

SW 1. Roby, Boles, and Redbird Canyons, Custer County

The lower sections of these canyons in the dry southwestern portions of the Black Hills contain a pine-juniper-shrub habitat that is very limited in South Dakota. This habitat is structurally similar to pinyon-juniper habitats of the southwestern United States and contains an interesting assemblage of birds, including the only South Dakota locale for breeding Virginia's Warblers. Much of this area is Black Hills National Forest land so it is accessible for birders, although the land is leased for cattle grazing in the summer, so there may be limited competition with cows! A Black Hills National Forest Map is helpful to determine precisely what property is public and what is private. This area is particularly fruitful for birding in late spring and summer. These canyons are rather remote from population centers within the state and from the main tourist sections of the Black Hills. Thus, they are not well studied ornithologically and consequently offer the possibility of some interesting finds. Indeed, the breeding population of Virginia's Warblers is relatively large and widespread in the lower reaches of these canyons, yet it was unknown until 1997. Rattlesnakes do occur in this area in small numbers, so use appropriate caution when hiking through the brush.

Ecology

The total area encompassed by the pine-juniper-shrub habitat is restricted in South Dakota mainly to the lower reaches of these and nearby canyons. The vegetation consists of a Ponderosa Pine overstory, with a middle layer of Rocky Mountain Juniper, and a shrubby understory of Mountain Mahogany and Skunkbush Sumac. This vegetation mix lines the canyon walls and the walls of draws and box canyons leading into the main canyons. The rims above the canyons are mainly vegetated with the shrub component without the overstory and the canyon bottoms of Boles and Redbird canyons (the larger canyons) are pasturelands. The elevation of the pine-juniper-shrub habitat extends from about 4,500 to 5,200 feet with the higher elevations in the canyons becoming almost exclusively pine forest. There is limited water in the area except for a few springs. These springs and some areas of the canyon bottoms where there is spring runoff have a shrubby, riparian-type, deciduous vegetation that attracts some birds associated with this type of habitat.

Birds of Note

The most notable bird occurring here is the Virginia's Warbler, which has a relatively large breeding population in this area. This is the northeasternmost breeding population of Virginia's Warbler and is removed from the next nearest known breeding population (near Casper, Wyoming) by over 130 miles. In addition to Virginia's Warbler, an interesting assemblage of birds occupies this area and species with grassland, shrubland, and montane affinities converge here. Many of the species occurring here are restricted to the Black Hills or other conifer forests in western South Dakota. Of these species, White-throated Swift, Dusky Flycatcher, Violet-green Swallow, Pinyon Jay, Plumbeous Vireo, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, and Western Tanager occur commonly, making these canyons a good place to search for them. Seven of the nine regularly breeding species of warblers in South Dakota can be found here; only Common Yellowthroat and Black-and-White Warblers do not breed here, although American Redstart is rare. Other birds with western affinities that can be found here include Common Poorwill, Say's Phoebe, Gray Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, Rock and Canyon wrens, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, and Brewer's Blackbird. Cooper's Hawks, Wild Turkeys, and White-winged Juncos can also be found in this area or further up the canyons. The area is has received relatively little birding attention during songbird migration in May and September so we have a lot to learn about the potential for vagrants during migration. Cassin's Kingbird has been recorded in Boles Canyon on a couple of recent occasions during May and might be a rare, but regular, migrant through the area. Because the habitat is structurally somewhat similar to pinyon-juniper habitats to the southwest overshoots during spring migration or postbreeding wanderers from pinyon-juniper habitats might occur. The area is also uninvestigated in winter, but because most species unique to this habitat are migrants, winter is probably not the best time to visit.

This area is probably also the among the best places in South Dakota to look for other species associated with pine-juniper habitats to the southwest, such as Black-throated Gray Warbler and Green-tailed Towhee. Several pine-juniper species occur in southwestern Wyoming, but are unrecorded in South Dakota. These species include Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bushtit, Scrub Jay, Juniper Titmouse, and Gray Vireo. If these birds are to be found in South Dakota, this habitat is the logical spot. Who knows, with a little luck anything might happen!

How to Get There

Despite their remote location, these canyons are not difficult to reach. Highway 16 runs from Custer, South Dakota to Newcastle, Wyoming and a good gravel road leads up Boles Canyon from this highway. From Custer, take Highway 16 past Jewel Cave National Monument toward Newcastle. After crossing into Wyoming take the first gravel road to your right (Boles Canyon Rd., Forest Service Road 117) at 0.8 miles. After about ½ mile, you will cross over a cattle guard and back into South Dakota. At 1.0 mile past the state line, Forest Service Road 376 branches to the right up Redbird Canyon. Another 1.8 miles on F.S. 117 past this junction a dirt road leads off to the left and travels up Roby Canyon. The pine-juniper-shrub habitat lines the canyon walls from the junction of F.S. 117 and F.S. 376. Black Hills National Forest lands begin about a mile past this junction in both Boles and Redbird Canyons and the entrances into National Forest lands are well-marked. Roby Canyon lies entirely within National Forest property. Private land is posted in this area and is not open for trespass, but the National Forest lands cover the best of the pine-juniper-shrub habitat so the temptation to trespass is easily resisted.

