

Opportunities for Birding at Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, The Nature Conservancy

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Introduction

Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, protected and managed by The Nature Conservancy, contains the largest contiguous remnant prairie in the state and is an excellent location for birding. The preserve encompasses over 1500 ha and features a bison herd of up to 200 animals. It is located at the northern terminus of the Loess Hills in Plymouth County, about 6.5 km south of Westfield, IA on Highway



Fig.1 Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, Plymouth Photograph by Bill Witt

12. Looking west across the rugged landscape, one can see both South Dakota and Nebraska, a reminder of the proximity to a more western ecoregion (Fig. 1). Many plants and animals reach the eastern limits of their range on the dry slopes of the Loess Hills Landform which provide an opportunity to see species more typical of the Great Plains to the west including soapweed yucca (*Yucca glauca*), tenpetal blazingstar (*Mentzelia decapetala*), buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*) Great Plains toad (*Anaxyrus cognatus*), and plains spadefoot toad (*Spea bombifrons*) among many others (Mutel 1989).

The avifauna of Plymouth County and Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve also reflects a western influence, albeit less pronounced today than in the past. As recently as 2016, Iowa's only population of breeding Black-billed Magpies occupied the preserve. The magpies are now presumed extirpated, possibly due to the spread of West Nile Virus (Brenner and Jorgensen 2020). The species was absent from the state for many years until their return to Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve in the 1990s (Dinsmore 1997), which provides the hope that they will once again expand their range into Iowa. Say's Phoebe is another western species that occasionally occurs in Plymouth County with two records at Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve in 2024 (Langan 2024). Say's Phoebe nested in western Iowa in the 1960s and 1970s, with up to 21 breeding pairs in Plymouth County at the peak (Bryant 1977). The Spotted Towhee also has potential for nesting in northwest Iowa. This species regularly breeds as close as northeastern Nebraska, and Iowa's first confirmed nesting record occurred in Sioux County in 2015 (Sharpe et al., 2001; Jungers 2015). Several reports of Spotted Towhees from Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve during summers could signal undetected intraspecies breeding or hybridization with the Eastern Towhee, however, there was

no confirmed breeding of Spotted Towhees at Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve as of 2024. Lastly, at least two Greater Prairie Chickens, a once abundant species in Iowa, have been observed in Plymouth County over the past 20 years. In 2020, a displaying male was seen within 8 km of Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, and in 2007, an individual was recorded northeast of Akron, IA (Kenne, 2007). The nearest population of breeding Greater Prairie Chickens is only 29 km west of the preserve in Nebraska, as the chicken flies. Will the prairie chicken recolonize this portion of Iowa? Only time will tell.

With the very real possibility of Great Plains vagrants, birdwatching at Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve is always exciting and full of hope. Regardless of whether you find an unusual bird visiting from the west, the sweeping vistas, bison, unique geology and ecosystem, and the abundance of avian life will allow you to “step back in time” to when Iowa was covered in vast swathes of prairie and oak woodlands.

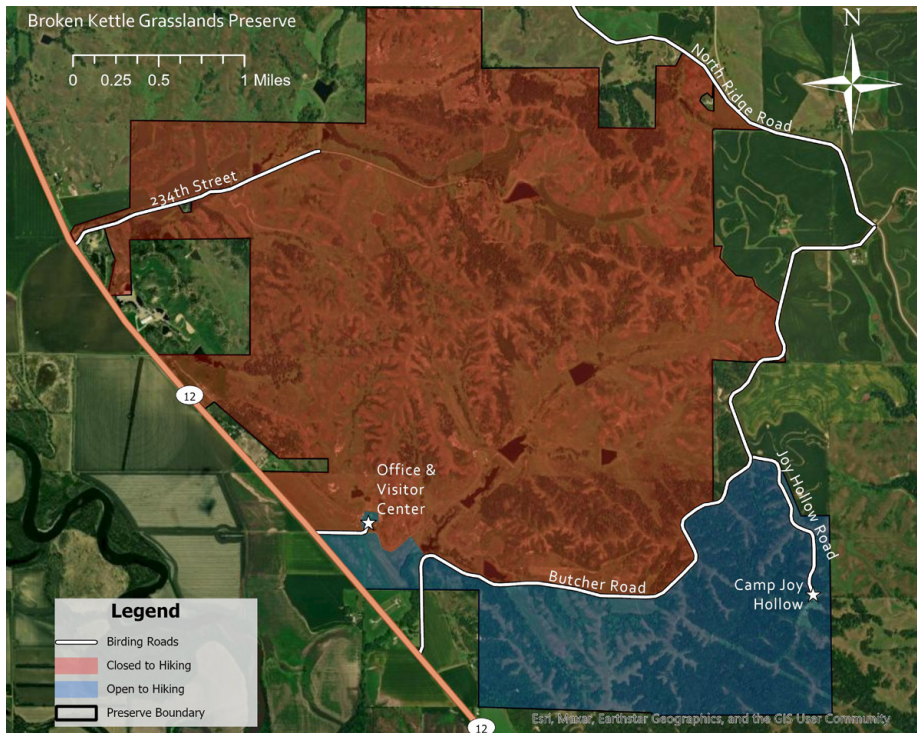


Fig.2 Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, Birding Map

Planning your visit

You can direct questions about visiting Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve to The Nature Conservancy staff by calling (712) 568-2596 (for birdwatching inquiries, select extension 4). The bison pasture is closed to hiking, however, there are ample opportunities for hiking in other

areas of the preserve, particularly to the south of Butcher Road (Fig. 2). Although the bison pasture is inaccessible for hikers, a large portion of the preserve is visible looking to the west from Butcher Road, making it possible to scope across the landscape for migrant raptors, waterfowl, and other wildlife. Here is a list of places to access the preserve for birding:

