

## **ROARING RIVER STATE PARK, CONSERVATION AREA, AND VICINITY**

Jeff Cantrell, 2013, revised 2016

Editor's Note: This Birders' Guide covers the state park, the conservation area and sites within the Mark Twain National Forest, providing the adventurous birder with site and route information to explore the area and/or seek special, often difficult birds, such as Swainson's Warbler and Painted Bunting.

Barry Co. DeLorme 61, H-7

Roaring River State Park (4,093 acres) owned by DNR.

For more information:

<http://mostateparks.com/park/roaring-river-state-park>

Park Office: (417) 847-2539

Lodging/Dining: (417) 847-2330

Roaring River Conservation Area, owned by MDC, consists of two tracts totaling 429 acres. The main tract is two miles east of Roaring River State Park on Rt. F. This is the portion discussed below.

For more information call 417-895-6880

<http://mdc4.mdc.mo.gov/applications/moatlas/AreaSummaryPage.aspx?txtAreaID=8623>

Mark Twain National Forest is a U.S. National Forest

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/mtnf>

Directions: From Cassville, go south on MO 112 to the park entrance. Additional directions are noted below.

When to Visit/Species to Expect: This area is arguably the richest in the state for nesting passerines, many of which are difficult or nearly impossible to find elsewhere in Missouri.

This Birders' Guide provides directions to sites for Painted Bunting, Hooded Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Swainson's Warbler, Black Vulture, and several others.

Features of interest to birders: The areas described below highlight spots or trails that offer the possibility of finding birds that are difficult to find elsewhere, or are found in especially good numbers in this vicinity.

## **ROARING RIVER STATE PARK SITES**

### **Melton Conference Center**

This lodge-like facility has sleeping rooms, a dining room, gift shop, and a good possibility of Black Vultures lounging on the roof. It is on the right (west) of Hwy. 112, just past Campground #1.

## Pibern Trail

At the end of Campground #1 is the trailhead to Pibern Trail. Watch for Louisiana Waterthrushes as you drive through the campground. The trail starts crossing the dry creek bed. You will probably find Acadian Flycatchers, Black & Whites and Kentucky Warblers immediately behind the restrooms and wherever you park near the trailhead.



Photo: Pibern Trail Head – it starts across the creek.

The trail is long and loops around to the first part of Campground #1. You may just want to walk about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile and come back the way you went in. Once you cross the dry creek bed, listen for Worm-eating Warblers along the steep hillside on your left [this may be the best place in the area for them]. There are two or three nesting pairs from there to the intersection of the trail and dry creek bed. (second crossing). Worm-eating and Kentucky Warblers respond well to spishing here in mid spring. This same trail section in the winter usually holds several Brown Creepers, Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warblers and Golden-crowned Kinglets.

Summer Tanagers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Red-eyed Vireos and Great-crested Flycatchers should also be plentiful along the valley of buckeyes to the point of the second crossing of the dry creek bed. If you walk the dry creek bed just a



little way to where the trail meets the dry creek bed. If you walk the dry creek bed just past the sharp “left turn” on Pibern Trail that goes up a steep hill, you should find Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush and hopefully, a Cerulean Warbler. At that point you might want to walk the dry creek bed a little farther, or just head back the trail you came in on, or go up that steep hill to continue on the trail to loop back to your starting point.



Photo: Turn-around parking area by the Pibern Restroom. The hillside on the left should have black & whites, Acadians, and a close Kentucky Warbler. The whole camping area has Louisiana Waterthrushes.

On the other end on this campground, by the private in-holding “Paradise Valley” a singing male Painted Bunting has been present for several years. But this is not the best place for Painted Buntings.

### Behind the Trout Hatchery

The other good Cerulean spot is behind the trout hatchery, itself. Birders are welcome to walk this area even though it looks like no one ventures that way. You can park your car below the Roaring River spring pool. You will see the hatchery office on your left. Behind those old buildings follow the signs to cabins 1-3, then walk down a road farther back in the valley. This is FR 1135, “Old Roaring River Road.” You will have a nice canopy of large trees, and a short

walk will take you to water again. Especially in May this is a good spot for a Cerulean Warbler and you will see/hear Wood Thrushes. Blackburnian Warblers are possible the first couple of weeks of May, while Wood Thrush will serenade birders all summer long.

