

BIRDING AT FREEZOUT LAKE



A BIRDING GUIDE
 BY MICHAEL T. SCHWITTERS
 CHOTEAU, MONTANA
 FOURTH EDITION, APRIL 2019

Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) offers a diverse seasonal variety of birding opportunities that are typical of a shortgrass prairie marsh habitat. This birding guide is based on 35 years of birding the Area by the author and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks staff. This guide presents a checklist of 237 species with each bird's status, seasonal abundance, and average date of first appearance. Also, a map of the area, annotated to show good spots for observation and species likely to be seen, is included. Additional information describing seasonal birding highlights is included as are some tips that may prove helpful.

Photos: Top to bottom - Lesser Snow Geese, Clark's Grebe & American Avocet

Seasonal Birding Highlights

Spring Waterfowl Migration – Often before the ice is out, late in February, Canada Geese return to Freezout. Soon after the whistling calls of Northern Pintail are heard—often tens of thousands are present. Next come the Tundra Swans, up to 10,000 birds around the middle of March. Large flocks of white geese stop over to feed in surrounding fields, enroute to their arctic nesting grounds after wintering in central California. The Snow Geese normally peak the last week of March. By mid-April, more than half of the white geese in the flocks are Ross's Geese. Look carefully for the rare dark or "blue" phase Ross. Throughout March and April, large numbers of ducks are moving through or arriving to nest. Eurasian Wigeon are present in flocks of American Wigeon. Large numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers can be seen. In the first half of April, the Main Lake can be filled with huge numbers of Ruddy Ducks, Eared Grebe, and American Coot.

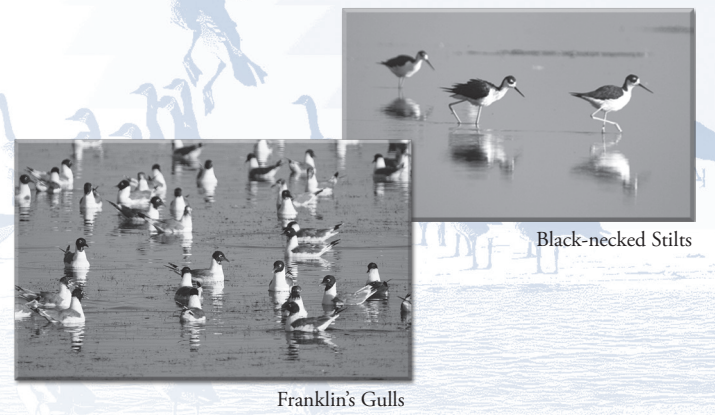
Spring Shorebird Migration – By mid-April, the shorebirds are beginning to be seen in the shallows. American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, and yellowlegs have arrived by the end of April. May brings the balance of the shorebird migration. Although there are never massive numbers of shorebirds at Freezout, the variety is very good (36 species have been recorded by the author). Always take time to look for rare shorebirds.

Nesting Season – Freezout produces thousands of young birds each summer. The Canada Geese chicks appear the first week in May. Many birds are courting and displaying at this time. Common Terns, Double-crested Cormorants, California, Ring-billed and Franklin's gulls, Eared and Western Grebes, and Black-crowned Night-herons crowd the islands and selected patches of bulrushes. In June, broods of ducks form little rafts of down escaping your approach. By the last two weeks of June, grebes are frequently seen with "baby on board."

Waterfowl Summer Molt – By late June the bright mating plumage of the male ducks begins to be replaced by brown. By July, it is "brown duck time." The summer molt presents a challenge for identification. The drab plumage can be discouraging, but this is somewhat compensated by an influx of new ducks from as far as California for the food and security offered at Freezout during their flightless time.

Shorebird Summer/Fall Migration – By early July, yellowlegs returning from arctic breeding grounds mark the beginning of the return flow of shorebirds. By August any mudflat will have a good variety of shorebirds. Certain species will be more common than during the spring. Baird's Sandpipers, Red-necked Phalaropes, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Common Snipe are examples.

