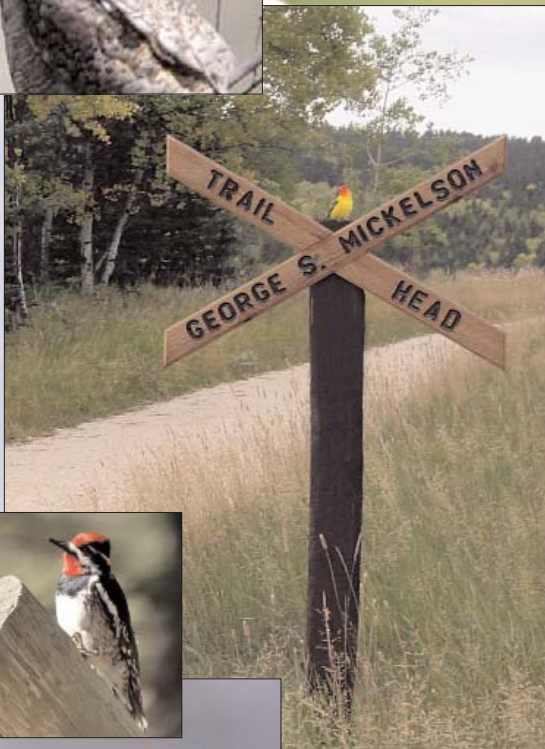


A Birder's Guide

to the *George S. Mickelson Trail*

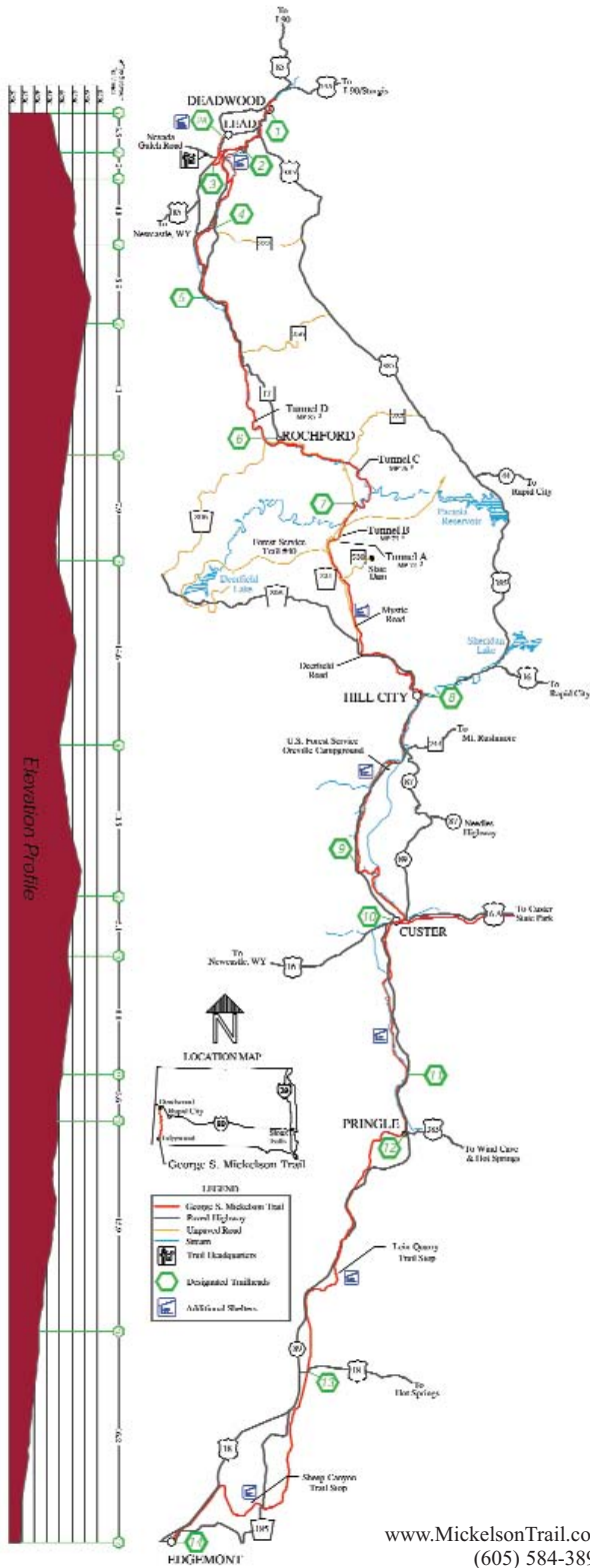


George S. Mickelson Trail

A Birder's Guide

to the *George S. Mickelson Trail*

The purpose of this guide is to enhance the Mickelson Trail experience. Primarily, it is intended for use by the casual or novice birder, although the advanced birder may also find it useful. Newcomers to the Black Hills will be surprised at the diversity and density of birds along the trail. Hopefully, this guide will be educational and serve to increase avian awareness. The ultimate goal, of course, is to spark interest and curiosity about birds where little or none previously existed. Please take up the challenge and have fun “checking off” the species you spot as you take in the beauty of the Mickelson Trail.



WESTERN Tanager



Doug Backlund

Trailheads

1. Deadwood Trailhead MP 108.8
2. Kirk Trailhead MP 105.3
- 2A. Lead Trailhead MP 103.7
3. Sugarloaf Trailhead MP 103.3
4. Englewood Trailhead MP 98.5
5. Dumont Trailhead MP 92.6
6. Rochford Trailhead MP 82.6
7. Mystic Trailhead MP 74.7
8. Burlington Northern Hill City Trailhead MP 60.1
9. The Mountain Trailhead MP 49.6
10. Harbach Park Trailhead in Custer MP 44.5
11. White Elephant Trailhead MP 35.7
12. Pringle Trailhead MP 32.1
13. Minnekahta Trailhead MP 16.2
14. Edgemont Trailhead MP 0

Cover photos: Inset photos-(Doug Backlund) Great Horned Owl, Chipping Sparrow, Red-naped Sapsucker, Red Crossbill (Dave Menke/USFWS), Ovenbird. Photo image- Western Tanager, GSM Trailhead (Doug Backlund, Emilie Miller)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This is not an identification guide, but rather an aid to inform the user of bird species which might be present along the Mickelson Trail. Use of a proper field guide to bird identification in conjunction with this guide is essential. See page 5 for suggested field guides.

This guide reduces the 14 trailheads into nine sections by combining some of the shorter routes. Each section has facing pages with the left page devoted to a map and notes

about habitat along or near the trail. The page on the right lists some of the birds—both expected and probable—for that section of the trail, along with brief notes on where and how to find them. It is important for the beginning bird watcher to understand the serendipity of birding.

Birds common to an area one day may not be found the next. Conversely, luck may have it that a rare species is operating on the same schedule as the birder.

Habitat awareness is important in anticipating which species might be encountered. Many birds are habitat specific. Others may have a preference but may be found in a variety of habitats. Some species are habitat non-specific and may turn up anywhere. It is always important to remember that birds have wings, which means that anything is possible.

