



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 9/2015

## NORTHERN MISSOURI, JULY 2015

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**Fig. 1. Upland Sandpiper**, an increasingly rare flagship species of US prairies, at Dunn Ranch, MO.

In 2015, 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July, I visited the state of Missouri, USA, for birdwatching. It was a short visit, only three-and-half days, because of my rather short list of target species: **Greater Prairie Chicken!** I did, nevertheless, see a number of other interesting birds and mammals at Dunn Ranch Prairie, Hatfield area and Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge, along the Missouri-Iowa-Nebraska borderlands, and would therefore like to share the experiences and information gained at these locations.

There were no other birders at the sites in July, and rather limited information in the Internet, too. The knowledge on Missouri breeding birds could apparently be more up-to-date than it today is. There are not enough birders to cover all the corners of the large state.

## CAR RENTAL

On arrival at Kansas City International Airport (in Missouri!), I rented a Nissan Sentra SV, a reliable Japanese car, at Alamo. Three days cost USD 294 (€262), CDW, all the fees and taxes included, with a navi as an extra (USD 39 (€35), included in the total). They kindly did not mind that I picked the car up two hours earlier than estimated in the reservation. American Airlines had changed my Dallas/Ft. Worth connection to an earlier one and I had had no problem in boarding on time, as my LAX flight had not been delayed. On arrival, the Kansas City airport had birds not otherwise recorded, such as a **Eurasian Collared Dove** and dozens of **Purple Martins**.



**Fig. 2.** Looking for a reliable and low consumption car, I chose a Nissan Sentra SV at Alamo.

The weather in Kansas City was fine and it was a pleasure to start the drive from the airport to Bethany before sunset. The roads of Missouri were in excellent condition, above the rather high average of US road standards, even better than in California. Missouri looked fine and became even more enchanting as soon as I learned that I was actually driving through the historical Jesse James country, past Liberty and Kearney. Year list birds started to accumulate on the rolling hills with woodland, the best one being a roadside **Barred Owl**, a lucky sunset discovery.

Each visit to a gas station felt like winning in a lottery, because of the extremely cheap gasoline. Paying less than half the price one pays in Europe makes traveling a budget experience, particularly if the vehicle one drives is a low consumption Japanese model, with an efficient engine. The gas must be heavily subsidized by the US federal government, if not directly, in some other ways. For my Nissan, a half-a-tank of gas cost USD 19, about the same as a small bottle of water with a cheese and ham roll costs at LAX airport. At home, I would have paid €40, an