- A.** Grebe City: bulrush patch across the water to the west. Breeding area for grebes, American Coots, and Black-crowned Night-herons. Forster's Terns nest here, too.
- B.** The "Thumb": The shoreline along this road is a good spot for shorebirds. Savannah Sparrows nest in the grass.
- C.** Southeast corner of the Main Lake: A consistently good view spot for waterfowl, grebes and in season shorebirds.
- D.** The Garage: One of the few spots for passerines, Yellow Warblers, House Wrens, and in summer, Western Wood-pewees are good bets. Great Horned Owls nest here in early spring. Swainson's Hawks nest here, too.
- E.** Southeast corner of Area: Bushes & trees near this old farmstead are favorite haunts of Brewer's Blackbird, Eastern Kingbird, and in spring migration, several sparrow species. Winter cover for Ring-necked Pheasants.
- F.** Look along this road for Chestnut-collared Longspurs and Baird's Sparrows. Long-billed Curlews and Western Meadow-larks nest here.
- G.** A pleasant drive through short grass prairie with good views of the Main Lake. Some rattlesnakes here.
- H.** Good views of the south end of Pond 4. Often many waterfowl. Chestnut-collared Longspurs by the parking area; watch for snakes.
- I.** Road back to the highway: Vesper Sparrows and Lark Buntings on the fence wires, Say's Phoebe nest in the old homestead. Look for Upland Sandpipers on fence posts. This gumbo road eats cars when wet! AVOID WHEN WET.
- J.** Many sparrows along this road including Vesper and Clay colored. View of Pond 1, but a spotting scope is needed.
- K.** Pond 1, often filled with waterfowl. Snow Geese rest here and Tundra Swans feed in early spring. The two islands on the left, close in, are colonized by Common Terns. American White Pelicans frequent these waters in the summer. This is one of the few spots where good sun angles are found in the afternoons.
- L.** Pond 4, often lots of waterfowl and gulls. During migration, Tundra Swans feed in the shallow pond. In dry years it can draw down to mud flats for many shorebirds.
- M.** Highway by Pond 3. Openings in the bulrushes can give you the closest views of ducks and American Coot. Black Terns nest here. Migrating White-faced Ibis stop here to rest and feed. **Pull well off the road to avoid traffic.**
- N.** Check out the bay of the Main Lake and the points on either side. The north point can be very good for shorebirds.
- P.** The Neck. This is the best birding spot on the Area. Marsh Wrens and Sora nest in the rushes. Shorebirds are present in great diversity, especially in dry years. A spotting scope is needed here for best views. Pond 5 from here gives good looks at waterfowl and grebes. Forster's Terns are here.
- Q.** Pond 5 boat launch, a good view of the east part of Pond 5. Marsh Wrens in the rushes; ducks in the water. The Red-necked Grebes nest here.
- R.** Priest Lake, 1½ miles northwest of the main area. Turn off Highway 89 onto the road going down to the water, but stop just after going through the gate. The large island is a major nesting spot for Canada Geese. The deeper waters here attract diving ducks. In spring there is nearly always a Common Loon out in the lake. White geese rest here during their migrations. Some rare species have been seen here, including White-winged Scoter and Long-tailed Duck (Nov.).
- S.** Priest Butte. Pull off on the east side of Highway 89 at the locked gate, a high point to view the north part of the lake. Priest Butte (State land) dominates the view west. Cliff Swallows nest on the cliffs. Raptors use the updrafts. (The three crosses have served as a setting for a Choteau church's Easter sunrise services.) Watch for traffic when returning to the highway.
- T.** Choteau...motels, restaurants, shopping and fuel. Camping at the City Park (birding, too) and a KOA just east of town. Choteau serves as a good stop-over point for birding the Rocky Mountain Front and Glacier Park.



