

Bird List and Species Accounts for a Nature Walk at Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historical Site



15 common species to focus on:

- Northern Shoveler
- Red-tailed Hawk
- Osprey
- Spotted Sandpiper
- Red-naped Sapsucker
- Willow Flycatcher
- Marsh Wren
- Yellow Warbler
- Common Yellowthroat
- Black-headed Grosbeak
- Savannah Sparrow
- Song Sparrow
- Bobolink
- Brown-headed Cowbird
- Red-winged Blackbird

Note to user: Katie Atkinson prepared the following species accounts as part of an internship with the Avian Science Center and Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS in Summer 2013. This document accompanies the Birds of Grant-Kohrs Ranch.ppt. Together, these materials introduce 15 common, readily identified bird species likely to be encountered on the nature trail along Cottonwood Creek. These materials are intended to help train interpretive staff in bird ID and natural history, and may be adapted for interpretive programs.



Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

This duck is named for its shovel-shaped bill that it uses to sift food out of the water. Look for this “flat on the end” bill as it is a very distinguishing feature. The females look very similar to a mallard female, brown and streaked. The males have a dark green head, a white chest, reddish under belly and a black back and tail. Often these are seen flying overhead along the nature trail. They fly with their heads slightly tucked and their backs hunched.

Red-tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis

The Red-tailed Hawk is one of the most commonly seen hawks in the area. When identifying it, look for boxy, squared off wings with dark shoulders and a short tail that is reddish in adults. Their call is a “scream” you will likely recognize from radio stations called “the Eagle” as the Red-tail call is often used! Red-tailed Hawks nest in the tops of cottonwoods and have nested at the Grant-Kohrs Ranch in many years.

Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

Ospreys are a large raptor with long narrow wings, a white chest and underwings. They have a black line along their heads and a black patch on their carpal joint. These birds can be seen almost anywhere on the ranch and have historically nested on the property. Their primary food is fish, so they will always be found near water. They often nest on platforms put up especially for them, in trees or on a cliff or high boulder. An osprey pair is very site faithful and will often return to the same nest repeatedly through the years. Most ospreys travel to Mexico and down into Central America, where they winter, then move back to the US and Canada in the summer.

Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularius

Sandpipers are a light brown shorebird with a long bill and a speckled chest. Often you will hear them rather than see them, they make a squeaky-toy like sound, “*weet, weet, weet*” very fast and many times in a row; they are very vocal birds and talk incessantly! They are most often seen along the river skittering back and forth from the edge. Some shorebirds, including this species, are unique in their polyandrous breeding, which means the female lays several clutches of eggs with different males. They then assist some with the incubation, up until hatching, before leaving the care of the young to the male. The chicks precocial, meaning they are able to walk and feed themselves almost immediately after hatching, but they remain with the male until fully grown.

Red-naped Sapsucker

Sphyrapicus nuchalis

When searching for this woodpecker, look for a red head, throat and back or “nape” of the neck. Listen for them drumming on the trees and watch for them especially on the tree trunks. Sapsuckers got their name from one of their main foods, sap. They have specialized tongues with brushy tips with which they get sap from “wells” they peck into a tree’s bark. Sapsuckers are beneficial to other sap eaters such as hummingbirds, who will also use the wells the sapsuckers make to get at the sap.

Willow Flycatcher

Empidonax traillii

First determine whether a bird is a flycatcher: they tend to be grey colored with big eyes, have long conical bills with bristles at the base. Watch for them perched at the tops of bushes and trees. From this perch they will do quick fluttery flights up in the air then back to their branch to catch insects.

The Empidonax flycatchers are an interesting group of birds as many species look very similar and are difficult to differentiate. When in the hand at the banding station, the bander is able to do a series of wing, tail, and bill measurements and compare to a table to determine the species. To identify in the field, the most definite way is by song as each species has a very distinct song. The Willow Flycatcher song is a nasal “*fitzbu*”, repeated fairly rapidly. Some people are able to make a call on the species by wing and tail ratios but this can be very tricky. Look and listen for this species in the willows and alders along the river.

Marsh Wren

Cistothorus palustris

The Marsh Wren is a small brown bird with a slightly curved bill and a tail that sticks almost straight up in the air. Their song is a long grating and gurgling sound. Look for them in the reed and cattail areas. They feed on the insects and larvae from the marsh floor. Wrens are very protective and aggressive; they will defend a nest and young emphatically. Wrens are often known to destroy nearby nests and eggs of both other species and other Marsh Wrens to reduce competition for food.

