

# Midwest USA



**June 2022**

**A Birding Trip  
Report by  
Ian Merrill**

## Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, South Dakota and Wyoming: 2<sup>nd</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> June 2022

### Introduction:

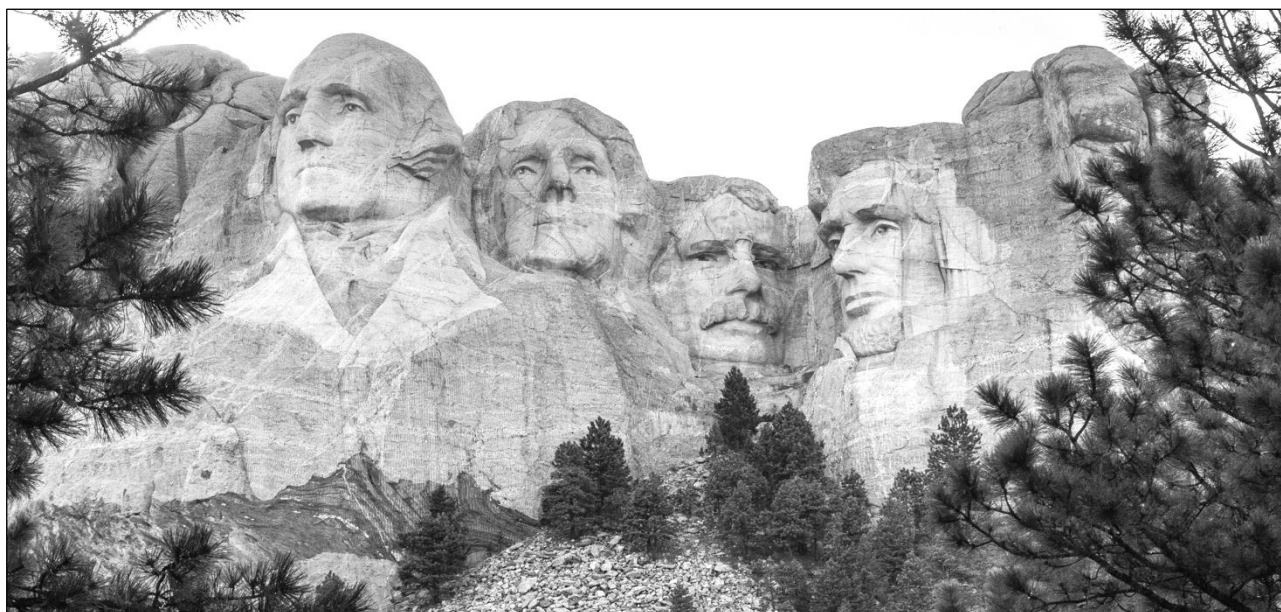
#### Where

This short report covers a lengthy road trip, just under four thousand miles in distance and through five Midwestern USA States. The itinerary was loosely molded around a handful of target birds, but also incorporated some of the spectacular landscapes and iconic landmarks, in a region which is often neglected by visiting birders and sightseers alike. As my tenth visit to the USA the list of Midwest bird targets was correspondingly short, actually being limit to just three species, namely Connecticut Warbler, Yellow Rail and Baird's Sparrow. Each one has a relatively remote range and rather secretive habits, making the prospects of a totally successful trip from a birding perspective something of a challenge.

Although this summary encompasses a broad region of the USA, including a number of outstanding birding sites, the ornithological focus was actually of secondary importance in many localities, as sightseeing and exploration formed an important element of this extremely rewarding adventure. The journey was conducted alongside by largely non-birding wife, Victoria, and therefore this report does not form a comprehensive birding guide to the region. Instead, it gives an update on finding a handful of sough-after bird species and also a feel for what can be achieved on a more family-friendly trip.

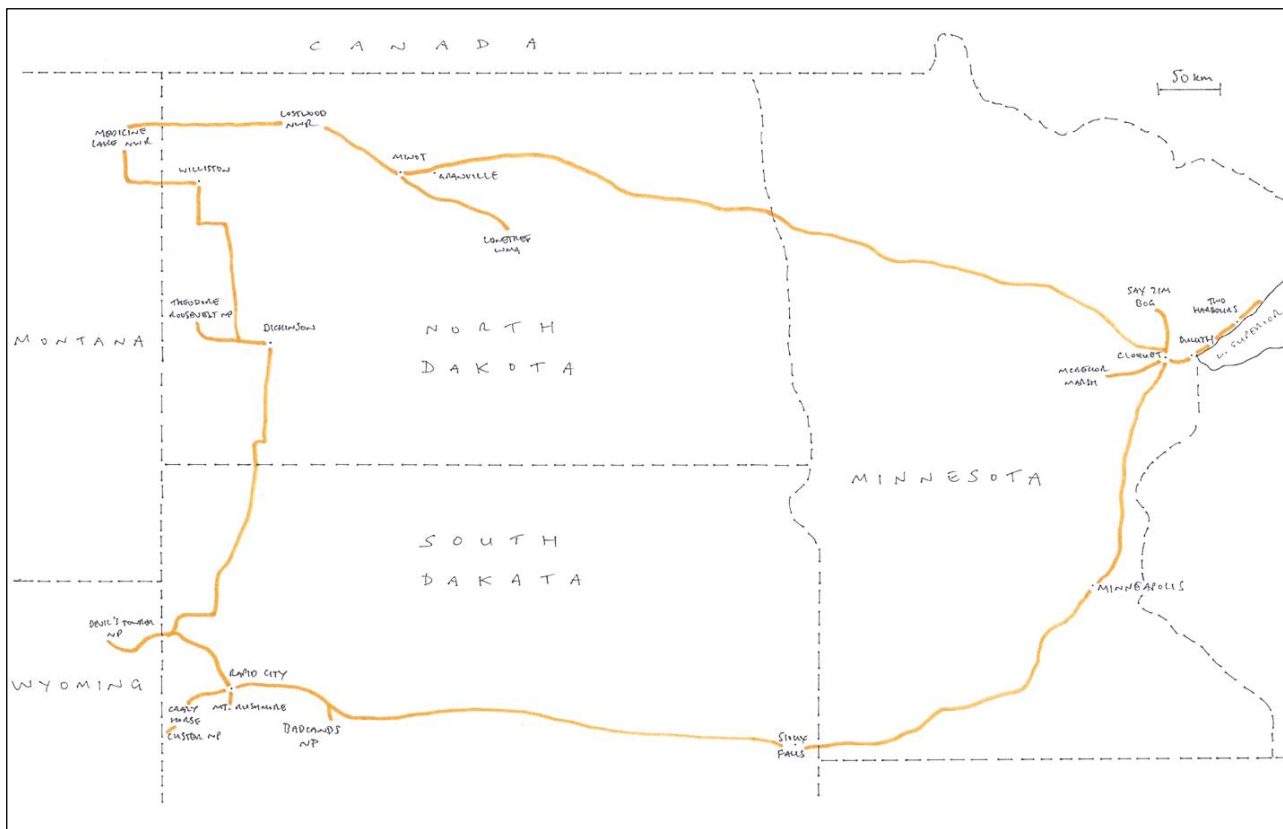
All three target birds were eventually secured, together with such bonuses as Trumpeter Swan, Sharp-tailed and Ruffed Grouse, Western Grebe; breeding Wilson's Snipe, Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope and Franklin's Gull; American Bittern, Ferruginous Hawk, Great Grey Owl, Lewis's Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, Canada Jay, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, 'White-winged' Junco, White-winged Crossbill, Chestnut-collared Longspur, plus a whole raft of amazing warblers, sparrows, vireos, flycatchers, buntings, finches and orioles, all on their respective nesting grounds.

