BIRDING AREAS FOUND ON THE MAP

LAWRENCE PARK
This city park is located below the Buffalo Hill Golf Course at the north end of Kalispell. Lawrence Park sits on a developed parkland, mature trees and a walking/biking trail through mixed riparian habitats along the Stillwater River.

Directions: From downtown Kalispell, follow 89 North (Main Street) across highway 2; in about 0.5 mile turn right on Main Street where you can park for a few hours. The entrance to Lawrence Park is on the right, just before the road heads uphill to the golf course.

Habitat: This area along the Stillwater River has birch, large cottonwoods, and dense dogwood understory. There are also cattail wetlands associated with a backwater slough of the Stillwater. If you park at the farthest (east) of the road, you can walk on a path that leads you to the original woods, which still have a mixture of thinned forest and dense riparian shrubs.

Seasons: Open year-round.

OWEN SOWTEN ERIE NATURAL AREA
This gem is an outstanding 442 acres of unsturbed riparian bottomland along the eastern outskirts of Kalispell and is Montana’s only state-designated National Area. Flathead Audubon and Montana Audubon manage this special birding hotspot. Most of the Area lies along the east side of the Stillwater River, mostly primary by boat. There is a network of maintained trails that connect with riparian shrubs, backwater channels and the Stillwater River. Birch, spruce and forest openings add diversity.

Seasons: Open year-round.

SWAN LAKE
A visit to Swan Lake always produces some birding rewards, especially in spring and summer. Start at the Forest Service boat ramp and swim area at the southeast end of the lake, before the Swan Lake townsite and then continue to the Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge just south of the townsite where there is a public viewing platform. After that, heads back to the Hubler Road to Rodrigo’s Restaurant, go around for Vaux’s Swift, then take the Camas Crossing area for a more in-depth look at the lake. The entire area offers interesting birding in all seasons.

Seasons: Year-round but may be icy and slick in winter.

LOWER VALLEY ROAD
The area known as “Lower Valley” to locals includes the Flathead Valley from Kalispell to Flathead Lake. A number of farm roads, including Lower Valley Road, Farm Road, and 100 Somers Road meander through farmlands and past potted wetlands, oxbow sloughs, and riparian areas between the Flathead River and the lake. The entire area offers interesting birding in all seasons.

Seasons: Year-round. Some roads are gravel and can be dusty in summer and slick in winter.

SMITH LAKE
A short drive west from Kalispell takes you to this complex of large, shallow wetlands and marsh scattered, among agricultural lands, ringed by periodic stands of willow and other shrubs and a few stands of dry coniferous forest.

Nearby Opportunities

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK
No visit to the Flathead Valley is complete without a trip to Glacier National Park, and indeed this is often where visitors focus their time. Pick up a park map at the entrance. Some of our most unique and rewarding birding opportunities are found in the park.

Directions: Glacier National Park is located about 30 miles west of Kalispell on Highway 2 and about 26 miles north of Whitefish on Highway 40. Routes to Both Kalispell and Whitefish are well marked.

Habitat: Glacier National Park includes habitats from wetland/tamarack forests to alpine. Habitats: Going-to-the-Sun Road crosses all of these habitats. The entrance area includes good viewing of the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, McDonald Creek and Lake McDonald.

Birds: Vaux’s Swift, Bald Eagle, Common Goldeneye, others and ducks small black. Terr. Sonja, Virginia Rail and Wilson’s Phalaropes families can be seen in summer, followed by a wide variety of sandpipers (mid-August is best). The agricultural lands are interspersed with riparian and upland shrub areas where Clay-colored Sparrows breed, Savannah Sparrows are prevalent. Common breeding raptors include Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle and Northern Harrier. Church Slough, about 5 miles from Highway 93 just east of the Ashley Creek bridge, is one of the best places for migratory waterfowl in early spring, with thousands of Tundra Swan, geese, and a wide variety of duck in late March and early April. It is the most reliable place in the Flathead Valley to find Greater Scap and Eurasian Wigeon, Rough-legged and Red-tailed (including Harlan’s) Hawks, Falcones and even the occasional Snail Kite that hunt the lower valley fields in winter. The Blaikie Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) on North Somers Road is the only sizeable piece of public land here, and offers grassland, shrub and wetland birds such as Short-eared Owl, Northern Harrier, Marsh Wren and several sparrow species. Another good site is the I-90 bridge from March 1st through July 1st to protect nesting birds.