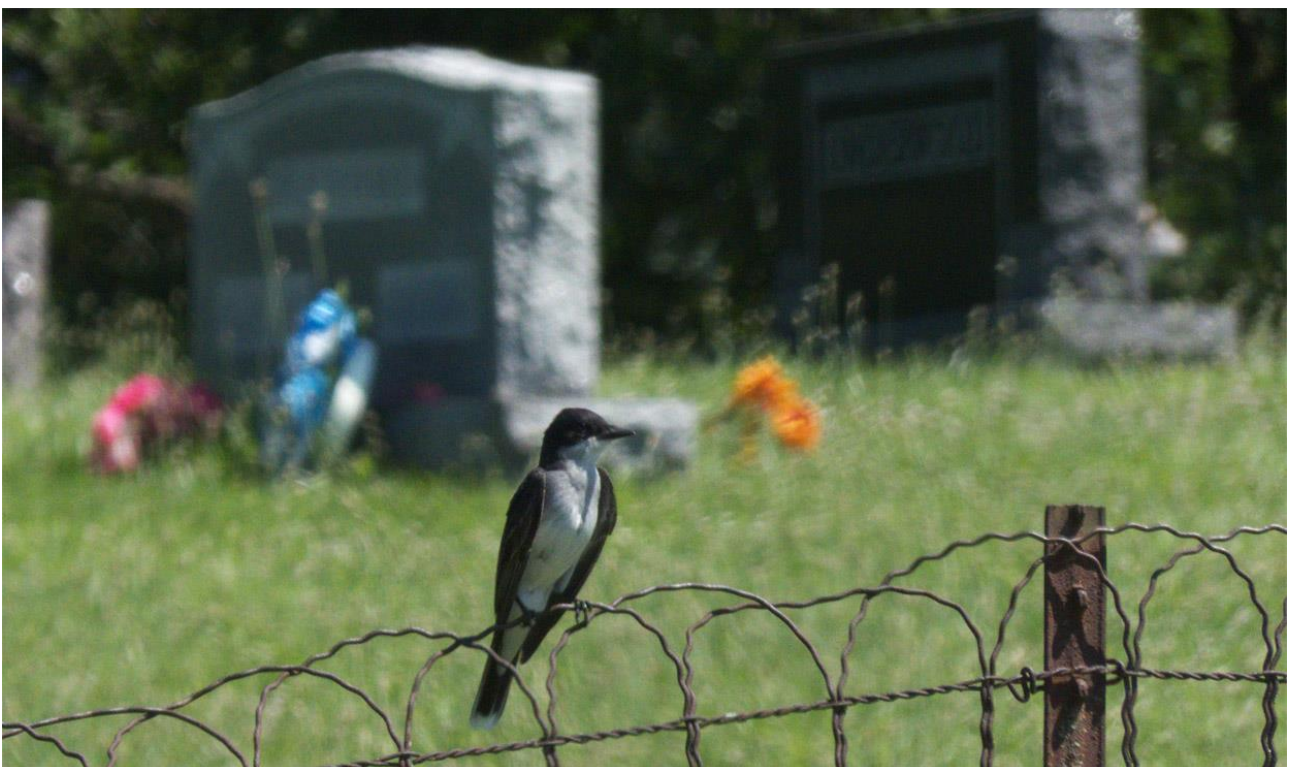


equivalent of USD 45. Still, the locals complained, pointing out that they have to drive long distances. We have the same problem in Finland and have the expensive gas on top of it. In an average year I drive 20.000 km at home, about 12.500 miles. On top of that, there is the 10.000 km driven abroad.

Listening the car radio was, however, no fun, in the long run. This was the Bible Belt: Christian fundamentalism, Republican extremism and country music. The music was ok but the views in the other programs frequently were rather distorted and grossly uninformed, if judged by a European listener. Many locals clearly had no idea of the developments in the world outside their immediate daily surroundings, if judged by the radio programs. They appeared to live in some sort of fantasy world, where fiction and superstition were more valued than factual understandings and knowledges. Fortunately, NPR still exists, at least in some parts of the USA. The educative, informative element is not completely lost, at least not yet.

The same can be said about television news: not much to learn, and focus on trivial matters or crime. As an example, I am completely confused by the CNN and Fox News policies of providing massive publicity to any murderer looking for it. In July 2015, the Charleston church shooting was a good example. Hundreds and hundreds of news reports, 24/7, all the media encouraging others to follow suit by celebrating the shooter, instead of denying him the publicity. At the same time, they purposefully neglected issues which affected everyday life all over the states. Why?! It does not make any sense to me.

On the surface we look so similar, in our thoughts, we are so different? Well, I myself had attached Jesse James, whose actions caused several deaths, to the 'romantic' Wild West!



**Fig. 3. Eastern Kingbirds** were conspicuous in Missouri; here is one at an old Hatfield cemetery.

## ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

I stayed all my nights at the Super 8 Bethany Motel, in Bethany. The Eagle's Landing Motel in Eagleville (pop. 316) appeared to be ok, but Bethany (pop. 20.000) had a more advantageous constitution, with its services such as supermarkets and gas stations. The driving time between these towns was only ten minutes. It is advisable to reserve a room before arrival. I did not, and had to stay my first night in a smoking room, which I did not like, to say the least. For the next two nights, I got a non-smoking double. For me, the room rate was USD 57 (€ 51.50) per night. The rooms were clean, cozy and with better than average amenities. Overall, it was clearly a higher class accommodation than my Ventura Motel 6 room, the day before, had been. There was no shortage of parking space in front of the building. Overall, it was a peaceful place for a rest.