The road goes 2.2 miles before coming to FR 2212, where a left turn will take you back to Hwy.112 in 1.6 miles. NOTE: FR 1135 is not well-maintained and is often washed out. A high-clearance vehicle is necessary, or WALK it.

### “Warbler Woods”

This area along the river, called “Warbler Woods” was a favorite of some of Missouri’s best and fondly remembered birders. Here you will be following the footsteps of Rebecca Mathews, Betty Dyer and Pat Mahnkey.

By the fish cleaning station go across the bridge and turn left (Rt. F). Rt. F will take you across another bridge (watch for Cliff Swallows) and then you will turn right by the nature center. Stay on that road and go to the end of Campground #3. There is a large parking area.



Photo: Parking area showing fence in corner with Fish Crow nest in tree beyond. From this parking area, Camp Smokey is on the hill on your left. “Warbler Woods” is straight ahead beyond the left end of the chain link fence. There is a one lane paved road that leads to it with a small turn-around, but it is probably



better to park here by the chain link fence.

[In 2013, Jeff Cantrell documented a Fish Crow nest in the sycamore tree beyond the fence in the photo. It may be the first Fish Crow nest documented in southwest Missouri.]



Photo: Small parking area/turn around near entrance to “Warbler Woods”.

In the area near the sign/gate at the entrance to “Warbler Woods” at the turn around, you should find Nothorn Parula, Kentucky, Black-and-White, Yellow-throated and possibly Blue-winged Warblers, and White-eyed Vireos. Birding during March and April here will likely turn up scores of Myrtle Yellow-Rumped Warblers and both species of kinglets.

This trail runs right along the “wild” part of the river and you should get everything expected in similar habitat except Prothonotary Warbler, which have not been found here. Before you get to the “bluff” head-on right-angle of the trail, you may find nesting pairs of Hooded and Kentucky Warblers. This small bluff forcing the trail to turn right will hold Gray Catbirds, Eastern Phoebe and White-eyed Vireos. During spring migration a birder will have a good chance at transient Wilson’s, Golden-winged, and Mourning Warblers and scores of American



Redstarts.

You will also get Hooded Warbler again along this trail after two “dips” (where small, usually dry creeks cross the trail). Your best view of Hooded Warbler should be at the end of the second dip, where there is a lot of secondary growth.

Even though the trail suffered from a very bad storm in 2012, and several big trees were lost, you may see an old eagle nest that Great Horned Owls have used in the past, and you might find a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron nest.



Photo: Camp Smokey Entrance

At the top of the hill, left of the parking area for “Warbler Wood” is Camp Smokey. This is a group camp and will be off-limits if a camp is in session. In spring and summer there should be Yellow-throated Vireos, both orioles, Blue Grosbeaks, and lots of Chipping Sparrows.

It offers good winter birding, with Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warblers, Cedar Waxwings, and Pine Siskins in those nice old cedars. Check the sky for Black Vultures all year long.

## ROARING RIVER CONSERVATION AREA

From the park nature center, go right (east) on Rt. F. You will go just under 2 miles to the Roaring River CA parking lot, (the sign will be on Chute Ridge on your left, the parking lot on your right).



Photo: Parking lot, Roaring River Conservation Area

There are two fisherman trails here. The entrance to the long trail to the river is between the two posts at the side of the lot. It starts parallel to the highway. Though longer, this trail is not as difficult as the shorter trail. Follow this trail to the little brook and continue to follow it to the canebrakes at the river. Swanison's Warbler has nested in this cane. It may be heard about 10-20 yards down river from where you first run into the cane. Playback vocals are discouraged here to keep from disturbing this rare species and its territorial and possible nesting behavior.

The beginning of the short trail is to the left, just off the corner of the parking lot, heading directly toward the river from the only large tree (honey locust) by the lot. This trail has a place with a steep drop down of about 3 feet that may be too treacherous for some.





Photo: Short trail

This trail takes you to a great spot for nesting Wood Thrushes. Also present along the trail are Ovenbirds, Eastern Towhees, Kentucky and Blue-winged Warblers and Northern Parulas, but the real draw is the possibility of finding a Swainson's Warbler.

## MARK TWAIN NATIONAL FOREST ALONG RT. F

### Chute Ridge Glade

Step across the highway from the conservation area parking lot and enjoy Chute Ridge Glade. This is one of the showiest wildflower areas in southwest Missouri and the birds are a bonus. There are at least six pairs of breeding Prairie Warblers on this side of the knob, Yellow-breasted Chats, Summer Tanagers, Field Sparrows, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and much more are to be found here.

