

NW___. Little Moreau State Recreation Area, Dewey County

This recreation area encompasses 160 acres along the Little Moreau River about 6 miles south of the town of Timber Lake. The Little Moreau is a typical small, slow moving, prairie stream that runs east into the Moreau River and eventually drains into the Missouri River. The stream meanders along a small floodplain that is bordered on either side by bluffs about 75-100 feet in elevation. The habitat along the river is riparian deciduous woodland. This habitat of the recreation area exists as a woodland oasis in a landscape dominated by pastures, grasslands, and agricultural fields. The park is located about 40 miles west of the Missouri River trench that bisects the northern half of the state, and this location provides for a nice mixture of eastern and western deciduous woodland birds. There is also a dam across the Little Moreau within the park that creates a lake of several acres in size. Camping and picnicking facilities are present in the park and swimming, boating, and fishing are all possible on the lake. This park is remote from population centers, so it is never very crowded and it can provide some nice birding in spring, summer, and fall for breeding and migrating deciduous woodland birds. It is virtually unbirded during migration periods, so extralimital rarities have not been documented, but given the oasis-like nature of the woodland here, it has the potential to serve as a migrant trap. The park is also essentially unbirded in winter, but probably does not harbor many birds at this season as the lake generally freezes over. Nearby grasslands also afford opportunities for observing many prairie birds of the northern part of the state and wet spots in the fields in this area can be great for migrating and breeding shorebirds.

Ecology

The habitat along the Little Moreau River is typical riparian deciduous woodland. A similar riparian habitat rings the reservoir within the park. Dominant tree species include green ash, box elder, and elm, with some cottonwoods, willows, and oaks also present. In addition, there is a shrubby understory present in most locations that is also attractive to birds. Grasslands and pastures, with some interspersed agricultural fields, dominate the general landscape of the area, so deciduous woodland is rather rare in this part of the state. Consequently, the riparian habitat here serves as an oasis for woodland birds and they can be found here in good numbers. The bluffs paralleling the river are crowned with grassland habitat that continues away from the river. The large state game production area just north of the recreation area is consists of good grassland habitat that harbors many of the grassland species resident in northern South Dakota. Finally, the reservoir provides some open water habitat and has a narrow fringe of cattail marsh surrounding it, so water birds and some marsh birds may also occur here.

Birds of Note

In the riparian deciduous woodland along the river and lake, a nice mixture of eastern and western deciduous forest species can be found during the breeding season. These include Black-billed Cuckoos (occasionally), Least, Willow, and Great Crested Flycatchers, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Red-eyed, Warbling, and occasionally Bell's Vireos, Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, Cedar Waxwing, Blue Jay, Eastern Bluebird, Yellow and Black-and-White (occasionally) Warbler, American Redstart, Yellow-breasted Chat, Spotted Towhee, Black-headed and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Lazuli Bunting, and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, among other woodland birds. Cooper's Hawks are also sometimes observed here in the woodland habitat, as are Wild Turkeys. Nocturnal or crepuscular species include Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, and Common Nighthawk.

The reservoir may hold numerous waterfowl during migration. Breeding waterfowl are fewer, but include Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal and Mallard. Pied-billed Grebes also nest along the lake edges and American White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants also sometimes occur here, most often during migration. Belted Kingfisher also occurs here regularly. Tree, Cliff, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows may be observed kiting over the surface of the lake and stream. In the marsh vegetation ringing the lake, look for Marsh Wrens, Common Yellowthroats and the ever present Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Grasslands in this area, including those of the state game production area just north of the park harbor Sharp-tailed Grouse, Ring-necked Pheasant, Gray Partridge, Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Lark Bunting, grassland sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and Bobolink as summering species. Common raptors of grasslands in this region include Northern Harrier, American Kestrels, and Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks. Short-eared Owls may also be observed occasionally during the breeding season.

Wet spots in fields can be numerous and can be terrific for migrating shorebirds. American Avocet and Wilson's Phalarope breed in some of the more permanent wetlands.

Because this park is remote from population centers and has received very little birding attention records of rarities are not well documented here. The oasis-like nature of the deciduous woodland habitat, however, should serve as an effective magnet for out-of-range woodland birds that happen to be wandering through the area, especially during migration. Increased birding coverage of the woodlands in the park during migration periods should turn up extralimital species on a regular basis.

Recommended Stops

From the park entrance, the road leads down the bluff to the large picnic area on the left (1). This picnic area is surrounded on three sides by a wide loop of the Little Moreau River. The habitat here consists of open woodland with grassy areas underneath in the picnic area itself and a more complex deciduous riparian growth, with trees and shrubs, along the river itself. Most of the species typical of riparian deciduous woodlands in this area can be found here. Cedar Waxwings occur here in numbers in summer. Other species that are common in the picnic area include Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker (both Yellow-shafted and Red-shafted forms occur), Least, Willow, and Great Crested Flycatchers, Blue Jay, Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, Field Sparrow, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, and American Goldfinch. In shrubby growth along the stream, look for Bell's Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Northern Rough-winged Swallows are common flying over the stream.

Return to the main road through the park and turn left to proceed upstream toward the lake. After about ¼-mile, there is a turnout on the right that leads to an old campground area (2) that is now closed to camping (but not to birding!). This area lies along the river, just below the dam that forms the lake in the park. There is a good mix of deciduous growth here, including some shrubby understory vegetation. Park at the gate that closes off the road to the old campground area and walk along the short loop (¼-mile) through the old campground. This area is particularly good for Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, Spotted Towhee, and Black-headed and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks among other woodland species. It is also a good place to look for the Black-and-White Warblers that sometimes occur here.

Continuing along the main park road shortly brings you to the lake on the right (3) and the camping area on the left. A couple of small wooded draws lead from the south toward the lake and can be good for woodland birds. The lake itself is worth a try for waterfowl, particularly during migration, and marsh birds in the cattail margin. Common Yellowthroats and Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds inhabit the marsh in summer.

For grassland birds, travel back to the park entrance and continue north on the road toward the town of Timber Lake. For about the first mile back toward town, the road is bordered on the east by the Wilder Elk Ranch and on the west by a state Game Production Area (GPA). The GPA consists of several hundred acres of natural grassland and hosts many grassland birds. Species that are regular here include Sharp-tailed Grouse, Ring-necked Pheasant, Gray Partridge, Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Lark Bunting, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Bobolink, and Western Meadowlark. Grassland sparrows that occur here include Field, Grasshopper, Lark, Vesper, and Savannah. Baird's Sparrow is also possible, as it has been recorded in other grassland areas within the county. The best access to the GPA is a parking area at the north end (4), about 1 mile from the park entrance. There is a grove of trees on the south side of the parking lot that is worth checking out for woodland birds and the extensive grassland area begins on the other side of the grove. Walking through the GPA should turn up most of the grassland species present. The area receives attention from hunters in the fall during grouse and pheasant season, so wearing bright colors at this time of year is advisable.

How to Get There

South Dakota Highway 20 runs through the town of Timber Lake. At the west end of town is a good gravel road leading to the south. This road is well marked from the highway, as a large brown sign indicates that Little Moreau State Recreation Area is 6 miles to the south. Traveling straight south on this road for 6 miles brings you to the park entrance.

Accommodations

There are five official campsites with electricity in the park itself plus some informal tent camping sites. Outhouses and running water are available. Timber Lake (population 517) also has a small motel. The nearest larger town is Moberge (population 4,000), along the Missouri River about 40 miles to the east of Timber Lake.