At the close-by BP, a stunning blonde cashier was as attractive to men as honey is to bees. I saw some customers so mesmerized that they just stood there, gaping at her. A sure way to attract more money than the neighbor – I hope they paid her accordingly. In terms of groceries, the Missouri gas stations were a pleasant surprise. Good variety and also fresh products, such as fruit. Supermarkets were, of course, even better. In Bethany, the best choice is the Hy-Vee Supermarket, at the corner of S 25<sup>th</sup> St/US Hwy 136 and Vandivert St. I never visited restaurants, because food and drinks were otherwise available. There is a Walmart right next to the Super 8 Motel, but it is a Walmart and therefore of little use for a traveling birder, even if one does not boycott the company.

## BIRDS, MAMMALS AND SITES

### Dunn Ranch Prairie



**Fig. 4.** The new Bison Enclosure is celebrated by this 'Wild West' style ranch sign.

Dunn Ranch is a 1.318 hectare Nature Conservancy prairie reserve about 6 kilometers west of Eagleville, Northern Missouri. As a result of long term commitment to restore the habitat by fire, seeding and bison, the prairie has become a paradise on earth. In July, I saw of sea of wild flowers and long grass, occupied by numerous insects, birds and mammals, in stark contrast with the



surrounding farmland, mainly planted with GMO corn and consequently almost devoid of wildlife. Before the visit, I had not realized how rich in biodiversity the American prairie actually was!

The driving directions are: Leave Interstate 35 at Eagleville intersection, drive to the centre of the village, till a T-junction (500 m), and turn right. After 200 meters, turn left and drive west on Fir St/W 170<sup>th</sup> St, also known as the M Rd. At W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave, about 7 to 8 km west of Eagleville, turn right. You have arrived at Dunn Ranch. Birding is done along the W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave and W 150<sup>th</sup> St. Stay on the gravel roads. On the left of the W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave, there is an **American Bison** enclosure with more than 80 animals, an area definitely out of bounds. On the right hand side, there are private farmlands. Also, be sure to stay on the right when crossing hillcrests to avoid colliding with other vehicles. The roads are narrow and it is a rolling landscape. Farmers tend to drive fast on familiar roads, just like they do back home in Finland.



**Fig. 5.** Restored prairie; a paradise for plants, insects, birds and mammals, including me!

Thunderstorms and tornados kept on circling around the Missouri-Iowa-Nebraska borderlands. In the first morning, some spectacular lightning and heavy rains were also experienced at Dunn Ranch Prairie. This proved to be a blessing, since the morning was delayed and both birds and mammals were active late, almost till noon. Later on, the weather was mostly fine, with a few short showers in the last morning, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July.

In the first morning, I spotted a man standing on the veranda of the Dunn Ranch main building, early in the morning. It was raining, but I drove in, parked close to him and introduced myself, explaining that I would be driving around their lot for the next three days or so, in search for **Greater Prairie Chicken**. He seemed to appreciate the information and told about a female with chicks which had recently been seen around the buffalo corral. It was not possible to go in there (**Bison** enclosure), but this is the area where I eventually scored with the species, observing the female in the last morning.





**Fig. 6.** The signs at the M Rd/W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave junction, about 7 to 8 km west of Eagleville.



