



# Baird's Sparrows, Sprague's Pipits, Oh My: Birding North Dakota in June

By Rena Cohen

Scouting the river. Photo by Diane Eubanks

**UNTIL 2020, NORTH DAKOTA'S ANNUAL** Potholes & Prairie Birding Festival was a popular destination due to the region's rich grassland-wetland ecosystem. That festival inspired a five-day, 645+-mile Lake-Cook Audubon Society adventure this past June that yielded 149 bird species, as well as stunning panoramas of prairies, buttes, and the gorges of the North Dakota Badlands, along with a few quirky only-in-North-Dakota cultural detours.

Extending nearly the entire width of the state - from Fargo on its eastern boundary to Theodore Roosevelt National Park to the west and back again - the trip began the morning of June 7 with superb local guides Ron Martin, co-author of *Birding North Dakota*, and Bob Anderson, a wildlife sciences professor at Valley City State University. Our first stop was a residential Fargo neighborhood where a pair of typically hard-to-find gray partridges had set up shop near two retention ponds for slam-dunk views.

With that target bird crossed off our list, we headed west along Interstate 94 to explore the Prairie Pothole Region, created when the glaciers retreated across the Great Plains. Dozens of small potholes dotted the landscape and lake-sized potholes, such as Dewald Slough and Tappen Slough, teemed with waterbirds. We saw western, eared and red-necked grebes. Willets were guarding chicks in a marshy area just off the road.

One memorable stop was on Day Two at the Kunkel School Section Prairie, 40 miles east of Bismarck. Set aside for a rural school when the state was first settled, this 640-acre native prairie is now leased to cattle ranchers whose grazing fees help support local schools. It is accessed by climbing through a barbed wire fence and is prime habitat for some of North Dakota's star birds.



Swainson's hawk. Photo by Kristen Cart



Barbed Wire. Photo by Diane Eubanks

As we dodged dried cow pies and marveled at wildflowers, like the delicately feathered prairie smoke, we spotted some 30 chestnut-collared longspurs glowing with black bellies, yellow throats and rusty napes. We also saw grasshopper sparrows, bobolinks, a marbled godwit nesting in the middle of the prairie (who knew?), and more than two dozen other species. Then our guides identified the melodious song of a Baird's sparrow. A victim of habitat loss that has wiped out 65 percent of its population since 1968, this subtly streaked bird was at the top of our wish list; luckily, we saw two of them warbling from a thicket of shrubs.

(Fun facts: John James Audubon first collected Baird's sparrow in 1843 in North Dakota, naming it for Spencer Baird, the first director of the Smithsonian Institution. Baird mentored Robert Ridgway, a founding member of Illinois Audubon Society.)

The next day, at Little Missouri National Grassland, we parked at a random spot along the road, slogged through the grasses toward a hill that looked much closer than it actually was, and waited. Suddenly, our guides pointed to a small bird circling high overhead and singing in a descending series of whistles. It was Sprague's pipit, a cryptically colored and notoriously difficult to find songbird of the prairies. The bird continued its aerial dance for several minutes then executed a near-vertical drop and briefly circumnavigated our group before ascending to repeat its flight display. The closeups weren't satisfying but the performance was a thrill. This pipit is also suffering severe population declines.

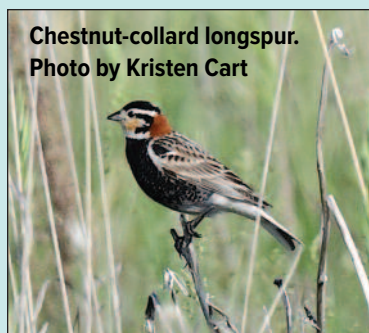
Our last stop before heading back east was Theodore Roosevelt National Park, with rugged badland vistas wildly different from the flatlands of the prairies. Standing in one spot we saw nesting golden eagles, lazuli buntings, a black-billed magpie, and a first-year male blue grosbeak that was a county record. Throughout the park we found lark sparrow, mountain bluebird, spotted towhee, and a recently fledged great-horned owl covered in fluffy white down. Prairie dogs were also abundant, looking like animated stuffed animals with their furry bodies and petite paws.

Non-birding highlights included a fleeting glimpse of a badger diving into his burrow. Early arrivals visited the Hjemkomst Center Museum in Moorehead, Minnesota to see the full-scale replica of a Viking ship built by a local man who dreamed of sailing it to Norway. (He didn't live to see it, but the ship made the journey in 1982.) And several of us attended the Medora Musical, an ultra-kitschy, horses-on-the-stage tribute to Theodore Roosevelt and the American West performed against the backdrop of the badlands.

As it turned out, we covered far more ground and saw many more birds than if we had attended the Potholes & Prairie Birding Festival. Put North Dakota on your birding bucket list. You'll be rewarded with great birds and spectacular scenery that will make you feel like a pioneer in a covered wagon heading west. ■



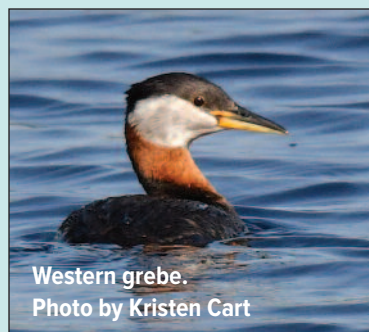
Photo by Diane Eubanks



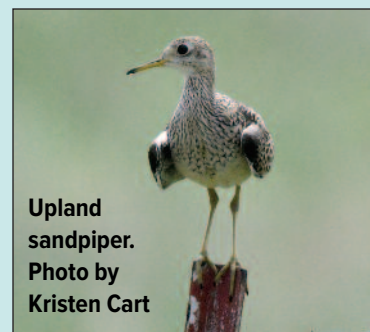
Chestnut-collared longspur.  
Photo by Kristen Cart



Gray partridge.  
Photo by Kristen Cart



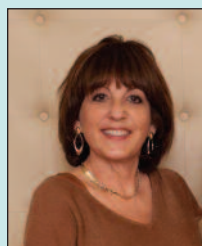
Western grebe.  
Photo by Kristen Cart



Upland sandpiper.  
Photo by Kristen Cart



Grassland birders. Photo by Diane Eubanks



## BIO

Rena Cohen is the president of the Lake-Cook Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society. She discovered birding on a trip she took with her husband to Point Pelee National Park, Ontario, Canada, a few decades ago.