Mammal watching was always a priority, with an impressive twenty six species recorded. Highlights included Black Bear, American Porcupine, American Beaver, Pronghorn, Bighorn Sheep, American Bison, Coyote and the much-wanted American Badger. Our sightseeing memories were topped by the picturesque Lake Superior north shore and the historic port of Duluth, Minnesota; the bird-filled prairies and wetlands of Medicine Lake NWR, Montana; the hidden gem of Theodore Roosevelt NP, North Dakota; and the majestic Black Hills region of South Dakota, including Devil's Tower NP (just into Wyoming), Custer SP, Mount Rushmoor and the Crazy Horse Memorial, plus the stark beauty of Badlands NP just to the east.



*Mount Rushmoor National Memorial, Black Hills, South Dakota; front cover, Badlands NP, South Dakota*





Our complete itinerary was as follows:

### Day 1: Thurs 2<sup>nd</sup> June

Comfortable [Delta Airlines](#) eight hour flight from LHR direct to Minneapolis – St Paul, arriving at 14.00 local time. Remarkably smooth and good-humored passage through immigration. Similarly efficient service from [Alamo](#) and collection of our bright blue Toyota RAV 4 SUV.

Two-and-a-half hour drive north to Cloquet and check in to [AmericInn](#) for a six-night stay. Short siesta then fifteen minute drive to Jason Cook State Park for leg stretch beside the river, first mosquitoes and bonus American Porcupine right overhead. Enjoyable meal and beers at [Streetcar Kitchen and Pub](#), Carlton, then early night at Cloquet. Accom: [AmericInn](#), Cloquet.

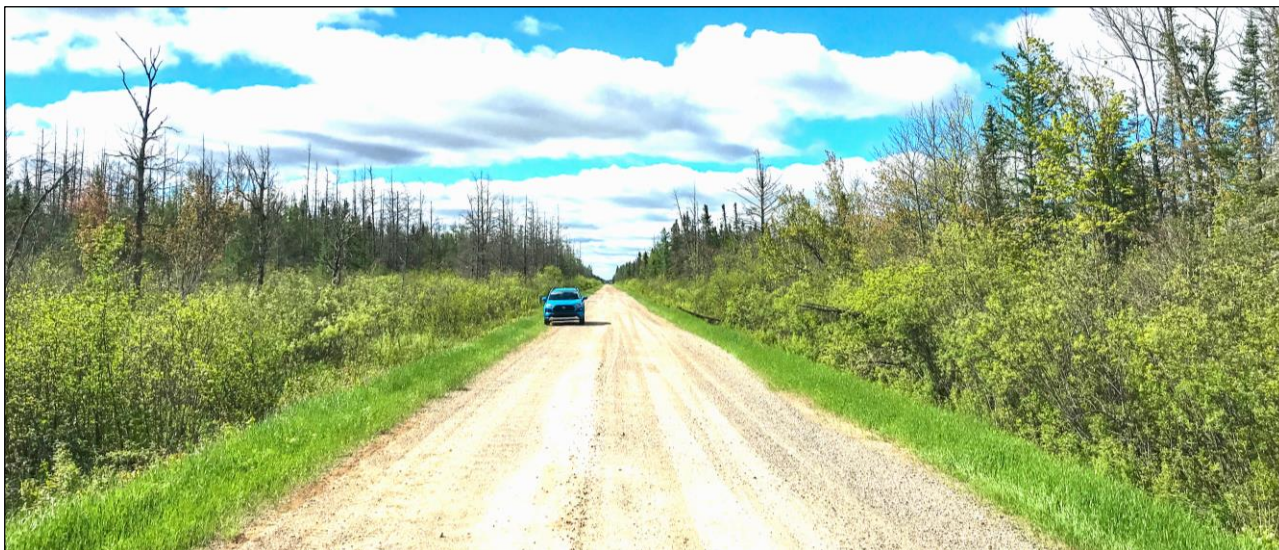
### Day 2: Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> June

05.00 start then fifty minute drive north to the vast green expanse of Sax Zim Bog, where I am welcomed by a Great Grey Owl! Very enjoyable morning of boreal forest birding from the gravel roadside of CR788, under a blue sky and with a cool breeze keeping the mosquitoes at bay. Call at the Sax Zim Bog [Owl Avenue Welcome Centre](#) and meet summer warden Mark Johnson, for a hugely informative summary of local information, both birding and far beyond (Ruffed Grouse, Great Grey Owl, White-winged Crossbill, Blue-headed Vireo, Canada Jay, Golden-winged, Chestnut-sided, Blackburnian, Black-and-White and Nashville Warblers, Hermit Thrush, Least and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, Eastern Wood-Pee-wee, Purple Finch, Swamp Sparrow).

Back to Cloquet for brunch at [Perkins](#), meeting up with Victoria, post morning run. Thirty minute drive to Duluth waterfront to explore the historic western-most Great Lakes seaport, including the town's landmark lift bridge, and an afternoon of ice cream and relaxation.

Evening return to Cloquet to grab a Subway tea, then recce of McGregor Marsh, a fifty minute drive southwest (Victoria stays in Cloquet). Heard-only Yellow Rails and lots of mosquitos, late return to Cloquet. Accom: [AmericInn](#), Cloquet.