**Fig. 7.** Fine gravel tracks crisscross the rolling landscape; here on the W 150<sup>th</sup> Street.

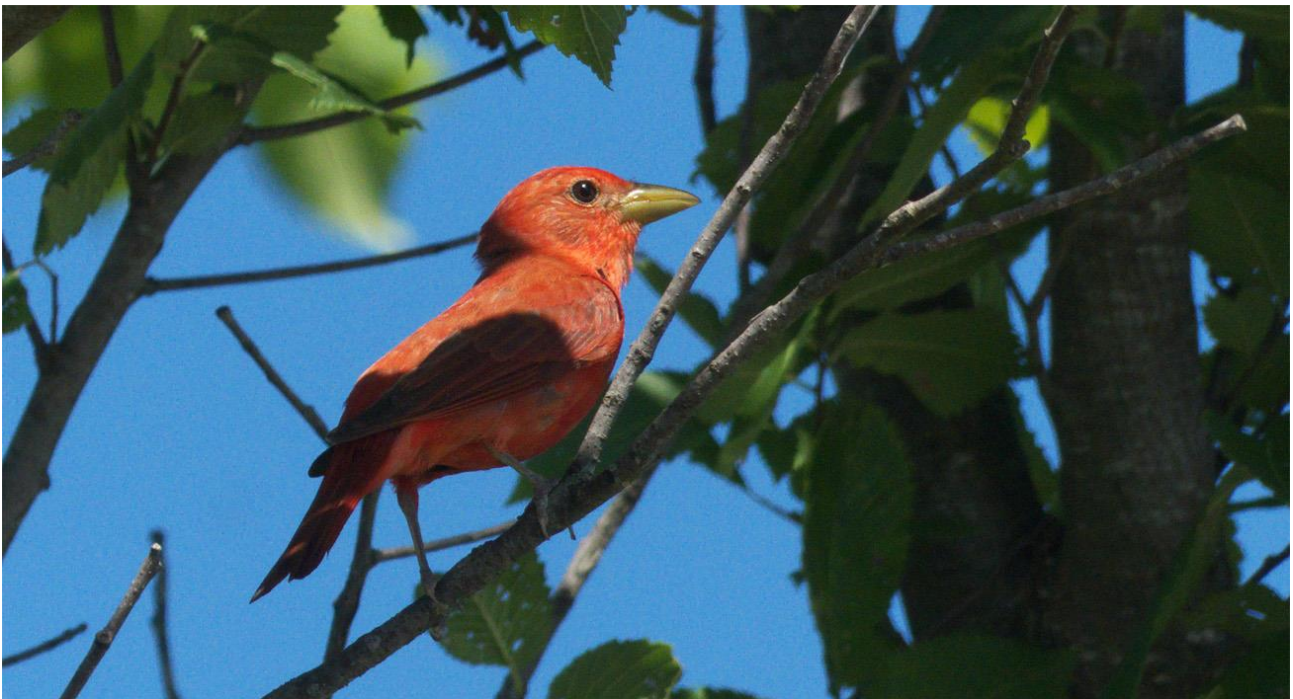
Overall, the chosen tactics was to drive slowly on the gravel roads, with car windows, eyes and ears open, and to make frequent stops on the way. This was done hour after hour, day after day, until the skulking bird was discovered. The prairie-chickens are easy only during the lekking season but not impossible at other times, as long as one has the patience to go after them. Needless to say, looking for a skulker in a prairie habitat is bound to produce an extensive list of other records. I never got bored at Dunn Ranch Prairie. There always was something new to see.



In regard to mammals, in addition to the re-introduced **American Bisons**, the following species were observed in the general area, between Eagleville and Hatfield, in most cases at Dunn Ranch: **White-tailed Deer** (30+), **American Badger** (1), **Raccoon** (1), **Coyote** (1), **American Red Fox** (1), **Long-tailed Weasel** (1), **Eastern Cottontail** (all over the place, >100), **Eastern Fox Squirrel** (4) and **Franklin Ground Squirrel** (1). Most of the deer, the badger and the raccoon were seen in the rainy first morning, when I arrived at Dunn Ranch Prairie very early, before sunrise.

