



# Birding in the Helena Area



Illustration by Jane Beasley

## A James P. Sunderland Park

Developed by Ash Grove Cement Company, this park and trail are located directly across from the cement plant east of Montana City on Route 518. The stream grade trail follows a narrow riparian corridor about 1.5 miles downstream from the trailhead. Common bird sightings include swallows, Yellow Warbler, Cedar Waxwing, Gray Catbird, Veery, and Song Sparrow.

## B Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir

When there is open water, many species of waterfowl are found here including uncommon migrants and regular summer nesters. Common Loon, grebes, Tundra Swan, mergansers, Double-crested Cormorant, and Bald Eagle can be viewed at various times of the year. The mudflats attract many shorebirds. Great Blue Herons have a rookery here.

## H Merritt Lane

Accessed from Lake Helena Drive, the lane crosses a small stream with a cattail marsh. Birds in this marsh setting can be viewed easily from the road. Red-winged Blackbirds can often be seen and a careful look might reveal Marsh Wren, Sora, or Wilson's Snipe. Sandhill Crane nest in this area too.

## I Floweree Drive to Sierra Road

This road passes through pastureland and along a meandering stretch of Prickly Pear Creek. Birds of the open field, roadside, and riparian habitats can be seen along this route. Belted Kingfisher, Brewer's Blackbird, Eastern Kingbird, Song and Savannah Sparrow, and Black-capped Chickadee are regulars.

## J Scratchgravel Hills

These dry, rocky hills on the west side of the Helena Valley are managed by the BLM and provide good hiking and nice views. Look for nuthatches, Chipping Sparrow, Pinyon jay, Townsend's Solitaire, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Cooper's Hawk.

## K Odd Fellows and Forestvale Cemeteries

The cemeteries, located south of Sierra Road on Forestvale Road, provide a small island of mature trees and shrubs. Northern Flicker, Downy Woodpecker, American Robin, Yellow Warbler, Cedar Waxwing, House Wren, and American Kestrel can be found here.

## L Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds

The pond at the edge of the fairgrounds parking lot generally has Mallard, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, and Ring-billed Gull as well as domesticated waterfowl. The west half of the fairgrounds has shrub/aspen thickets, with Gray Catbird, Clay-colored Sparrow, and warblers in migration. Look for Red-winged Blackbird, Wilson's Snipe, and other marsh birds in the cattails just across Custer Ave.

## M Spring Meadow Lake State Park

Formerly a gravel pit, this site is now a state park and can be reached by following the signs from U.S. Hwy 12. Although the western edge is an urban park, the south and east sides offer good birding during quiet morning and evening hours via a path around the lake. A number of songbirds nest here including Cedar Waxwing, Western Wood-Pewee, and Bullock's Oriole. Common Loons and various waterfowl rest here during migration.

## N Mount Helena City Park

Main access is at the south end of Park Avenue through Reeder's Village subdivision. Several trails enter the park from the parking area. Western Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, and Mountain Bluebird can be found on the lower north slopes of the park in the

of habitat provides good birding. Walk across the dam to access the trail that goes north along the Missouri River to Beaver Creek. The river often has mergansers, goldeneyes, Bald Eagle, and American Dipper during the winter. A variety of forest edge and riparian birds nest here during the summer.

## F Road to York

The road to York passes close by Hauser Lake and water birds can often be seen. The low, sparsely vegetated hills provide habitat for Brewer's and Vesper Sparrow and Horned Lark.

## G Lake Helena Wildlife Management Area

The state-owned area overlooking Lake Helena and the marsh is a good place to see waterfowl. Canada Goose, Mallard, grebes, and teal nest here (See Lake Helena Drive for other waterfowl).

grassland areas. In the shrubby draws and brushy slopes Rufous and Calliope Hummingbird, Lazuli Bunting, Green-tailed Towhee, and Chipping Sparrow are usually present. Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush, Western Tanager, and Yellow-rumped Warbler inhabit the conifer forest areas surrounding the upper half of the mountain.

## O Grizzly and Orofino Gulches

These gulches are characterized by brushy creek bottoms with some cottonwoods and tall shrubs flanked by slopes covered with Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and dry grassland. Look for Spotted and Green-tailed Towhee, Rock Wren, Warbling Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Dark-eyed Junco, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warbler, Dusky Flycatcher, and Calliope and Rufous Hummingbird.

## P K-mart Ponds

This city-owned stormwater retainment area provides a wild space within the city of Helena. It can be reached by turning north on North Harris St. from Cedar St. Follow N. Harris St. until it deadends at a fence. The retainment ponds provide habitat for many waterfowl species including Canada Goose, Cinnamon Teal, and a variety of other ducks. American Coots, grebes, Wilson's Snipe, and Killdeer are also common. A pair of Sandhill Cranes have nested here for several years running. During spring and fall, the cottonwoods and shrubs around the ponds are great spots to find migrating songbirds like warblers, kinglets, sparrows, and the occasional rarity. The ponds are also stopover sites for migrating shorebirds. Solitary Sandpiper, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher, and several of the smaller peeps can be easily viewed from the walking paths.