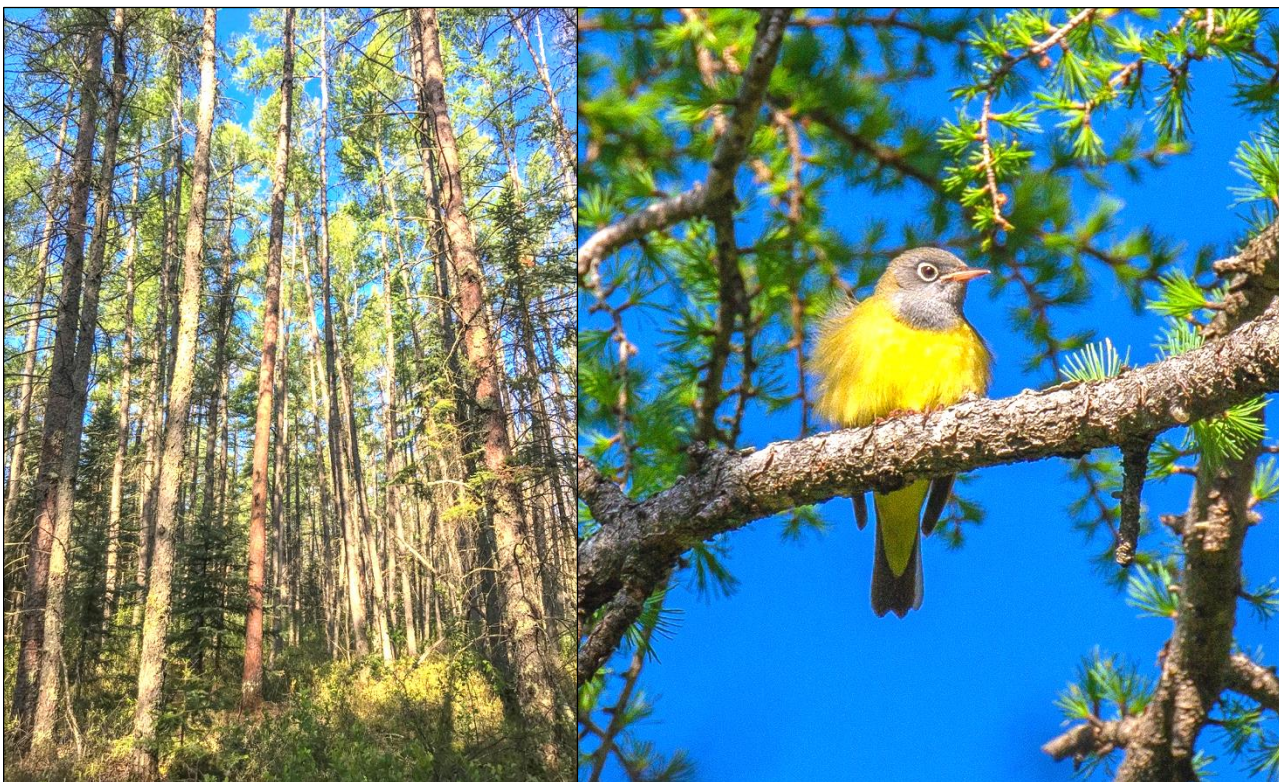
*County Road 788, Sax Zim Bog, Minnesota*

**Day 3: Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> June**

04.30 start and drive to Sax Zim Bog, Owl Avenue, for concerted effort on Connecticut Warbler. Single bird located after one-and-a-half hours searching in the mosquito-ridden Tamarack Pine swamp forest (American Porcupine, Black Bear, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Connecticut and Mourning Warblers).

Return to Cloquet to collect Victoria, post morning run. Subway picnic lunch, then drive to Duluth and on to Park Point, close to the tip of the world's longest freshwater sandbar. Sunny afternoon walk through beaches, dunes and woodland, to view the Lake Superior Entry Lighthouse from the adjacent breakwater.

Short drive into suburban Duluth early evening, to [At Sara's Table Chester Creek Cafe](#), for a fine evening meal. Return to Cloquet. Accom: [AmericInn](#), Cloquet.



*Tamarack Pine stand and Connecticut Warbler, Owl Avenue, Sax Zim Bog, Minnesota*



**Day 4: Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> June**

Hotel breakfast. One-and-a-half hour drive east and along Lake Superior north shore to Gooseberry Falls SP. 10km of trail walking along highly scenic iron-stained rocky coastline and adjacent mixed woodland (American Red and Franklin's Ground Squirrels, Veery, Philadelphia Vireo, Ovenbird, Black-throated Green and Mourning Warblers). Short drive west to Split Rock Lighthouse, the most photographed location in Minnesota, for pictures and drawing.

Return to Cloquet to collect Subway tea, drop off Vic at hotel and drive fifty minutes to McGregor Marsh. Chance encounter with US birders Jason Heinen and Eric Reubel, also on a Yellow Rail quest. Four hours spent fighting off mosquitos and wading through marshes, culminating in two unformattable point-blank Yellow Rail sightings, out on the floating reedbed; a new bird for all! (Yellow Rail, American Bittern, Sandhill Crane, Wilson's Snipe, Black-billed Cuckoo, Sedge Wren, Marsh Wren). Back at Cloquet 01.30. Accom: [AmericInn](#), Cloquet.



*Soo Line Trail at dusk, McGregor Marsh, Minnesota and Yellow Rail*



**Day 5: Monday 6<sup>th</sup> June**

Lie in and hotel breakfast. Return our RAV4 to Alamo at Duluth Airport to repair damaged tyre. Forty minute drive west in replacement hire car to Two Harbours, on Lake Superior North shore. Explore historic town and quay, then scenic coastline, with lighthouse and boat sketching, collect repaired car late afternoon (Clay-coloured Sparrow, Common Loon).

Return to Cloquet, pick up [Sammy's Pizza](#) then drive north to Sax Zim Bog. Fruitless owling/mammal watching on Stonelake Road, CR213 and Owl Avenue, though memorable pizza picnic and boreal forest sunset. Return to Cloquet at dusk. Accom: [AmericInn](#), Cloquet.

**Day 6: Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> June**

04.30 start and drive to Sax Zim Bog pays dividends, with outrageous views of Great Grey Owl beside CR788. Roadside birding then cold pizza breakfast. Call by Welcome Centre for thank-yous to Mark, and donations, learning a whole new raft of interesting facts, this time about Lewis and Clark's epic journey of discovery, over two hundred years before (usual set of pristine warblers, plus Ruby-throated Hummingbirds around Welcome Centre feeders). Return to Cloquet.

Hotel siesta followed by Cloquet town exploration on foot, including parks around St Louis River and some quiet suburbs. Sort out kit for next leg of journey. Ten minute drive to Carlton for an excellent final Minnesota meal and drinks at [Streetcar Kitchen and Pub](#), Carlton. Accom: [AmericInn](#), Cloquet.