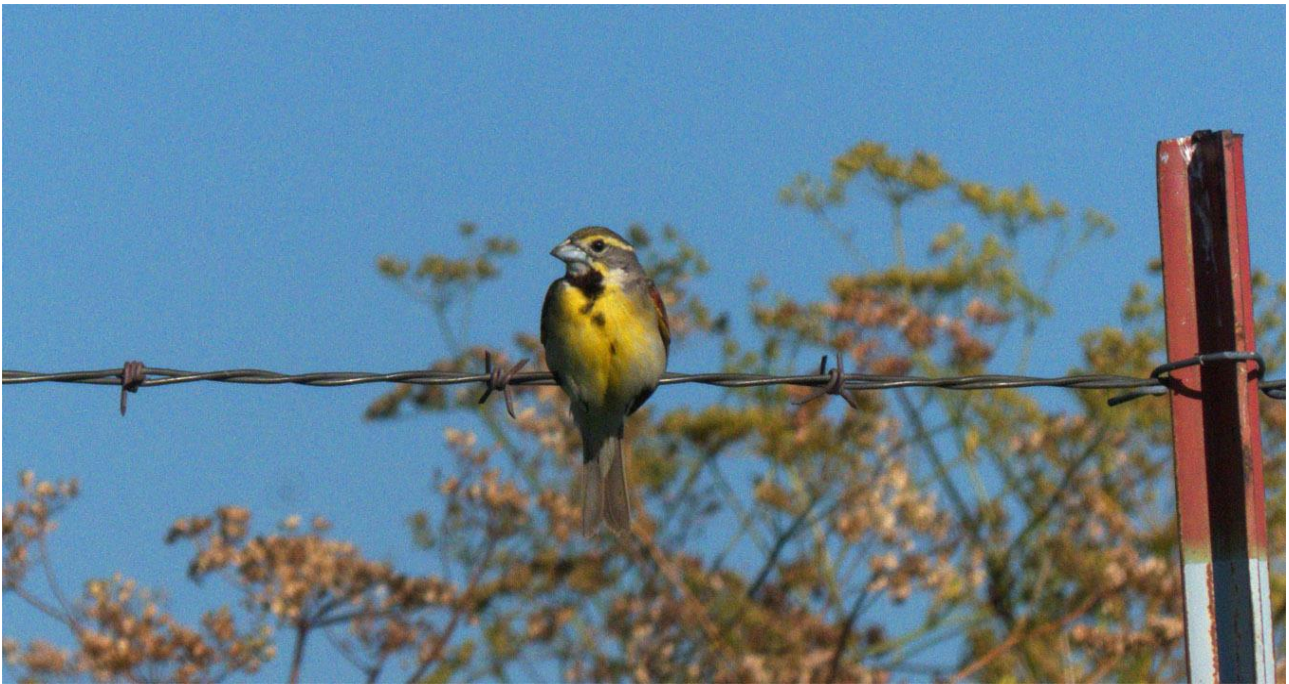


**Fig. 8.** The cute little **Eastern Cottontails** were all over the place in July 2015.



**Fig. 9.** What would a Missouri summer be without **Summer Tanagers**?





**Fig. 10.** The song of **Dickcissel** dominated the soundscape of prairie at Dunn Ranch.

The following 60 species of birds were observed at Dunn Ranch Prairie:

**Wood Duck** 1 female.

**Great Blue Heron** 2 ; there apparently are no fish in the many ponds, as herons are so rare?

**Turkey Vulture** Several dozens.

**Swainson's Hawk** 2 or 3 individuals, typical pale phase adults.

**Cooper's Hawk** 1

**American Kestrel** 2

**Prairie Falcon** 1 ; I did not expect to see one this far east.

**Horned Owl** 2 ; sunning themselves after getting wet in the rain.

**Burrowing Owl** 1

**Ring-necked Pheasant** 2 males and a 1 female with large chicks.

**Greater Prairie Chicken** 1 female.

**Northern Bobwhite** 6 to 8 males ; calling from high vantage points, such as on a gate.

**Black Rail** 1 ; calling at one of the many small ponds along W 150<sup>th</sup> St, west of W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave junction.

**Killdeer** 7

**Upland Sandpiper** Two breeding territories, always present on W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave.

**Common Nighthawk** One pair.

**Mourning Dove** Very common.

**Groove-billed Ani** 1 ; a vagrant bird!

**Northern Flicker** 1 male ; along W 150<sup>th</sup> St, east of W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave junction.

**Ruby-throated Hummingbird** 1 male and 1 female.

**Eastern Wood Pewee** Common.

**Eastern Phoebe** Common.

**Great Crested Flycatcher** 1



**Eastern Kingbird** Very common and conspicuous.

**Loggerhead Shrike** 4 ; more common in drier habitats in the west.

**American Redstart** 1 male; upper W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave, north of W 150<sup>th</sup> St junction.

