

A BIRDERS' GUIDE TO MISSOURI PUBLIC LANDS

BENNETT (RUDOLF) CONSERVATION AREA

Edge Wade, summer 2015

3,575 acres Randolph, Howard, Boone Co. DeLorme 30, F-4

GPS: 39.248119,-92.45547

MDC owned; for information call 573-815-7900

Directions: From US 63 about 19 miles north of Columbia, go 5 miles west on Rt. F, then 2.75 miles north on Rt. T. A cantilever sign indicates a left turn (west) onto CR 2390. The area begins uphill beyond the Little Perche Creek crossing.

Alternative directions: To enter on the south side of the area, immediately after turning onto Rt. T from Rt. F, make a left turn onto Thornhill Rd., then go right in about 2 miles onto CR 135. This road goes past some of the most easily accessible open land in the area, and the overflow parking and the Boy Scout Parking Lot (all good for grassland species). About a mile past Boy Scout Lot, a right turn puts you on CR 2930 toward the shooting range and the entrance in the directions above. If you continue north (straight) past the right turn option, a left turn onto CR 2925 is the most direct route to the lake.

Dr. Rudolf Bennitt was a zoology professor at the University of Missouri. In the 1930s he worked with influential conservation-minded people to develop the Missouri plan for conservation and establish the Missouri Department of Conservation, and served as a technical advisor to the first MDC Commission. He revived the Audubon Society of Missouri (ASM), was secretary and editor of *The Bluebird*, and published a statewide bird checklist. ASM's highest honor is the Rudolf Bennitt Award, bestowed on members who have made significant contributions toward the organization and its mission.

ADA Information: The roads, 10 parking lots and 5 camping areas give good opportunities for birding from or near a vehicle in a variety of habitats. There are no paved trails.

When to Visit/Species to Expect: If you plan to enter your finds into eBird, be sure to note the county line on the MDC map and file one list for Howard County and one for Randolph. Note that Randolph Co. roads have four digits; Howard Co. roads have three. The very small Boone County acreage at the southeast corner is not easily accessible. A downloadable field checklist for all of Rudolf Bennitt is at <http://www.mobirds.org/CACHE/AreaChecklist.aspx?site=447>.

As of summer 2015, 112 species have been reported from birding trips spanning the seasons. This conservation area has enough habitat variation to support the full range of species typical of mid-Missouri in the appropriate season. Warbler species are well represented (both migrants and breeders); summer resident and wintering sparrows are fairly well represented. Vireos, tanagers, orioles and grosbeaks are easily found in spring and summer. Most expected flycatchers have been reported here, but there are

still some “firsts” to be found. Despite the presence of Bennitt Lake in the Howard County portion of the area, there are surprisingly few waterfowl species on the checklist.

Features of interest to birders: The area of mostly gently rolling hills is nearly 80% wooded with an active program of improved forest management. There are more than 300 acres of old fields and about 120 acres each of warm season non-prairie grasses and savanna. MDC has built small watering ponds and contracts with local farmers to plant wildlife food plots. Mile-long stretches of Perche and Little Perche creeks in the eastern part of the area and Moniteau Creek on the west side add to the diversity. Dammed in 1999, the 48-acre Bennitt Lake, with a fishing dock and boat ramp appears to be more attractive to fish than waterfowl.

Gravel roads give excellent access to large portions of the area (but beware of the hill down to the lake on snowy or icy winter mornings).

The moderate-rated 12.5 mile multi-use Moniteau Wilderness Trail (MWT) is a well-maintained system of old two-tracks and improved base, natural with chat surface trails built to withstand heavy equestrian use (which it gets). This trail has interconnecting loops, but most are too long for a typical birding morning walk. It may be accessed from several points along roads and campgrounds, so stretches of it are easy to use for good birding with some backtracking to a vehicle.

In addition to providing a means of accessing good habitat on a good surface along mostly gentle terrain, the trail reduces encounters with ticks. This and all other area trails are closed to all but hunters during modern firearms deer and spring turkey hunting seasons.

Suggestions for birding on foot: These are some examples of walks/hikes of varying length. Enjoy them and do some exploring. The Moniteau Wilderness Trail (MWT) crosses the area roads in several places. Park in a lot, a campground, or beside the road at any of these points and go as far as you like. A short hike any direction will likely take you past open areas through woodland and forest. Some lead to creek bottoms. There are sections where ecotones with their rich variety of birdlife may be observed from a quiet stretch of trail. Below are some suggested sections of trail and some other areas suitable for walking.

Along the way, watch and listen for a fine variety of species including woodpeckers, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Summer and Scarlet Tanager, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Wood Thrush, Eastern Towhee, White-eyed, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireo, American Redstart, Northern Parula, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat Kentucky Warbler, Great-crested and Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-pewee and Easter Phoebe, Field Sparrow and Yellow-breasted Chat, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

Howard Co. hikes:

In the southeast corner of the area (accessed from Thornhill Rd.) the MWT crosses the road between the Boy Scout Parking Lot and campsites 22-24. You can hike about a half-mile through woods along the MWT with a limited view of an arm of the lake and return to the road, or continue as far as you like (but it is not a loop). This is an excellent slice through restored forest with good chances to see migrants and summer resident species.

From the Boy Scout lot and/or the campsites, be sure to check out the adjacent grasslands, scrub and old fields to the east.

Randolph Co. hikes:

At the campground on CR 2920 with sites 6-16, take a stroll along the road with loops through it. This gives easy access to woods/open area interface. There is a small waterhole toward the end far from the campground entrance.

On CR 2930, from the Slab Parking Lot on the MDC map near campsites 1-5, take the trail near the information signs. It goes through woodland past old fields and grassland, heading toward Little Perche Creek. This portion of the MWT has a loop that allows you to return to your car by hiking about 2 miles. You can cut this short by taking a 50-60 foot walk through grass to reach the corner of the campground and return to your car.

Also from the Slab Parking Lot, there is the option of crossing the road and following the MWT for a short distance. Both of these trail sections are good in any season, but are especially worth taking for spring migrant birding.

From the parking lot on Rt. T at the northeast corner of the area an old gravel road trail section leads down a gentle slope through woods, fields and the creek bottom of Little Perche Creek. You can hike a short way and return to your car or take a long hike toward the Slab Parking Lot described above.

From the parking lot at the west end of CR 2920 (past the campground), an old two-track gravel road leads downhill. Louisiana Waterthrush is among the possibilities.

Even the shooting range, when not in use, is a place to explore. The mown area makes easy walking to explore the ecotone it creates. Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Eastern Wood-pewee, Eastern Phoebe and tanagers may be present.

From the easternmost lot along Rt. T an old two-track leads to a power line cut. This area has a good variety of species, but is "tick heaven" in summer.

Toilets: One ADA accessible privy is at Lake Bennitt. There are no others.

Camping: Five primitive camping areas with a total of 27 numbered sites are designed especially for horse camping, but open to all at no charge. Only the three sites at the lake have a privy nearby. Walk-in primitive camping is allowed except during modern firearms deer season.

Hazards/Limitations: The excellent equestrian facilities attract large numbers of riders, many using the campgrounds in RVs with generators running, especially on weekends. Trails are closed to all but hunters during modern firearms deer and spring turkey hunting seasons. The shooting range is smack dab in the middle, so often heavy gunfire may be heard throughout the area.

Nearby Birding Sites: Lick Creek CA, Tri-City Community Lake, Finger Lakes SP, Rocky Fork Lakes CA.