Seasons: Year-round. Some roads are gravel and can be dusty in summer and slick in winter.

Located about 30 miles west of Kalispell, the nearly 8,000-acre Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, is the newest local addition to the National Wildlife Refuge system and is important for wetlands and grassland species. The refuge lies along the bottom of a picturesque east-west valley composed of lakes, wetlands and grasslands that transition to conifer forests. There are no entrance fees. The headquarters are located at the western end and is open most weekdays between 7:30 am to 3:30 pm. A portion of the refuge valley is closed in the fall for all public uses.

Directions: Lost Trail NWR can be reached by following the West Fork of Flathead River approximately 20 miles to Marion. Turn north at Marion onto Marion Valley Road. After approximately 1.3 miles, take the right fork and continue on the Blacktop past Little Bitterroot Lake until reaching the gravel road. Continue on the gravel road for approximately 13 miles over Mallis Pass dropping into Pleasant Valley. This road is not well maintained in winter.

Habitat: This grassland area supports Vesper and Savannah Sparrows, Mountain Bluebird and Long-billed Curlew in summer. The wet meadows and Dahl Lake provide habitat for migrant and breeding waterfowl and Sandhill Crane. Bald Eagle and Black Tern nest here, and thousands of ducks, geese and swan can be seen in spring (late March – early May).

Seasons: Best spring, summer, and early fall.

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Birds: Vaux’s Swift, Bald Eagle, Common Goldeneye, others and ducks small black. Terr. Sonja, Virginia Rail and Wilson’s Phalaropes families can be seen in summer, followed by a wide variety of sandpipers (mid-August is best). The agricultural lands are interspersed with riparian and upland shrub areas where Clay-colored Sparrows breed, Savannah Sparrows are prevalent. Common breeding raptors include Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle and Northern Harrier. Church Slough, about 5 miles from Highway 93 just east of the Ashley Creek bridge, is one of the best places for migratory waterfowl in early spring, with thousands of Tundra Swan, geese, and a wide variety of duck in late March and early April. It is the most reliable place in the Flathead Valley to find Greater Scap and Eurasian Wigeon, Rough-legged and Red-tailed (including Harlan’s) Hawks, Falcones and even the occasional Snail Kite that hunt the lower valley fields in winter. The Blaikie Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) on North Somers Road is the only sizeable piece of public land here, and offers grassland, shrub and wetland birds such as Short-eared Owl, Northern Harrier, Marsh Wren and several sparrow species. Another good site is the I-90 bridge from March 1st through July 1st to protect nesting birds.

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**WEST VALLEY**

The area known locally as “West Valley” lies between Kalispell and Whitefish west of Highway 93 and offers a variety of habitats from lakes and wetlands to agricultural fields and conifer forests. This birding loop can start at either Whitefish or Kalispell with a return via Highway 93. Many of the roads are not paved and can be muddy in the spring or after rains; in winter some roads may be drifted over. On your return, you can turn west into the county sanctuary landfill and observe a number of gull species that often concentrate there. The length is about 20 miles one way.

**Directions:** From Highway 2 west of Kalispell, head north for 1/4 mile on North Meridian Road Turn left on Farm to Market Road and continue about 4 miles north and west to West Valley Drive, passing farm land and spring creek habitats. Turn right (north) on West Valley Drive, go north 3 miles to Drive looking for raptors and farmar species. Turn right onto Clark Drive, which soon turns into a gravel road. North of the roads a wetland and pasture complex that holds migratory waterfowl spring and fall, Sandhill Crane, shorebirds and nesting grassland birds. Continue west on this gravel Road, bear right as it turns left. After 1.7 miles, turn right (northeast) onto Log Cabin Road, which becomes Bridger Vista Drive and join Trail Creek Road. Continue on Trail Creek Road for 2 miles to Farm to Market Road near. From Whitefish, take Highway 93 to Reserve Drive, and continue west 4 miles to Farm to Market Road, West Valley Drive, and continue on this road 3 miles to Farm to Market Road, turn right and proceed north 9 miles to the Tally Lake Campground (FS 913), where you will find 20 miles of paved Spring Prairie Road continuing west onto the Kuhns Wildlife Management Area. From here you can continue on paved or dirt roads to the south shore (better views exist at a large pull-out off the highway above the lake). Head east 4 miles to Whitefish on Highway 93.