Butcher Road: This Loess Hills Scenic Byway Excursion Loop provides soaring views of the preserve and offers the best opportunity to see bison. Heading east from the intersection with Highway 12, you will pass a couple of small ponds that sometimes host waterfowl and marsh birds. Bell's Vireo and Blue Grosbeak can be heard calling near the ponds, particularly from the brush on the north side. Continuing up the road leads to panoramic views of the preserve from atop a Loess Hills ridge. This area provides excellent opportunities to scope across the landscape for migrant raptors, including Golden Eagles, Swainson's Hawks, and Rough-legged Hawks. The ridgetop is also a good place to scan for migrant Franklin's Gulls, American White Pelicans, waterfowl and other birds following the Missouri River Valley. The road meanders through oak woodlands where Scarlet Tanagers, Pileated Woodpeckers, and Red-shouldered Hawks occur. In the summer, Grasshopper Sparrows, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, Eastern Towhees, and Field Sparrows can be abundant, and, as noted, migrant Spotted Towhees are also a possibility. Eastern Whip-poor-wills are common here during spring and summer nights, with sometimes up to a dozen individuals singing from all directions.

234th Street: This short, dead-end road (less than 2 km) is one of the best places on the preserve for finding American Woodcock, Northern Bobwhite, and migrant passerines. During the spring, listen for peenting American Woodcocks at sunrise and sunset, particularly just to the west of the bison corral. Northern Bobwhites are often seen running along the road and can be heard singing in spring and summer. The road runs along a small, sheltered creek that beavers dammed in several spots. Migrant passerines, including warblers, vireos, and flycatchers, will often take advantage of the abundance of insects near the ponds, particularly on windy days when they tuck down in the dense vegetation. Sparrows and other seed-eating birds can be abundant here during the spring and fall, especially due to the weedy vegetation that grows up around the bison corral. The corral is closed to the public but is adjacent to the road. During migration and in winter, the ridges to the north and south of 234th Street are good places to check for soaring raptors catching thermals.

Camp Joy Hollow: The Nature Conservancy recently purchased the camp from the Girls Scouts of Greater Iowa. The camp is open to the public for hiking; however, no public camping is allowed. Girls Scouts still rent the facilities to groups, during which time access to the property is closed. If you would like to access the property, it is advisable to call the Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve office ahead of time to check the

schedule. The camp provides a change of scenery as it is centered around a heavily wooded and rugged creek valley. Species including Kentucky Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Pileated Woodpeckers are at the edge of their Great Plains range here. Blue Grosbeaks and Bell's Vireo are often observed along the entrance road, and Field Sparrows, Eastern Towhee, and other woodland/grassland ecotone-loving species are common here. A map of the hiking trails (maintained by the Girls Scouts) is available to view at the parking lot kiosk, or paper copies are available in the nearby picnic shelter.



Blue Grosbeak on the bison fence, Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, Plymouth, 23 May 2024. Photograph by Caleb McIntyre, Lemars, IA



Say's Phoebe, Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, Plymouth, 10 April 2024. Photograph by William F. Huser, South Sioux City, NE

Office and Visitor Center: Stop into the visitor center at 24764 Highway 12, Westfield, IA, to learn more about the preserve and to delve deeper into the natural history of the grasslands. There are a couple of weedy, in-progress prairie restorations south of the headquarters driveway and around the visitor center. These are excellent spots to check for migrant sparrows, including Harris's Sparrows, LeConte's Sparrows, and even Spotted Towhees. Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Harrier are often seen hunting the prairie in this area during migration and winter. When the Big Sioux River floods, as was the case in the summer of 2024, displaced Least Terns can sometimes occur along Highway 12 near the visitor center.

North Ridge Road: This road winds along the north side of the preserve, although most of the land along this road is private property. Northern Shrikes are often seen on the powerlines running along the road in the winter, and Loggerhead Shrikes are occasionally seen in the summer. Red-headed Woodpeckers are common here in the summer, flying between power poles in pursuit of insects.

Additional Resources

Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve is just one of many locations in the northern Loess Hills to view birds and take in the scenery. The

Loess Hills Audubon Society recently published an updated version of the *Siouxland Bird Guide*, which is available for pickup at the Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve visitor center. This guide contains a map of birding locations in the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota tri-state region in addition to a checklist of bird species. The Birding Hotspots website is another resource to discover new places to watch birds. You can visit <https://birdinghotspots.org/region/US-IA-149> to view birding hotspots in Plymouth County.

If your interest in the natural world is broad, the classic book, *Fragile Giants: A Natural History of the Loess Hills* by Cornelia F. Mutel (1989) is a great introduction to the world treasure that is the Loess Hills and will enrich your visit.

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