Although not the best spot for Painted Bunting, a pair has nested right by the Conservation Area sign in several years. Watch for a singing male on the wire.

In June, calamint will fill the air and the glade will be in full bloom. Birders who bring an Ozark Wildflower Field Guide along for their walk will be glad they did.





Photo: Sunday, 09 June 2013, just across the road from RRCA parking lot.

## PRIVATE LANDS SOUTHEAST OF THE PARK

### Painted Bunting Hot Spot

From the RRCA parking lot turn right, drive along Chute Ridge for a short while and in about 2 ½ miles you will come to the MO 86 junction.

If you want a diversion, the first right, CR 1162, leads past a cemetery. Park at it for a nice walk along a neotropic-filled county road. During migration this is a good spot for lots of species. Eastern Kingbirds will be in high numbers and Olive-sided Flycatchers at the right in dead branches across Roaring River. As of 2013, water washed out the road, and it is not advisable to go beyond the cemetery. If you take this road, come back to the highway by the way you went in.

At the Rt. F and MO 86 junction, turn right toward Eagle Rock. In only about ½ mile you will see Roaring River Southern Baptist Church. Turn right just past the church, on CR 2260.

You will go about 2 ½ miles, going over Roaring River, en route. Watch carefully

for a sharp right turn by a house on the left. It is close to the road, with a big garden and Purple Martin house.

From now on, this section of road is fantastic, especially during migration. Expect Bobolinks, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and much more.



Photo: View on the right directly past the house on the sharp right curve

Before you start to go down the hill, stop. There is a slight pull off on the right. In breeding season, you should find Painted Bunting here. Watch the power line. Spish and he will most likely come from the left side. Scan the fencerow.





Photo: Painted Bunting favorite stretch of power line.

There are two more painted bunting territories at the bottom of the hill. At the intersection you should have one singing male to the left, but the landowner here may not be “birder friendly”, so use discretion. You might see nesting vultures in the barn (from the road).

Another Painted Bunting territory is at the intersection of CR 1162 and CR 2260, or barely to the right. Yellow-breasted Chats and Northern Bobwhite are here, too.

Turn around and come back the way you came in, but turn right and see the area local birders call “the highland” that is so good for migration birding. That “highland” is full of Bobolinks, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, orioles, Eastern Kingbirds, and Blue Grosbeaks in May.

## MARK TWAIN NATIONAL FOREST LANDS SOUTH OF THE STATE PARK

### Pine Warbler Habitat

From the Melton Conference Center, turn right and go south (uphill) on Highway

112 for 0.9 miles to Forest Service Road 1050 on the left. This road is not well marked. It is on the left (east) immediately south of a “faux” log cabin home with an RV shed. You may see the road number on a 3-foot high post after you turn. Turn left onto FR1050 and go 0.2 miles to a parking area on the left. Check the pine trees on the opposite side of the road for Pine and Yellow-throated Warbler.

### Butler Hollow

From the Melton Conference Center, turn right and go south (uphill) on Highway 112 for 3.1 miles to Sugar Camp Scenic Drive and turn left. This is Forest Service Road FR2275. Follow FR2275 for 1.4 miles to FR2280. Turn right onto FR2280 and go 0.6 miles to the cave. Look for Worm-eating and Hooded Warblers. At mile 0.7 there is another cave, at 0.9 the road crosses a creek bed, 1.0 there is a small turn around spot on the right. After the turn around spot, listen for Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warblers, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Follow the road another 0.7 mile to the intersection with FR2285. Turn around here and go back to Sugar Camp Scenic Drive.

### Cerulean Warbler Habitat

After returning to Sugar Camp Scenic Drive from Butler Hollow, turn right and go 0.3 mile to a curve at the top of a hill. Listen and watch for Ceruleans here. You can also go around the curve and head further east. When you see a red gate on the left about 3 miles down the road, start listening for Ceruleans. From this point down the hill for the next mile or so is a nesting area for them. Scarlet Tanager may also be in this area.

Toilets: Modern toilets and vault toilets are available throughout the park.

Camping: There are three large campgrounds in the park. Check with the park for details.

Hazards/Limitations: Parts of this area are subject to flooding. Roads may be washed out. Check conditions before driving the forest roads.

Nearby Birding Sites: Cassville City Greenway, Flag Spring CA, Pilot Knob CA.