

A Guide to Birding in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi

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In 1977 I prepared a guide to birding in Oktibbeha County for attendees at the 58th annual meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Society which was held on the Mississippi State University campus from 19-22 May of that year (Jackson 1977). Since then new birding areas have been explored, some old ones have been lost to development or natural succession, and some new bird species have been documented for the county. This revision has been prepared to introduce new visitors, especially attendees at the 104th stated meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, to our county and the best birding areas it has to offer.

Oktibbeha County in east-central Mississippi includes an edge of the black-belt prairie to the northeast, but before human settlement, was primarily what Kuchler (1964) refers to as oak-hickory-pine forest. Bernard Romans (1962:313) in 1771 briefly characterized what is probably now partly Oktibbeha County: "...we went to the Chickasaw nation, through a road leading in general over stiff clay land; saw very little else but white oak, and that no where tall, occasioned by the stiffness of the land; crossed only two rivers of note, one Nashooba, the other Oka teabee haw; no remarkable ascent or descent on the whole road; crossed many savannahs.."

Romans (op. cit.) also mentions considerable cultivation of the land by Choctaw Indians. During the past two centuries most of the remaining forest land was cleared for agriculture. By the 1930's depleted soils and economic depression resulted in much of the land reverting to second growth forest, although considerable acreage was kept in pasture and the county became known as the dairy capital of the South. Today there are fewer than half the number of dairy herds in the county that there were in 1956, and Oktibbeha County does not seem to be a major center for any agricultural product (Scott 1976). Various forest industries are important in the county, and over 148 thousand acres (51% of the county) was forested in 1976. Much

of the forested area is loblolly pine, but along the many stream bottoms there are still sizeable stands of hardwoods. Unfortunately, as a result of current and past forest management practices, there is little old forest. The Noxubee River (referred to by Romans, above, as the "Nashooba") flows along the southern boundary of the county through Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. Although a permanent stream and large enough to canoe, numerous logs that have fallen across the river require canoers to spend more time crawling over and around logs than paddling. For the hiker, though, there are numerous opportunities to cross the river. In the northern and eastern sections of the county, Cretaceous chalk is near the surface and, where streams have cut into the chalk, water is relatively clear and the hard beds provide enjoyable walking/wading. Good birding habitats are also provided by other aquatic environments such as the abundant farm ponds, the Oktibbeha County Lake, Bluff Lake, the Starkville and MSU sewage lagoons, and the aquaculture ponds on the MSU South farm.

The best bottomland forest habitats are those along the Noxubee River and its tributaries, and can be reached either by way of Oktoc Road or from Mississippi highway 25. The best open, grassland (*Andropogon*)/agricultural bottomlands are just north of Starkville along Mississippi highway 389. Fringes of black-belt prairie habitat and chalk-bottom creek habitats can be found along U.S. 82, the "Old West Point Road" (follow Glen St. north out of Starkville from highway 82), and along Sessums Rd. To really experience the black-belt prairie habitats, one must continue east into Lowndes County or northeast into Clay County. Pine and pine-hardwood forests are best developed to the south and west of Starkville along Mississippi highways 12 and 25 and at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge.

Some of the better birding areas in the county are described below and are indicated in Figure 1. Bird names refer to species as listed in The AOU Checklist of North American Birds (American Ornithologists' Union 1983).

1. Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge.--Slightly less than half of this 46,000 acre refuge is located in Oktibbeha County. This includes extensive pine-hardwood forest along Mississippi highway 25 and bottomland hardwood forest along Cypress Creek, the Noxubee River, and Oktoc Creek. Approximately 1200 acres of bottomland hardwood between Oktoc Creek and the Noxubee River were proposed for Wilderness status, but no action was taken on the proposal. At the moment, the area remains a wild and

beautiful mature bottomland hardwood forest. However, yellow paint daubed on by foresters suggests many of the older trees may soon be cut. During spring and fall a trek along the Noxubee River between the north levee of Bluff Lake and the east end of the Keeton Tower Rd. makes an enjoyable one-day hike. Black Vultures nest commonly in hollow logs and the hollowed bases of trees. Wood Ducks, all of our native woodpeckers except the Red-cockaded and Ivory-billed, and bottomland specialties such as Swainson's, Kentucky, Northern Parula, and Yellow-throated warblers can be found. There are many other good birding areas on the refuge, some of which are in Winston or Noxubee county. A few prime spots in Oktibbeha County are detailed below. For maps, bird checklists, and additional information, visit refuge headquarters near the southwest corner of Bluff Lake (open only on weekdays). Information can also be obtained by writing to the Refuge Manager, Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge, Brooksville, MS 39759.

