIVE ECOSYSTEMS

By Graham Gerdeman



Indigo Bunting

Image by Graham Gerdeman

In the summer of 2014, Seven Islands Wildlife Refuge in Kodak became Tennessee's 56th state park — and the state's first park dedicated to birding.

Seven Islands State Birding Park encompasses 416 acres along the French Broad River, about 19 miles east of Knoxville. The park offers more than 8 miles of trails through habitats ranging from native grassland to wooded forest and riverbank riparian zones. This diversity supports more than 240 species of bird that have been documented in the park. It is a committed focus on the restoration of these native ecosystems that truly sets Seven Islands State Birding Park apart. What was once heavily disturbed farmland is now native prairie, where **Wild Turkeys** roam. The grassland restoration, in particular, has been a priority on the property for the past 20 years. A primary motivation for this is the preservation of the park's "umbrella" species, the **Northern Bobwhite**. Decades of hard work have resulted in this near-threatened species being once again relatively common throughout the park.

THE BLUEBIRD BARN

Several historic barns have been maintained on the property, one of which — the Bluebird Barn — greets visitors near the main entrance with well-designed informational displays about the local birds and their habitats. Around the barn is the Wild Yards Garden, which teaches visitors the importance of planting native wildflowers for pollinators and birds.

Image by Graham Gerdeman



Northern Bobwhite

It's a great place to see **American Goldfinches**, **Tufted Titmice**, **Carolina Chickadees**, and other common seed-eating species. You may see your first brilliant-blue **Indigo Bunting** here, which is a common park resident in spring and summer, or **Dark-eyed Juncos** in winter. The Bluebird Barn serves as the meeting place for numerous bird hikes and other activities held frequently every month. Beginning bird walks for kids, bird-banding programs, and even a monthly kids' birding club are among the many things on the park's monthly event calendar.

BIKE & PADDLING OPTIONS

There are two paved, wheelchair-accessible trails that start at the park's main entrance. The Bobwhite Accessible Trail continues through the Bluebird Barn and is 0.9 miles (one way); it descends all the way to the Linda and Pete Claussen Bridge, which spans the river over to Newsom's Island — one of the original seven islands and shoals for which the park was named. Along the way, visitors are treated to stunning views of the Great Smoky Mountains. In spring and summer, the grassy fields and rolling hills along the trail contain many breeding species of birds, including **Common Yellowthroat**, **Yellow-breasted Chat**, and **Blue Grosbeak**. **Singing Field Sparrows** and **Indigo Buntings** are abundant, and you may hear the insect-like trill of a **Grasshopper Sparrow**. In the late fall and winter, these same grasslands provide critical habitat for hordes of wintering sparrows: **White-throated**, **Song**, **Swamp**, **Savannah** and **White-crowned Sparrows** are all abundant. It is the most consistent location for White-crowned Sparrows in the region. **Fox Sparrows** can be found along the forest edges and in heavier thickets. The river itself is a fine location to see an assortment of ducks in winter and early spring, including **Hooded Mergansers**, **Bufflehead** and **Lesser Scaup**. Tennessee's most dramatically dressed resident duck, the **Wood Duck**, can be seen year-round. From just past the bridge, the 1.2-mile Island Loop Trail circumnavigates the island, offering further options for finding river species like **herons**, **egrets** and **Belted Kingfishers**.

White-crowned Sparrows



Image by Graham Gerdeman

The second paved option in the park is the Kelly Lane Greenway, which extends 2.5 miles down to the end of the peninsula and back. From its terminus, hikers can continue on the Seclusion Bend Trail, which largely follows the river along Kelly Bend. Another pair of historic barns on these trails can sometimes house secretive **Barn Owls** — one of at least five species of owl that have been found in the park. Diurnal raptors like **Cooper's** and **Red-tailed Hawks** are common, and migratory **Northern Harriers** patrol low over the fields in winter, searching for small rodent prey.

The Seven Islands Loop Trail, Hickory Ridge Loop Trail, and Kelly Lane Greenway are best for experiencing the park's hardwood forest habitat. During spring and fall migration, the careful birder can find more than 30 species of warblers. Other migration favorites like **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** come through, as well, as do more elusive species such as the **Black-billed Cuckoo**.