The checklist on pages 26 to 29 lists species in *taxonomic order*—the known or assumed relationship between species. It is a good idea for the beginning birder to get accustomed to this method, as it facilitates locating birds in field guides. Like anything else, with regular use, familiarity with taxonomic order becomes second nature. Two columns precede the species listing. The first column is for “checking off” a sighting. The second column notes the habitat(s) where a species is most likely to occur. There are four columns following the species list. These columns note the probability of encountering the species (either visually or audibly) in a given season.

Just as birds can be found out of habitat, the user should also note that birds are not necessarily obedient to calendars. The issue of seasons becomes even more arbitrary when two seasons converge and as weather patterns fluctuate. It should be noted that some common species—particularly those found throughout the entire length of the Mickelson Trail—are not always listed.

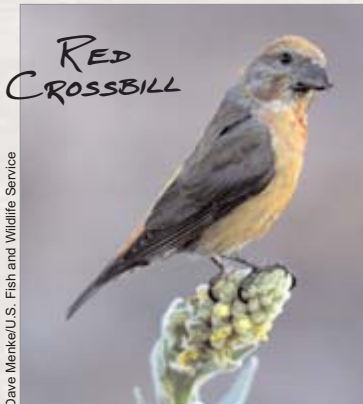
Birding Tips

Habitat is everything to a bird. It is important for the fledgling birder to develop and cultivate some basic knowledge of birds’ preferred habitats and how to identify them. Habitat preference is related to basic instincts and needs—food, shelter, survival, and carrying on the species. Knowing what birds eat and where they nest are key to understanding where to find them. Awareness of *bird distribution*—the range in which they normally are found—and migration routes is also helpful.

Listening is often as important as seeing when it comes to detecting and identifying birds. Birds are often heard before they are seen. This is especially true in spring and early summer. Listening to recordings and acquiring even a modest familiarity with *bird vocalizations*—calls, songs or notes—greatly improves the chance of making an identification.

Mental notes should be made *before* consulting a field guide when trying to identify a bird. Birds do not always cooperate in their identification and they can disappear quickly. Begin by noting the **relative size** of the bird in relation to familiar species—sparrows, robins, pigeons, and crows. Size comparisons are most accurate when a familiar species is present. Next, **note the bill**—its shape, color and its size in relation to the head. **Field marks** such as overall color, wing bars, spotting or streaking, and especially patterns about the head are important. A birds’ **general shape and profile** is often a good clue as to its family—such as sparrow, wren or woodpecker. Don’t stop observing **when the bird flies**. Look for

VIOLET GREEN SWALLOW markings on the tail and wings, and note the manner of flight—direct, flitting, undulating. **Habitat and behavior** are good clues—where was the bird and what was it doing?

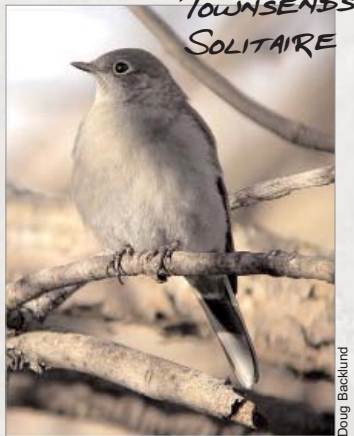


Dave Menke/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Doug Backlund

When to look for birds is somewhat species-specific. Generally speaking, the best time to go birding is early in the morning, or later in the day toward evening. This is when birds are the most conspicuous in song and behavior. Bird behavior is directly linked to seasonal changes. Spring is a time for migration, courtship and nest building. Summer is for the rearing of young. Fall is a time to build fat reserves for migration. Winter is a time of survival. These factors affect bird activity and the times of day in which they are likely to be active.



TOWNSEND'S
SOLITAIRE

Doug Backlund

Light and atmospheric conditions can greatly influence the perception of color. The intensity of light and weather conditions such as fog or rain can make it easy for gray to appear as blue, or for red to be mistaken for black. Back lighting is the scourge of all birders—making the brightest of colors appear black and erasing all field marks. The best approach when bird identification is uncertain is to relegate the sighting to “unidentified,” instead of making a potentially incorrect “guess.”

Migration means more than birds leaving. It also signals the arrival of new species. Not all birds migrate. Some are local residents year-round. It should be noted that most birds have what are called *basic* and *alternate* (breeding) plumage. Field guides should be closely consulted in terms of the species and season.

Be quiet. Birds are very aware of sound and easily scared off. The quiet birder will not only benefit by seeing more birds, but also by hearing them.



AMERICAN REDSTART



Optics

Binoculars, even the most modest and inexpensive, are virtually a must for proper bird identification and enjoyment. Try out several models before choosing one. Test how they fit the eyes and hands, ease of focus, clarity and brightness. The beginning birder is wise to start with the most durable, expensive pair of binoculars affordable—within reason. The trials and tribulations of being a beginner usually result in that first pair becoming damaged.



Field Guides

The field guide of choice has become the *National Audubon Society's Sibley Guide to Birds*. It is easy to use and includes all the birds of North America. Another widely used book is the *National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. It is smaller and more easily slipped into a pocket than the Sibley guide, but not as extensively illustrated. When choosing field guides, remember that illustrations are far superior to photographs when it comes to bird identification. Artistic illustrations, in essence, simplify and accentuate field marks, making correct identification easier. A slight exception to this is the *Kaufman Focus Guide, Birds of North America*. This book uses the wonders of technology to alter and enhance digital photographs—a hybrid of photography and painting. This guide and the Sibley book, both use the “Peterson system” of arrows to point out distinguishing field marks.



Etiquette

Care must be taken to not be too aggressive when attempting to observe or identify a bird. Over zealous pursuit or harassment can severely stress a bird and cause breeding, nest, or young abandonment. It is also important to remember that many sections of the trail border private property. Please do not trespass in an attempt to identify a bird.



Weather

Weather conditions can change very quickly in the Black Hills and with little advanced warning. Spring and summer showers can seemingly materialize out of nowhere and be gone in minutes. Temperatures can fluctuate greatly. Be prepared. Travel with rain gear and dress in layers of clothing.

TRAILHEADS 1-4



AMERICAN DIPPER



Doug Backlund

Habitat

The distance between the Deadwood (1) and Englewood Trailhead (4) is diverse in habitat, which makes for interesting birding. Unfortunately, the early stages of the trail also have many urban disturbances.

The trail out of Deadwood and the spur to the trailheads at Lead (2A) and Sugarloaf (3) are in close proximity to heavily trafficked roads—not always appealing to birds or birders. However, the trail does follow Whitewood Creek, making it excellent riparian habitat for year-round birding. The creek's strong current and rocky channel make it a good place to see the elusive and much sought after American Dipper.

From the Kirk Trailhead (2), the route splits. Though the spur follows some good riparian habitat, the route directly to Englewood (4) provides better and more diverse habitat, following the creek and passing through white spruce, aspen, birch, and later ponderosa pine. Slate outcrop borders much of the trail before milepost 100.



