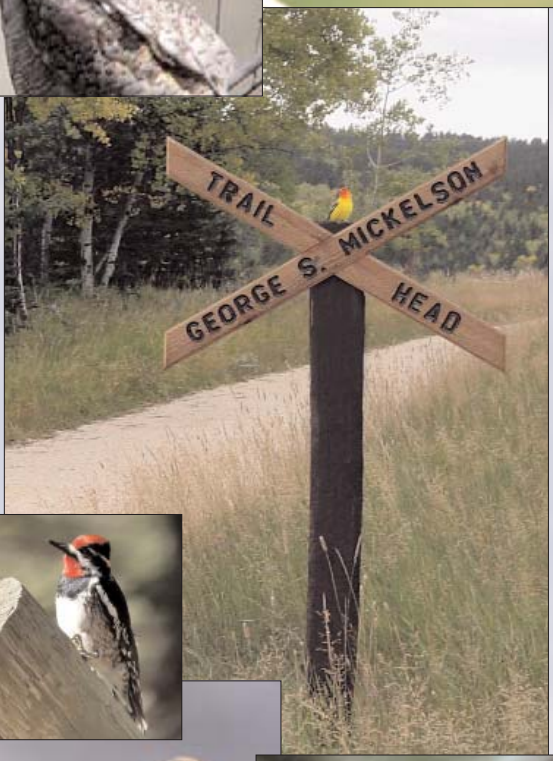
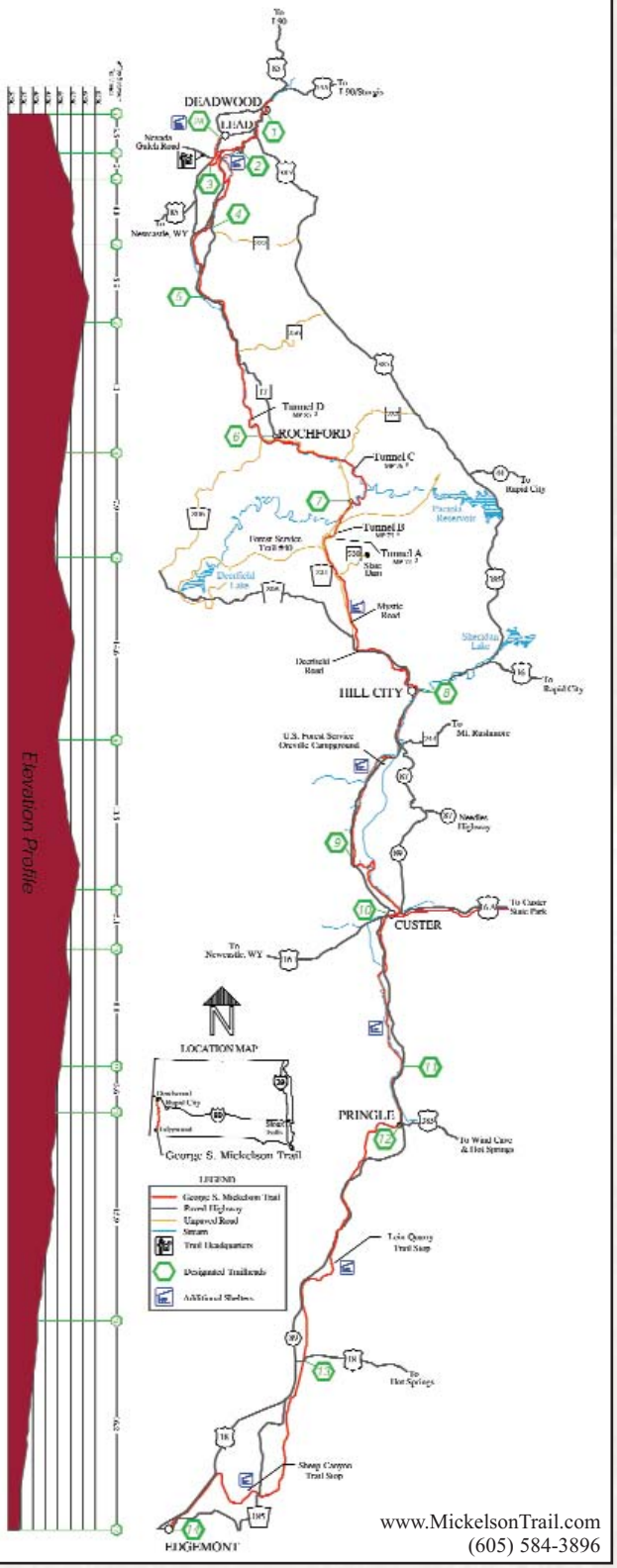
A Birder's Guide to the *George S. Mickelson Trail*



