

A Lifelister's Paradise

Every dedicated Montana birder needs to migrate to the Westby area for a few days in springtime.

By Sneed B. Collard III

My buddy Scott and I pulled into Onstad Park in Westby full of nervous excitement. We had already spent three days in late May birding our way from Missoula across central and eastern Montana, but this was our ultimate destination.

The tiny town of Westby lies in the extreme northeastern part of our state, straddling the North Dakota border only 10 miles from Canada. With a population of less than 200, it's a place so small and out of the way that most Montanans have never heard of it. But for birders, Westby and surrounding areas are the place to see birds we can't find anywhere else in the state.

What makes this area so special? *Location. Location. Location.*

"The extreme northeast of Montana is part of what's called the Missouri Coteau, or Missouri Plateau—a narrow region of rolling mixed-grass prairie and wetland potholes that stretches from southern Saskatchewan to South Dakota," says Heather Harris, FWP's grassland and wetland coordinator. "Not only is it prairie pothole country, making it part of North America's 'duck factory,' it's part of not one, but two north-south migration routes, or flyways."

Most waterfowl hunters know that northeastern Montana sits almost dead center in the continent's Central Flyway. Of greater importance for birders, the area also catches the far western edge of the Mississippi

Sneed B. Collard III is a writer in Missoula.



Flyway. That means it is visited by a variety of typically eastern birds that seem distinctly out of place in Big Sky Country. Some actually breed in northeastern Montana, but many others are tree-loving species like vireos, thrushes, flycatchers, and warblers that clip the corner of the state each spring on their way to forested breeding grounds in Canada and Alaska.

The same birds also stop in Westby during early fall as they head south for the winter.

In addition to being surrounded by wet-



MADE IT The author celebrates arriving in Westby with a birding buddy. The tree-filled town amid a landscape of wetlands and prairie makes a natural stopover for migrating warblers, vireos, thrushes, and flycatchers.

lands and prairie, the town of Westby provides an oasis of trees in a mostly prairie landscape. With its leafy park and neighborhoods, Westby and surrounding prairie-wetlands make the area a must-visit destination for Montana birders—especially those trying to add to their life or state birding lists. Birders who regularly attempt to do a Montana Big Year—viewing the greatest possible number of species in a calendar year—must visit the Westby area each spring if they hope to hold their heads high in the state's birding community.

SONGBIRDS GALORE

Westby's main attractions are the migrating warblers, vireos, thrushes, orioles, and other songbirds that are not ordinarily seen elsewhere in the Treasure State. As Scott and I set out exploring Onstad Park, a two-acre park lined with massive cottonwoods in the center of town, we particularly hoped to see types of rare eastern warblers and other songbirds that I had yet to add to my life list.

Our expectations were buoyed when two groups of birders told us they had recently sighted a mourning warbler, a Philadelphia vireo, and a black-throated green warbler. Alas, none of these birds cooperated with us, but before we left the park, a stunning orange-and-black Baltimore oriole zoomed across our field of vision while several purple martins flitted overhead.

While walking Westby's main streets, we spotted other birds, including two species high on my "to see" list. The first was a stunning male rose-breasted grosbeak singing merrily from the top of a tree. Walking a side street 20 minutes later, Scott and I watched a pair of orchard orioles. That species has been breeding in eastern Montana only since the 1970s, but the heart of their range runs from Nebraska southeast to Alabama,

so every sighting is a treat. According to range maps, rose-breasted grosbeaks do not breed in Montana, but because their breeding range extends north of us into Alberta and beyond, many of them barrel through each spring, creating great excitement for birders lucky enough to spy one.

As much as we would have liked to spend the entire day searching for songbirds, however, Scott and I also had other birds to find.

SURROUNDING SHORB-BURBS

In addition to songbirds in town, the Westby area offers one the state's best opportunities to see migrating shorebirds. These species generally breed in Arctic Canada and Alaska and, like the songbirds, just brush Montana's northeastern corner as they migrate. On our way into Westby that first morning, I had hit the brakes when I spotted a suspicious long-legged bird with a slightly curved bill in a puddle up ahead. A quick look through our spotting scope confirmed my hunch. It was a stilt sandpiper, a bird I'd seen only twice before in Montana.

Scott and I headed a mile north of Westby to Round Lake, part of a wetland-prairie complex designated an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society. There we encountered several groups of "shorbs" that included ten sanderlings and four red-necked phalaropes on their way to the Arctic. Next we headed to Upper Goose Lake, south of town. We were watching a large flock of sanderlings, stilt sandpipers, Wilson's phalaropes, and semipalmated sandpipers when Scott received a phone call he had to take.

While waiting for him to finish his call so we could head to the next shorb hotspot, I happened to glance at the shoreline below me and saw a small, sand-colored bird land 150 yards away. I thought, "No way," while quickly swinging the spotting scope toward the bird. As I focused in, my heart beat faster.

Yes! A piping plover!

Sadly, fewer than 10,000 piping plovers remain on the planet, and they are divided into three distinct populations. The alkali ponds of northeastern Montana provide important nesting habitat for the 100 to 200 birds of the Northern Great Plains population. I'd dared only hope to ever see one in

my lifetime. Now, this dainty, short-beaked bird was casually hunting worms and crustaceans before my eyes!

As if that wasn't exciting enough, Scott and I drove back by the same spot half an hour later and I spotted another small plover, though darker. It was a semipalmated. This species' populations are in better shape than its sand-colored relatives, but unlike the piping plover, the semipalmated nests much farther north in Canada, making the sighting a special thrill for me and Scott.

Both birds were a terrific way to wrap up our wonderful day of birding—and a guarantee that we would return to this remote migratory bird mecca. 🐦

I happened to glance at the shoreline below me and saw a small, sand-colored bird land 150 yards away. I thought, "No way."



1 OF 200 The relatively rare piping plover is just one of the many shorebird species that show up in the prairie-wetland complexes that surround Westby in far northeastern Montana.

If you go

When to go: Peak migration seasons are from mid-May to mid-June, and then from mid-August to mid-September.

Where to stay: The nearest motels are in Plentywood, 26 miles west of Westby. Camping opportunities are widely available.

Where to bird: In addition to places mentioned in this article, check out the parks in Plentywood as well as Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Brush Lake State Park, and the Culbertson Bridge Fishing Access Site on the Missouri River.

Essentials: Bug spray, food and drink for lunches, binoculars, and, if possible, a spotting scope. Note that gas stations are as rare as piping plovers in this part of the state, so fill up whenever you have the chance.



Orchard oriole