

A BIRDERS' GUIDE TO MISSOURI PUBLIC LANDS

COLUMBIA BOTTOM CONSERVATION AREA

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4318 acres St. Louis County DeLorme 41, D-9

MDC owned; for information call 314-877-6014

Directions: Columbia Bottom lies in the northeasternmost corner of St. Louis County, along the south side of the Missouri River and the west side of the Mississippi, with an overlook at the confluence of the two. To reach it from the south and west, take Interstate 270 east to the last exit in Missouri, Exit 34, marked Riverview Drive. Exit there and turn left (north); the road changes its name to Columbia Bottom Road. Proceed for about 2.5 miles to the signed entrance drive on your right.

Alternatively, coming from Riverlands or other points north, go south on US-67 and cross the Missouri River bridge. Continue to the exit for Parker Road. Go left on Parker for just under a mile, then left again on Bellefontaine Road and almost immediately right on Spanish Pond Road. In 2.4 more miles you will find yourself at the Columbia Bottom entrance drive.

Birding opportunities: Columbia Bottom has established itself as one of the top conservation areas in birding potential, as measured by the list of birds found there, which stands at 270, or possibly only 269 since Carolina Chickadees, recorded by some visitors, may or may not truly occur there (this author, while admitting the presence of some birds that look rather like Carolinas, has never heard any chickadee song other than Black-capped on the area). This puts it in the same league with Otter Slough CA (259) and Eagle Bluffs CA (264, with the same Carolina Chickadee issue) and significantly behind only one area, Schell-Osage CA (278). These data are taken from CACHE checklists as of December 2012. Part of the area's "secret," of course, lies in its proximity to St. Louis and the frequency with which it is visited by a great many birders. Because of this steady coverage, the area list includes a number of rarities like Fulvous Whistling-Duck, White Ibis, White-tailed Kite, Swainson's Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Northern Shrike, and Chestnut-collared Longspur.

As with some other areas, the potential for a long species list on any given day depends partly on the presence of wetland habitat. Columbia Bottom has been irregular in this regard, with very extensive wetland due to flooding in some years, much less in others, although pumps installed by the Department of Conservation do keep some sections flooded for waterfowl during the fall hunting season even in the driest years. Otherwise, the combination of open fields (some in prairie grasses), a lot of brushy areas and riparian woodland, a small patch of upland woods, and the river overlook combine to make this a worthwhile place to visit any day of the year. Here are some of the highlights:

- A. From the entry point, turn left toward the visitor center, park in the main lot

or the gravel overflow lot below it, and begin meandering along the paved path that leads from the gravel lot past a line of trees and brush and out across fields toward the Missouri River levee. This path would take you up onto the levee to continue for miles, all the way to the confluence observation area, if you wanted to take a long hike or bike ride with a broad and unobstructed view of open country. Otherwise, you can begin briefly here with a nice assortment of sparrows and other birds, then backtrack to the visitor center, which is open Wednesday-Friday 8-5 and Saturday-Sunday 8-4. There, besides the luxury of indoor restrooms, you will find MDC publications for sale, including *Birds in Missouri* by Brad Jacobs, plus other books and bulletins on trees, reptiles and amphibians, etc. You can also pick up a map of this or any other St. Louis area CA. Outside the windows are feeders that may attract a variety of native sparrows in season along with Eurasian Tree Sparrows and hummingbirds.