2. Bluff Lake.--Only the northern end of this 1000-acre lake on Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge is in Oktibbeha County. This lake is home for several thousand ducks and geese each winter. Canada Geese are resident descendants of a captive flock that was introduced to the refuge several years ago. A new policy of the Fish and Wildlife Service has resulted in removal or deterioration of the Wood Duck boxes that were described in 1977 as providing homes for numerous cavity-nesting species. The decision to end the nest box program was apparently based on the assumption that adequate natural cavities were available. In the 1950's Bald Eagles nested in a cypress tree at the west end of the lake. They still regularly winter on the lake, as does an occasional Golden Eagle. Ospreys linger awhile during migration. Following a flood which washed out the dam, in 1979, fishing was prohibited in Bluff Lake and more emergent vegetation appeared there. Great Blue Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and Anhingas nested successfully in the cypress until fishing was reopened in 1983. The opening of fishing season on 1 March each year results in a flood of power boats and human activity on the lake -- and immediate departure of most remaining wintering birds. Although nesting colonial waterbirds have disappeared, a canoe trip through the cypress during the spring and summer can be rewarding. Wood Ducks, Eastern Kingbirds, Prothonotary Warblers, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Great Crested Flycatchers, Acadian Flycatchers, Green-backed Herons, Red-winged Blackbirds, and many other species pay little heed to a silent canoe passing by. In late

summer the lake is lowered to allow growth of food plants for wintering ducks. The resulting mud flats attract large numbers of wading birds - including post-breeding Wood Storks, although their numbers have declined dramatically in recent years and in some years they have not appeared at all. Up to 200 or more Black and Turkey vultures congregate around the south and west areas of the lake in dead trees during late summer and often remain through the winter. Winter months also generally bring Double-crested Cormorants, an occasional Common Loon, and a few Horned Grebes. Gulls and terns are not common in the area, but show up regularly during migration and in winter.

3. North Levee Trail.--In 1977, the north levee of Bluff Lake was one of the favored birding areas in the county. It was called the "Bamboo Trail" because of dense stands of bamboo that arched over the levee for several hundred feet. Some of the bamboo was over 30 feet tall and six inches in diameter. Although an exotic species that was planted there in the 1940s, the bamboo attracted numerous visitors, both human and feathered. The bamboo and all of the other vegetation that was along the north levee at Bluff Lake were bulldozed and the levee was reinforced with large rocks following the flood of 1979. Although vegetation was also cleared on the forest side of the levee, this is still a fruitful birding area. The top of the levee was graded as a service road, and a walk down the approximately 1-mile length provides good vantage points for observing aquatic birds on the lake, and forest and edge birds away from the lake. Gone, however, are the close views of nesting birds and the large flocks of roosting winter finches. Gone too is the shade, so this is not a hike for a hot afternoon!

4. Pete's Slough.--This cypress slough is not readily accessible, but is an attractive area for the birder willing to hike through brambles and maybe do a little wading. In past years Great Blue Herons and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons have nested in the tops of the cypresses in the slough. The character of this slough is unlike that of the cypress areas at the west edge of Bluff Lake in that the trees are more dense and much less sunlight reaches the water. The slough begins about 2 miles east of highway 25 and 150-200 yards south of the Keeton Tower Road.

5. Mississippi State University Forest.--This forest borders Mississippi highway 25 and its boundary adjoins Noxubee

National Wildlife Refuge in many areas. While managed primarily for forest products and used as a training and experimental area for forestry students from Mississippi State University, the area also provides a lot of good birding. Much of the area is pine-hardwood forest, though bottomland hardwood habitats occur along Chinchahoma Creek. Two Red-cockaded Woodpecker colonies were active on the forest in 1977, but both have since been abandoned, apparently as a result of management activities. The young pine plantations in the area provide habitat for Prairie Warblers. Older pine forests have such southern specialties as Brown-headed Nuthatches and Chuck-will's-Widows.

6. Dorman Lake.--This 12-acre lake on the Mississippi State University Forest is surrounded by pine-hardwood forest on all sides. Brown-headed Nuthatches are common in the pines around the picnic area to the east. Prothonotary Warblers nest in several of the dead trees along the upper arms of the lake, and Swainson's Warblers have been seen along the ephemeral streams that feed into and from the lake. A trail leads from the picnic area around the lake. Dorman Lake is about 9 miles south of Starkville and about a mile east of highway 25. The road to the lake is at the top of a hill and is well-marked by a sign directing you to the lake.

7. Starkville Sewage Disposal Ponds.--In fall and winter these are used by a number of species of waterfowl. Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks are common along the edges in summer. The ponds can be reached by taking the first gravel road to the southeast from highway 25 as you drive toward Starkville from Emerson Elementary School.