BELTED KING FISHER

Doug Backlund

RUFFED GROUSE

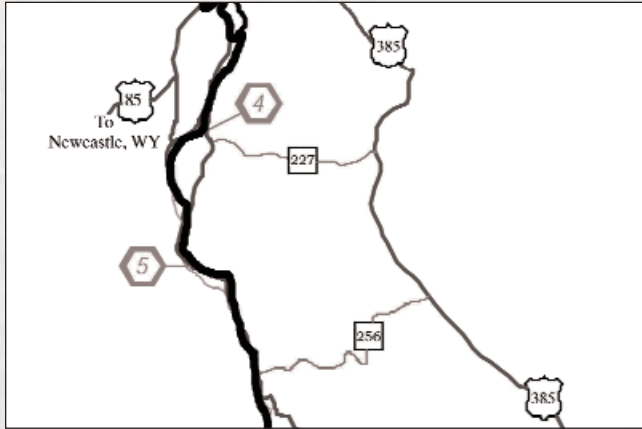


Doug Backlund

Birds and Notes

- Great Blue Heron along Whitewood Creek
- Wood Duck riparian/cavity nester
- Mallard calm portions of creek
- Bald Eagle in winter
- Broad-winged Hawk riparian and pine
- Ruffed Grouse aspen/spruce
- Spotted Sandpiper along creek shallows
- Black-billed Cuckoo listen for in riparian
- Great Horned Owl large cottonwoods
- Common Nighthawk listen for overhead
- Belted Kingfisher along creek even in winter
- Red-naped Sapsucker aspen
- American Three-toed Woodpecker. white spruce
- Black-backed Woodpecker burn areas
- Cordilleran Flycatcher shady areas in gulch
- Red-eyed Vireo listen for along creek
- Blue Jay deciduous and towns
- Tree Swallow swooping just above creek
- Violet-green Swallow in gulch near cliffs
- Black-capped Chickadee worth watching
- American Dipper rapid, rocky creek
- Swainson's Thrush singing from spruce
- Black-throated Blue Warbler migration/creek
- American Redstart stunning riparian nester
- Chipping Sparrow abundant BH breeder
- Song Sparrow low in debris/along creek
- White-crowned Sparrow on ground/migration
- Gray-crowned Rosy Finch feeders in winter

TRAILHEADS 4-5



Habitat

The Englewood (4) to Dumont (5) portion of the trail is an interesting mix of conifer and open, high country meadows edged with aspen. The trailhead, even though at the intersection of several roads, immediately offers good birding in the form of a wet meadow created by a narrow willow-lined stream. The trail follows a long meadow passing through small stands of aspen and spruce, with pine forest dominating the nearby hillsides.



RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER

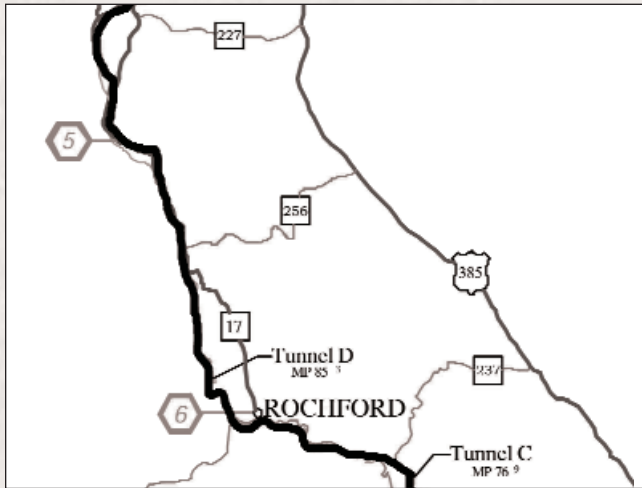
Soon the trail disappears into dense white spruce intermixed with aspen and birch. For a couple of miles the dominant habitat seems to alternate between pine and spruce, but neither is ever out of sight. At milepost 94 the view widens into meadow with young pine forest to the east. Just before reaching the Dumont Trailhead, a huge aspen forest is visible beyond a wide meadow.

Birds and Notes

Great Blue Heron streams and ponds
 Red-tailed Hawk soaring above meadow
 Ruffed Grouse watch for on trail
 Common Snipe in wet meadow near stream
 Mourning Dove forest edge and fence line
 Red-naped Sapsucker nest cavities in aspen
 Hairy Woodpecker they like mixed forest
 Northern Flicker on ground or clinging to snags
 Least Flycatcher aspen/meadow shrubs
 Dusky Flycatcher meadow shrubs
 Warbling Vireo calling high in aspen
 Blue Jay towns/most anywhere
 Black-billed Magpie shrubland/very vocal
 Golden-crowned Kinglet white spruce
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet loud call/small bird
 Mountain Bluebird fence and power lines
 Swainson's Thrush flute-like call from aspen
 American Robin sadly taken for granted
 Cedar Waxwing flit about high in spruce
 Yellow-rumped Warbler all types of forest
 MacGillivray's Warbler meadow shrubs
 Common Yellowthroat wet areas/shrubland
 Chipping Sparrow calling from top of spruce
 Song Sparrows skulking about in shrubs
 Dark-eyed Junco found about anywhere
 Black-headed Grosbeak shrubland/feeders
 Pine Siskin conifer forest/often in flocks



TRAILHEADS 5-6



Habitat

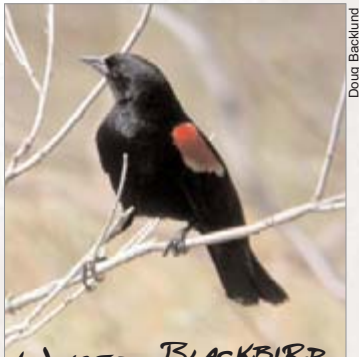
Several miles of relatively open country, with pine as the dominant conifer, typifies the trail from Dumont (4) to Rochford (6), but a few pleasant surprises are thrown in.



COMMON
YELLOWTHROAT

There are several small ponds along the route, which could host waterfowl. Large grassy meadows used for cattle grazing and some haying open the possibility of grassland species, such as bobolink, meadowlark and vesper sparrow.

A lightly traveled highway runs close to the trail from milepost 92 to just beyond post 89 near Nahant. Pine borders the highway on the east and extensive stands of aspen are to the west, beyond the meadow. The open space begins to taper off, ending near milepost 86, with pine forest closing in steeply on both sides. Granite outcrop surrounds Tunnel D, one of four tunnels on the trail. Within a mile, the habitat changes from pine to spruce converging with Rapid Creek, more ponds, and variety of deciduous habitat at Rochford (6).



RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD



SONG SPARROW

GRAY JAY



Les Voornis



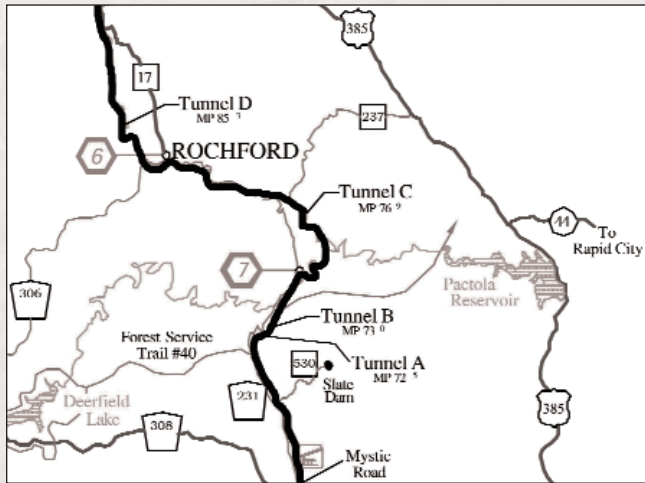
BREWERS
BLACKBIRD

Doug Backlund

Birds and Notes

Gadwall	ponds
Mallard	ponds/meadows
Red-tailed Hawk	listen for call overhead
American Kestrel	watch for on power lines
Common Snipe	wet meadows
Mourning Dove	open shrubland
Great Horned Owl	open areas for hunting
Common Nighthawk	overhead in evening
Downy Woodpecker	thickets and trail ditch
Northern Flicker	feeding on ground
Cordilleran Flycatcher	gulch near tunnel
Eastern Kingbird	open areas/fence lines
Loggerhead Shrike	shrubland
Northern Shrike	winter only/perched high
Tree Swallow	nest boxes
Violet-green Swallow	above rock outcrops
Eastern Bluebird	clearings near aspen
Mountain Bluebird	nest boxes/fence lines
Yellow-rumped Warbler	act like flycatchers
MacGillivray's Warbler	shrubland near water
Common Yellowthroat	streams/wet meadow
Vesper Sparrow	forest edge/open areas
Song Sparrow	usually near water
Bobolink	hayed meadows/migration
Red-winged Blackbird	open, wet areas
Western Meadowlark	open areas/fence lines
Brewer's Blackbird	open areas/fence lines

TRAILHEADS 6-7



Habitat

Spruce forest dominates much of the trail between Rochford (6) and Mystic (7). However, extensive pine forest is always close enough to have an effect on bird diversity. Typically, pine forest is found on sunny south facing slopes, with spruce occurring in shady gulches and north facing hillsides. This is evident for the first few miles of the trail, with pine to one side and spruce the other.



Doug Backlund

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET

The trail follows Rapid Creek all the way to where it forks with Castle Creek, shortly before Mystic. This makes for excellent riparian habitat, and the last possibility of finding an American Dipper. Unfortunately, a gravel road also follows the creek, but in most cases it probably has little effect on bird activity. Willow and birch thickets line the creek channel with occasional stands of mature mixed deciduous. Between mileposts 79 and 78 there is a modest little waterfall, with a pond nearby. From milepost 78 to Tunnel C, the trail enters a slight gulch and is surrounded by spruce with slate outcrop above.



Doug Backlund

AMERICAN ROBIN

Birds and Notes

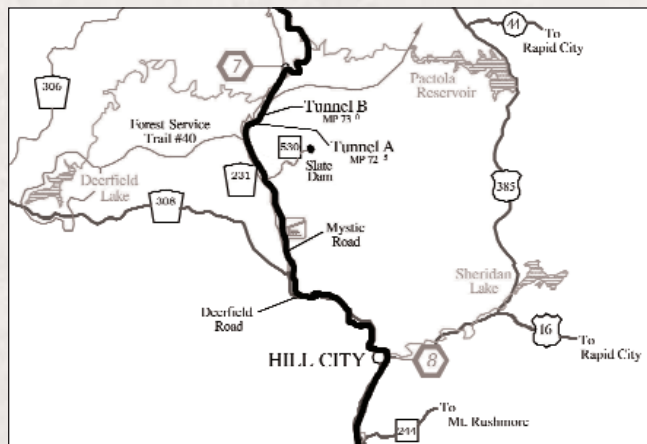
Turkey Vultures tilting about overhead
 Mallard at pond/in creek
 Osprey nest nearby at Pilot Knob/Pactola
 Spotted Sandpiper flitting along creek
 Northern Saw-whet Owl calling from forest
 White-throated Swift rock outcrop/overhead
 Belted Kingfisher perches above creek
 Northern Flicker loud, calling from pine
 Cordilleran Flycatcher near tunnel
 Northern Shrike along creek in winter
 Warbling Vireo deciduous near creek
 Gray Jay buoyant, gliding flight/conifers
 Violet-green Swallow listen and look for overhead
 Red-breasted Nuthatch spruce/pine
 American Dipper dipping/on rocks in creek
 Golden-crowned Kinglet difficult to see
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet nervously flitting about
 Townsend's Solitaire likes cliffs and pine
 American Robin vocal very early in morning
 Yellow-rumped Warbler look for Audubon's race
 Ovenbird loud call/low or on ground/pine
 Northern Waterthrush migrant/along creek
 Common Yellowthroat low /bushes along creek
 Chipping Sparrow often on ground
 Dark-eyed Junco flashes white outer tail feathers
 Red-winged Blackbird along creek



CORDILLERAN FLYCATCHER

Doug Backlund

TRAILHEADS 7-8



Habitat

A popular section of the trail is between Mystic (7) to Hill City (8). The trail begins at 5,000 feet and ends at approximately the same elevation, but it is by no means flat. Castle Creek flows next to the trail, through what starts out as a mixed conifer forest. Shortly before Tunnel B, pine dominates. South of Tunnel B there is a nice stretch of aspen and birch, before giving way to pine again at Tunnel A. Between the tunnels is some very interesting habitat—a marsh and a pond at milepost 76. Slate outcrop, though not always visible from the trail, is widespread.

It should be noted that pine, though maybe not adjacent to the trail, is always nearby dominating the hilltops and making species specific to that habitat a possibility. This fact soon becomes apparent at milepost 74, with pine extending from hilltop to trail on one side and spruce on the other. There is also a pond at milepost 72 and a nice mix of conifer and aspen.

After milepost 71, pine dominates and a series of small meadows, edged with aspen, lead all the way to where the trail meets the highway. The habitat beyond milepost 66 to Hill City remains much the same, but with a few scattered wetlands and ponds—including Newton Lake—formed by several small streams. At Hill City, all the possibilities of urban birds emerge, but with two possible additions: There is an Osprey nesting platform at Hill City Lake, which has been used in recent years, and occasionally, an American Dipper is seen at the spillway below the lake.