*Great Grey Owl, County Road 788, Sax Zim Bog, Minnesota*

**Day 7: Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> June**

Hotel breakfast then 07.00 start for seven-and-a-half hour drive west to Minot under a cloudless blue sky, with the landscape gradually morphing from verdant boreal forest to featureless prairie farmlands, as we pass into North Dakota. Subway picnic lunch en route. Check in to [Microtel](#) in Minot, a rather soulless sprawling city.



Whist Vic takes a run, then swims in the hotel pool, I make a one-and-a-half hour drive back southwest to Lonetree WMA, for a rendezvous with local birder Steven Easley. Two hours spend scouring a known Baird's Sparrow prairie grassland site to no avail; conclusion is that birds are breeding and now silent (American Beaver, Pronghorn, Marbled Godwit, Western Meadowlark, Bobolink, Grasshopper, Clay-coloured and Savannah Sparrows).

Subway tea en route back to Minot. Accom: [Microtel](#), Minot.

#### Day 8: Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> June

05.30 on site at 57th Street Marsh, Granville, just east of Minot. No Baird's Sparrow, once again (Wilson's Snipe, Upland Sandpiper, Black Tern, Willow Flycatcher, Western Meadowlark, Sedge Wren, Grasshopper, Savannah and Clay-coloured Sparrow, Bobolink).

Back to Minot for hotel breakfast. Check out and drive west one hour to check Baird's Sparrow sites close to Lostwood NWR; can't even access my prime eBird stakeout! (Ferruginous Hawk).

Continue for one-and-a-half hours west and into Montana, to Medicine Lake NWR. Three Baird's Sparrows located in grassland adjacent to access road between 14.00 and 16.00, performing superbly; total contrast to previous sites. Visit concluded with 5km walk in vicinity of the headquarters of this wonderful site, protecting precious prairie grasslands and several large lakes, teeming with waterbirds (Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Phalarope, Baird's, Grasshopper, Savannah and Clay-coloured Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Bobolink, Western Meadowlark).

One-hour-fifteen-minute drive to [Microtel](#), Williston arriving in huge thunderstorm. Quick shower then good evening meal at [Williston Brewing Company](#), though very much overpriced. Accom: [Microtel](#), Williston.



*Baird's Sparrow and its prairie grassland habitat, Medicine Lake NWR, Montana*

**Day 9: Friday 10<sup>th</sup> June**

Early waffle and syrup breakfast, best hotel offerings yet! Return trip to Montana and Medicine Lake NWR to further explore this oasis of unique habitats. All day until 15.30 watching sparrows, painting, walking and driving trails (White-rumped and Least Sandpipers, Sanderling, Wilson's Snipe, American Avocet, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, American Wigeon, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Western and Eared Grebes, Ferruginous Hawk, Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, Marbled Godwit, Willett, Franklin's Gull, Forster's Tern, Marsh Wren, Baird's, Grasshopper, Savannah and Clay-coloured Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Bobolink, Western Meadowlark). Picnic lunch on site.

Three hour drive southeast to Dickinson and check into weirdly deserted [Heritage Hotel](#). Evening meal and beers at the excellent [Phatt Fish Brewing Company](#), less than a ten minute drive away. Live country music as we savour fine pizzas and a mouthwatering selection of craft ale. Accom: [Heritage Hotel](#), Dickinson.

**Day 10: Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> June**

Scant hotel breakfast, then thirty-five minute drive west to [Theodore Roosevelt National Park](#) South Unit. Purchase 80 USD joint annual National Park pass.

Great advice from extremely helpful visitors' centre staff points us to the scenic Jones Creek Trail for 10km return hike through herb-rich prairie and juniper groves, all under warm sunshine and amidst wonderfully varied scenery (American Bison, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-breasted Chat, Spotted Towhee, Field, Lark and Vesper Sparrows, Lazuli Bunting). Head to picnic area for cold pizza lunch and siesta.

Late afternoon exploring remainder of park including the Buck Hill and Wind Canyon Trails, as a huge electric storm builds over the spectacular badlands landforms. Back to Dickinson for a quick brush-up and return visit to [Phatt Fish Brewing Company](#). Accom: [Heritage Hotel](#), Dickinson.



*Jones Creek Trail, Theodore Roosevelt National Park South Unit, North Dakota*

**Day 11: Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> June**

Early hotel breakfast and twenty minute drive to 47th Street SW, south of Bellfield (via speeding ticket), for an hour of roadside prairie birding (Marbled Godwit, Horned Lark, Bobolink, Grasshopper, Savannah, Vesper and Baird's Sparrow, Lark Bunting, Western Meadowlark).

One hour drive north to [Theodore Roosevelt National Park](#) North Unit. Fantastic seven kilometer hike around the outstandingly scenic Caprock Coulee Loop Trail hike, through starkly barren badlands, dense juniper forests and flower-filled meadows (Yellow-breasted Chat, Rock Wren, Spotted Towhee, Lazuli Bunting, Mountain Bluebird).