8. Mississippi State University Campus.-- The main campus of Mississippi State University is well-landscaped and provides habitat for many bird species. Warblers are abundant in the large water oaks and sugarberry trees during migration. Flocks of 200 or more Cedar Waxwings or American Goldfinches can often be found on campus from February through early May. Barn Owls have nested on campus, but none has been seen in the past few years. During the Wilson Ornithological Society meeting in 1977, there was an active nest in a hollow of a large post oak just outside of the Student Union. Unfortunately, the tree died and was removed, and the owls have not been seen since. Past campus nest sites have included a large oak near Rice Dormitory, and concrete supports under the stadium. Northern Flickers have excavated numerous cavities along the eaves of Herbert Hall, and the flickers, as well as American Kestrels, have nested there

for several years. The wooded areas at the edge of campus, and Eckie's Pond near the President's home, provide good birding. The Ed Roberts Nature Trail extends along the north and east edges of campus, keeping as much as possible to the wooded and undeveloped areas. One of the best segments loops through the woods behind Hamlin Hall. The entrance to the trail is not well marked. To find it, go to the parking lot behind Hamlin and follow the entrance drive straight back to the edge of the woods. Turn west and the entrance should be within about 100 feet. The trail emerges from the woods just behind the Baptist Student Center. At that point, cross the road and pick up the trail again to the south of the Methodist Student Center. This section of the trail is not well used now since much of the trail was replaced by a large parking lot behind McKee Hall. Even the parking lot has its interest, however, since the grading at the east edge has bared a Cretaceous chalk bed that is rich in fossils. The trail picks up again at the southeast corner of the parking lot and continues to Eckie's Pond. Habitat along the trail varies from mature hardwoods, to second growth hardwoods, to edge habitats, to pine woods, to grassland. It is not really "wild," but it is a pleasant trail along which birds of disturbed areas, hardwood forest, and forest edge can readily be found. A campus map can be obtained at the Information Desk in the MSU Student Union.

9. Mississippi State University South Farm.--Located just south of the MSU campus and reached from Spring St. or by travelling straight south from campus on Stone Blvd., the MSU South Farm is primarily pasture land, but also includes a number of aquaculture ponds and some small second-growth forest areas. A large ditch through the center of the South Farm (Catalpa Creek) provides habitat for hundreds of nesting Red-winged Blackbirds, a few pairs of Belted Kingfishers, and a few Rough-winged Swallows. Northern Harriers can be found in the fields during fall and winter, and American Kestrels and Loggerhead Shrikes commonly use utility wires and fences as hunting perches. Water Pipits frequent bare wet areas in winter. Numerous shorebirds are attracted to the aquaculture ponds when they are drained in fall. Bobolinks are regular visitors along the roadsides during spring migration (late April, May). A 23-acre ecological research area at the east edge of the South Farm provides habitat for Chuck-will's-Widows and other woodland birds.

10. Mississippi State University North Farm.--This area, bordering U.S. highway 82 just north of the main campus, is used

primarily for crop research, although a dairy farm is at the west edge. Two sewage lagoons provide habitat for wintering waterfowl and a few waders. Sand Creek runs along the north border of the farm and also attracts shorebirds. The bare fields are good places for Horned Larks and Water Pipits in winter and for Golden Plovers during spring migration. Culverts along U.S. 82 adjacent to the North Farm support large colonies of Barn Swallows.

11. Cedar Bluff Road-Sun Creek.--The bridge just west of Sun Creek is the only known recent nest site of Eastern Phoebes in the county. The bottomland along the creek at this point often supports concentrations of ducks, geese, and wading birds during winter.

12. Hillbrook Subdivision.--The grassy hills of this subdivision are still used each spring as a display ground by courting American Woodcock. The birds can be heard and sometimes seen in their display almost any evening from late January through early March. Displays begin shortly before dark and may continue until well after midnight. However, there have been fewer woodcock in the area since 1977, probably because of the added houses in the subdivision and the growth of trees where there were open fields. To reach the area, take Oktoc Road toward Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. Approximately 1.5 miles south of the junction of Oktoc and Blackjack roads, a paved road branches to the right just before Oktoc crosses a small creek. Take the right hand road. The woodcock are most often heard near the back of the subdivision in grassy areas.

13. Oktibbeha County Lake.--This 700-acre lake and the surrounding pine-hardwood forests provide good birding most of the year. During late summer the water level of the lake is lowered and extensive mud flats attract numbers of shorebirds and other waders, including occasional Wood Storks. Waterfowl also winter on the lake, though not in the numbers found at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. The best birding area is at the west end of the lake, where a gravel road separates the main lake from a shallow marsh area. Oktibbeha County Lake is approximately 7 miles northwest of Starkville and is reached by a paved county road which turns north from U.S. highway 82 at Adaton. A large sign on the highway directs you to the lake.

14. Blocker's Farm.--This prime winter birding area was not included in the 1977 guide. The site is an extensive cleared bottomland area belonging to the Blocker family. The

area floods each winter and attracts hundreds of waterfowl. It has been a consistent spot for occasional Tundra Swans; Bald Eagles and Northern Harriers are regular winter visitors. The land is posted, but a spotting scope provides adequate viewing from the gravel county road that runs along the edge of the property. To reach this area, take Oktoc Road south toward Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. Just beyond the Oktoc Community Center (which is a conspicuous landmark on the left about 9 miles south of the MSU campus) is Gentry's Store and a gravel road to the right. Turn onto this road and follow it. In about 2.5 miles, you reach a 4-way stop. Continue straight ahead. In less than a mile the road drops into the Warrior Creek bottom. The flooded areas that are most productive are on the left just before and just after the main road makes a sharp curve to the right.

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