OSPREY



Doug Backlund

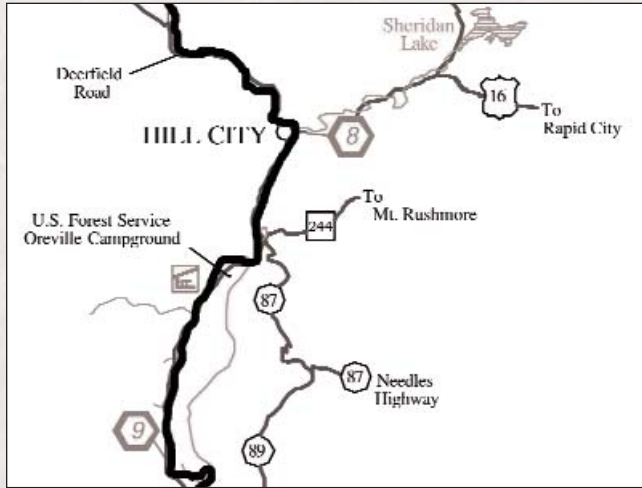


Doug Backlund

Birds and Notes

Great Blue Heron large prehistoric looking bird
Turkey Vultures riding thermals overhead
Mallard on or near water
Blue-winged Teal ponds and marsh
Osprey Hill City Lake
Cooper's Hawk watch for in dense forest
American Kestrel open meadows/powerlines
Mourning Dove towns/meadows
Great Horned Owl forest edge/deciduous
White-throated Swift rock outcrops at tunnels
Belted Kingfisher streams/ponds/lakes
Red-naped Sapsucker listen for drilling/aspen
Downy Woodpecker not as common as Hairy
Hairy Woodpecker mature aspen
Northern Flicker meadows and towns
Cordilleran Flycatcher shady areas/near tunnels
Plumbeous Vireo pine and aspen edge
Gray Jay very top of spruce/pine
Clark's Nutcracker perched high/rocky areas
Violet-green Swallow high, near cliffs
Mountain Bluebird meadows/nest boxes
Townsend's Solitaire rocky areas/cliffs
Ovenbird especially aspen/birch
Common Yellowthroat marsh/wetlands w/shrubs
Western Tanager pine
Vesper Sparrow forest edge
Song Sparrow creeks/wetlands
Dark-eyed Junco watch for white-winged
Red-winged Blackbird marsh/wetlands
Western Meadowlark large meadows
Brewer's Blackbird grazed meadows
Red-crossbill feeding on pine cones
White-winged Crossbill rare but possible/spruce

TRAILHEADS 8-9



Habitat

This central portion of the trail is solidly in the granite range of the Black Hills. In terms of the Mickelson Trail, the large tracts of white spruce typical in the north are no longer found and ponderosa pine dominate the forest. The Black Hills also begins to open up into larger meadows and grasslands. The climate begins to change with higher temperatures and drier conditions. Not surprisingly, the variety of bird life also begins to shift.

The trail runs alongside Highway 16/385 along its course from Hill City (8) to the Mountain Trailhead (9) three miles north of Custer. At times, the proximity of this heavily traveled road has a noticeable affect on bird density and diversity. Mitigating this manmade intrusion somewhat is Tenderfoot Creek, which meanders along the trail for several miles.

Leaving Hill City the trail immediately passes a rather large marsh followed by a succession of grazed meadows and ponds. Near milepost 58, small areas of deciduous riparian and wet meadow alternate. This continues until milepost 54. Between mileposts 55 and 54 lies a small, marshy, wet meadow and the first of several granite outcrops, which become expansive to the east of the trail. A small stand of white spruce is near milepost 53. Just before the Mountain Trailhead (9), the pine forest opens to a large meadow/grassland.

Birds and Notes

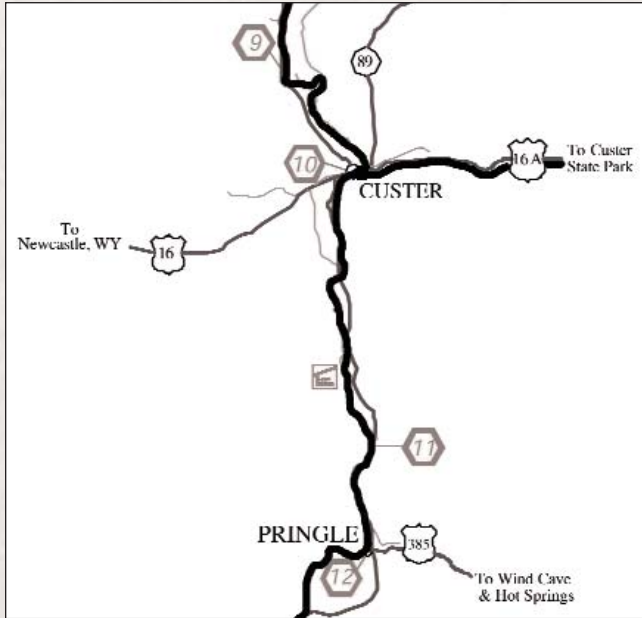
Mallard	ponds/wetlands
Red-tailed Hawk	soaring above
Wild Turkey	forest floor
White-throated Swift	granite outcrop
Northern Flicker	on ground or snags
Western Wood Peewee	calling from pine
Dusky Flycatcher	shrubs/meadow edge
Loggerhead Shrike	thorny thickets/fence lines
Plumbeous Vireo	pine forest edge
Gray Jay	often imitates hawks
Clark's Nutcracker	rocky hilltops
American Crow	in flocks anywhere
Violet-green Swallow	overhead/near cliffs
Red-breasted Nuthatch	calling from pine
Mountain Bluebird	open areas
Townsend's Solitaire	pine/near granite outcrop
American Robin	towns/forest edge/meadow
Yellow-rumped Warbler	any woodland
Common Yellowthroat	marsh/low shrubs
Western Tanager	pine
Vesper Sparrow	open grassland/meadow
Song Sparrow	marsh/streamside
Dark-eyed Junco	almost anywhere
Red-winged Blackbird	marsh/wetland
Western Meadowlark	open grassland
Brewer's Blackbird	grazed grassland
Cassin's Finch	elusive/pine/feeders
Red Crossbill	noisy flocks/pine
Pine Siskin	abundant/conspicuous flocks
American Goldfinch	deciduous/along stream

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER



Dave Menke/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

TRAILHEADS 9-12



Habitat

The trail becomes decidedly more interesting after leaving the Mountain Trailhead (9) and moving to the east—away from the highway and closer to the granite formations. Within the first two miles, the pine forest shares space with areas of wet meadow and mature aspen stands. These habitats alternate amid the looming presence of granite (with a couple of ponds thrown in for good measure) along the entire distance to Custer (10).

The first few miles out of Custer are rich with choice habitat—willows, wetland, marsh, ponds, aspen and pine—but a highway runs nearby and there are many manmade structures. At milepost 41, the trail leaves the highway and the rewards are instant, revealing a small pond and a wet meadow with willow, aspen and snags. This area is surrounded by open mid-growth pine. The next two miles (milepost 41-39) are lined with granite outcrop, small aspen, wet meadow and small ponds, courtesy of Beaver Creek. Open fenced grassland with some agricultural land characterizes the next two miles to milepost 37. Near White Elephant Trailhead (11) are two wood bridges spanning Beaver Creek and some nice wetlands with willow. In less than three miles, things change drastically. Granite gives way to sandstone, the pine trees are smaller, and the climate becomes more arid at Pringle (12).