Northern Pintail



Short-eared Owl

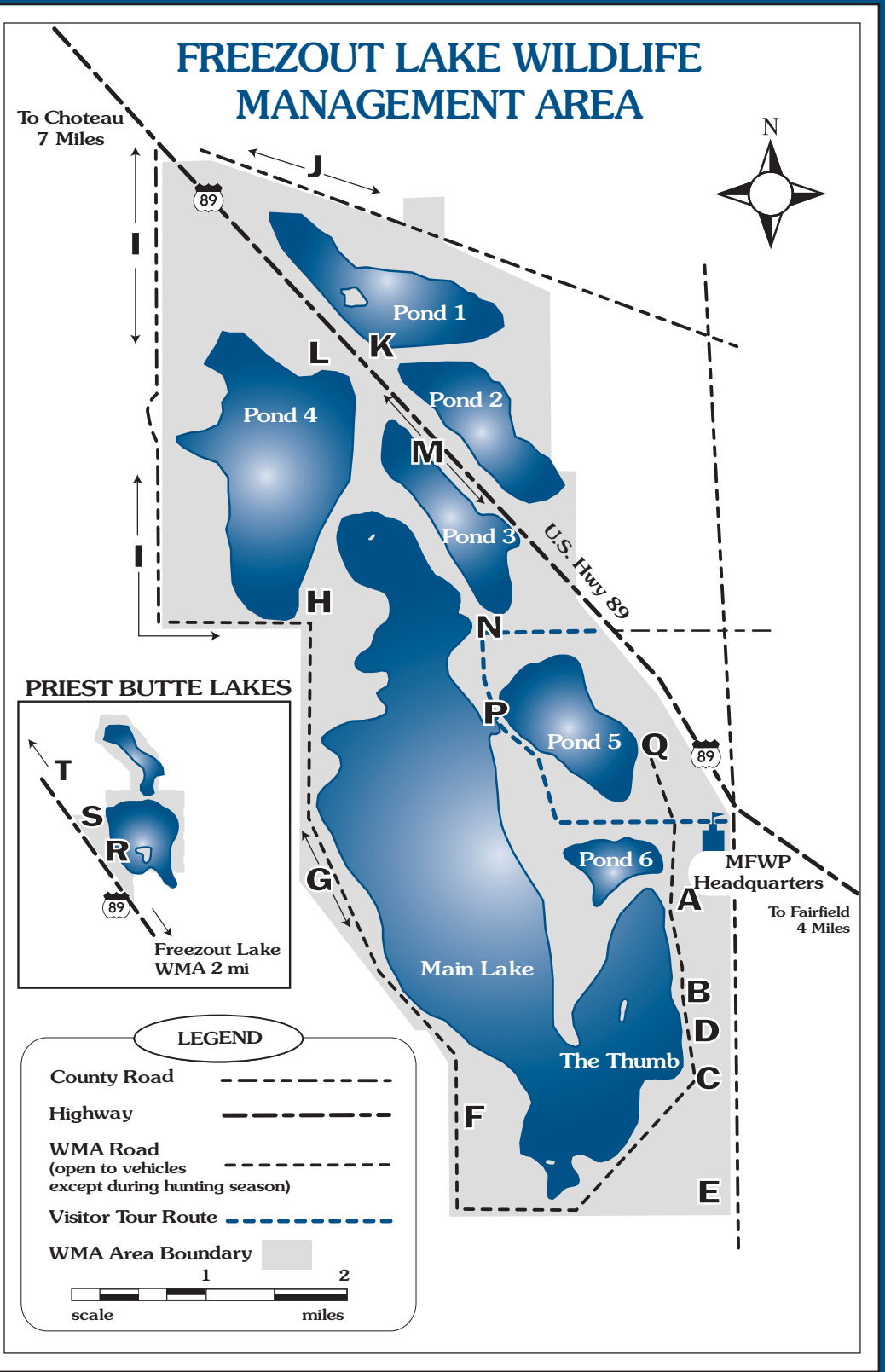


Non-Game Tax Checkoff

Printed on recycled paper



FWP Region 4
 4600 Giant Springs Rd.
 Great Falls, MT 59405-0901
 406-454-5840



Birds of the Freezout Lake WMA

These species have been observed by the author at least once in 35 years of observation on the Area and along the roads bordering the Area.

Status (STATUS) is defined as follows:

- B** – Direct evidence of breeding
- b** – Indirect evidence of breeding
- t** – Observed, no evidence of breeding
- W** – Overwintering
- w** – Observed, December 15 - February 15
- (#)** – Number of times observed by author

These definitions are those of P. D. Skaar's *Montana Bird Distribution*.

Seasons of occurrence:

- SP** – March - May
- S** – June - July
- F** – August - November
- W** – December - February

These seasons correspond to the four seasons as published in *North American Birds*.

Relative abundance by season:

- a** – Abundant, common species, very numerous
- c** – Common, likely to be seen in suitable habitat
- u** – Uncommon, present but may not be seen
- o** – Occasional, seen only a few times a season
- r** – Rare, seen only once a year or less
- v** – Vagrant, seen only once or twice in 10 years

FIRST – Average date of first observation (month/day)

- Res** – Resident
- *** – Observations not yet recognized by the Montana Bird Records Committee

SPECIES	STATUS	SP	S	F	W	FIRST
1___ Greater White-fronted Goose	t	o	r			3/02
2___ Lesser Snow Goose	t,w	a	r	a	r	3/06
3___ Ross's Goose	t	c	c			3/17
4___ Cackling Goose	t	r	r			
5___ Canada Goose	B,W	c	c	c	u	2/09
6___ Trumpeter Swan	t	o	r	o		3/24
7___ Tundra Swan	t	a	r	a		3/05
8___ Wood Duck	t	r	o			6/20
9___ Gadwall	B	c	c	u		3/19
10___ Eurasian Wigeon	t	u	v			3/12
11___ American Wigeon	B,w	a	c	c	r	3/06
12___ Mallard	B,W	a	c	a	u	2/06
13___ Blue-winged Teal	B	c	c	c		4/13
14___ Cinnamon Teal	B	a	c	c		4/05
15___ Northern Shoveler	B	a	a	c		3/19
16___ Northern Pintail	B,w	a	c	c	r	3/04
17___ Green-winged Teal	B	a	c	a		3/15