**Bell's Vireo** A few.

**Warbling Vireo** 1

**Sand Martin** 2

**American Cliff Swallow** Abundant ; >1.500.

**Barn Swallow** Hundreds.

**House Wren** Common ; found two nests, one in a dead tree, one in a steel gate (hollow pipe).

**Sedge Wren** 3

**Eastern Bluebird** Common ; with many juveniles.

**American Robin** Very common.

**Grey Catbird** Very common.

**Northern Mockingbird** Only 3.

**Brown Thrasher** Common ; frequently on roads.

**Cedar Waxwing** 2 ; upper W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave, north of W 150<sup>th</sup> St junction.

**Common Yellowthroat** Common.

**Chipping Sparrow** 2

**Field Sparrow** 1

**Henslow's Sparrow** About 10.

**Grasshopper Sparrow** Very common.

**Song Sparrow** 6

**Northern Cardinal** 1

**Rose-breasted Grosbeak** 1

**Dickcissel** >100 ; the most conspicuous songbird in the area.

**Bobolink** 6

**Summer Tanager** 2 males; upper W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave, north of W 150<sup>th</sup> St junction.

**Red-winged Blackbird** Abundant ; thousands.

**Brown-headed Cowbird** 10

**Eastern Meadowlark** Very common, >100.

**Baltimore Oriole** 6

**Common Grackle** 7

**Indigo Bunting** 3 males.

**American Goldfinch** Common.

**House Sparrow** 3

**Blue Jay** One party of 8 ; along W 150<sup>th</sup> St, east of W 180<sup>th</sup> Ave junction.

**American Crow** Uncommon.

To which degree the restoration of the habitat has induced some of the scarcer species to find their way to Dunn Ranch is difficult to estimate. Only in the case of **Greater Prairie Chicken**, it is clear that a release program has supported the existing local population. The **Groove-billed Ani** was clearly a vagrant and the **Black Rail** probably is a casual summer visitor, even though its distribution in the USA is not completely understood. In regard to the **Prairie Falcon** and **Swainson's Hawks** (rare Missouri breeder?), the records may reflect range extension, or not?