BLACK-BILLED
MAGPIE



Les Voorhies

WESTERN
MEADOWLARK



Doug Becklund

Birds and Notes

Turkey Vulture	looking for road kill
Mallard	ponds/wetland
Red-tailed Hawk	overhead/forest edge
American Kestrel	open areas
Mourning Dove	fence lines/towns/farms
White-throated Swift	above granite outcrop
Hairy Woodpecker	aspen/away from road
Northern Flicker	foraging on ground
Western Wood Peewee	calling from pine
Least Flycatcher	aspen/deciduous
Dusky Flycatcher	shrubs/pine edge
Western Kingbird	open areas near deciduous
Eastern Kingbird	fence line/open areas
Plumbeous Vireo	calling from pine edge
Clark's Nutcracker	granite formations
Black-billed Magpie	southern open areas
American Crow	conspicuous/in flocks
Horned Lark	open dry grassland
Violet-green Swallow	prefer cliffs
Cliff Swallow	look for mud nests/bridges
Red-breasted Nuthatch	pine branches
White-breasted Nuthatch	deciduous trunks
Mountain Bluebird	meadows/grassland
Townsend's Solitaire	near granite/pine
Common Yellowthroat	marsh/wetlands/shrubs
Western Tanager	hard to miss if present
Vesper Sparrow	meadows/grassland
Song Sparrow	along creek/marsh
Black-headed Grosbeak	streamside thickets
Red-winged Blackbird	open areas/marsh
Brewer's Blackbird	grassland/agricultural
Red Crossbill	pine/noisy flyover

TRAILHEADS 12-13



AMERICAN KESTREL



Doug Backlund

Habitat

The trail south of Pringle (12) offers some geological features not found to the north. The country is dry, open grassland with sandstone formations, clay and shale cutbanks, and scattered stands of relatively young pine. Several manmade influences are also present between Pringle and Argyle, such as bridges, power lines and gravel pits.



ROCK WREN

Doug Backlund

South of Argyle, roads pinch in on the trail from both sides, and yucca appears. Near milepost 22 there is an



MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD

interesting gulch of sandstone bluffs with cottonwoods, cedars, plum thickets, and mid-growth pine. Short grass prairie persists, with power and fence lines to Minnekahta Junction (13).

Birds and Notes

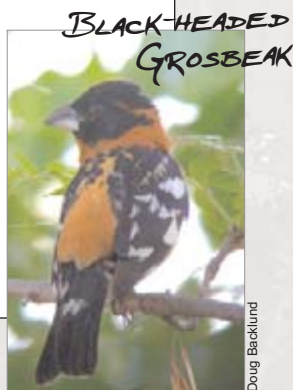
- Turkey Vultures soaring overhead
- Rough-legged Hawk in winter
- Golden Eagle..... soaring/on ground
- American Kestrel..... perch on powerlines
- Sharp-tailed Grouse..... grassland/gullies
- Sandhill Cranes..... listen for in migration
- Killdeer low flying/running in grassland
- Long-billed Curlew..... grassland
- Upland Sandpiper perch on fence posts
- Mourning Dove fence lines
- Burrowing Owl on ground/prairie dog towns
- Long-eared Owl cedar/gully thickets
- Common Poorwill camouflaged on trail
- Lewis's Woodpecker.... crow like flight/perch high
- Red-headed Woodpecker cottonwoods
- Northern Flicker seem to be everywhere
- Dusky Flycatcher thickets/shrubland/pine
- Say's Phoebe grasslands/sandstone bluffs
- Eastern Kingbird grassland fence lines
- Loggerhead Shrike thickets
- Black-billed Magpie shrubland/gulches
- Horned Lark..... open country/ on ground
- Rock Wren sandstone/rocky areas/cut bank
- Mountain Bluebird open country near pine
- Spotted Towhee thickets/shrubland
- Vesper Sparrow..... grassland
- Lark Sparrow shrubland/open country
- Lark Bunting fence line/grassland
- Western Meadowlark grassland/fence lines
- American Goldfinch weedy areas/deciduous



SPOTTED TOWHEE

Doug Backlund

TRAILHEADS 13-14



Habitat

Agricultural flatland and fences border the trail at the Minnekahta Trailhead (13). Trees are present only in the distance. At milepost 15, rolling hills and grazed grassland reappear with plum thickets and stands of cottonwood. Continuing south (between mileposts 13 and 9) are a series of draws and ravines, full of cottonwood, plum and other deciduous trees. At times, plum thickets line the trail. Sagebrush and scattered stands of young pine are everywhere. There are also some sandstone outcrops and hilltops strewn with rock.

A string of wood bridges leads toward a rocky ridge near Sheep Canyon. Cottonwood stands abound on the surrounding grassland. There is a burn area to the east at milepost 9.

Sheep Canyon is a steep sandstone gorge with yucca, thickets and some pine. At milepost 7 is the infamous railroad trestle, which affords a great view of the prairie below. It crosses a rocky drainage with the sloping hillsides bearing plum, cedar, yucca and some small pine. Descending to milepost 6, the trailside remains very rocky with scattered pine, cedar, sagebrush, and mountain mahogany. Halfway down, at milepost 5 is a large prairie dog town in open grazed prairie. Near milepost 3 is White Draw, lined with mature cottonwoods. The remaining three miles parallel railroad tracks, moving through sagebrush country with powerlines, fences, and some homes. The Cheyenne River flows through Edgemont (14) with its urban forest of cottonwood.

Birds and Notes

Ferruginous Hawk	prairie dog town
Golden Eagle	soaring/canyon cliffs
American Kestrel	perched on powerline
Prairie Falcon	hunting in open country
Killdeer	grassland/agricultural
Long-billed Curlew	grassland/prairie dog town
Upland Sandpiper	grassland/fence posts
Mourning Dove	shrublands/deciduous
Long-eared Owl	ravine thickets/cedar
Burrowing Owl	prairie dog town
Common Nighthawk	overhead in evening
White-throated Swift	canyon walls
Lewis's Woodpecker	burn/snags
Red-headed Woodpecker	cottonwood
Say's Phoebe	grassland/corrals/fence lines
Western Kingbird	towns/fence lines/cottonwood
Loggerhead Shrike	thorny thickets
Red-eyed Vireo	cottonwood/riparian
Pinyon Jay	dry shrubland near pine
Black-billed Magpie	thickets/canyon cedar
American Crow	deciduous draws/canyon
N. Rough-winged Swallow	riparian
Cliff Swallow	bridges/canyon
Barn Swallow	near farms/town
Red-breasted Nuthatch	pine
White-breasted Nuthatch	cottonwoods
Rock Wren	rocky areas/canyon
Canyon Wren	listen for song in canyon
Mountain Bluebird	anywhere
American Robin	shamefully ignored
Gray Catbird	dense thickets
Brown Thrasher	low in shrubs/towns
Yellow-breasted Chat	dense thickets
Spotted Towhee	thickets/deciduous
Lark Sparrow	grassland/shrubland
Lark Bunting	grassland
Grasshopper Sparrow	grassland fence line
Black-headed Grosbeak	deciduous/riparian
Blue Grosbeak	deciduous edge/thickets
Lazuli Bunting	riparian/deciduous
Indigo Bunting	deciduous edge
Western Meadowlark	grassland
Brewer's Blackbird	grassland/farms
Orchard Oriole	groves/shrubland/towns
Lesser Goldfinch	riparian/towns
American Goldfinch	weedy areas/thistle

BIRD CHECKLIST

Devising a checklist to the birds of the Mickelson Trail is a daunting and perhaps even controversial task. The Black Hills are situated at the eastern-most edge of the western range, or conversely the western-most edge of eastern birds. This fact alone makes for interesting possibilities. The Mickelson Trail neatly bisects the Black Hills, running 109 miles, north and south. Adding to the intrigue, the trail traverses a landscape ranging in elevation from approximately 3,400 to 6,200 feet above sea level. These factors, coupled with very unique geologic features, contribute to a great variety of habitat and terrain. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, is the indisputable fact that birds have wings, which makes many things possible.