Recommended Stops

Probably the easiest place to find Virginia's Warblers is Roby Canyon. The road leading up this canyon is dirt and is rocky and a little rough in places, but is easily passable without four-wheel drive vehicles, at least in the sections where Virginia's Warblers occur. There is a gate about ¼-mile up this road from F.S. 117 that is closed from 1 November – 15 May to protect wildlife habitat, but since Virginia's Warblers arrive about mid-May this is not a problem. There is a parking area to the left of the gate and a good strategy for birding this canyon is to park here and walk up the road, listening all the while for the Virginia's Warbler song. This song can be confused with Audubon's Warbler from a distance and is reminiscent of Lazuli Bunting at close range, at least to my ear. The good habitat extends for about three miles up the canyon and there are generally several pairs of Virginia's Warblers in this stretch. In fact, they have been observed on several occasions right at the canyon mouth or by the gate. Virginia's prefer areas with at least some relatively large pines interspersed among or bordering the shrubby understory, so look for sites with these characteristics. The males often sing from elevated perches within the pines, as if to better survey their territories.

In Boles Canyon, there is a sizeable parking area at the entrance to National Forest property. Another strategy for locating Virginia's Warblers would be to park here and walk up the road, investigating the draws and box canyons leading into Boles Canyon from the west. Alternatively, you could cross the pasture to the canyon wall to the east and work up the canyon from there. Again, several pairs of Virginia's Warblers can usually be found in this general area. A particularly good site along the western (left) wall is the box canyon behind the Roby headstone at just over 1-mile from the entrance to National Forest property. A good side canyon also enters Boles Canyon at this level on the opposite (east) side. In addition to Virginia's Warblers, Common Poorwills can be heard calling in the summer, starting at dusk, for about the first 6-7 miles of Boles Canyon. These birds can also sometimes be seen while driving on the road at night. Look for the orange eye-shine.

At about 1.5 miles after the junction of F.S. 376 with F.S. 117 is a primitive road leading up a draw in the canyon wall to the left (west) providing access for turkey hunters. This road is usually closed by a gate and is not suitable for driving unless you have a four-wheel drive vehicle anyway. However, you can park at the bottom and climb up the road which leads, after about ½-mile, to meadow-shrub areas on the canyon rim. This road passes through Ponderosa Pine forest bordered by juniper-shrub habitat and is a good place to find nesting Plumbeous Vireos, Audubon's Warblers, Ovenbirds, and Western Tanagers. Cassin's Finch, Pine Siskin, and Red Crossbill are sometimes observed here, and Gray Jays have nested along this section of the trail. In addition several pairs of Virginia's Warblers generally frequent the pine-shrub transition areas for about the first mile of the trail. The rim on top of the canyon is good for Vesper Sparrows and Spotted Towhees and borders another canyon to the west that gives a scenic overview.

The good habitat in Redbird Canyon extends for about one mile from the National Forest boundary (once again at a cattle guard) to the residential area at the base of a large, and scenic, cliff face. Prairie Falcons have nested along this cliff face. A flat area suitable for parking can be found on the left just around the corner from the National Forest entrance. Black-billed Magpies and Pinyon Jays are regularly observed along this one-mile stretch. You can also cross the pasture on the canyon bottom to the far side of Redbird Canyon once you are on National Forest property. There is some nice pine-juniper-shrub habitat along the far canyon wall. Several pairs of Virginia's

Warblers normally occur along both sides of the canyon in this area. Common Poorwills can also be found regularly in the lower 3 miles or so of Redbird Canyon.

Accommodations

Numerous motels and KOA-type camping facilities can be found in Custer (29 miles) and Newcastle (9 miles). Comanche Park campground (\$ 10 per night camping fee) is located about 5 miles west of Custer and has showers and restrooms. There is also primitive camping (no fee) at Moon campground, 16 miles up Boles Canyon from Highway 16.

Associated Sites

Several other sites in this general area also bear mentioning. One of these sites is Hell Canyon, at the western edge of Jewel Cave National Monument. Jewel Cave National Monument itself is pine forest and is generally unremarkable for birding, although the characteristic species of the pine forests in the Black Hills may be found here. The cave is interesting and beautiful, and the Visitor's Center has a small bookstore with books about natural history of the area. Hell Canyon is a beautiful spot, certainly not living up to its moniker! It is lined by riparian vegetation along the canyon bottom along a small stream. There are also numerous exposed cliff faces looming over the canyon and adding to the scenic beauty of the canyon. The huge Jasper fire in 2000 burned much of the pine forest around Hell Canyon, including the initial portion of the Hell Canyon Trail, but much of the deciduous forest in the canyon bottom escaped the fire, although the stream, which usually provided at least some running water, is now almost always dry.