**Fig. 11.** Hiking in an enclosure of 80 American Bison, protective of their young ones? No way!

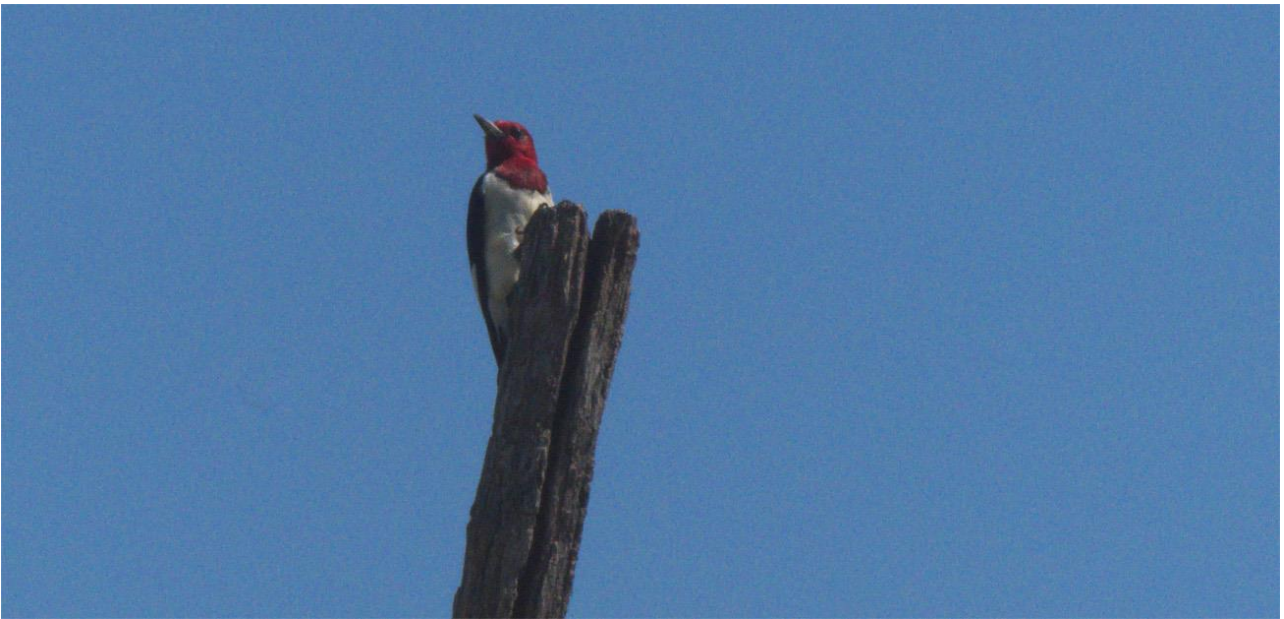


**Fig. 12.** Male **Northern Bobwhites** were constantly calling from their perches, such as on gates.

### **Hatfield**

Another 6 kilometers northwest of Dunn Ranch, the country roads south of Hatfield (W 130<sup>th</sup> Ave, W 160<sup>th</sup> St and W 140<sup>th</sup> Ave) provided an interesting alternative bird-ride, along which also the Pawnee Prairie Natural Area, another prairie reserve, was located. I went there once around noon, and saw the following additional species worth a mention: **Red-headed Woodpecker** (4), **Red-bellied Woodpecker** (2), **Blue-grey Gnatcatcher** (5) and **Black-capped Chickadee** (2). In other words, slightly different habitats and therefore some new year list species. On the way there, I also drove a few kilometers into Iowa, but there were nothing but GMO corn fields along the road. Time did unfortunately not permit visiting the prairie sites there.





**Fig. 13.** A typical perch of a **Red-headed Woodpecker**; on top of a dead tree.



**Fig. 14.** A network of restored prairie lots is developed in the Midwest; Pawnee Prairie Natural Area, close to Hatfield, MO. The Pawnees apparently never occupied this area! It was within the Iowa territories, before they were forced away from Missouri, by the US government, in early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Bethany Reservoir (Lake 1)**

About four kilometers north of Bethany, along the old Hwy 69, lies the Bethany Reservoir, a large artificial body of water. The somewhat barren reservoir did produce a few birds during a short visit, during a return drive to Bethany on an alternative route, instead of the fast but boring Interstate 35. Look for W Intrepid Road and check the both directions beyond a lakeside Y-junction, 300 meters downhill from the 69. I saw two **Great Blue Herons**, a **Green Heron** and a **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**.





**Fig. 15.** Herons are scarce in northern Missouri; a **Great Blue Heron** at Bethany Reservoir.

### Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge

To fulfill my desire to add Nebraska on the list of visited US States (so far, 26 out of 50), and to cross the mighty Missouri River, I decided to drive to Rulo (originally, Rouleau, Pop. 172), the southeasternmost point of Nebraska. The site of an old toll bridge had some interesting old buildings, too. On the way there, I noticed a lone **Western Kingbird** and the large wetland reserve of Squaw Creek. It is signposted along Hwy 159 and may be reached by driving north for 1.5 hours, from Kansas City to St. Joseph (Hwy 29), and by turning left to Rulo.



**Fig. 16.** The entrance of Squaw Creek NWR is well signposted along Highway 159 to Rulo.



Once inside the refuge, it is possible to drive around the wetland (one way, start on the left). The track was a bit muddy in places but passable in a sedan. One needs a minimum of one hour to do the circle, preferably more. I stayed there for two hours, which was not enough, before returning to Kansas City. There were some gigantic **American Bullfrogs** in the marsh! The wetlands of the southern Midwest do, however, appear remarkably empty in summer, because so few wildfowl and waders breed there. They are more important as wintering grounds.