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Rose-breasted Grosbeak



Image by Graham Gerdeman



Pileated Woodpecker

PAVED TRAILS

Paved trails in the park are open to cyclists. It's also a place for anglers and those wishing to explore the river by canoe or kayak. A boat launch is located just past the main entrance of the park at the end of Kelly Lane. On the south side of the river, directly across from Newsom's Island, is another river access called Mutton Hollow Landing. This 20-acre extension of the park was created to intentionally expand access to the river, which is part of the Great Smoky Mountains Blueway. There is a trail to a small pond there and birding can be quite good, though visitors are unlikely to find any species that don't also occur in the main park. There are plans for further expansion of this section of the park, so additional trails are likely here in the future.

East Tennessee is a popular destination for its rugged natural beauty and proximity to nature. If you find yourself visiting Knoxville, Gatlinburg, or the Pigeon Forge area, be sure to include a visit to Seven Islands State Birding Park in your itinerary!

For more information, visit <https://tnstateparks.com/parks/seven-islands>.

Image by Graham Gerdeman

SEASONAL BIRD-WATCHING HIGHLIGHTS IN TENNESSEE

By Tony Lance



Cerulean Warbler

There are places across Tennessee where you can spot flocks of birds during different seasons of the year. Here's a list of birds that make annual visits to locations across the state.

CERULEAN WARBLER: EDGAR EVANS STATE PARK

While you're never going to see large flocks of **Cerulean Warblers**, one of the last remaining strongholds of this declining songbird, named for the male's sky-blue plumage, is in Tennessee's Cumberland Mountains. Denizens of mature hardwood forests in the eastern United States, they arrive from South America in the early spring to their nesting grounds, leaving before summer's end. Because of habitat loss, the Cerulean Warbler's population has plummeted more than 60 percent since the 1960s. One of the most reliable places to see and hear this species is the observation tower at the **Edgar Evans State Park** Visitor Center

in Silver Point. These hard-to-find warblers are notorious among birders for their habit of foraging in the treetops, so expect to come away with a sore neck as you look up and search for them. But the payoff is a view of one of the loveliest birds in our forests.

AMERICAN CROW: MIDTOWN NASHVILLE

Among the most intelligent of birds, **American Crows** are familiar residents in all parts of the state, and in the fall and winter evenings, many crows leave the rural areas where they forage during the day and converge on cities, flying perhaps 20 to 30 miles one way. **Midtown Nashville** hosts one such site with thousands of crows congregating at a locale that varies from year to year. Why do they make such a long trek each day? It's thought that cities offer a safe, well-lit place for these social birds to spend the night. Indeed, their archnemesis, the Great Horned Owl, which is known to take crows as they sleep, tends to avoid urban areas.

Sandhill Cranes

Image by Graham Gerdeman



Swallow-tailed Kite



Image by Graham Gerdeman

SANDHILL CRANE: BIRCHWOOD

One of our tallest birds at four and a half feet, the **Sandhill Crane** spends its breeding season in the northern half of the continent and winters in the south. An impressive winter population, numbering as many as 12,000, can be found in the southeastern part of the state at Hiwassee Refuge in Birchwood, Tennessee. They begin arriving in the fall and reach their peak by the end of the year, forming flocks so impressive that the Tennessee Sandhill Crane Festival, held in January each year, was created to celebrate these wetland-loving birds whose trumpeting calls are one of the most evocative sounds in the avian world.

SWALLOW-TAILED KITE: SEQUATCHIE VALLEY

If asked to name the bird with the most graceful flight, few would argue with the nomination of the Swallow-tailed Kite. With its long, pointed wings and deeply forked tail, this species is a master aerialist and moves effortlessly across the sky. It breeds in wetlands in the more southern states, but each year individuals wander widely, perhaps searching for new areas to colonize the following year. As many as a dozen have been seen in and around Dunlap and the Sequatchie Valley of Southeast Tennessee, in July and August in recent years before migrating to Brazil and Bolivia.

CLIFF SWALLOW: ASHLAND CITY

Historically a species of the western United States, the Cliff Swallow has expanded its range across the eastern half of the country over the last few centuries as humans have created suitable nest sites — mainly bridges — for these colonial breeders. Cliff Swallows are found widely across the state near water, and one of the best places to see them up close and in big numbers is the Sycamore Creek Recreation Area in Ashland City. Each spring, they arrive and construct hundreds of their gourd-like mud nests underneath the bridge where Chapmansboro Road crosses Sycamore Creek. If you're lucky, you might see them gathering little dabs of wet earth from nearby fields as they do touch-ups on their domiciles.