## Q Upper Prickly Pear FAS

This 36 acre tract acquired by Montana FWP in 2014 was formerly known by local birders as Stansfield Lane. The FAS is primarily riparian habitat along the Prickly Pear Creek corridor with willows and large cottonwood stands. Grazing lands border the site. The area is home to Bullock's Oriole, Belted Kingfisher, Bald Eagle and Sandhill Cranes. To access the FAS from Interstate 15, drive east on Custer Avenue then turn left on to York Road. Drive one mile, then turn left on to Olsen Road. This road takes you directly to the fishing access.

## C Lake Helena Drive

This road offers a vantage point overlooking the lower end of Lake Helena. Be sure to find a safe parking place out of the traffic lanes. In the pastureland below the road, Western meadowlark, Sandhill Crane, and Northern Harrier are sometimes seen. A spotting scope is useful for viewing birds on the lake. Huge flocks of American White Pelican, Northern Pintail, Snow and Canada Goose, and Tundra Swan can be seen during migration. In March, Bald Eagles sit on the edge of the melting ice, attracted by winter-killed fish.

## D Causeway

With open water even in the coldest weather, the Causeway attracts many different diving birds including Western, Eared, and Horned Grebes, Common Loon and Common Goldeneye. Yellow-headed Blackbirds frequent the lone tree and shallow-water bulrushes on the west shore.

## E Road to Hauser Dam

Heading north from the Causeway, this road crosses a dry upland of ponderosa pine savannah and then follows the edge of Hauser Lake ending at Hauser Dam. The variety

Last Chance Audubon Society is a local volunteer organization established in 1971 as a grassroots affiliate of the National Audubon Society. LCAS promotes understanding, respect, and enjoyment of birds and the natural world through education, habitat protection, and environmental advocacy.

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## Birding Spots Outside the Map Area

### Little Prickly Pear Creek

Take Lincoln Rd. 12.5 miles north and west from Helena toward Canyon Creek. At the power Station turn east on Duffy Lane. Wetlands occur along Duffy Lane between Lincoln Road and the Prickly Pear canyon. Long-billed Curlew, Wilson's Snipe, Willow Flycatcher, Common Yellowthroat and Bobolink are reliable sighting. At the junction of Duffy Lane and the canyon road, there are two possible routes: 1) turning north takes you to the Sieben Ranch and Interstate 14 along a corridor supporting diverse riparian vegetation. Common bird sightings here include swallows, Gray Catbird, Warbling Vireo, Veery, American redstart, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Lazuli Bunting; or 2) turning south takes you to Silver City along a dirt road bordered by grassland and sagebrush where Western Meadowlark, Sage Thrasher, and Vesper and Brewer's Sparrow can be found.

### Lower Skelly Gulch BLM Area

Take Birdseye Road north and west from Helena 4.3 miles and turn left on Austin Road. Follow this dirt road 2.2 miles until you reach a small parking area on the right. This fenced area of 140 acres has riparian habitat along Skelly and Greenhorn Creeks that attracts warblers, flycatchers, Warbling Vireo, and Veery during spring and summer. Watch for Yellow-rumped Warbler and Western Tanager in stands of conifers. Upland grasslands and shrub communities usually provide viewing of a variety of raptors.

### Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area

The 5,000-acre state-owned area at the south end of Canyon Ferry Lake has a rich diversity of habitat. Dikes have created four 400 to 500-acre ponds which have some 350 small artificial islands for waterfowl nesting Canada Goose, several species of duck, Double-crested Cormorant, American White Pelican, California and Ring-billed Gull, Caspian Tern and several grebe species nest here. The river bottom and upland plant communities provide habitat for raptors and songbirds. Nesting species include Osprey, Bullock's Oriole, Least Flycatcher, Clay-colored and Lark Sparrow, and Western Kingbird. To reach the wildlife management area, take W.S. Hwy 12 toward Townsend. West shore access, including Pond #4, is reached from several gravel roads off U.S. Hwy 12 beginning 4 miles north of Townsend. Access to the east shore is reached by going through Townsend on U.S. Hwy 12 and turning north on Hwy 284. Ponds #1, #2, and #3 are reached by road going west from Hwy 284: Lower Dry Gulch Road goes to Pond #1 (the farthest north); and Lower Ray Creek Road goes to portions of Ponds #2 and #3. Going west on Delger Road and north on Canton Lane leads to a parking area and trail going to the south end of Pond #3.