The following 32 bird species were seen during the circular afternoon ride:

**Canada Goose** 16

**Wood Duck** 5

**Least Bittern** 1 adult & 3 juveniles, together.

**Great Blue Heron** 7

**Great White Egret** 2

**Little Blue Heron** 1

**Bald Eagle** 1 second calendar year bird ; breeds at the reserve.

**Red-tailed Hawk** 2

**Sora Rail** 1

**Spotted Sandpiper** 1

**Black Tern** A beautiful group of 20 adults!

**Yellow-billed Cuckoo** 1

**Red-headed Woodpecker** 15

**Red-bellied Woodpecker** 3

**Downy Woodpecker** 2

**Eastern Wood Pewee** 6

**Least Flycatcher** 1 ; an early migrant?

**Acadian Flycatcher** 3

**Eastern Phoebe** 4

**Great Crested Flycatcher** 1 pair.

**Tree Swallow** Abundant ; >1.000!

**American Cliff Swallow** 30

**Barn Swallow** 30

**House Wren** 10

**Eastern Bluebird** 1

**Grey Catbird** 10

**Prothonotary Warbler** 1 male.

**Indigo Bunting** 3 males.

**Common Grackle** 70

**Great-tailed Grackle** 40

**Baltimore Oriole** 8

**Orchard Oriole** 12

(Why did I drive to Kansas City when I could have taken a short-cut from Bethany to St. Joseph and Rulo instead? That was because I had planned to visit the Cabela's Retail Store in Kansas City, with

a long shopping list. Unfortunately, not a single item on my list was available at the massive store, with its stuffed Polar Bears and other decorations! They had to be ordered by mail, with the additional EU import taxes! At the store, almost everything for sale was of bulk quality, the better products being reserved for Internet sales, probably because not so many people among their clientele were willing to invest in quality. On the plus side, when I ordered some clothes at home in Finland, they arrived in five days, on US Postal Service surface mail!)



**Fig. 17. American Cliff Swallow** was one of the widespread species; two juveniles and an adult.

#### **AT THE END OF THE DAY**

I had another American Airlines flight to Miami early the next morning. As Alamo closed in the evening and did not open their office early enough the next day, I returned my car in the evening and took the shuttle bus to the airport. As usual, and always amazing to me, the car return formalities took only one minute. The US car rental companies know how to serve their customers at an airport!

At the airport departure area, only one café was open. Fortunately, I had anticipated it, and stocked up earlier that day. Self-check in was not possible in the evening; it opened at 3.40. The seats in the waiting were uncomfortable, to say the very least. All in all, the Kansas City airport is a step back in time, perhaps all the way to the fifties, and of regional character, which is not altogether bad.

I spent the night on some seats, mostly making notes and reading books. Sleeping was not too important because I was going to crash in a motel immediately after arrival in Miami, and have a proper rest there. The stop-over was dictated by flight timetables and would include a lot of sleeping, and a bird walk in the suburbs, to see some resident exotics, such as **Orange-winged Amazons** and **Dusky-headed Conures**.

At the provincial Kansas City International Airport, the only interesting feature was a car which had been left right in front of the arrivals, in a no-parking zone. Mentally preparing myself for a car-bomb, just in case, I was amazed to see the police loitering around the vehicle for an hour, up to



four officers simultaneously standing there, before the car was finally towed away. Their training apparently did not include advice on minimizing risks in a situation such as this.

I would have been more worried. Think about it: No departures at the time when the car was left there. The driver could not be located in the building, even though it was almost unoccupied. Morning arrivals and departures would start in a few hours and the vehicle was left right next to the main exit/entrance. Plenty to think about, for a paranoid.

At 4.29, they opened the security check. I was the first person in. The preparations had looked impressive but everything went smoothly, with the exception of my problems in understanding the local dialect. My flight departed at 6.00, as scheduled, and arrived in Miami three hours later. At the Days Inn, the receptionist complained that I had arrived way too early, the check in starting at 13.00, but she nevertheless let me to have a vacant room at once. In twenty minutes, I was in the bed, dreaming of the rolling Missouri prairie, with bisons, prairie-chickens, **Upland Sandpipers** and **Dickcissels**.

The visit in Missouri had been a pleasant one and the diversity of birds, mammals, plants and insects in the regenerating native prairie impressive. The summers are so great in the rural areas of the USA that I sometimes dream of staying longer, even permanently. I am, after all, a small town boy from a rural area. Listening to the local radio helps in getting rid of these feelings.



**Fig. 18.** At Kansas City International Airport, all AA check in machines were off line in the evening.