

Trip Report — Birding the Dakotas: Prairies, Black Hills, & Badlands 2026

May 28-June 5, 2026 with Cory Gregory



Some of the prairie birds we enjoyed in the Dakotas were downright stunners! Here's a male Chestnut-collared Longspur coming in for landing. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

The Dakotas sit in a part of the country that is not often visited by most Americans. They think it's flat and not worth their time. Even many birders think these states are birdless and not worth traveling to for birding. But, after our trip together through North Dakota and South Dakota, I hope you can agree that they're mistaken. These states have a great number of birds, including some very hard-to-find and gorgeous specialties. The prairie potholes were teeming with blackbirds, terns, and countless ducks and geese. Prairies to the west hosted Chestnut-collared Longspurs and Baird's Sparrow, and the habitat we were in, especially in South Dakota, was anything but flat. The Black Hills, jutting up sharply in western South

Dakota, is an island of surprisingly impressive mountains and thus a stark contrast to the surrounding prairie. Rushing streams through steep-walled canyons, mountain meadows, expansive coniferous forests, lush creekside thickets, we got to sample all of these during our time there. By the end of the trip, I think everyone had adjusted their preconceptions about the Dakotas!



Not all grassland birds are tough to see! The Western Meadowlarks, the state bird of North Dakota, were abundant and it was lovely getting to enjoy their songs as they drifted over the northern prairies. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

We started our trip together in Bismarck and although we battled high winds and a cold front, we enjoyed seeing the countless ponds and lakes to the east, all hosting a wide variety of birds. Whether it was pairs of Wilson's Phalaropes foraging along the roadsides or the Franklin's Gulls overhead, we kept busy. We saw many species of grebes, terns, ducks, blackbirds, and even an impressive variety of shorebirds. White-rumped Sandpipers, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstone, and even Sanderling were added to our list here. Nesting shorebirds included Marbled Godwit, Willet,

and the huge Long-billed Curlew. Nearby, we enjoyed watching Clay-colored Sparrows singing from a fence and a slew of Bobolinks doing their aerial displays out over of the prairie.

Afterwards, we moved into western North Dakota where we spent time at Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Although the expansive vistas were one of the first things we noticed, the American Bison were a main feature here as well. Joining them were the Black-tailed Prairie-Dogs, Pronghorn, and some fun passerines like Lazuli Bunting, Black-billed Magpie, and Lark Bunting. Western Wood-Pewee and Eastern Warbling Vireo shared the same tree, Red-headed Woodpecker was a nice addition, and Yellow-breasted Chats skulked nearby. Not bad at all, given the rain we often battled!



Mount Rushmore is a well-known National Monument and we visited it during our time in the Black Hills. Most people agree that it's more impressive once you see it in person. Still, it's pretty impressive from photos too! Photo by participant Mary Lou Barritt.

The next chapter of our trip began when we entered South Dakota and made our way south to the Black Hills. We wound our way up the gorgeous Spearfish Canyon, enjoying waterfalls along the way and watching for dippers in the streams. Our expansive wooden lodge for a couple of nights was a beautiful place to call home. Just outside its doors were Ponderosa Pine forests; Red Crossbills littered the trees, Black-headed Grosbeaks sang, Western Flycatcher song burst from nearby thickets, and MacGillivray's Warblers slunk through the creekside trees. Violet-green Swallows swarmed overhead, keeping company with the White-throated Swifts which were circling higher still.



This tour is one of the only ones, if not the only one, that gets to enjoy both species of warbling vireo. Here is a Western Warbling Vireo singing away from a mountain streamside high in the Black Hills. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

We spent several leisurely days in the Black Hills, enjoying the many sights and sounds. We visited some campgrounds that were alive with Red-naped Sapsuckers, Canada Jays, both kinds of kinglets, and the American Dippers which fed at close range in the trickling streams. A walk up into a mountain

meadow provided our first Mountain Bluebirds, while a bunch of nesting flickers prompted a quick study of their widespread integration. We also visited a few sites of famous American lore. First was Mount Rushmore. We couldn't have asked for a more picturesque morning, and the blue skies were out while we enjoyed seeing, photographing, and learning more about this well-known monument. Birdwise, we were able to find a very cooperative Canyon Wren that worked its way down the sides of a cliff. The only thing to distract us from that was a Western Tanager and Western Flycatcher that perched mere feet from our heads! Nearby, we drove down the picturesque Needles Highway and enjoyed some of the incredible geology (when we weren't in narrow tunnels).



Most birders might be surprised to learn that there are American Dippers in the Dakotas! But yes, there is an isolated population of dippers found in the Black Hills. How and when they got there is an interesting question to ponder. Photo by participant Mary Lou Barritt.