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*

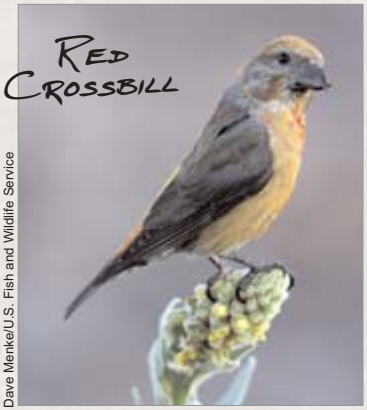
3. Sugarloaf Trailhead *MP 103.3*
4. Englewood Trailhead *MP 98.5*
5. Dumont Trailhead *MP 92.6*
6. Rochford Trailhead *MP 82.6*
7. Mystic Trailhead *MP 74.7*
8. Burlington Northern Hill City Trailhead *MP 60.1*
9. The Mountain Trailhead *MP 49.6*
10. Harbach Park Trailhead in Custer *MP 44.5*
11. White 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.



Dave Menke/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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

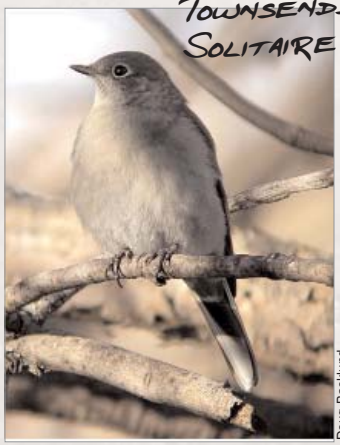
Habitat is everything to a bird. It is important for the fledgling birder to develop and cultivate some basic knowledge of birds' preferred habitats and how to identify them. Habitat preference is related to basic instincts and needs–food, shelter, survival, and carrying on the species. Knowing what 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 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?

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.


Doug Backlund

Townsend's Solitaire

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.

US Fish and Wildlife Service

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.

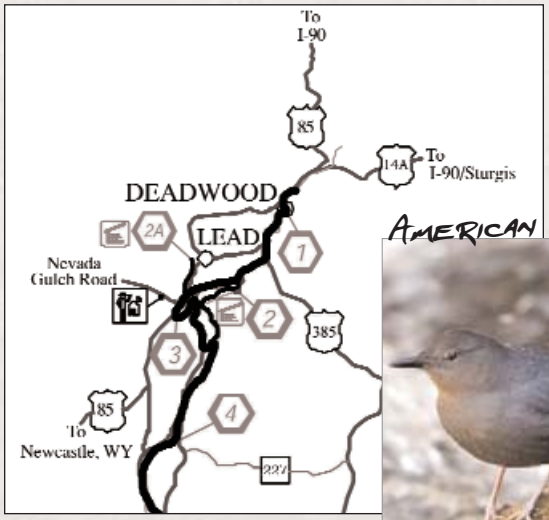
Etiquette

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.

Doug Backlund

Belted King Fisher

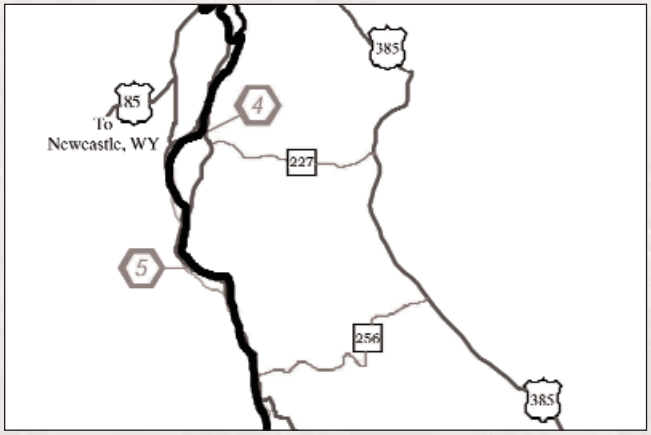
Ruffed Grouse

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

Chipping Sparrow

Doug Backlund

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

Doug Backlund

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.