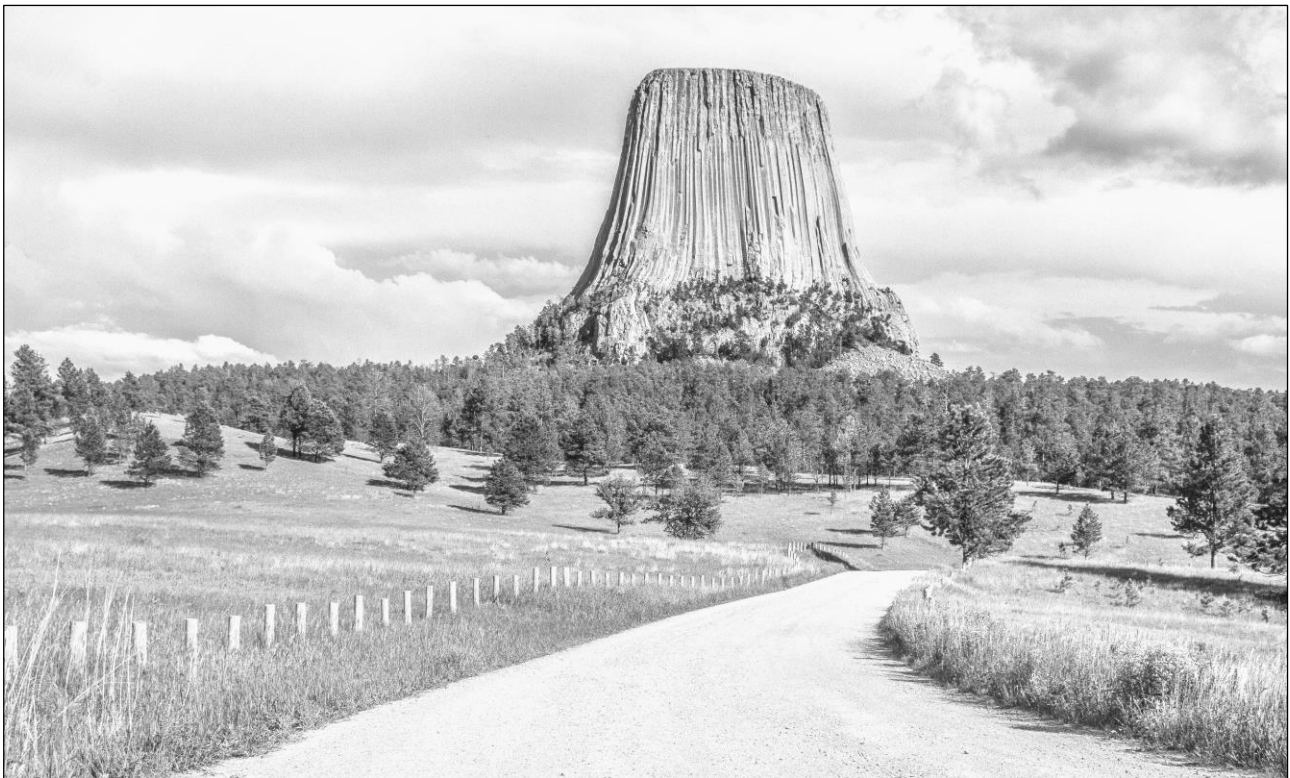
Cold pizza lunch at camp site, siesta, then late afternoon birding on Little Mo Nature Trail, weaving amongst cotton woods in the valley base (Red-eyed and Warbling Vireos, Cedar Waxwing, Brown Thrasher, Orchard Oriole, Field Sparrow).

Return trip to Dickinson for a freshen up and our final visit to [Phatt Fish Brewing Company](#). Accom: [Heritage Hotel](#), Dickinson.

### **Day 12: Monday 13<sup>th</sup> June**

Dawn birding at Patterson Lake, ten minutes south of hotel (American Bittern, American White Pelican, Sora, Northern Harrier, Spotted Sandpiper, Marsh Wren), early morning run for Vic. Hotel breakfast, checkout and commence four-hour drive south on die-straight roads, through endless prairie plains.

The monotony is broken when we reach the picturesque forested uplands of South Dakota's famed Black Hills and take a break for a cold pizza lunch. Mid-afternoon sees the appearance on the horizon of the iconic basalt spire of Devil's Tower, prelude to our next National Park visit. The truly breathtaking natural landmark lives to all expectations, being circumnavigated by a fine 6km hike (Mountain Bluebird, Red Crossbill, Red-breasted Nuthatch).



*Devil's Tower, Wyoming*

Two hour drive southeast to Rapid City, latterly through torrential thunder storms. Pick up four days of groceries from a local Walmart, finally arriving at our Sagewood Suites AirBnB at 21.00. Eventually fathom our room entry routine and settle down to cook a late dinner. Accom: [Sagewood Suites AirBnB](#), Rapid City.

### **Day 13: Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> June**

Home-cooked breakfast then one hour drive though Black Hills, southwest to [Hell Canyon](#). Slow walk through flower-filled mixed woodland glades, alive with birdsong, then return loop around rim of spectacular limestone gorge to complete an inspirational 12km hike (Yellow-bellied Marmot, Least Chipmunk, White-throated Swift, Lewis's and Red-headed Woodpeckers, Canyon Wren, Violet-green Swallow, Cordilleran and Dusky Flycatchers, Plumbeous Vireo, Red Crossbill, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak).



Well-deserved picnic lunch on site, siesta, then thirty-minute drive to [Crazy Horse Memorial](#) for remainder of afternoon. Great experience, learning much about Native American Indian culture. Return to Rapid city for evening home-cooked meal. Accom: [Sagewood Suites Airbnb](#), Rapid City.

**Day 14: Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> June**

Early home-cooked breakfast then ninety minute drive east to [Badlands National Park](#). First stop Castle / Medicine Route Trails for 8km circular route hike through canyon edge and prairies, in rapidly increasing heat. Brief visit to visitor centre adds little value with regard to mammal hunting advice.

Drive northwest on Badlands Loop Road via a few scenic viewpoints, concluding in picnic lunch and siesta. Drive on to Wall, for ice cream and a little shopping in the famous [Wall Drug](#) emporium. Pick up Subway picnic tea.

Short drive back to [Badlands National Park](#), to witness the area come to life, as temperatures fall and low evening light accentuates the subtle badlands hues. Fantastic sunset and accompanying mammalian emergence, including the much-wanted American Badger. Picnic tea at Roberts Prairie Dog Town at dusk, serenaded by howling Coyotes (Pronghorn, Mule Deer, Bighorn Sheep, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, American Bison, Coyote, American Badger). One hour drive back to Rapid City after dark. Accom: [Sagewood Suites Airbnb](#), Rapid City.



*Badlands National Park, South Dakota*

**Day 15: Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June**

Early home-cooked breakfast and one hour drive to the outstandingly picturesque [Custer State Park](#). Early morning birding and drawing in vicinity of Sylvan Lake (Least Chipmunk, Red-naped Sapsucker, Townsend's Solitaire, Western Wood-Pee-wee, Red Crossbill, White-winged Junco, Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, Western Tanager).

Extremely rewarding 12km there-and-back hike to Black Elk Peak, the highest point between the Rockies and the Pyrenees, involving some serious ascent but capped with outstanding views over the whole of the Black Hills (Least Chipmunk, Canada Jay, White-throated Swift, Mountain Bluebird, Swainson's Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-winged Junco).



Much needed lakeside picnic lunch and siesta, then twenty minute drive to [Mount Rushmore National Memorial](#). Pay homage to iconic mountainside sculptures via the typically slick visitor centre and boardwalk loop (American Red Squirrel, White-winged Junco). Forty minute drive return to Rapid City for home cooked evening meal. Accom: [Sagewood Suites AirBnB](#), Rapid City.