This trip stays multiple nights at the State Game Lodge at Custer State Park. This expansive park, South Dakota's first and largest state park, is home to a multitude of birds and animals. We drove the Wildlife Drive Loop

a couple of times, enjoying close views of American Bison, Black-tailed Prairie-Dog, and Pronghorn. Nesting Mountain Bluebirds, kingbirds, and Tree Swallows lined the fences, Red-headed Woodpeckers swooped from tree to tree, and the expansive prairie gave us more chances to enjoy Upland Sandpiper, Western Meadowlark, Black-billed Magpie, Lark Sparrow, and Common Nighthawks. Outside our lodge, we even heard a Common Poorwill singing one night. Just outside of the park to the west lays Wyoming. Although it wasn't in our initial plan, we swung in briefly to enjoy some great birdfeeders. Our host was most gracious and we saw some great trip highlights thanks to him. Many Lewis's Woodpeckers were coming in right in front of us, a couple Lesser Goldfinches were in attendance, but it was the flock of 30+ Pinyon Jays that really stood out!



Our spontaneous trip into Wyoming netted us a couple of very special birds, one being the handsome Lewis's Woodpecker. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

We closed out our trip with a visit to another well known locale, the famous Badlands National Park. The prairie-dog towns stretched to the horizons

which made looking for Burrowing Owls a fun challenge (and boy did we find them!). Once we made it to the cliff edges and looked off into the expanse, it really hit home why this is such a special park; countless jagged spires rose from the valley floor below and layers upon layers of different colored rocks were windows into the past. Quite at home here were the Rock Wrens which we saw very well and the Grasshopper Sparrows back off the edge in the grasslands. In some low shrubbery, we even had nice views of Spotted Towhee and Bell's Vireo. After we made it to the visitor center before closing (whew), and enjoyed the short video, it was time to start making our way back to Rapid City for our final evening.



Another special bird we encountered on this trip, this one technically in Wyoming, was the Pinyon Jay. But not just one or two, more like thirty! Photo by participant Mary Lou Barritt.

I want to thank each of you for coming along and letting me show you a little of what the Dakotas have to offer. We really did traverse some incredible country, saw some incredible parks, and ended up with a very fun collection of birds and animals. Hopefully you all made some good memories and will

have an appreciation for what birding the Dakotas is all about. Until next time, be safe and good birding!



Our lodge in Spearfish Canyon put us right in the middle of the action. Dippers were just outside, Red Crossbills were seen on the grounds, and this beautiful canyon awaited us every morning. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

Here's a list of the mammals we encountered:

Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) - Seen on many of our days.

Least Chipmunk (*Neotamias minimus*) - A few seen in the Black Hills.

Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*) - Seen in the Black Hills, thankfully not called woodchuck.

Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (*Ictidomys tridecemlineatus*) - Seen on two of our days. Could you count the lines?

Black-tailed Prairie Dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) - Common

Coyote (*Canis latrans*) - One seen on our final day.

Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) - A few seen nicely at Badlands National Park where they've been reintroduced.

Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) - Fairly common.

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) - Common.

Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) - These aren't actually antelope. Either way, we saw lots and lots.

American Bison (*Bos bison*) - Remember, not a buffalo! Amazing views of all ages throughout the trip!

