

A BIRDERS' GUIDE TO MISSOURI PUBLIC LANDS

JOHNSON'S SHUT-INS STATE PARK

Edge Wade: edgewATmchsi.com spring 2015

8,670 acres Reynolds Co. DeLorme 56, C & D-2 &3

GPS: 37.5358659779204,-90.8404541015625

DNR owned; for additional information call 573-546-2450

Website:<http://mostateparks.com/park/johnsons-shut-ins-state-park>

Directions: From Hwy. 21 north of Pilot Knob, turn onto Rt. N and follow it to the park entrance. Or, from Hwy. 72 west of Lesterville, turn onto Rt. N to reach the entrance.

ADA Information: The park roads, including the loops through the campgrounds, and parking lots are good for birding from an auto. Additionally, the Shut-Ins Trail from the parking lot to the shut-ins is paved. It slopes, but is compatible for wheelchair use.

A stroll or roll along the service road running behind the visitor center toward the store near the trail to the shut-ins can result in some very good, little disturbed birding. This asphalt road (indicated as "Taum Sauk Trail" on the online park map) can be accessed from the north from a small pull-in on Rt. N, or from near the store/large parking lot at the south end, or from the small parking area by the education/conference building (reached via a short road to the right just before the big parking lot). The variety possible includes Worm-eating and Pine Warblers, White-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, Red-bellied and Pileated Woodpeckers, Gray Catbirds and Brown Thrashers, Eastern Towhees and Chipping Sparrows. Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-will's Widows are vocal on spring and summer evenings

General Information:

Johnson's Shut-Ins was dedicated as part of Missouri state parks system in 1955. Its large acreage encompasses a sample of the rugged St. Francois Mountains. The central feature is the "shut-ins" stretch of the East Fork of the Black River as it flows through a narrow channel cut into 1.4 billion year-old rhyolite.

Two recent events, one manmade, one natural, caused major habitat changes in the park. The breach of the Taum Sauk Reservoir (site of an electrical power generating operation) in 2005 caused 1.3 billion gallons of water and waterborne debris, including mature trees and large boulders, to cascade down Proffit Mountain and through the park, scouring a wide swath along hillside and valley, leaving a desolate, barren landscape several hundred yards wide.

In May, 2009, a massive severe windstorm roared through the St. Francois Mountains, leaving thousands of acres of felled trees strewn haphazardly in its wake. These straight winds, with the damaging force of a tornado, are called "derecho" (Spanish for "straight ahead"). Parts of Johnson's Shut-Ins SP were severely impacted by the storm. This natural event impacted the East Fork Wild Area most profoundly. In recent years, the woodlands have rejuvenated from the windstorm, resulting in a canopy cover in line with the early historic records of the area. Pine and post oaks are among the most commonly encountered species in the derecho impact. Woodland flora is lush, dominated by a grass/forb mix unlike in other parts of the park.

The word "devastating" is appropriate for the effects of both of these events, especially for the wildlife dependent on food and shelter in the ecosystems that lay in their paths. But the changes they wrought carried opportunity, too; and birds, like all living things, are opportunistic. The loss of a portion of the habitat needed by some species has meant creation of conditions favorable for others.

Birdlife at Johnson's Shut-Ins SP is thriving. The park may well now have greater numbers and diversity than were present for many, many years. Birders able to time their trips well and those willing to explore a bit will be well-rewarded with a trip here.

When to Visit/Species to Expect: This park has a high number of visitors, but has not been explored often by birders. The SPARKS checklist is about 130 species. Species other than waterfowl are well represented on the list, but occurrence records are skimpy. Many birds are to be found in the rich, varied habitats.

Every season will produce rewarding birding experiences here. Take special note of the Hazard/Limitations section.

Features of interest to birders: This is a remarkably diverse park. Seventeen natural terrestrial communities support more than 850 plant species (40% of the species found in Missouri). This plant and geologic diversity supports a broad spectrum of bird species. Many more birds are surely using the park land than appear on the checklist.