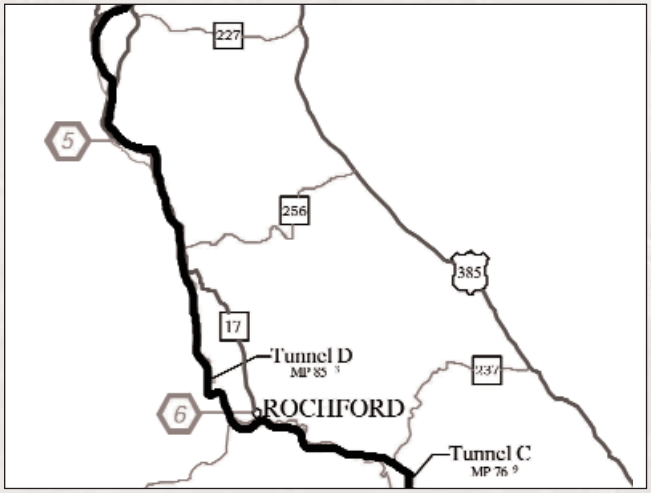
Birds and Notes

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

Dark-eyed Junco

Doug Backlund

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

Doug Backlund

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

Doug Backlund

Song Sparrow

Doug Backlund

Gray Jay

Les Voorhis

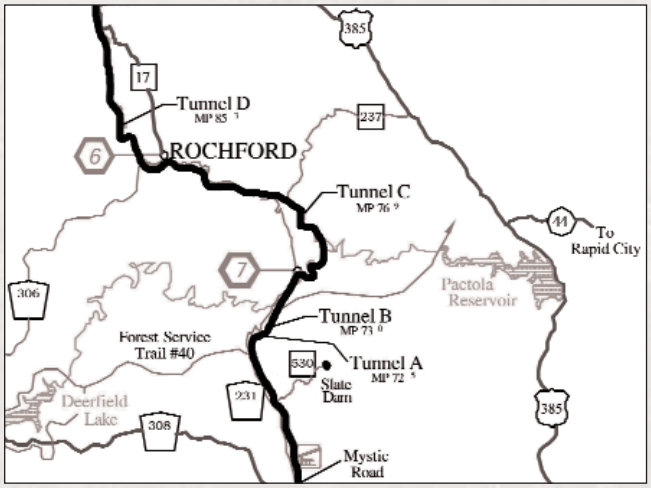
Brewer's Blackbird

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

Doug Backlund

Golden-crowned Kinglet

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.

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

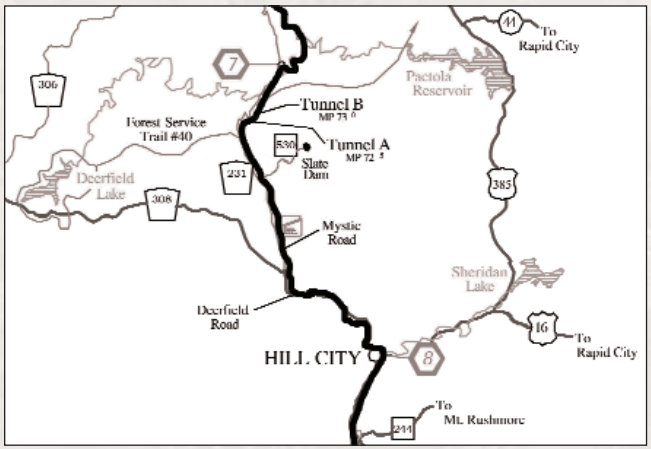
Birds and Notes

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

Doug Backlund

Cordilleran Flycatcher

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

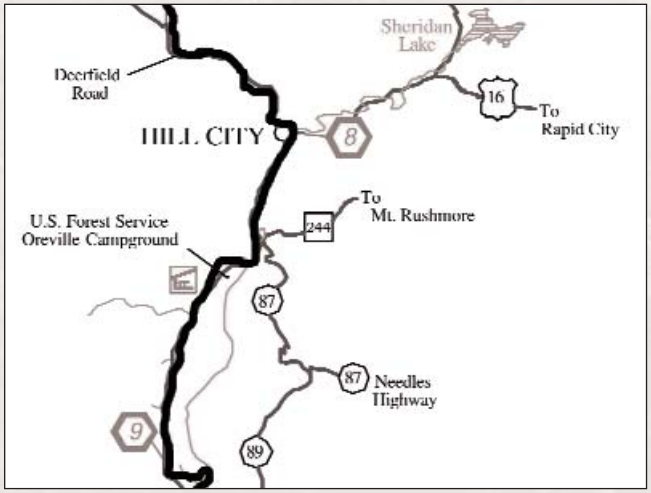
Doug Backlund

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.