The Hell Canyon Trail is a 5.5-mile loop that includes both canyon rim and bottom. Stick to the canyon bottom for the best birding, as the forest along the rim burned during the Jasper fire. A hike up this canyon is likely to produce birds of both pine forest and riparian habitats of the Black Hills, as well as species such as Canyon Wren and White-throated Swift that are associated with exposed cliff faces. Regular nesting species include Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Wood-Pewee, Dusky and Cordilleran flycatchers, Plumbeous, Warbling, and Red-eyed vireos, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Violet-green Swallow, Townsend's Solitaire, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Audubon's and MacGillivray's warblers, Western Tanager, White-winged Junco, and Red Crossbill. Clark's Nutcracker, a difficult species in South Dakota, also occurs along the canyon with some regularity and Pygmy Nuthatches are also regular visitors. Hell Canyon can also be a good area for migrants. Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, which were formerly only a casual migrant in the Black Hills, are now regular summer residents. This canyon is an excellent spot to look for vagrants during migration, and such rarities as Hammond's Flycatcher, Carolina Wren, and Blue-winged and Townsend's warblers have been observed here. Watch out for Wood Ticks, which can be abundant in late spring-early summer. The ticks and the locally abundant poison ivy represent the only features of Hell Canyon that I know of worthy of its name!

The initial section of the trail leads through burned ponderosa pine forest, which sometimes harbors Lewis's Woodpeckers. Rock Wrens also occur regularly along this section in the cliffs bordering the canyon, and White-throated Swifts and Violet-green Swallows cavort overhead. About ¼-mile after the trailhead, after crossing the dry streambed twice, you will begin encountering the riparian deciduous forest habitat, intermixed with pine forest. The scrubby area to the left of the trail after the third stream crossing is often good for Dusky and Cordilleran flycatchers and Lazuli Bunting also often occurs in this general area. After another couple hundred yards, you will come to an old road grade, with some pavement still visible among the grass and shrubs. Just after the paved area is the small first meadow. This meadow usually has a displaying Broad-tailed Hummingbird in the summer months, and Warbling Vireo, MacGillivray's Warbler and Spotted Towhee are also regular here.

After the first meadow, you will cross the streambed again, and the riparian deciduous forest becomes very thick along the left of the trail. This is a good area for Townsend's Solitaire (which can be abundant when the chokecherries come on in August), Western Tanager, and Black-Headed Grosbeak. Another ¼-mile brings you to the second meadow area, another spot that is good for displaying Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. After crossing the streambed again (the streambed is vegetated rather than rocky at this crossing), note the thick growth of chokecherries along the left edge of the meadow. This is a great spot for birds in late summer, including migrants such as Townsend's Warbler. As you are nearing the far end of the second meadow, you will come to a spring with a concrete well-housing built around it. This flow in this spring used to flow over the concrete walls and provide

water to the stream, but since the Jasper fire, the flow has decreased so that now there is water only within the cement walls. Given that this is the only regular water in the area, this spot can be very attractive to birds. Audubon's Warblers and White-winged Juncos can always be found here, and this is another good spot for Broad-tailed Hummingbirds.

Just prior to crossing the streambed before entering the second meadow, a small trail also leads up the small side canyon to the right. Following this trail around the corner along the dry streambed brings you to an excellent grove of aspen and shrubs. This is also an excellent spot for many of the resident breeding birds, and can also be a good spot for vagrants. Townsend's Warbler has also occurred in this grove.

Moon Campground is located in pine forest at 6,400 feet elevation 16 miles up F.S. 117 from Highway 16. In this general area Northern Saw-whet Owls have been heard calling and will respond to a whistled imitation of their call. The best time for locating these owls is February through May when they are calling on a regular basis. Gray Jays and White-winged Juncos nest in this area and Mountain Bluebirds and Vesper Sparrows frequent the numerous open meadows. Beaver Creek campground (\$8 per night camping fee) is located 12 miles northwest of Moon campground. To get there go north on F.S. 117 for about 8 miles and turn left (west) on F.S. 111 to the campground (four miles). The south side F.S. 111 all the way to the campground and beyond to the Wyoming border (one mile) is lined with White Spruce, making this one of the most extensive areas of spruce in the Black Hills. The bird species characteristic of Black Hills spruce habitats can be found here including Ruffed Grouse, Ruby and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Swainson's Thrush, Veery, Audubon's Warbler, Pine Siskins, and Red Crossbills. Also, this is a good place for Cordilleran Flycatchers along the rocky ledges of the canyon walls. American Three-toed Woodpeckers also occur here but can be difficult to find on a consistent basis. Warbling Vireos and MacGillivray's Warblers occur at the campground itself, which has some nice aspen stands and is a really pretty area. If Boreal Owl were to ever be found in South Dakota, this would seem to be a likely location. There is a cross-country ski area here that is maintained in winter so access to this area is available year around. As an added bonus, Beaver Creek offers good fishing for pan-size Brook and Brown Trout.