The natural fen in the day-use area was largely destroyed in the dam breach. Restoration is being attempted. Perhaps the Marsh Wren found there in 2010 is an indicator that the efforts will succeed, though the present day fen restoration is of a different character than the forested fen that was destroyed by the levee breach.

An excellent trail system provides opportunities suitable for the most casual to the most ardent birder. Always check on the status of trails before planning a birding trip, especially along the longer trails.

Closures due to the dam breach or the derecho may still be necessary.

For a full listing of the trails, check with the park office or online. Below is a sampling particularly suited for birding.

Day-use area:

The Black River Trail System is comprised of several sections and loops (2 miles total) that meander from the Black River [visitor] Center near the entrance to the store near the beginning of the Shut-Ins Trail leading to the river. The Black River Trail allows easy birding along the valley, past deciduous woods and some pines, by small thickets, the fen, through picnic areas, the boulder field, and scoured creek area.

The Horseshoe Glade Trail (1.5 mile loop) begins near the store, along the Shut-Ins Trail. This loop traverses the East Fork Wild Area. Oak-hickory woods, scattered pines and glades are delightful for birds and birders. The view of the river and mountains would be worth the walk, even if the birds weren't there to see.

The Ozark Trail section through the East Fork Wild Area will provide a remarkable view of the impacts of the May 2009 windstorm. Look for the Ozark Trail sign on Hwy. N south of the park office turnoff. You can also access the trailhead from the Goggins Mountain Wild Area.

The service road (entrance on Rt. N, and running behind the Black River Center building to the store) is especially birdy in the early morning as sunlight hits the hillside here before other parts of the valley. This road is also a good bet when other parts of the park are overrun with people. It is posted for no vehicles, but permission to drive it may be sought in the park office. Of course, the best birding is on foot.

Campground area (entrance on Rt. MM):

The Campground Trail system leads through the 5 camping loops and along the .25 mile Beaver Pond Trail. A slow drive through the campground loops will produce birds for folks short on time.

Between the turn off of Rt. MM (the campground entrance) and the camper check station is a small lot with a picnic shelter and vault toilet. This small area and the trailhead for the Goggins Mountain Equestrian Trail is especially attractive to a variety of species and is worth a walk-around in any season.

Scour Trail and vicinity:

The Scour Trail (2 mile loop with a length-shortening connector) begins at a parking lot on Rt. N east of the main entrance. The trail goes through woods and along the scour channel created by the dam breach. The scour channel may not

be full of birds, but it may harbor some species not easily seen in other parts of the park.

The Scour Trail parking lot and the country lane road extending from it provide a quiet area for birding when the park is full of visitors enjoying the shut-ins area. This road leads to private land. Do not go beyond the park boundary.

Toilets: Flush toilets at the Black River Center (visitor center) parking lot; several vault toilets in the day-use and campground areas.

Camping: A full range of camping options is available.

Hazards/Limitations: This is a heavily visited park. Summer and warm off-season weekends may have too many people to allow enjoyable birding experiences in the day-use area. Plan your birding visit with this in mind. Even if your birding visit is during a peak park use period, birding in early morning or in an area away from the main activity will be a pleasant experience.

Remember to check on the open/closed status of trails (especially the 14 mile Ozark Trail).

Pets, food and disposable containers are not allowed on the Shut-Ins Trail.

As an acknowledgement of the potentiality of a recurrence of a dam breach and the threat it would have to people in the path, a siren alarm system and signage detailing appropriate response are present. Read the signs and know what to do if the sirens sound.

Nearby Birding Sites: There are many state parks and conservation areas in the St. Francois Mountains area. The sites listed here are a selection based on pleasurable birding. Lower Taum Sauk Lake CA, Ketcherside Mountain CA, Bismarck Lake CA, Lesterville Access (especially for Cerulean Warblers), Dillard Mill SHS, St. Joe SP.