

NC . Lake Hiddenwood State Park, Walworth County.

This is a relatively little used State Park that is far from population centers (such as they are) in South Dakota. It is located about 4 miles northeast of Selby (pop. 700). Because of its relatively remote location, this park has received scant ornithological attention. This is unfortunate because it is a beautiful little park with some thickly wooded areas. Such areas are unusual in this portion of the state, so it serves as an oasis for deciduous forest birds. The park encompasses 332 acres and includes lake, stream, deciduous forest, and prairie habitats. The lake is formed by a dam on Hiddenwood Creek. The creek and its small valley were named by the early settlers because they are surrounded by rolling prairie and the wooded valley only becomes visible as you near its very edge. The lake and the creek both hold bass, crappie, and sunfish, so piscatorial opportunities abound. The principal avian attractions here are woodland and grassland/prairie birds present during the breeding season. The birding opportunities here were essentially unexplored during migration, except for the past few years, but because of the oasis-like quality of the woodland habitat it seemingly holds much potential for being a migrant-trap for woodland birds. Indeed, Worm-eating and Yellow-throated warblers, both casual to accidental for South Dakota, have been observed here recently. Birding opportunities in winter are also essentially unexplored, but as the lake freezes over and most woodland species migrate, it is not likely to be very productive at this season. However, there are cross-country ski trails available in the park during winter, so a winter visit might be worthwhile.

Ecology

Hiddenwood Creek is a relatively small creek and the lake formed by its impounding is also relatively small (a 1-mile hike takes you completely around the lake). The lake is ringed by rather dense deciduous forest, as is the creek that winds through the park to empty into the lake. Prominent deciduous trees include green ash, willow, and cottonwood, with some ornamentals present, particularly around the picnic/camping area. The forest around the lake and creek is in a relatively narrow strip, but covers the slopes of the small valley of the creek. At the rim of the valley, the vegetation changes from deciduous forest to prairie, with some interspersed scrubby vegetation. Above the rim, the land becomes pastureland and agricultural fields.

Species of Note

Because the park includes both grassland/prairie and forested habitats it attracts a variety of birds. It is also located near the middle of the state on an east-west basis, so there is a mix of eastern and western species, although for woodland birds, eastern species predominate. This park is a reliable spot in the early summer for breeding Least Flycatchers, which is an uncommon and scattered breeder across South Dakota. Other noteworthy woodland species that are regular nesters here include Black-billed Cuckoo, Red-headed and Downy Woodpeckers, Willow Flycatcher, Eastern Bluebird, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. Both Black-headed and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks may occur here. Prairie habitats within the park and surrounding pasturelands host Upland Sandpipers, Lark Buntings, Clay-colored and Grasshopper Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and Bobolinks. In native prairies look for Baird's Sparrow, which has not been documented here, but does occur in similar habitats in neighboring counties. The lake itself also hosts a number of waterfowl during the breeding season including Wood Duck, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, and Ruddy Duck. In addition, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, and Black-crowned Night-Heron can all be found on dead snags around the lake.

Because this park has received little birding attention, a complete list of vagrants that have been recorded is not available, but it is starting to receive more birding attention during migration. Among other migrants, Worm-eating, Cape May and Yellow-throated warblers have been documented here, and because of its oasis-like quality it probably attracts a large variety of vagrant woodland species during migration. It could also potentially host some out-of-place waterfowl during migration.

How to Get There

To reach the park from Selby, which is on U.S. Highway 83, take State Highway 130 east for 2 miles. Turn left (north) on the gravel road and proceed 3.6 miles to the park entrance (on the right, entry fee

required). The gravel road veers sharply to the right as it intersects with another gravel road about ½-mile prior to the park entrance. Coming from the east, turn north off of U.S. Highway 12 onto State Highway 271 (toward the town of Java). After 4 miles, this road intersects Highway 130. Turn left (west) at this intersection and proceed 5 miles to the gravel road that leads to the park, as describe above.

