

SE 2. Union Grove State Park (Union County)

This park is one of South Dakota's least utilized state parks. It is located about 12 miles south of Beresford, just a few miles from Interstate 29. Union Grove Park boasts an excellent example of eastern deciduous forest, and is most productive for birding during spring and fall songbird migrations, but it also hosts some interesting species at other times of the year. Portions of the park are closed to vehicles during the winter, but roads are still open for hikers, or if there is snow, to cross-country skiers and snowshoers. Indeed, some really good cross-country skiing can be had in the park in winter, although there are no groomed trails. The park also has a number of horse trails and is popular with equestrian enthusiasts. Hunting dog trials are held in the park at the horse corral area on some weekends in April and May. While this doesn't seem to bother the birds, barking dogs and hollering trainers make it wise to avoid this area of the park during the dog trials.

Ecology

The park consists of 499 acres transected by Brule Creek, a tributary of the Big Sioux River, and is largely composed of rolling hills formed from glacial moraines. Approximately half of the park area is wooded with the other half composed of grasslands. The wooded areas include riparian forest along Brule Creek, upland deciduous dominated by bur oak on the northern slopes of the hills, stands of eastern red cedar and introduced pine, and an old arboretum with numerous ornamental trees and shrubs. Adjacent to the park are agricultural lands, principally rowcrops (corn and soybeans) and pastures, although some Conservation Reserve Program grassland areas can be found nearby.

Birds of Note

Upland deciduous forest is limited to scattered and relatively small areas in eastern South Dakota, and Union Grove Park is one of these areas. The several types of wooded habitats present within the park make this an excellent place to look for woodland birds. This park, along with Newton Hills State Park, are probably the best places in the southeastern part of the state, and maybe in the entire state, for observing rare or vagrant Neotropical passerines during migration. During the peak of the spring Neotropical passerine migration in mid-May, 20 species of warblers are possible on any given day. Personally, I like this park better than Newton Hills for finding migrants because the woodland area is smaller and can be covered more thoroughly than at Newton Hills. I think this improves your chances of observing something rare if it is present in the park. Rarities observed at Union Grove park during migration over the past few years include Mississippi Kite, Rock Wren, White-eyed and Philadelphia vireos, Summer Tanager, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Blue-winged, Golden-winged, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Gray, Pine, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Kentucky, Connecticut, and Hooded warblers. Fall migration can also be spectacular, although usually the diversity is slightly lower than in spring. The typical woodland migrating and nesting species for South Dakota can all be found here. Northern Cardinals, which are primarily limited within the state to the southeastern region, are regular permanent residents here. Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers are also very restricted nesters in South Dakota, but nest within the park. Both Eastern and Spotted towhees can be heard calling in spring. In addition, Scarlet Tanagers are very rare nesters in southeastern South Dakota, but nest occasionally within the park. Whip-poor-wills are also common in riparian areas in the park and can easily be heard on any summer evening and Wild Turkeys can be heard gobbling from the woodlands in spring.

The thickets of eastern red cedar are quite thick in places and serve as appropriate habitat for migrating Long-eared and Saw-whet owls in fall. Townsend's Solitaires regularly winter in these cedar groves. In migration, both species of kinglets and Red-breasted Nuthatches may be found in the pine and cedar groves, and Red Crossbills and Purple Finches sometimes occur in the pines, particularly in winter and early spring. Numerous hawks also migrate along the ridges within and surrounding the park, particularly in fall, and this is a good place for Broad-winged Hawk in the spring. The grassland habitats adjacent to the wooded areas within the park harbor a number of characteristic grassland species for this part of the state, including Northern Bobwhite and Field Sparrows, and a number of other sparrows, such as Harris's and Clay-colored are common during migration. Eastern Meadowlarks have even been reported from the park during the breeding season.

How to Get There

Union Grove State Park is very easy to reach and is ideal for a short visit if you are traveling along Interstate 29 and want to make a quick stop to bird. The park is located just off a road running parallel to Interstate 29 about a half-

mile to the east. If you are traveling from the south, take Exit 31 (Spink/Akron) and turn right on this road (Highway 48). At ½-mile you will come to an intersection with a paved road (Union County 11). Turn left and follow this road for 5 miles; the park entrance will be on your right. From the north, take exit 38 and turn left. After ½-mile you will reach a stop sign at the intersection with Union County 11. Turn right and follow this road for 2 miles to the park entrance on the left.