*Black Elk Peak, Black Hills, South Dakota, view from the summit looking south*

#### **Day 16: Friday 17<sup>th</sup> June**

Cooked breakfast, pack bags and check out early to make the most of our final time in the Black Hills. Twenty minute drive south for 6km hike along [Flume Trail](#), from Coon Hollow Trailhead (Least Chipmunk, Eastern Fox Squirrel, Townsend's Solitaire, White-breasted Nuthatch, Plumbeous Vireo, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, White-winged Junco, Spotted Towhee).

Set off on five hour journey east, with break at the informative [Minuteman Missile Silo](#) just east of Wall, including picnic lunch. Onward to Sioux Falls, check in to [Super 8 Motel](#), quick spruce-up and five minute drive into the surprisingly up-market and cultural heart of town. Easily one of the best meals of the trip at [MacKenzie River Pizza](#). Accom: [Super 8 Motel](#), Sioux Falls.

#### **Day 17: Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> June**

Last unsustainable, plastic-plated breakfast of the trip and check out for three-and-a-half hour drive to airport. Break at Seven Mile Creek Country Park, St Peter, beside the Minnesota River (Chimney Swift, Yellow-throated Vireo, Baltimore Oriole, House Finch).

Seamless car return to Alamo at Minneapolis – St Paul International Airport and late afternoon flight home to deposit us at LHR early morning on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June.

#### **When**

The dates of the trip were carefully planned to optimise the chances of finding my three target birds. Although Yellow Rail and Baird's Sparrow can be seen on their breeding grounds from the middle of May, Connecticut Warblers do not return until late May or even early June. Our chosen slot at the very beginning of June worked out well, as Connecticut Warbler was newly on territory and very vocal, the spring vegetation in the marshes was not yet high enough to conceal Yellow Rails, and at least some of the Baird's Sparrows were not yet in the throes of nesting, when they can be hard to find.

It is worth noting that the early June period is already into the mosquito season, so be prepared for a serious onslaught of biting insects when visiting Sax Zim Bog and McGregor Marsh!



## How

At the time of our departure a Covid-19 Rapid Antigen Test was necessary before access could be granted to the USA. Having met this requirement, we flew direct from London Heathrow to Minneapolis - St Paul with [Delta Airlines](#). It is many years since I last used this airline and they have massively upped their game, meaning that I would now recommend Delta without hesitation.

Our Toyota RAV4 hire car was sourced via [Kayak](#) and rented from [Alamo](#), whose service was impeccable. The RAV4 was a superb vehicle, being very comfortable over the long distances covered, well adapted to some gravel road use, whilst also being relatively economical on fuel. 3984 miles were clocked up in the course of the trip.

Navigation between sites was done by pre-downloaded [Google Maps](#), long distances being covered with relative ease thanks to the USA's excellent highway network. Published bird information was sourced almost exclusively from the invaluable [eBird](#) recording network, supplemented by several [CloudBirders](#) trip reports and some first class local insights. My personal thanks are due to Mark Johnson, Jason Heinen, Steven Easley, Nick Ramsey, Jesse Kolar and Barry Wright, all of whom provided excellent up-to-date birding advice.

Note that Jason Heinen is based in Duluth and offers bird guiding throughout the area, including trips for Yellow Rail. During my brief encounter he proved to be an extremely competent birder with a huge knowledge of the area and its birds, plus great company too. He can be contacted by email on: [jasonheinen21@gmail.com](mailto:jasonheinen21@gmail.com).

[TripAdvisor](#) was used to source the majority of the accommodation listed in the daily itinerary above, and [AirBnB](#) for our time in Rapid City; all accommodation proved to be very good, though breakfast options were more variable and always accompanied by the depressing insistence on single-use plastic plates and cutlery, all destined for the landfill. Local dining was sourced from a mixture of [TripAdvisor](#) and local advice. We have always found that obtaining good, healthy food to be an issue in the USA, especially in remote areas, however this trip did produce some culinary gems and it was great to see so many craft ale breweries coming to the fore.

Cornell's fee [Merlin](#) bird call identification app proved to be something of a game-changer on this trip. It is the first time I had used it and, although far from infallible, it was absolutely invaluable in terms of rapidly naming innumerable unidentified bird songs and calls; do not visit the USA without it!

Finally, in the face of global warming and the known impacts of air travel upon climate change, I would urge anyone undertaking journeys such as the one described above to consider carbon offsetting via the excellent scheme hosted by the [World Land Trust](#).



*Prairie landscape close to Medicine Lake NWR, Montana*



### Notes on Key Target Species and Local Specialties

This is not a comprehensive checklist and focusses upon my target birds, plus some of the species which I was most excited to see, after an absence of many years.

#### Birds:

##### **Trumpeter Swan** *Cygnus buccinator*

A single pair on a roadside lake en route to McGregor Marsh, MN, 03/06/22.

##### **Ruffed Grouse** *Bonasa umbellus mediana*

A single bird seen on the CR788 gravel track, Sax Zim Bog, MN, 03/06/22.

##### **Sharp-tailed Grouse** *Tympanuchus phasianellus campestris*

c20 at Lonetree WMA, ND, on 08/06/22, and two seen on each visit to Medicine Lake NWR, MT.

##### **Yellow Rail** *Coturnicops noveboracensis noveboracensis*

Two heard at McGregor Marsh on 03/06/22, double figures heard plus two seen very well on 05/06/22, both sightings in the vicinity of 46.59435, -93.289975. Seeing Yellow Rail, one of only three target birds on the trip, was a certain highlight, enhanced by the unique circumstances in which the encounters occurred. It should be noted that 2022 was something of an exceptional year with regard to Yellow Rail numbers at McGregor Marsh, with over fifty calling birds being reliably counted; numbers, and indeed presence, are directly related to seasonal water levels and one year can be very different to the next.

Sibley states that Yellow Rail is 'extremely secretive and very rarely seen', a description supported by the fact that so few birders have ever set eyes on this species, even in such a populous and well-observed environment as North America. Having heard the highly distinctive mechanical clicking call given by territorial males on my recce, and having failed to lure one into view, my second visit to McGregor commenced with some trepidation. Fortunately my arrival coincided with that of Jason Heinen and Eric Reubel, US birders also in search of this legendarily elusive species.

Armed with their first-hand advice on how best to go about actually seeing a Yellow Rail, we first had to locate a calling bird which was accessible without the need of a snorkel and flippers! The next revelation was that the deeper into the night it gets, the more rails start calling; by the time I departed at c00.30, multiple birds could be heard calling in all directions, even from where I'd parked my car. Having checked other areas of the vast marsh, we focused on the section just northwest of the HW65 / Soo Line Trail intersection, this area hosting multiple calling birds but also being open and accessible, without the need to ford the deep dykes which bound most of the marsh perimeter.