B. Starting again from the entry sign, take the main paved drive that winds through the agricultural fields and the fallow and prairie plots that make up much of Columbia Bottom. MDC contracts with farmers to raise crops here but maintains control over what is planted, how much is to be left on the ground for wildlife, etc. You may stop anywhere along this 4-mile drive to look and listen for open-country birds like Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs in colder weather, various sparrows, blackbirds including occasional Brewer's in spring and fall, and raptors such as (commonly) Northern Harrier and Red-tailed Hawk and (uncommonly) Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. The grassy areas are good nesting habitat for Dickcissels, Sedge Wrens, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Common Yellowthroats. MDC has provided nine parking areas at intervals along this route, but the shoulders are broad and safe too. At 0.9 miles, the road meets the Missouri River levee and parallels it for a while; you can stop and cross the levee to check the riparian woods and the river at any point along there. To your right are fields that may have mowed strips between thickly overgrown patches, for dove hunters in September; when hunting is over, these provide great sparrow habitat. Soon (at 1.5 miles) you reach a large parking lot and boat ramp with pit toilets. This provides a broad view of the Missouri, and the trees and brush in the vicinity can be good for passerines in migration. Another stop comes at the 3.5-mile mark, where an observation ramp leads you up to a commanding view of the fields.

C. At 4.0 miles, the road leaves the open fields, crosses the levee, and enters a section of patchy woods and brush where you can find resident woodland birds; migrants such as warblers, vireos, and thrushes in season; and often Red-shouldered Hawk and other raptors. Almost immediately, on the left, you find a parking loop and a short elevated boardwalk through the trees to a (frequently dry) low clearing; this spot will often produce some good passerines, including migrant warblers and sparrows. On the other side of the road, opposite this parking loop, is the continuation of the walking trail from the levees; this provides good opportunities for a new assortment of birds. It could be walked all the way to the confluence overlook, but more likely you will want to try it for a little while and then backtrack to your car and drive slowly on, perhaps stopping to check roadside tangles, until you reach the parking lot at the end of the road, again with pit toilets. Please note the pole showing the depth reached by the flood of 1993! Here a short additional walk takes you out to a platform where you view the

confluence, with the Missouri on your left emptying into the Mississippi straight ahead. Bald Eagles are expectable here (perhaps a nesting pair) along with Great Blue Herons, Ring-billed Gulls most of the year plus Herrings in colder weather (and occasionally other larids), small numbers of ducks, possibly a few passing cormorants or pelicans, and the occasional shorebird on a sandbar.

D. From the confluence parking lot, drive back out, re-cross the levee into open terrain, and turn left onto a gravel road which, after a fairly short distance, tees into another gravel road. Turning left here brings you to a parking lot and a short path through the woods to another view of the Mississippi River; turning right puts you on the other main refuge road, which will eventually lead you back to the paved drive near the entrance. Along the way, on your right, you will pass many wetland pools, potential or actual depending on the year and the season. If some have water to a good depth, you will probably see waterfowl in spring and fall, also in winter if unfrozen; and if some have shallow water and a muddy interface, you will probably see some shorebirds. In warmer weather, any wet areas may produce herons and egrets, and stands of rushes and smartweed may harbor rails or bitterns. On your left (south), mostly screened by a row of trees, is the “refuge area” to which waterfowl may retreat in hunting season—and by the way, this whole loop is closed during that season, accessible only to licensed hunters. Continuing back toward the entrance takes you through fields that offer more chances for Horned Larks, Grasshopper Sparrows, and raptors. At a sharp left turn just yards from a large equipment barn, you can park and walk back to the open rear side of the barn, where Eurasian Tree Sparrows usually roost on the rafters and tractors. After the sharp left, a straight stretch of road returns you to the paved drive.

Toilets: See above. There are pit toilets at two sites within the area and indoor facilities in the visitor center.

Camping: None, but hiking and biking are popular.

Hazards: None except for the usual poison ivy and mosquitoes in season. All or portions of the area may be closed due to flooding. If river levels are high, check the area’s status before you go.

Nearby birding sites: Riverlands is no more than 20 minutes away; note the Audubon Center there, with fine displays, large viewing windows, and multiple feeders. Once at Riverlands, you are also close to Confluence Point State Park and the Cora Island unit of the Big Muddy National Wildlife Refuge. By heading west on MO-94 from US-67, you can reach Dresser Island CA in about 20 minutes and Marais Temps Clair CA in about 30 minutes.