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this

link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/539831>

You can download a combined PDF of this page and the eBird report at this

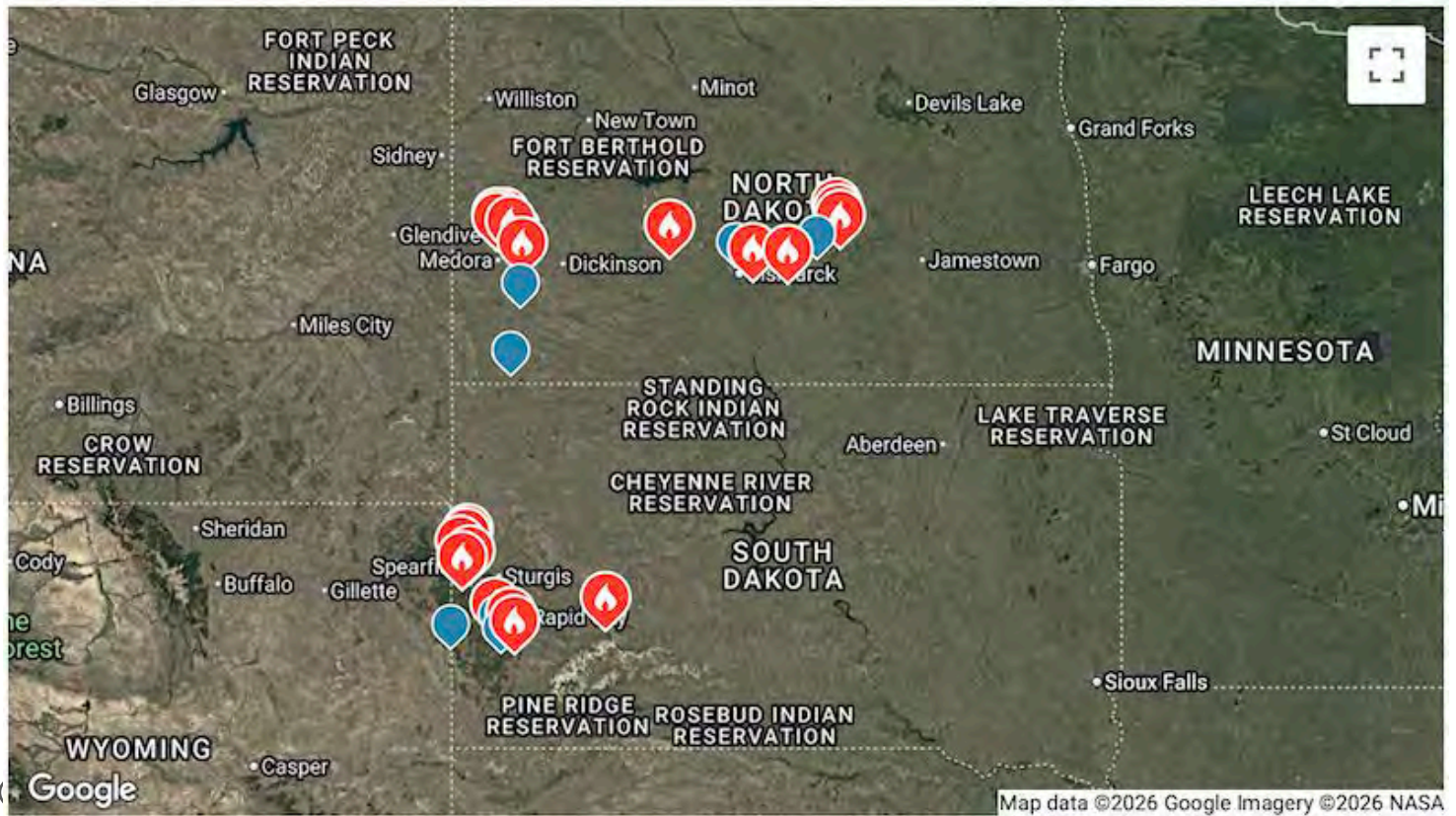
link: <https://fieldguides.com/triplists/dak26TRIPLIST.pdf>

-- Cory Gregory (Curlew)

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 Cory Gregory



For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional...

 **150**

Species Observed

 **36**

Checklists

 **29**

Species with Photos

Species Observed

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- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| 49 | Canada Goose | <i>Branta canadensis</i> | ▶  5 |
| 10 | Blue-winged Teal | <i>Spatula discors</i> | ▶  4 |
| 2 | Northern Shoveler | <i>Spatula clypeata</i> | ▶  1 |
| 7 | Gadwall | <i>Mareca strepera</i> | ▶  2 |
| 2 | American Wigeon | <i>Mareca americana</i> | ▶  1 |
| 9 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | ▶  5 |
| 8 | Northern Pintail | <i>Anas acuta</i> | ▶  2 |
| 3 | Canvasback | <i>Aythya valisineria</i> | ▶  1 |
| 5 | Redhead | <i>Aythya americana</i> | ▶  1 |
| 8 | Lesser Scaup | <i>Aythya affinis</i> | ▶  2 |

9	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	▶  2
12	Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i> *	▶  2
4	Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>	▶  2
2	Gray Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i> *	▶  1  2
15	Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i> *	▶  5
4	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i> *	▶  1
10	Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> *	▶  4
17	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	▶  10
10	Common Nighthawk	<i>Chordeiles minor</i>	▶  4
1	Common Poorwill	<i>Phalaenoptilus nuttallii</i>	▶  1
4	White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>	▶  2
1	Broad-tailed Hummingbird	<i>Selasphorus platycercus</i>	▶  1
1	Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>	▶  1
1	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	▶  1
14	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	▶  7
1	Piping Plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	▶  1
7	Upland Sandpiper	<i>Bartramia longicauda</i>	▶  1  3
5	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>	▶  2
13	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>	▶  6
3	Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>	▶  1