Recommended Stops

Shortly after you enter the park, the road crosses the dam on Hiddenwood Creek. The lake expands to the left and the creek continues downstream to the right. This is a good location to glass over the lake to see waterfowl, cormorants, and wading birds along the shore. Both the lake and the creek are surrounded by thick deciduous vegetation at this location and this is a good spot to look for woodland birds. There is a large turnout on the south (far) side of the dam where you can park and get out to explore. Directly below the dam is a large pool in the creek that usually has some large carp wallowing about that provide an interesting fish-watching distraction. Just north of the dam is a trail (Hidden Beauty Trail) that crosses the park road. To the west, this trail winds down to the creek, passing along the edge of deciduous woods and prairie uplands. The trail reaches a bridge across the creek within about ¼-mile and this stretch of trail is a good place to find a number of the typical woodland species of the area.

Continue south on the park road from the parking area on the south side of the dam. After about ¼-mile the road veers to the left (east) around the lake, but on the rim of the shallow valley. At this point, there is another parking area on the left that leads to a covered bench overlooking the lake and the shallow valley. This stop is worth it just for the view – below you are the wooded slopes and the lake, and above are grasslands with scattered trees. There is a trail that crosses the park road here (a continuation of the Hidden Beauty Trail). Wandering along this trail to the east shortly takes you into the woodland, while toward the west the trail follows the border between woodland and prairie. This latter section of trail and the grasslands extending from the bench area can be good for grassland birds, particularly sparrows like Savannah and Grasshopper and Western Meadowlarks.

The park road continues around the south end of the lake, more or less above the rim of the shallow valley, and passes through grasslands with scattered clumps of trees. Again, grassland birds are possible in this area. A road branches off to the left within about ½-mile that takes you down along the edge of the lake. This road provides another good vantage point for viewing the lake itself for water birds. The road also passes through deciduous forest here, so a walk along the road can be productive for woodland birds as well. This road loops back to reconnect with the main park road after less than ½-mile. Continuing on the park road will take you down to the large picnic/camping area. This area is basically a mowed field with picnic shelters and campsites in the trees around the edges. The creek winds around on the north side of the picnic area and the lake forms the border on the west side. From the large picnic shelter, a bridge crosses the creek leading to a couple of trails, the Hidden Beauty Trail that circles the lake, and trails that lead upstream along the creek. This general area of the picnic shelter and trailhead seems to be a good location for finding Least Flycatchers and Black-billed Cuckoos. The Hidden Beauty Trail is about 1-mile long and is worth the hike. It winds up and down the slopes surrounding the lake, sometimes through thick deciduous forest, sometimes along the border of woodland with prairie. It can be muddy, so don appropriate footwear. The other trail leads along the creek and stays mostly in deciduous forest habitat. Walking around the edge of the picnic area is another productive way to get many of the woodland birds of the park, as it is surrounded by deciduous forest. Just as you are entering the picnic area at the bottom of the hill another road branches off to the right to follow the stream. Again, it passes through deciduous forest that is good for woodland birds. Near where this road branches off is a small slough area that is good for cuckoos, vireos and warblers.

The most productive spots for grassland birds are pasturelands along the roads leading to the park. A particularly good road is Highway 271 that branches to the north off of U.S. Highway 12 (see How to Get There section). Upland Sandpipers, Lark Buntings, sparrows, and Chestnut-collared Longspurs can all be found in pasturelands along this road in the 4-mile section between U.S. Highway 12 and Highway 130. Other pasturelands in this general area, however, can be equally good.

Accommodations

The park has 14 camping sites, seven with electrical hookups and seven without. Motel accommodations are also available in nearby Selby.

Accessory Sites

The Molstad Lake Public Access Area is just north of Highway 12 about 10 miles west of the junctions of Highways 12 and 83, just to the west of Lake Hiddenwood State Park. This area consists of Molstad Lake, which is a small lake that harbors a few waterfowl and some shorebirds under appropriate water conditions. Perhaps more attractive though is a small woodland area near the lake that can be very good for migrants. At times, these trees can be dripping with warblers and other Neotropical migrants, and Cape May Warblers have been observed here. Because this woodland is smaller than that at Lake Hiddenwood, it may act as an oasis and concentrate migrants to an even greater degree than the woodlands at Lake Hiddenwood.