Walking out onto the floating mat of dead reeds takes a little nerve and a modicum of balance, plus either rubber boots or very old trainers, as one explores habitat with the feel of a very leaky water bed! We closed in on a territorial bird, at least 100m from solid ground, with Jason encouraging a response by cleverly improvised call imitation, rhythmically tapping two Quarters carefully grasped in dexterous fingers. Once within the heart of the territory this wasn't quite enough to get our bird to show, so a speaker was hung from a Typha stem and a couple of bars of playback given. The results were simply devastating! Our rail instantly flew to the source of the sound, revealing white secondary flashes in the torchlight. This would have been ample reward, however once in the vicinity our bird was relatively undaunted, continuing to call and showing itself at incredibly close range; the whole experience, out on a floating reedbed in the middle of a Minnesota night, alongside two other elated birders, was totally unforgettable!

I repeated the exercise with a second bird, achieving the same results, after the others had departed and with my camera at the ready. This clearly established that the response was not a one-off and perhaps the norm, should one get the location and timing correct. The key to seeing this incredibly charismatic species appears to be hitting the correct period of the year, when birds are relatively new to territories but also when the reeds are not so high as to make viewing impossible. One must also select a safely accessible site,



something with can be an issue when deep ditches bisect a marsh such as the case at McGregor. It does appear, however, that once within a territory, Yellow Rail can be a highly responsive and eminently seeable species.

**Western Grebe** *Aechmophorus occidentalis*

Only seen at Medicine Lake NWR, MT, with a maximum count of c30.

**Sandhill Crane** *Antigone canadensis tabida*

Two seen close to Sax Zim Bog on 05/06/22, heard only at McGregor Marsh and another pair seen in transit on the Minnesota / North Dakota border.

**Upland Sandpiper** *Bartramia longicauda*

Great to see fence post mounted breeding birds at 57th Street Marsh, Granville and close to Bellfield, ND.



*Upland Sandpiper, Granville and Marbled Godwit, Medicine Lake NWR*

**Marbled Godwit** *Limosa fedoa*

A real wading bird highlight was seeing good numbers of this species displaying over their prairie breeding grounds; noted at Lonetree WMA, ND, Medicine Lake NWR, MT, and 47<sup>th</sup> Street Southwest, Bellfield, ND.

**Wilson's Snipe** *Gallinago delicata*

Another wader bonus, the charismatic 'drumming' of this species was noted over McGregor Marsh, MN, 57th Street Marsh, Granville, ND and Medicine Lake NWR, MT.

**Wilson's Phalarope** *Phalaropus tricolor*

Up to fifty gorgeous summer plumaged birds recorded at Medicine Lake NWR, MT.

**Franklin's Gull** *Leucophaeus pipixcan*

A fine gull to observe on it's breeding quarters, up to three hundred counted at Medicine Lake NWR, MT.

**American Bittern** *Botaurus lentiginosus*

Seen at McGregor Marsh, MN and Patterson Lake, ND, with its bizarre gulping territorial calls heard at the former site.

**Ferruginous Hawk** *Buteo regalis*

This prairie specialist was recorded hunting on farmland just west of Lostwood NWR, ND, on 09/06/22 and south of Medicine Lake NWR, MT, on 10/06/22.



**Great Grey Owl** *Strix nebulosa nebulosa*

A definite trip highlight were the outrageously close views of this magnificent owl at Sax Zim Bog CR778 on both 03/06/22 and 07/06/22, exact location 47.25801, -92.626112. Presumably the same first-light bird, it's hunting perch was right beside the gravel road and it remained oblivious of several ecstatic observers as shutters clicked close by.

**Lewis's Woodpecker** *Melanerpes lewis*

The beautiful woodpecker was observed in the dead pines close to the Hell Canyon parking area, SD, on 14/06/22.

**Red-naped Sapsucker** *Sphyrapicus nuchalis*

Two seen at Custer SP, SD, on 16/06/22. Lack of pre-trip reading led to a series of pleasant surprise encounters with primarily 'western' species in the Black Hills, this being the first in my systematic list, where they are noted out of interest.

**Canada Jay** *Perisoreus canadensis*

Birds of the Boreal Group were seen at Sax Zim Bog, MN, on 03/06/22 and a single bird of the Rocky Mountains Group was seen in Custer State Park, SD, on 16/06/22.

**Townsend's Solitaire** *Myadestes townsendi townsendi*

Heard at Custer SP and a pair seen extremely well on the Flume Trail, SD, 17/06/22.



*Bobolink, Medicine Lake; Spotted Towhee, Theodore Roosevelt NP; Grasshopper Sparrow, Medicine Lake*

**Red Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra benti*

This species was notably abundant in the Black Hills, SD, with multiple sightings at Devil's Tower, Hell Canyon and Custer SP. Assumed to be 'Type 2' or 'Ponderosa Pine' crossbills.

**White-winged Crossbill** *Loxia leucoptera leucoptera*

A group of at least four of these colourful northern forest specialists were seen on Sax Zim Bog FR 788 on 03/06/22.

**Chestnut-collared Longspur** *Calcarius ornatus*

It was a pleasure to see good numbers of the extremely attractive species in display above the prairie grassland of Medicine Lake NWR, MT, with up to sixty birds noted on the second day of our time at this site.



**Field Sparrow** *Spizella pusilla*

This attractive little sparrow was relatively abundant in Theodore Roosevelt NP, ND, with double figures noted along the Jones Creek Trail on 11/06/22.

**Dark-eyed Junco** *Junco hyemalis aikenii*

Previously regarded as a separate species, White-winged Junco, I was keen to see this distinctive race within its tiny Black Hills breeding range. In the South Dakota Black Hills it actually proved to be relatively abundant in the correct habitat, being seen at Custer SP, Mount Rushmore and on the Flume Trail.



*Lazuli Bunting and Cedar Waxwing, Theodore Roosevelt NP; 'White-winged' Junco, Custer NP*

**Baird's Sparrow** *Centronyx bairdii*

A major trip target, being a species with a remote and shrinking prairie breeding range, and one which proved to be a little more tricky than expected. After failing to locate birds at known 2022 sites in the form of Lonetree WMA and 57th Street Marsh, Granville, success was rapidly achieved at Medicine Lake. At the latter site territories were noted to the north of the main access road at 48.48484, -104.476155; 48.484562, -104.47383; 48.484539, -104.470794 on 09/06/22 and 10/06/22. A single territory also located at 47<sup>th</sup> Street Southwest, Bellfield, on 12/06/22 46.731337, -103.197120, following up on an eBird sighting.