BALD EAGLE: REELFOOT LAKE

The Bald Eagle, our national symbol, is truly a conservation success story. Once in danger of extinction, this majestic bird now breeds widely in Tennessee. Your best bet for seeing these raptors in large numbers is to go to Reelfoot Lake State Park in Tiptonville in the winter — where a couple of hundred come down from northern areas to spend the winter — and take one of the Bald Eagle tours offered by outfitters in the area.

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN: TENNESSEE LAKES

One of the largest birds in North America, the American White Pelican breeds on inland bodies of water in the western United States and Canada. Historically, they wintered almost exclusively along the coasts and in Mexico, and a sighting of one in Tennessee was a notable occurrence. But over the last couple of decades, more and more of them have begun to spend the colder months on large bodies of water all across the state. Flocks of more than 200 birds have been reported, though smaller numbers are the norm. Great spots to see these magnificent fish-eaters include: Old Hickory Lake in Hendersonville, the Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge in Springville, and Reelfoot Lake State Park in Tiptonville.

*Image by Graham Gerdeman*

Cliff Swallow

TURKEY VULTURE & BLACK VULTURE: ASHLAND CITY

The award for the most macabre multitude of birds goes to the Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures that descend in the fall and winter on a neighborhood near the town center of Ashland City, not far from Nashville. For reasons known only to these scavengers, after spending the day searching for roadkill and other sources of rotting flesh, hundreds of nature's clean-up crew soar in from all directions at the end of the day, settling into trees in a residential area. Watching them effortlessly glide down and find a suitable limb for the night is a remarkable sight.

PURPLE MARTIN: NASHVILLE

The largest member of the swallow family in North America, Purple Martins migrate annually from South America to nest sites — almost exclusively supplied by humans — that are located predominantly in the eastern United States. After nesting, beginning in July and going into August as they prepare to make the trip south, Purple Martins begin to congregate by the thousands at various roost sites across the country — and downtown Nashville is home to one of them. Although the location changes from time to time, in 2024 the Martins selected trees next to Nissan Stadium for their layover. Beginning several hours before dusk, the birds begin to fill the skies above their roost site, and just as the last rays of daylight fades, upwards of 100,000 Martins stream down to the trees, creating a truly memorable spectacle.

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Eastern Bluebird



CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHT: MORE BUGS EQUALS MORE BIRDS

By Bob Ford

“Aerial insectivores” are insect-eating birds. Scientists estimate that these birds consume up to 500 million tons of bugs worldwide each year! However, many of these bird populations — which include swallows, swifts, flycatchers and night birds such as the Common Nighthawk and Whippoorwill — are in steep decline in North America.

Why are the numbers of these birds declining? Back to the bugs: one reason is a loss of insects in the air. While we know some things about the types of insects that damage homes or agricultural crops, we do not know a lot about the ecology, abundance, and distribution of most insects. A few studies in

different countries have indicated a precipitous decline in insects, and there is a worrisome suspicion that insect populations are declining worldwide.

You can do your own study of insect abundance in Tennessee. Literally, we might call it a “windshield survey.” As you drive highways and backroads in Tennessee, count how many bugs hit your windshield. Thirty years ago, there would have been a lot more insect road casualties than you’ll see now. Fewer bugs. And fewer birds.

While aerial insectivore populations are declining from their abundance of a few years ago, many species are still considered common and are easily seen across the state. Here are a few you may see in the spring and summer.

EASTERN KINGBIRD

Look on roadside telephone wires or fences for a bird perched upright and alert, with a bright white front and a black back. If you watch long enough, you'll see it jump from its perch to fly into the air and catch a passing bug. That's an **Eastern Kingbird**. These birds nest across much of the United States and all of Tennessee, migrating to South America for our winter months. While they're still fairly common and widespread, Kingbirds have declined by about 40 percent in the last 40 years.

BARN SWALLOW

The **Barn Swallow** is another aerial insectivore. Easily seen in summer around its nesting places under bridges, in barns and in buildings, this swift flyer with a forked tail is often seen in flocks of 20 or more. Barn Swallows are the most abundant swallow species, and they occur worldwide. They nest across North America and spend our winter months in Mexico and Central America.