Recommended Stops

The entire wooded area within the park can be good for woodland birds. A system of hiking trails winds its way through most of the wooded habitat, but these trails are generally rather primitive with limited maintenance so they can be muddy and slippery, especially in spring. A good pair of waterproof, or at least water resistant, boots is recommended. The best strategy for finding birds, particularly during migration, is to wander around the wooded areas looking for mixed-species foraging flocks. In fall, the easiest way to do this is to listen for calling Black-capped Chickadees; if you find chickadees, you will almost always find a variety of migrants following them around at this time of year.

To thoroughly cover the wooded area within the park, you should bird all of the different wooded habitat types. I often begin birding in the wooded area along Brule Creek next to the parking lot for the large picnic area in the northeast corner of the park. We call this area “the hole,” as it is about the lowest area within the park. “The hole” is often productive for warblers during migration and Cerulean Warbler has been observed there. From here walk upstream through the riparian vegetation along the creek and follow the trail up the hill to the arboretum area. Northern Rough-winged Swallows can be found gliding and perching above the creek and Wood Ducks and their broods are often seen in summer in this area. The arboretum area can also be productive for migrants. Continue walking up the hill through the arboretum until you hit the paved road through the park. Follow this road to the left through the upland deciduous forest dominated by bur oak. This is an area where Northern Cardinals can often be seen. As you follow the road it drops down to another parking area before rising up another hill. This general area around the parking lot and outhouses can be great for migrants and many of the Neotropical migrant rarities have been recorded in this area. Broad-winged Hawks may also be found along this road in spring and the parking lot area is fairly reliable for Wild Turkey.

From this parking area, follow the road up the hill to a “Y”-intersection. Side trails to the left lead to the creek and can be productive as well. The left fork of the road goes to the horse corral area. This area lies at the transition between woods and grasslands, so birds of both habitat types can be found here. Northern Bobwhite can often be heard calling in this area, and although some of these are undoubtedly escapees from the hunting dog trials (as evidence, I once found a Chukar in this area), wild populations also exist. In the area near the corrals White-eyed Vireo and Rock Wren have been recorded. A small tributary stream runs along the eastern edge of the large parking area. Following this creek to the left (north) leads you to an area of old-growth gallery forest where Scarlet Tanagers have bred. Louisiana Waterthrush has also occurred in this area. Following the same creek to the right (south) of the parking area leads to a thin strip of riparian woods bordered by grasslands. This area can also be good for woodland migrants and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher has been observed here on more than one occasion.

The right fork of the road at the “Y”-intersection leads to a parking area that is just downhill from the highest point in the park. A short walk to the top of the hill provides a nice panoramic view of the park and surrounding area. This is the best area to watch for migrating hawks soaring along the ridgetops and both towhees can be heard in this area in spring. The grove of cedars to the south of the hilltop is very thick and is a good location to hunt for Long-eared and Saw-whet Owls in spring and fall and Townsend’s Solitaire in winter. A final wooded habitat type is the introduced pine forest surrounding the camping area. This can be a good spot for Red-breasted Nuthatch in fall and for Red Crossbills in winter. Northern Bobwhite can sometimes be observed in the open area immediately to the south of the camping area.

A productive birding hike in winter is along the lower horse trail, near the southern boundary of the park, which can be reached by wandering downhill from the campground area. This trail passes through areas of birch and planted exotic conifers, such as western red cedar, and this combination is attractive to a wide variety of birds. Purple Finches are regular along this trail in winter and Townsend’s Solitaire also occurs here on a fairly regular basis.

Flooded areas along Union County Road 11 occur in spring and also bear mentioning for their shorebird possibilities. Along this road, starting at its junction with Highway 50 one-half mile east of the Yankton-Vermillion

exit (Exit 26) off of I-29 to the junction with the Volin exit (Exit 38), there may be flooded areas in wet springs. These can be very productive for shorebirds, such as Hudsonian Godwit, American and Black-bellied Plovers, various “peeps,” and Red-necked and Wilson’s Phalaropes, among others. A couple of particularly good sites include the grassy area at the entrance to the rest area just east of the Yankton-Vermillion exit and a flooded field 2.6 miles north of Highway 50 on the left.

Accommodations

Camping is available at the park, and both tent (4) and electrical (17) sites are present, with nearby bathrooms with running water. Numerous motels are available in Beresford (about 15 minutes to the north) and Vermillion (about 20 minutes to the southwest).