Over 400 species appear on the checklist to the *Birds of South Dakota*. A checklist of the Black Hills and surrounding plains would include over 200 species of commonly occurring birds and approximately 300 species when including casual visitors and migrants. The checklist in this guide includes 176 species. This is due to the narrow corridor the trail weaves through the Black Hills. Conspicuously absent from this list are gulls, many ducks, and shorebirds. Habitat conducive to these species does not exist along the trail.

Habitat means everything to birds and birders. Most birds have a habitat preference and are referred to as habitat-specific. Many birds are found in a variety of habitats. Still others are very non-specific and may occur about anywhere. Birds in migration may easily be found outside of their normal habitats used for breeding, nesting and food. The habitats listed before each species are those most common to that species. Whenever possible, the habitats were listed in the order in which a bird is most likely to be found. The following codes, though at first a bit confusing, will become familiar with use.

The difference in bird species between the northern and southern hills is remarkable. Many of the seasonal codes include references (n or s) which simply designate where (north or south) a particular species is most likely to be found. For example, a code “?n” means you may see this bird, and if you do, it will most likely be in the northern hills.

Habitat

- P** Pine, most prevalent conifer in the Black Hills
- WS** White Spruce, conifer more specific to northern hills
- A** Aspen (including birch)
- D** Deciduous (cottonwood, oak, ash, elm, box elder, etc.)
- S** Shrublands and thickets (willow, plum, dogwood, etc.)
- M** Meadow, open areas surrounded by forest
- G** Grasslands, open prairie larger in scale than a meadow
- R** Riparian, areas of flowing water lined with forest
- W** Water and/or a variety of wet habitats:
 - ... **Wr** – rapids, fast flowing water of larger creeks
 - ... **Wp** – ponds, open water surrounded by vegetation
 - ... **Ws** – streams, meandering and slow-moving
 - ... **Wm** – marsh, wet areas with cattails and/or tall grass
- C** Cliffs and canyons, also rock outcrops and talus
- O** Open ground, generally barren and dry
- U** Urban (towns, residential areas, farms, and ranches)
- B** Burn areas
- MS** Manmade Structures (bridges, corrals, nest boxes)
- N** Non-specific, species without a habitat preference
- NW** Non-specific Woodland, species with no preference for conifer or deciduous

Seasonal Columns

The climate of the Black Hills, especially the northern hills, tends to be much less predictable than that of the surrounding plains. Generalizations such as late springs, short summers, erratic falls and mild winters are for the most part true. Specifically defining the seasons, especially since birds do not follow human calendars, is difficult.

- Sp** Spring - roughly early March to late May
- Su** Summer - roughly early June to early August
- Fa** Fall - roughly early August to November
- Wi** Winter - roughly late November to early March

Inside the seasonal columns are symbols which represent the likelihood of observing a particular species. Bird numbers can vary greatly from year to year, and are subject to weather patterns, food supplies, migratory routes, and a host of other influences. The skill and luck of the individual birder certainly has an effect on the number of species observed. Needless to say, there is considerable gray area separating the following codes.

- X** should see or hear, with little or no effort
- ?** may see or hear with some effort or a little luck
- !** lucky to see or hear - either rare or secretive
- fo** species detected overhead as “flyovers”

BIRD CHECKLIST

✓	Habitat	Species	Sp	Su	F	W
	Hérons					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,W	Great Blue Heron	X	X	X	
	Vultures					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Turkey Vulture	X	X	X	
	Ducks & Geese					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Canada Goose	!fo	!fo	!fo	!fo
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,Ws	Wood Duck	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wp,Wm	Gadwall	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	W	Mallard	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wp,Wm	Blue-winged Teal	?	?	?	
	Hawks & Eagles					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,W	Osprey	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Bald Eagle	?		?	X
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Sharp-shinned Hawk	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Cooper's Hawk	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Northern Goshawk	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,P	Broad-winged Hawk	!	?	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Red-tailed Hawk	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Ferruginous Hawk	!s	!s	!s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Rough-legged Hawk				!s
<input type="checkbox"/>	C,G	Golden Eagle	?	?	?	?
	Falcons					
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,M	American Kestrel	?	?	?	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS,P,S	Merlin	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Peregrine Falcon	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,C	Prairie Falcon	!s	!s	!s	!s
	Game Birds					
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,A	Ruffed Grouse	?n	?n	?n	?n
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Sharp-tailed Grouse	!s	!s	!s	!s
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,D	Wild Turkey	?	?	?	?
	Rails					
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wm	Vignina Rail	!s	!s	!s	!s
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wm	Sora	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wp	American Coot	!	!	!	
	Cranes					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Sandhill Crane	!fo		!fo	
	Shorebirds					
<input type="checkbox"/>	M,G	Killdeer	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	We,Wp	Solitary Sandpiper	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wp,Ws	Spotted Sandpiper	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Long-billed Curlew	!s	!s	!s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Upland Sandpiper	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	We,Wb	Common Snipe	!	!	!	!
	Doves					
<input type="checkbox"/>	U	Rock Pigeon	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,U	Mourning Dove	X	X	X	?s
	Cuckoos					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R	Black-billed Cuckoo	!	!	!	!
	Owls					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D,S	Eastern Screech Owl	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Great Horned Owl	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Burrowing Owl	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,WS,S	Long-eared Owl	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,WS,A	Northern Saw-whet Owl	!	!	!	!

GEORGE S. MICKELSON TRAIL

✓	Habitat	Species	Sp	Su	F	W
	Goatsuckers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Common Nighthawk		Xfo	?fo	
<input type="checkbox"/>	O	Common Poorwill		!	!	
	Swifts					
<input type="checkbox"/>	C	White-throated Swift	?	X	?	
	Hummingbirds					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Broad-tailed Hummingbird	!	!		
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Rufous Hummingbird	!	!		
	Kingfishers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R	Belted Kingfisher	X	X	X	?
	Woodpeckers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	B,D,S	Lewis's Woodpecker	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	B,R,D,P	Red-headed Woodpecker	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	A,P,S	Red-naped Sapsucker	Xn	Xn	Xn	
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW,S	Downy Woodpecker	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW,B	Hairy Woodpecker	X	X	X	X
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS	Am. Three-toed Woodpecker	!n	!n	!n	!n
<input type="checkbox"/>	B,P	Black-backed Woodpecker	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Northern Flicker	X	X	X	?
	Flycatchers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS,P	Olive-sided Flycatcher	!	!n	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Western Wood-Pee-wee	?s	Xs	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R	Willow Flycatcher	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	A,D,R	Least Flycatcher	?	?n	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,S,A	Dusky Flycatcher	?	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,WS,D	Cordilleran Flycatcher	?	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D,MS	Eastern Phoebe	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,O	Say's Phoebe	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	O,P	Cassin's Kingbird	!s	!s	!s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,P,G,U	Western Kingbird	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,G	Eastern Kingbird	X	X	X	
	Shrikes					
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,G	Loggerhead Shrike	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Northern Shrike			!	?
	Vireos					
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,A	Plumbeous Vireo	?	X	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R	Warbling Vireo	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R	Red-eyed Vireo	X	X	X	
	Jays					
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,WS	Gray Jay	X	X	X	X
<input type="checkbox"/>	D	Blue Jay	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,P	Pinyon Jay	!s	!s	!s	!s
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,C	Clark's Nutcracker	?c	?c	?c	?c
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,M,G	Black-billed Magpie	?	?	?	?
	Crows					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	American Crow	X	X	X	X
	Larks					
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,O	Horned Lark	?	?	?	?
	Swallows					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D,M,A	Tree Swallow	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	C,S,P,D	Violet-green Swallow	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,S,O	N. Rough-winged Swallow	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	C,Ms	Cliff Swallow	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,MS,U	Barn Swallow	X	X	X	