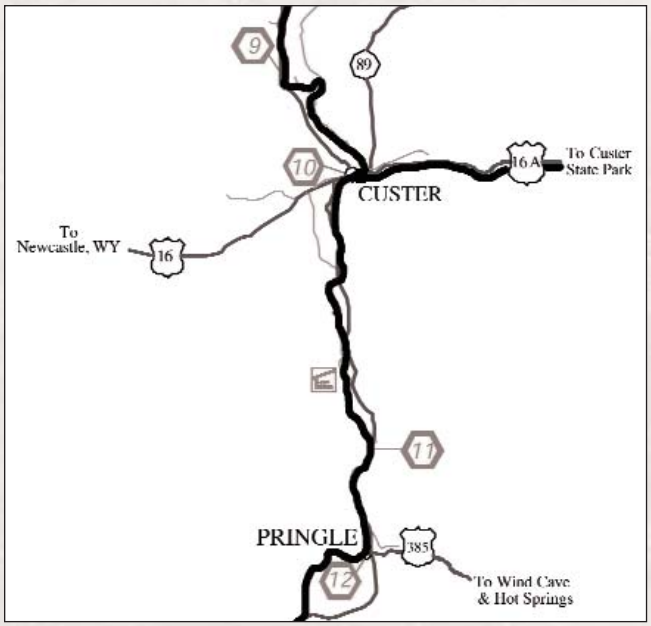
Birds and Notes

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 Voorhis

Western Meadowlark

Doug Backlund

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

Rock Wren

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.

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

Doug Backlund

Mountain Bluebird

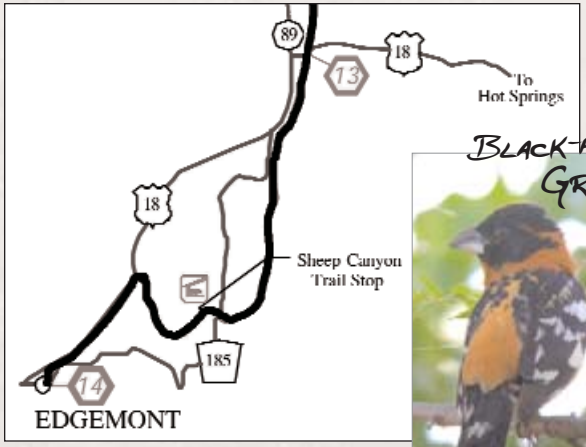
Birds and Notes

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



Doug Backlund

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 slopping 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"

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

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

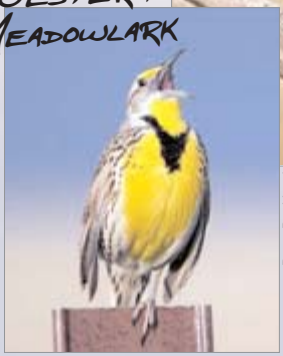
✓	Habitat	Species	Sp	Su	F	W
	Chickadees					
☐	N	Black-capped Chickadee	X	X	X	X
	Nuthatches					
☐	P,WS	Red-brested Nuthatch	X	X	X	X
☐	NW	White-breasted Nuthatch	X	X	X	X
☐	P	Pygmy Nuthatch	!	!	!	!
	Creepers					
☐	NW	Brown Creeper	?	?	?	?
	Wrens					
☐	C,O	Rock Wren	?	?	?	
☐	C	Canyon Wren	?	?	?	?
☐	S,U,D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

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

Western Tanager,
Gary Kramer/USFWS

A Birder's Guide
to the *George S. Mickelson Trail*

Doug Backlund



Doug Backlund

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~ George D. Prisbe, researcher/writer

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