

A BIRDERS' GUIDE TO MISSOURI PUBLIC LANDS

HA HA TONKA STATE PARK

3,709 acres Camden Co. DeLorme 45, F-6

DNR owned; contact 573-346-2986 for additional information

Website: <http://mostateparks.com/park/prairie-state-park>

Tom Nagel, Della Rhoades, Edge Wade: edgewATmchsi.com revised 2011

Directions: From the traffic light in Camdenton (old Hwy. 5 and US 54), go 2.5 miles southwest on US 54 to Rt. D. Go east (left) on Rt. D approximately 1.5 miles to the park visitor center.

When to Visit/Species to Expect: Anytime but a hot summer afternoon will bring a good variety of species to birders who sample the trails into the karst topography and restored oak woodlands and glades. Savannas, glades, woodland, Missouri's 12th largest spring, lake frontage, lowlands and heights provide suitable habitat for nesting species and refuge for migrants. Warblers, flycatchers, tanagers, orioles, and nightjars nest here. Black Vultures have been seen. The Ha Ha Tonka Oak Woodland Natural Area makes up approximately 90% of the park's acreage.

Of Special Note: The 5 eggs in the last known Common Raven nest in Missouri were collected in April, 1901, at Ha Ha Tonka. About six pairs were reported in the vicinity in 1907. This was the last report of ravens in Missouri.

Features of interest to birders: The park has 15 trails of varying lengths and difficulty of terrain. Most highlight features of the karst topography and woodlands. Below are the trails best suited for enjoyable birding.

Spring Trail (1.5 miles). Continue past the park entrance on Rt. D for one mile, and take the first road to your right. Go 0.25 mile to the gated picnic area entrance on your right, open during daylight hours. The road dead ends in a parking area. The trail starts at the far end of the parking area and parallels Ha Ha Tonka Spring Branch, ending at the spring. Bald Eagles are sometimes seen in this cove in winter; Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, Green Heron, Acadian Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Prothonotary and Kentucky Warblers, and Louisiana Waterthrush are seen or heard along the spring branch in summer.

The trail makes a loop through moist white oak woodlands reich with Eastern Wood Pewees and Red-eyed Vireos. Field Sparrows can be seen on the glade at the top of the hill at the junction with the Boulder Ridge Trail.

The best birding is early in the day as this is an extremely popular area with park visitors.

Turkey Pen Hollow Trail (7 mile loop, some rugged terrain). Continue past the park entrance 0.5 mile to the parking area on your left. A self-guided trail loops through a savanna. This area has been under prescribed fire management for over 30 years. Common birds on the trail are Yellow-breasted Chats, Prairie Warblers, Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, Eastern Wood Pewees, Red-headed Woodpeckers and Eastern Bluebirds. Field Sparrows and Indigo Buntings are particularly common on the area's large glades. Bewick's Wrens are occasionally spotted.

Colosseum Trail (0.5 mile). Turn into the park entrance. Just past the large parking lot on your right, turn left. After about 0.25 miles this road ends with a small parking lot--- the trailhead for the Colosseum Trail. The trail goes beneath the natural bridge and into the Colosseum, a collapsed cave system that represents one of the few true forested areas of the park. As part of the Ha Ha Tonka Karst Natural Area, this is a spectacular place for viewing spring wildflowers which often bloom here two to three weeks ahead of nearby sites. Kentucky Warblers, Eastern Pheobes and Wood Thrush are here in summer. Chuck-will's-widows call after dark, but you'll need to park at Turkey Pen Hollow parking lot and walk across Rt. D to this site, as the park entrance road is gated at sunset.

Ha Ha Tonka Castle Ruins (0.25 one way). Turn right off Rt. D into the park at the entrance. Go 0.25 mile to a large parking lot on the right and follow the paved trail to the castle ruins. A scenic overlook along this trail and also one at the castle give outstanding views of the collapsed cave valley through which the spring branch flows. Turkey Vulture sometimes roost on the castle ruins. As of 2010, Black Vultures may be among them. Watch for them from the overlook. Prairie Warblers call from the glade along the trail.

Quarry Trail (1.75 mi loop). Turn right off Rt. D to park at the Castle Ruins parking area. The Quarry Trail begins at the Castle Ruins. Hikers will experience open woodlands rich with Summer Tanagers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and Red-eyed Vireos. In spring and summer months, large glades along the trail harbor breeding Field Sparrows and populations of Chipping Sparrows. This area has been treated with prescribed fire for many years, and summer glade and woodland wildflowers are abundant.

Oak Woodland Interpretive Trail (450 feet, asphalt) and Acorn Trail (0.75 mile, moderate terrain). Park at the lot east of Hwy. D, between the park's castle and spring entrances for these. Both offer easy access to open oak woodland. In summer you may find Summer Tanagers, a variety of sparrows and Prairie Warblers. This trail serves as the portal to the Ha Ha Tonk Oak Woodland Natural Area.

Toilets: Flush toilets at the visitor center; a vault toilet at the picnic shelter on Rt. D west of the post office; vault toilets at the east and west ends of the parking lot at the head of the Spring Branch Trail.

Camping: Backpack camping is allowed along the Turkey Pen Hollow trail.

Hazards/Limitations:

There are sheer bluffs from 30 to 200 feet high around the sinkholes and in the vicinity of the castle.

Prescribed burns are conducted in much of this park. If you plan to hike off trail into more remote areas on weekdays from late September to late March, contact the park office to be certain there is no scheduled burn in the area that day.

Collecting of any kind is prohibited in all state parks.

Due to heavy park visitation and trail use, visitor use tends to be restricted to the trails in the vicinity of the castle ruins, stable ruins, water tower ruins, spring branch, natural bridge, and the Colosseum, Whispering Dell, and River Cave sinkholes.

Birders are encouraged to visit the less frequented areas such as the Turkey Pen Hollow, Dolomite, and Acorn Trails.

Nearby Birding Sites: Lead Mine CA, Bennett Spring SP, Fiery Fork CA, Branch Towersite, Larry R. Gale Access.