BIRD CHECKLIST

GEORGE S. MICKELSON TRAIL

✓	Habitat	Species	Sp	Su	F	W
	Chickadees					
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Black-capped Chickadee	X	X	X	X
	Nuthatches					
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,WS	Red-breasted Nuthatch	X	X	X	X
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	White-breasted Nuthatch	X	X	X	X
<input type="checkbox"/>	P	Pygmy Nuthatch	!	!	!	!
	Creepers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Brown Creeper	?	?	?	?
	Wrens					
<input type="checkbox"/>	C,O	Rock Wren	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	C	Canyon Wren	?	?	?	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,U,D	House Wren	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R	Winter Wren	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wm	Marsh Wren	!s	!s	!s	!s
	Dippers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wr	American Dipper	!n	!n	!n	!n
	Kinglets					
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS	Golden-crowned Kinglet	?n	?n	?n	?n
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	X	X	X	
	Thrushes					
<input type="checkbox"/>	M,D,MS	Eastern Bluebird	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,D,M	Mountain Bluebird	X	X	X	?s
<input type="checkbox"/>	C,P,S	Townsend's Solitaire	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS,A	Swainson's Thrush	?n	?n	?n	
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	American Robin	X	X	X	?
	Mimics					
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,R	Gray Catbird	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,U	Brown Thrasher	?	?	?	
	Starlings					
<input type="checkbox"/>	U,MS	European Starling	X	X	X	X
	Waxwings					
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS,D,P	Bohemian Waxwing				?
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Cedar Waxwing	X	X	X	?
	Warblers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D,S	Tennessee Warbler	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D,S	Orange-crowned Warbler	?		?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D,S	Nashville Warbler	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Northern Parula	!n	!n	!n	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R,S	Yellow Warbler	!s	!s	!s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R	Chestnut-sided Warbler	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R	Black-throated Blue Warbler	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW	Yellow-rumped Warbler	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	P	Townsend's Warbler			!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,A,R	Blackpoll Warbler	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,A,R	Black & White Warbler	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,A	American Redstart	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,A,D	Ovenbird	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,D	Northern Waterthrush	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,R	MacGillivray's Warbler	?	?	?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,R,We	Common Yellowthroat	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R,S	Wilson's Warbler	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S	Yellow-breasted Chat	!s	!s	!s	

✓	Habitat	Species	Sp	Su	F	W
	Tanagers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,R	Western Tanager	X	X	X	
	Towhees					
<input type="checkbox"/>	S	Spotted Towhee	Xs	Xs	Xs	
	Sparrows					
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,Wm	American Tree Sparrow				!
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW,S,U	Chipping Sparrow	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,S	Clay-colored Sparrow	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,S	Field Sparrow	!s	!s	!s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	M,G	Vesper Sparrow	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,G,O	Lark Sparrow	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Lark Bunting	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,We	Savannah Sparrow	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Grasshopper Sparrow	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,We,S	Song Sparrow	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,We	Lincoln's Sparrow	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,D,U	White-throated Sparrow	!		!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,D,U	White-crowned Sparrow	X		X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Dark-eyed Junco	X	X	X	X
	Grosbeaks					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,A	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW,S	Black-headed Grosbeak	X	X	X	
<input type="checkbox"/>	S	Blue Grosbeak	!s	!s	!s	
	Buntings					
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,S	Lazuli Bunting	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R	Indigo Bunting	!s	!s	!s	
	Blackbirds					
<input type="checkbox"/>	G	Bobolink	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wm,M	Red-winged Blackbird	X	X	X	?s
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,M	Western Meadowlark	X	X	X	?s
<input type="checkbox"/>	G,S,MS	Brewer's Blackbird	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	U,D	Common Grackle	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	N	Brown-headed Cowbird	X	X	X	
	Orioles					
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R,S	Orchard Oriole	?s	?s	?s	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R	Bullock's Oriole	!s	!s	!s	
	Finches					
<input type="checkbox"/>	O,C,MS	Gray-crowned Rosy Finch				!
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,WS	Pine Grosbeak	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,B,U	Cassin's Finch	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	U,NW	House Finch	?s	?s	?s	?s
<input type="checkbox"/>	P	Red Crossbill	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	WS	White-winged Crossbill	!	!	!	!
<input type="checkbox"/>	S,D,A	Common Redpoll				!
<input type="checkbox"/>	NW,U	Pine Siskin	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	R,S,U	Lesser Goldfinch	!	!	!	
<input type="checkbox"/>	D,R,U	American Goldfinch	X	X	X	?
<input type="checkbox"/>	P,WS	Evening Grosbeak	!	!	!	?
	Weavers					
<input type="checkbox"/>	U,D,MS	House Sparrow	X	X	X	X

A Birder's Guide

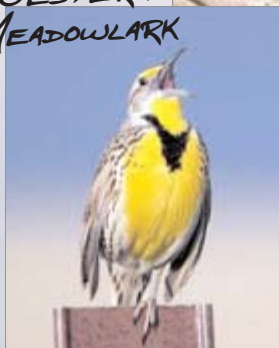
to the *George S. Mickelson Trail*



SPOTTED
TOWHEE

Doug Backlund

WESTERN
MEADOWLARK



Doug Backlund



BELTED
KING FISHER

Doug Backlund

Many resources were mined in the creation of this trail guide. The Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory has been conducting field research in the Black Hills, establishing a wealth of baseline information. Many thanks to them and the National Forest Service. Information was also gleaned from: *The Birds of South Dakota*, published by South Dakota Ornithologists' Union; *A Bird Watcher's Guide to the Black Hills* by Richard A. Peterson; *The South Dakota Breeding Bird Atlas* compiled by Richard A. Peterson; and *Birds of the Black Hills* by Olin Pettingill and Nathaniel Whitney. Most important of all are the many, often fanatical, birders who spend countless hours in field and graciously shared their sightings and knowledge.

~ George D. Prisbe, researcher/writer

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