

## A BIRDERS' GUIDE TO MISSOURI PUBLIC LANDS

### **UNION RIDGE CONSERVATION AREA--Updated: 7/19/2009**

**Phil Wire**

This guide is complimentary to the map of Union Ridge found at <http://mdc.mo.gov/cgi-bin/atlas/gis4media.cgi?area=8932map>

The parking lots and a few roads are not marked with signs, so it is highly recommended that you bring this MDC map along (whether following the directions below or not). It is possible to access the current checklist for Union Ridge at

<http://mobirds.org/CACHE/mdcchecklists1.asp?locID=802>

Entering Union Ridge from the south, there are two ways to access the conservation area. One can take Route D directly into the conservation area (if doing so, ignore the rest of this paragraph). By taking Spring Creek Road (off of 6), it allows one to pass through agricultural and wooded areas with several parking lots in the conservation area. This wooded area has produced good numbers of birds in mixed flocks in winter and both tanager species and assorted warblers in spring. The agricultural areas can be good for raptors, including accipiters. If taking this route, be sure to turn left on Maryland Road at the URCA parking lot (marked H on the map) and follow it back to D, watching for birds along the way.

Once at Highway D, turn right and continue on Highway D until you reach the first parking lot in the CA on your left, marked as J on the map. (Note- there is a pseudo-lot for MDC vehicles only with a radio tower- don't park here, keep going). Once at the first lot, you will notice a mowed trail through the grass. This area can be great for sparrows- Henslow's and Vesper Sparrows have been seen here. The most productive areas in the immediate vicinity are within about 100 yards of the parking lot. In April, there may be several Henslow's Sparrows calling about with their "tsi-lick" call. Hiking downhill to the wooded streambeds may produce numerous towhees and some interesting woodland species, but beware, it is steep. The far limits of the mowed trail have not been explored, and there is well over 2,000 acres of savannah being restored by the MDC.

Back at the car, continue on Route D. The extensive savannah area here undergoes periodic burning, but the whole area can be good for expected savannah species. Continue on farther north on Route D. You will notice agricultural fields, which have produced a Northern Shrike, but usually don't harbor much activity. Continue on to Parking lot L, which has primitive toilet facilities. The wooded creekbed behind the toilets can be excellent for Lincoln's Sparrows and other brush-loving birds. Woodpeckers and nuthatches also enjoy the large trees to the east of the creek. Keep walking away from D through the parking area, and you will notice a wide

makeshift trail between two stands of trees. This is one of the best places in the CA to observe passerine birds. Kinglets and chickadees in the winter give way to such diverse species as Northern Parula, Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Blackpoll Warbler in spring. After a few hundred yards, the trail dead-ends at an agricultural field. This area can also be good for hearing owls call, as can other wooded areas throughout the CA. During an early spring visit it is possible to hear multiple pairs of Barred Owls with just a mediocre imitation.

Return to Highway D and head towards parking lot E (look out!- it's easily missed) and Union Ridge Lake. This is a deeper-water reservoir and can have a nice assortment of waterfowl in season. Tree Swallows and Barn Swallows also like to forage in this area. (If it's empty, don't be discouraged- many diving species, like Ruddy Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, and Merganser species use the marsh as well, coming up at your next stop). A trail goes around the lake, but not much has been seen from the trail. Pull back on to Route D and proceed until you reach a gravel road on the right, Foliage Road. Take it, and park at lot M, the first lot on the right. From here, one can see the Union Ridge marsh. Scoping the marsh from the parking lot can produce looks at some waterfowl, but it is much better to take the mowed trail that follows the levee around the marsh and bring your scope along. The most productive part of the marsh is the far (west) end, where the water is shallower. Note- during hunting season, the waterfowl will be very skittish- it is best not to traverse all the way around the levee, as everything on the marsh will be disturbed. During non-waterfowl hunting periods, it can be very productive to walk a loop around the marsh. Keep an eye out on the fields to your left, as they have been very good for sparrows on occasion. Shorebirds, including Wilson's Phalaropes, Dunlins, and Willets are possible, along with any other shorebird species that migrates through the area, depending on water levels. Raptors like Peregrine Falcons, Bald Eagles and Northern Harriers take advantage of the marsh as well. The extensive grassy area around the marsh is excellent for American Woodcocks in spring, and has produced interesting species such as Short-eared Owl and American Bittern. Two species of rails, and both Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Leconte's Sparrows have been flushed from the grasses around the marsh in season. Walking around the marsh on the levee and returning through the brush makes for a pretty long walk, but it is the best way to see a good variety of species at Union Ridge. An option with less walking is to simply walk out about halfway down the levee and then return the way you came. To exit the CA once back at your car, one can continue heading southwest on Foliage Road to complete a loop back to D, or just backtrack directly to D.

**OTHER AREAS-** There are three areas that the above route does not address: The northeast corner, the northwest corner, and the western limits of the area. The easiest to access is the northeast corner, accessible by lots B, C and D, which can be reach simply by continuing on D past Foliage Road. This area has interesting mosaics of grassland and wooded areas that would likely attract many, many different species. Some lots have trails at the end allowing for easier exploration.

-The western portion of the area is accessible by lots R, S, and T. Little exploring has been done.

-The far northwestern corner is more remote and is only accessible only by parking lot A. The area appears to mostly woodlands.

GENERAL INFORMATION- In season, ticks are plentiful at Union Ridge, so take precautions. Also, cell service in the area (as well as along 6) is unreliable at best, and in most places there is no cell phone service, so take the necessary precautions to be without cell service if that is a problem.

Please be very careful during deer and turkey hunting seasons- Union Ridge has good populations of game animals and in-season, it is almost certain that hunters will be using the area. Wear orange. Also, private land surrounds the CA, and is usually very well marked.

Union Ridge is a very large area (approximately 8,000 acres), and much of the area has yet to be explored. If you do find an area of interest (such as a large pine grove for owls, a very productive woodlands spot, etc.) please contact Phil at [phw222@truman.edu](mailto:phw222@truman.edu) so I can make the necessary changes to this guide.