

McNenny State Fish Hatchery and Mirror Lakes, Lawrence County

McNenny State Fish Hatchery is located in the grasslands of the Red Valley north of the Black Hills proper. The hatchery grounds contain lush deciduous woodlands with abundant shrubs along Crow Creek and some of its tributary springs. The area is the only area of extensive deciduous woodlands in the area, so it acts as an oasis for woodland birds characteristic of the Black Hills foothills. Birding is best in spring and summer, but because the springs maintain a constant temperature year-round, some open water remains in the winter, so this site can provide productive winter birding too. The deciduous trees lining the springs and Crow Creek include bur oak, box elder, willow, green ash, Russian olive, elm and some large cottonwoods. Shrubs include willow and honeysuckle. The surrounding grasslands are dry and interspersed with yucca. Upper and Lower Mirror lakes are small spring-fed lakes that are partially rimmed with deciduous vegetation. The lakes are stocked with trout, including some large fish and can provide decent fishing. Crow Creek is a small brushy creek with some deep pools and provides good fishing for brown and rainbow trout. Rattlesnakes are rare, but occur in the area, so be careful when walking through the grass or brush. Ticks can be a nuisance in the spring and early summer.

To get to the McNenny Hatchery area, take exit 2 off of Interstate 90 and follow the signs north. Turn right at the first intersection and follow this road for **about ½-mile** before turning left on McNenny Hatchery Road. After **about ½-mile**, you will reach the entrance to the hatchery area on the left. After turning left, immediately turn right on Trout Lane and proceed toward the hatchery. In **about ¼-mile** a visitor's parking area will be on the right – park here as personal vehicles are not allowed beyond this point. A nature trail leads from the northwest corner of the parking lot through the dry grasslands above the springs and creek. This trail is not particularly productive for birds, although Western Meadowlark and Lark Sparrow can usually be found, and canopy-level views of some of the deciduous vegetation around the springs can provide views of some woodland birds. Walking downhill from the parking area along Trout Lane toward the hatchery complex leads you into deciduous woodland. Just downhill from the parking area on the left is a small, shallow, gravel-bottomed stream surrounded by a fence. This stream is bordered by a lush deciduous growth, including numerous oaks. This area is worth checking for woodland birds and Spotted Towhee, Blue Jay and American Redstart are regular in this area. The stream occasionally hosts shorebirds, such as Solitary Sandpiper, during migration and is also a good spot for Northern Waterthrush during migration. Just east of the stream, the road gives off a branch to the left that crosses the stream and loops through the staff residences around the hatchery trout pond. This pond is rimmed with deciduous vegetation and the residences have some large oaks, cottonwoods and willows around them. This loop is another spot worth checking for woodland birds, including Black-headed Grosbeak and Bullock's Oriole. Watching the large brown, rainbow and brook trout in the trout pond can also be entertaining, and Belted Kingfisher can sometimes be seen around the pond.

Just east of the trout pond are the covered hatchery raceways, where the young trout are reared. Behind the raceways is a mowed nature trail that penetrates the deciduous vegetation lining the springs and Crow Creek. Just behind the raceways, the vegetation is mostly shrubby and this area can be very productive for woodland birds. Among the regular species here in summer are Eastern Kingbird, Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwing, Black-capped Chickadee, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Lazuli Bunting, Black-headed Grosbeak, Orchard Oriole and American Goldfinch. Bohemian Waxwing sometimes occur here in winter. Overhead, look for Common Nighthawk and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. At the south end of this area behind the open hatchery outlet pools are numerous spring feeding into a small stream. Belted Kingfisher and Great Blue Heron sometimes occur in this area, and in winter this can be a spot where Virginia Rail occur. The trail continues from the springs and winds through the deciduous vegetation along the spring-fed stream and eventually follows a short section of Crow Creek on the north end of the hatchery grounds. The main trail gives off numerous dead-end branches that provide access to much of the deciduous vegetation along the stream and creek. As the trail leaves Crow Creek and heads back toward the raceway buildings, some large cottonwoods border the trail. Look over the cottonwoods for Bullock's Oriole, Eastern Screech-Owl and Great Horned Owl. The trail ends at the raceways, where you can walk back to the parking area.

From the parking area, travel back on Trout Lane to the hatchery entrance road and turn right, following the road to Mirror Lakes. This road passes downhill with grasslands on the left and woodland on the right,

passing over Crow Creek after about ½-mile. After crossing the creek the road gives off numerous branches that lead to and around the two lakes. The grasslands harbor Western Meadowlark, and Lark and Vesper sparrows. The woodland copses around the lake provide another chance for any woodland birds of the area that you might have missed on the hatchery grounds. In addition, Canada Geese nest on the lakes and Belted Kingfisher is common around the lakes. Forster's Tern and Osprey can sometimes be seen fishing in the lakes as well.