The habitat for this species can be a little tricky to hone in on, being a mix of short prairie grassland interspersed with some thicker, taller tussocks, which hardly stands out to the untrained eye. It can clearly survive in limited habitat, as the birds frequenting the 47<sup>th</sup> Street Southwest verge lines would testify, however Medicine Lake would seem to be the definitive site. My struggles at Lonetree WMA appear to be directly linked to the breeding cycle, as birds which had been highly responsive and visible a matter of days previously were clearly nesting and silent. Conversely, at Medicine Lake NWR, the birds were remarkably showy, which I can only assume related to the fact that they were actively establishing territories. Learning from experience I would recommend eBird scrutiny for current sightings and a visit to Medicine Lake NWR if one's itinerary permits, as one of the best overall birding sites of our trip.

**Connecticut Warbler** *Oporornis agilis*

Arguably the most elusive of North America's regularly breeding warblers, this species was one of my primary trip targets. Timing is important, as one's likelihood of success will be enhanced by coinciding a trip with the late May / early June arrival of this species on its rather remote boreal forest breeding sites. The start of our whole Midwest trip was actually timed around likely arrival dates, following local advice, which concluded that in some exceptional years birds may not be on breeding grounds until the first week in June.

Connecticut Warbler breeds in Tamarack Pine forest, a habitat ridden by mosquitoes and invariably very wet underfoot; insect repellent and rubber boots are essentials. Sax Zim Bog is probably the number-one site in the USA for this species and my focus was entirely limited to this area, however the tracts of habitat are very extensive. eBird sightings proved to be somewhat misleading in my experience, as searches on the first morning of my trip were guided by recent eBird records and produced a blank. It was also interesting to note that I didn't speak to any other birders who had seen or even heard a Connecticut Warbler in the course of my travels; this bird really does have a very low density of territories, even in prime sites, so be prepared to work hard!

Advice given by Mark Johnson, one of the summer wardens at Sax Zim Bog [Owl Avenue Welcome Centre](#), proved to be absolutely invaluable in tracking down Connecticut Warbler. Mark supplied the approximate location of a confirmed 2022 sighting, off Owl Avenue, which I then followed up with an early morning return visit. On 04/06/22 I needed rubber boots to access the block of woodland identified and then it took around an hour-and-a-half to track down a singing bird at 47.134150, -92.731368, approximately half-a-kilometer from the main vehicle track. Once located, however, this wonderful bird was faithful to two or three Tamaracks as its song-post and continued to sing for over an hour whilst I soaked up the sunlit wonder of my final US breeding warbler.

**Western Tanager** *Piranga ludoviciana*

Another western surprise in the Black Hills, this striking tanager was recorded at Hell Canyon, Custer SP and on the Flume Trail, SD.

**Black-headed Grosbeak** *Pheucticus melanocephalus*

This western species was recorded at Hell Canyon and the Flume Trail, SD.

**Lazuli Bunting** *Passerina amoena*

This colourful little western bunting was regularly encountered at Theodore Roosevelt NP, ND.



*Big skies, close to Medicine Lake NWR, Montana*



**Mammal Species Recorded:****Mountain Cottontail** *Sylvilagus nutallii*

One at Theodore Roosevelt NP on 12/06/22.

**Eastern Cottontail** *Sylvilagus floridanus*

Encountered throughout Minnesota and also seen at several locations in North Dakota.

**Snowshoe Hare** *Lepus americanus*

Several in Sax Zim Bog, Minnesota.

**White-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus townsendii*

Regularly seen in the prairies and badlands areas.

**North American Porcupine** *Erethizon dorsatum*

One at Jason Cook State Park on 02/06/22 and one at Sax Zim Bog on 04/06/22, both c5m high in Aspen, feeding on fresh leaves.

**Muskrat** *Ondatra zibethicus*

One in a dyke at McGregor Marsh on 05/06/22.

**American Beaver** *Castor canadensis*

A group of three seen very well on a pond close to Lonetree WMA on 08/06/22.



*American Bison and Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Theodore Roosevelt NP*

**Yellow-bellied Marmot** *Marmota flaviventris*

Seen at several locations in the South Dakota Black Hills.

**Eastern Grey Squirrel** *Sciurus carolinensis*

Encountered a number of times in eastern Minnesota.

**Eastern Fox Squirrel** *Sciurus niger*

One seen in the Black Hills, on the Flume Trail on 17/06/22.

**American Red Squirrel** *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*

Noted in both Minnesota and the Black Hills of South Dakota.

**Black-tailed Prairie Dog** *Cynomys ludovicianus*

Seen in large colonial towns at Theodore Roosevelt NP, Badlands NP and several other grassland sites in South Dakota.

**Franklin's Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus franklinii*

Not uncommon in some of the areas visited on the Lake Superior North Shore, such as Gooseberry Falls SP.

**Richardson's Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus richardsonii*

Noted at Lostwood NWR in western North Dakota and Medicine Lake NWR in eastern Montana; range makes identification easier!

**Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus tridecemlineatus*

Only noted with certainty at Lostwood NWR on 09/06/22.

**Eastern Chipmunk** *Tamias striatus*

A handful seen in eastern Minnesota.

**Least Chipmunk** *Tamias minimus*

Common in the woodlands of the Black Hills region.

**Coyote** *Canis latrans*

Three seen in Badlands NP on 15/06/22, plus some wonderful dusk vocalisations.

**Black Bear** *Ursus americanus*

A very brief and sadly distant view of one crossing Owl Avenue, Sax Zim Bog, on 04/06/22.

**Northern Raccoon** *Procyon lotor*

One briefly seen crossing the road en route to McGregor Marsh on 03/06/22.

**American Badger** *Taxidea taxus*

One seen at dusk, on the Quinn Road Prairie Dog Town, Badlands NP, SD on 15/06/22. The mammalian highlight of the trip and a much wanted species.

**Pronghorn** *Antilocapra Americana*

Small numbers regularly seen throughout the prairie landscapes.

**Bighorn Sheep** *Ovis canadensis*

Double figures encountered in Badlands NP on 15/06/22.

**American Bison** *Bison bison*

Seen in Theodore Roosevelt NP on 11 and 12/06/22 and in large numbers in Badlands NP on 15/06/22.

**Mule Deer** *Odocoileus hemionus*

Double figures seen in Badlands NP on 15/06/22.

**White-tailed Deer** *Odocoileus virginianus*

Regular encounters throughout Minnesota, plus numerous road casualties.

Ian Merrill, Leicestershire, UK. July 2022.

[i.merrill@btopenworld.com](mailto:i.merrill@btopenworld.com)