COMMON NIGHTHAWK

Not all aerial insectivores are daytime creatures. **Common Nighthawks**, sometimes called "bullbats," can be seen in the summer around small-town court squares, big-city lit parking lots, under the lights at baseball stadiums, or out over open fields in open country. The first tip that they are close by may be their nasal "peent" call. Nighthawks nest across Tennessee and much of North America, and spend our winters across much of South America.

CHIMNEY SWIFT

The **Chimney Swift** is an aerial insectivore with unique links to Tennessee birders and community scientists. Identified as a "stubbed-out cigar shape with narrow wings," the swift is heard and seen across Tennessee and throughout the summer in both rural and urban areas. Tennessee has a unique link with Chimney Swifts. In the 1930s, scientists asked for help to find out where Chimney Swifts go when they leave North America each fall. They called not only on their fellow professional researchers, but also on a vast number of "community scientists" — people who volunteer to collect data for science projects. Tennesseans pitched in to help, as documented in the September

Image by Graham Gerdeman

Purple Martin
with a wasp



1944 issue of *The Migrant* — the journal of the Tennessee Ornithological Society.

More than 100,000 Chimney Swifts were captured in Tennessee, and each had a small metal band placed on its leg (a well established process called "banding") in the hopes that someone would find the bird and the band outside of North America. The effort was a success. In the early 1940s, 13 bands were delivered to the American Embassy in Lima, Peru, by a person who had been given the bands by Indigenous people of the Yanayaco River. Of those 13 bands that first revealed the South American home of Chimney Swifts, eight had been placed on birds in Tennessee.

Chimney Swifts and other aerial insectivores still need the efforts of community scientists. Although aerial insectivores are still considered common, the decline in their population must be stopped now before they become our next generation of threatened or endangered species. Help the birds by helping the bugs. Promote native grasses in open fields, plant pollinator gardens, allow edges of the farm or garden to grow up in brush. And be like those who have come before us: become a community scientist who helps to monitor and report on bird populations.

TENNESSEE BIRDING FESTIVALS & EVENTS



Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Image by Graham Gerdeman

JANUARY

- Sandhill Crane Festival, Birchwood
- Reelfoot Lake Eagle Festival, Tiptonville

APRIL

- Hatchie BirdFest, Brownsville

MAY

- Tipton County Museum Bird Festival, Covington

AUGUST

- Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge Hummingbird Event, Springville

- Hummingbird Festival, Clarksville
- Hummingbird Event, Cross Creeks, Dover
- Ijams Hummingbird Festival, Knoxville

SEPTEMBER

- Warner Parks Hummingbird Celebration, Warner Park Nature Center, Nashville
- Hummingbird Festival Wilderness Station, Barfield Crescent Park, Murfreesboro

OCTOBER

- Reelfoot Lake Pelican Festival, Tiptonville

CONTRIBUTORS

Bob Ford

Bob Ford grew up in Whitehaven, Tennessee, in West Tennessee and has been a Tennessee Ornithological Society member since the early 1980s. He went to the University of Memphis and graduated from UT Knoxville in wildlife biology. His career has included working for the Tennessee Conservation League, The Nature Conservancy, the Tennessee Department of Conservation, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, serving in the Washington Office as the United States staff for the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI), where he helped forge conservation partnerships between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Bob also worked for the Anderson–Tully Company and Champion, where he studied birds and developed habitat management and conservation guidelines for birds. Bob was also the leader for the first “State of the Birds” report for the United States in 2009. Bob retired from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2022. He is now an independent wildlife conservation consultant, including part-time Director at the newly formed nonprofit Hatchie River Conservancy (hatchieriver.org), and is one of the lead organizers for the Hatchie BirdFest.



Bob Ford

Graham Gerdeman

Graham Gerdeman is a prominent birder and award-winning conservation photographer whose work has appeared in publications including the *New York Times*, *BWD*, *Birdwatching* magazine, and others. A native Tennessean, naturalist, and amateur ornithologist, he currently serves as the editor of seasonal reports for Tennessee and Kentucky for North American Birds, as well as *The Migrant*, and is the active chair of the Tennessee Bird Records Committee for the Tennessee Ornithological Society.



Graham Gerdeman

Tony Lance

Tony Lance, a lifelong birder, is the staff naturalist for the Tennessee Wildlife Federation.



Tony Lance

Summer Tanager

GUIDE TO BIRDING IN TENNESSEE

Image by Graham Gerdeman

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