8	Wilson's Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>	▶  2
1	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>	▶  1
6	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	▶  1  3
4	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	▶  1
1	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	▶  1
10	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	▶  1
4	Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>	▶  1
30	Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>	▶  3
27	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	▶  4
85	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	▶  3
11	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	▶  3
9	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	▶  4
1	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	▶  1
3	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	▶  1
32	Eared Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	▶  2
110	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	▶  2
8	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	▶  2
3	White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>	▶  1
1	American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	▶  1
7	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	▶  4

30	American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>	▶  1
36	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	▶  8
1	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	▶  1
1	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	▶  1
2	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Astur cooperii</i>	▶  1
10	Swainson's Hawk	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i>	▶  4
3	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	▶  3
6	Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>	▶  2  1
6	Red-naped Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus nuchalis</i>	▶  1  4
8	Lewis's Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>	▶  4  2
7	Red-headed Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>	▶  3
1	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	▶  1
3	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>	▶  3
12	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	▶  1  7
4	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	▶  4
6	Western Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus sordidulus</i>	▶  5
2	Least Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax minimus</i>	▶  1
7	Western Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax difficilis</i>	▶  4
1	Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	▶  1
2	Say's Phoebe	<i>Sayornis saya</i>	▶  1

16	Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>	▶  6
32	Eastern Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus tyrannus</i>	▶  8
2	Bell's Vireo	<i>Vireo bellii</i>	▶  1  1
1	Plumbeous Vireo	<i>Vireo plumbeus</i>	▶  1
1	Eastern Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo gilvus</i>	▶  1
8	Western Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo swainsoni</i>	▶  3  4
8	Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	▶  4
2	Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>	▶  1
8	Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	▶  3  2
35	Pinyon Jay	<i>Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus</i>	▶  2  1
1	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	▶  1
10	Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	▶  4
3	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	▶  3
1	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	▶  1
9	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	▶  6
12	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	▶  5
10	Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	▶  3
9	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	▶  1  4
22	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>	▶  6
3	Purple Martin	<i>Progne subis</i>	▶  1

14	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	▶  6
23	Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>	▶  4
8	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Corthylio calendula</i>	▶  3
6	Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>	▶  1  1
3	White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>	▶  1
4	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	▶  4
2	Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>	▶  1
1	Canyon Wren	<i>Catherpes mexicanus</i>	▶  1
5	Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	▶  4
5	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	▶  1
3	American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>	▶  2  3
1	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> *	▶  1
7	Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	▶  3
1	Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>	▶  1
10	Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>	▶  1  4
1	Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>	▶  1
5	Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>	▶  3  1
2	Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>	▶  2
36	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	▶  15
18	Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>	▶  4

4	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	*	▶  2
1	House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>	*	▶  1
29	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		▶  2  4
8	Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>		▶  1  3
3	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Spinus psaltria</i>		▶  1
14	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>		▶  5
4	Chestnut-collared Longspur	<i>Calcarius ornatus</i>		▶  6  1
27	Grasshopper Sparrow	<i>Ammodramus savannarum</i>		▶  1  5
11	Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>		▶  5
1	Clay-colored Sparrow	<i>Spizella pallida</i>		▶  1  1
3	Field Sparrow	<i>Spizella pusilla</i>		▶  2
19	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>		▶  1  5
40	Lark Bunting	<i>Calamospiza melanocorys</i>		▶  1  2
2	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>		▶  1
5	Vesper Sparrow	<i>Pooecetes gramineus</i>		▶  4
3	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>		▶  2
5	Baird's Sparrow	<i>Centronyx bairdii</i>		▶  1  2
5	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>		▶  2
13	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>		▶  3  5
1	Yellow-breasted Chat	<i>Icteria virens</i>		▶  1

31	Yellow-headed Blackbird	<i>Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus</i>	▶  1  5
12	Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	▶  5
68	Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>	▶  3  10
2	Orchard Oriole	<i>Icterus spurius</i>	▶  1
2	Bullock's Oriole	<i>Icterus bullockii</i>	▶  1
1	Baltimore Oriole	<i>Icterus galbula</i>	▶  1
36	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	▶  14
38	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	▶  1  8
13	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	▶  5
49	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	▶  12
1	Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>	▶  1
2	MacGillivray's Warbler	<i>Geothlypis tolmiei</i>	▶  2
5	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	▶  4
13	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	▶  3
11	Northern Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga aestiva</i>	▶  7
8	Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>	▶  5
5	Western Tanager	<i>Piranga ludoviciana</i>	▶  4
8	Black-headed Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus melanocephalus</i>	▶  2  3
1	Blue Grosbeak	<i>Passerina caerulea</i>	▶  1
5	Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>	▶  3

ADDITIONAL TAXA

5 *Larus* sp. *Larus* sp.