Nine miles west of Bowdle, Edmunds Co., on Highway 12 and 3 miles east of the Hwy 271-Hwy 12 junction is a marsh to the south of the highway that is part of the Spring Lake Waterfowl Production Area (WPA). This marsh has hosted nesting Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the 1990's and is one of the few places in the state where these birds nest. There is also access to other sections of the WPA on the west and east sides of Spring Lake. Roads traveling south from Highway 12, beginning one mile east and west of the marsh described above can reach these access points. The road on the west reaches the WPA after about 1 mile and the road on the east after about 2 miles. The roads to the access points can be muddy after rainy periods so beware. Spring Lake hosts nesting populations of a number of water birds, including Eared Grebe, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Redhead, and Ruddy Duck. Black-crowned Night Heron and White-faced Ibis are sometimes seen here during spring and summer. Tree, Cliff, and Barn Swallows can be found zipping over the marsh and lake. In the scattered trees and shrubs, look for Willow Flycatchers, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Yellow Warblers, and Orchard Orioles. Grassy areas adjacent to the lake host nesting Sedge Wrens, Clay-colored Sparrows, Grasshopper Sparrows, Bobolinks, and Western Meadowlarks. In the reeds around the marsh look for Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat, Song and Swamp Sparrows, and marsh-nesting Blackbirds.

About 40 miles southwest of Lake Hiddenwood State Park, along the eastern shore of Lake Oahe in Potter County, is West Whitlocks Bay Recreation Area. Birding opportunities at this park are best in summer and during migration, but there are cross-country ski trails maintained in winter, although birding is not overly productive at this time of year. This park consists of 175 acres, lying on a tip of a point of land extending into Lake Oahe. The recreation area includes a spawning station for Chinook Salmon and Rainbow Trout that were introduced into Lake Oahe. The salmon return to the station to spawn in September and October, the trout in April. In addition to the spawning station, the recreation area contains boat launches, hiking trails, a camping area (103 sites including both electrical and non-electrical units), and a swimming beach. Habitats present include, open water, lakeshore, open deciduous woodlands, and wet meadows. Just outside the recreation area is a resort community with a bait shop/store. This recreation area is typically uncrowded during the summer, except for weekends when fishing tournaments are running. Lake Oahe in this area can provide great Walleye fishing.

To get to the park, take U.S. Highway 212 west for 6 miles from the intersection with U.S. Highway 83. This intersection is 7 miles west of the town of Gettysburg (population 1,500). After 6 miles, you will come to a paved road (Highway 1804) leading to the right (north). Take 1804 for just over 4 miles. At this point, you will come to an intersection with a paved road leading to the left. Highway 1804 ends at this intersection, although a gravel road continues on in a northerly direction. Take the paved road to the left. After 3 ½ miles, you will reach the park entrance (entry fee required). Along 1804 and, especially, along the road to the park entrance are extensive grasslands that can be excellent for raptors and grassland birds. Watch the fences and power lines carefully. Birds occurring in this area are Red-tailed, Swainson's, Ferruginous, and Rough-legged (winter) Hawks, Northern Harrier, Upland Sandpiper, Loggerhead and Northern (winter) Shrikes, Western Meadowlarks, Lark Bunting, and a variety of sparrows (Grasshopper, Vesper, Savannah, and Lark).

Before reaching the park entrance, a road branches off to the right and runs through the resort community to the lakeshore. At the end of this road are some wet meadows that harbor Sedge Wrens and Western and Eastern Kingbirds. Walking through the resort community itself can be productive. Mourning Doves, Eurasian Collared Doves, House Finches and American Goldfinches abound. The park itself can be good for waterfowl and water birds, particularly during migration, woodland birds during summer and migration, and wet meadow species during summer. Common and Least Terns can sometimes be observed flying over open water habitats in this area, as both nest along the shores of Lake Oahe. A network of trails exists just to the east of the camping area and these trails lead through grassland, open woodland, and wet meadow habitats. Noteworthy species that are regular in summer along these trails include Eastern Wood-pewee, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Sedge Wren, Tree Swallow, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Black-headed Grosbeak.