Yellow Warbler

Setophaga petechia

The adult males are brilliantly colored yellow with light red streaks on their bellies, the females are a duller yellow, grey or greenish. They sing a song they can sound like they are saying “*sweet, sweet, I’m so sweet*” in a high pitched nasal tone. The Yellow Warbler is the most common warbler found on the ranch, and the most often caught warbler at the banding station. These little guys nest in the willows, alders and other shrubs in the riparian zone. They are one of the most common nests in which the Brown-headed Cowbird lays their eggs. This can cause nest failure because the warblers will sometimes abandon nests due to the unknown egg, or once the nestlings hatch, the cowbird nestling will be larger and much pushier for food, which is detrimental to the survival of the warbler nestlings.

Common Yellowthroat

Geothlypis trichas

Common Yellowthroat males are an easy warbler to identify as they have a bright yellow throat and a black “bandits mask” over their eyes. The females are greenish with yellow throats and undertail feathers. They have a song that sounds like they are saying “*witch-i-ty witch-i-ty.*” They tend to hang out in the willows and alders along with the Yellow Warblers. The nesting habits of these little bandits are to build low nests, either on the ground or slightly up in grasses, small shrubs or in cattails.

Black-headed Grosbeak

Pheucticus melanocephalus

The distinguishing characteristics of this bird are, in males: a black head, a reddish-orange body, black wings and white wing bars. The females are brown and streaked with a little yellow on their wings. Both sexes have a large blocky bill, hence their name “grosbeak.” Their song is very much like that of a robin but faster with a rounder, rolling sound. Grosbeaks prefer to hang out where there are cottonwoods present, but they usually nest in the willows and alders.

Savannah Sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis

These birds are brown with streaking down their chest and sides, almost always have a spot of yellow just behind their eye, and an indistinct central spot on their chest. Most often they will be detected by their buzzy song which sounds like they are saying “*take, take it eaassy.*” The Savannah Sparrow will be found in many places along the trail, they especially like to be in the transition areas, where the riparian is turning into the grassland. At the banding station these birds are the most commonly captured sparrow. They nest on the ground in small cup like nests that are very well hidden, often under the base of a willow branch or a grass clump.

Song Sparrow

Melospiza melodia

The Song Sparrow is a brown and white streaked sparrow, often with a darker spot on their chest; they also have a darker reddish-brown crown. They have a highly variable song which includes bouncy, energetic and buzzy notes. Song Sparrows most often nest low in grass or shrubs, sometimes on the ground in the riparian areas. Song Sparrows are very sneaky about their nest building, making the nest difficult to locate during the nest building stage.

Bobolink

Dolichonyx oryzivorys

The distinguishing characters of the males are a black body with white on the wings and yellow on the backs of their heads. The Bobolink has a very bubbly sounding song and you will often see them doing a flight display above their territory, fluttering up and hovering helicopter like. Look for these especially near or on the beaver-slide stacker at the ranch. They nest in the hay fields, especially near the riparian area. The Bobolink is considered a species of concern in Montana, due to hay (often where they are nesting) being cut earlier than in the past. Young Bobolinks are usually well out of the nest by the end of June, so delaying haying until then allows the birds to successfully breed. The habitat the Grant-Kohrs Ranch provides for them in the later hayed fields is especially important.

Brown-headed Cowbird

Molothrus aster

Male Brown-headed Cowbird are a medium sized blackbird with a brown head. The females are light brown, often with some streaking. They are found almost anywhere along the trail but most will be found in the marshes, and willows. These birds are nest parasites, meaning they lay their eggs in other birds' nests leaving the incubation and care of the young to the host species. Most often the target nests of the species on the ranch are the warblers, Song Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds. One of the ways female cowbirds search for nests is much the same as our method of nest searching, sitting and watching for nest building activity then following the builder to the nest.

Red-winged Blackbird

Agelaius phoeniceus

The males are black with very prominent red patches on their shoulders. Females are brownish, rather plain looking birds. The males have a distinctive "conk-a-ree" song that they often sing while perched on a cattail. Find them in the marshes as the females build their nests in the cattails and tall grasses. The birds in the family *Icteridae*, of which these are a part, are often polygynous, meaning that each male will mate with several females. This is thought to have evolved because the food in the marshes is often so plentiful that the male is not needed to support the nestlings, hence giving him more energy to "spread his genes further."