**Habitat:** This loop includes a mix of grain fields, haylands, spring creek smalls shallow pothole wetlands, and low elevation Douglas fir and ponderosa pine stands. The route passes by or through several patches of coniferous forest, Lake past the a variety of woodland species. Near Whitefish, the route passes by Spencer Lake, a nesting lake for Common Loon, usually there from ice-out in early April through early fall.

**Birds:** These pothole wetlands offer great views of migratory waterfowl during spring and fall, as well as the best local diversity of shorebirds during fall migration (July/September) including Pectoral Sandpiper, Black-bellied and American Golden Plover, Stilt Sandpiper, and Long-billed Dowkhers. Sandhill Crane are abundant along the north roads year-round, but this is one of the best areas for the valley for observing high density of waterfowl species, such as Red-shouldered (including Harlan’s) and Rough-legged Hawk, Bald Eagle and Prairie Falcon, and in some winters, Snowy Owl. This entire area is private land, but offers great viewing from the road. On the ponds look for Barred and Horred Grebes, Barrow’s Goldeneye, and Common Loon in spring and summer. Many species of ducks breed here while the surrounding fields usually support a few pairs of Sandhill Crane, which also gather here in large numbers in the fall. Less common, but regular migrants include Snow and Ross’s Goose (in spring) and Bonaparte’s Gull, Savannah and Vesper Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and Gray Pratridge are common along the roadsides. Watch for White-tailed Kites, Brown-headed cowbird, and Sharp-shinned Hawk along the lakeshore. Late evenings along Logan Creek might yield Great Horned Owl, Northern Pygmy Owl, and Red crossbill. Red-necked Grebe, Eared and Horned Grebes, Barrow’s Goldeneye, and Common Loon offer a variety of habitats from lakes and wetlands to agricultural fields and conifer forests, streamside willow, alder, and Douglas fir forests, open meadows, and numerous ephemeral streams, to subalpine and exposed near-timberline habitats on the very top.

**Birds:** Durian early and June early on the lower part of the trail you will hear Townsend’s Warbler. Watch for American Robin, Northern Waterthrush, Brewer’s Blackbird, and American Robin. Watch for Long-billed Dowkhers, Mockingbird, and White-throated Sparrow. All of these species can be found along the lakeshore. Late evenings along Logan Creek might yield great horned Owls, Northern Pygmy Owls, and Red crossbills. Red-necked Grebes, Eared and Horned Grebes, Barrow’s Goldeneye, and Common Loon offer a variety of habitats from lakes and wetlands to agricultural fields and conifer forests, streamside willow, alder, and Douglas fir forests, open meadows, and numerous ephemeral streams, to subalpine and exposed near-timberline habitats on the very top.

**Birds:** During May and late June on the lower part of the trail you will hear Townsend’s Warbler. Watch the tops of the trees for this exceptionally beautiful bird. The trail is also an excellent place to see Orange-crowned, Yellow-rumped, and MacGillivray’s Warbler, as well as Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Other common birds in the lower part of the trail are Swainson’s Thrush, Townsend’s Solitaire, Cassin’s Vireo and Waringio. Most of the flycatchers can be seen here, particularly Olive-sided Flycatcher. About half way up, the trail turns north to the left side of a deep gully and soon turns to a gravel road. This is one of the best areas of the valley for observing a high density of waterfowl species, such as Red-shouldered (including Harlan’s) and Rough-legged Hawk, Bald Eagle and Prairie Falcon, and in some winters, Snowy Owl. This entire area is private land, but offers great viewing from the road. On the ponds look for Barred and Horred Grebes, Barrow’s Goldeneye, and Common Loon in spring and summer. Many species of ducks breed here while the surrounding fields usually support a few pairs of Sandhill Crane, which also gather here in large numbers in the fall. Less common, but regular migrants include Snow and Ross’s Goose (in spring) and Bonaparte’s Gull, Savannah and Vesper Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and Gray Pratridge are common along the roadsides. Watch for White-tailed Kites, Brown-headed cowbird, and Sharp-shinned Hawk along the lakeshore. Late evenings along Logan Creek might yield Great Horned Owl, Northern Pygmy Owl, and Red crossbill. Red-necked Grebe, Eared and Horned Grebes, Barrow’s Goldeneye, and Common Loon offer a variety of habitats from lakes and wetlands to agricultural fields and conifer forests, streamside willow, alder, and Douglas fir forests, open meadows, and numerous ephemeral streams, to subalpine and exposed near-timberline habitats on the very top.

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