SPECIES	STATUS	SP	S	F	W	FIRST
18___ Canvasback	B	c	c	c		3/13
19___ Redhead	B	c	c	u		3/11
20___ Ring-necked Duck	t	u	u	o		3/20
21___ Tufted Duck*	(1)	v				
22___ Greater Scaup	t	r	v			3/15
23___ Lesser Scaup	B	c	u	u		3/19
24___ Surf Scoter	(3)		r			10/26
25___ White-winged Scoter	(3)	v	r			10/24
26___ Long-tailed Duck	t		r			11/06
27___ Bufflehead	t	c	u	u		3/21
28___ Common Goldeneye	t,W	c	o	o	o	2/16
29___ Barrow's Goldeneye	t	o	o	r		3/27
30___ Hooded Merganser	t	r	r	r		3/19
31___ Common Merganser	t,w	r			r	3/20
32___ Red-breasted Merganser	t	c				4/04
33___ Ruddy Duck	B	a	c	u		4/06
34___ Gray Partridge	B,W	u	u	u	u	Res
35___ Ring-necked Pheasant	B,W	c	c	c	c	Res
36___ Sharp-tailed Grouse	t,W	u	o	u	u	Res
37___ Pacific Loon	(1)		v			
38___ Common Loon	t	u	r	o		4/16
39___ Yellow-billed Loon	(1),w			v		
40___ Pied-billed Grebe	B	c	u	u		5/09
41___ Horned Grebe	B	o	o	o		4/30
42___ Red-necked Grebe	B	u	u	o		4/25
43___ Eared Grebe	B	a	c	u		4/10
44___ Western Grebe	B	c	c	c		4/20
45___ Clark's Grebe	B	u	u	u		4/26
46___ American White Pelican	t	c	c	c		4/04
47___ Double-crested Cormorant	B	c	c	c		4/11
48___ American Bittern	B	o	o	r		5/12
49___ Great Blue Heron	t	u	u	u		4/12
50___ Great Egret	(3)	v	v			5/28
51___ Snowy Egret	t	r	v			
52___ Cattle Egret	(3)	v	v			
53___ Black-crowned Night-Heron	B	c	c	u		4/25
54___ Glossy Ibis	(1)		v			
55___ White-faced Ibis	B	o	o	r		5/26
56___ Turkey Vulture	(2)	v				3/22
57___ Osprey	B	o	c			5/04
58___ Bald Eagle	t,W	r	r	u		1/29
59___ Northern Harrier	B,W	c	c	c	u	2/12
60___ Sharp-shinned Hawk	(2)	v	v			4/16
61___ Cooper's Hawk	(2)		v			9/20
62___ Northern Goshawk	(2)	v				3/27
63___ Swainson's Hawk	B	c	c	u		5/03
64___ Red-tailed Hawk	B	u	o	o		4/01

SPECIES	STATUS	SP	S	F	W	FIRST
65___ Ferruginous Hawk	(3)	r				5/05
66___ Rough-legged Hawk	t,W	o	v	o	u	1/30
67___ Golden Eagle	t,W	o	o	o	u	2/06
68___ American Kestrel	t	o	r			4/22
69___ Merlin	t,w		r	r		9/19
70___ Gyrfalcon	t,w	r	r	r		5/27
71___ Peregrine Falcon	t	r				4/03
72___ Prairie Falcon	B	o	o			5/03
73___ Virginia Rail	B	r	r			7/05
74___ Sora	B	u	u	o		5/06
75___ American Coot	B	c	c	c		3/17
76___ Sandhill Crane	t	o	r			4/08
77___ Black-bellied Plover	t	o	r	o		5/22
78___ American Golden Plover	t	v	v	v		8/16
79___ Snowy Plover*	(1)	v				
80___ Semipalmated Plover	t	o	o	o		5/15
81___ Piping Plover	(4)	v	v			5/24
82___ Killdeer	B	c	c	c		3/11
83___ Black-necked Stilt	B	c	u	u		4/16
84___ American Avocet	B	c	c	u		4/06
85___ Spotted Sandpiper	t	o	r	o		5/13
86___ Solitary Sandpiper	t	r	r			5/16
87___ Greater Yellowlegs	t	u	o	u		4/09
88___ Willet	B	c	u	u		4/21
89___ Lesser Yellowlegs	t	c	o	c		4/17
90___ Upland Sandpiper	B	u	u			5/16
91___ Whimbrel	t	r				5/09
92___ Long-billed Curlew	B	u	o	o		4/17
93___ Hudsonian Godwit	t	r	r			7/23
94___ Marbled Godwit	B	c	u	u		4/22
95___ Ruddy Turnstone	t	r	r			6/04
96___ Purple Sandpiper	(1)		v			11/13
97___ Red Knot	t	r	v			5/23
98___ Sanderling	t	u	r			6/18
99___ Semipalmated Sandpiper	t	u	o	u		5/11
100___ Western Sandpiper	t	o	r			6/07
101___ Least Sandpiper	t	u	o	u		5/10
102___ White-rumped Sandpiper	(2)	v				
103___ Baird's Sandpiper	t	u	u			5/15
104___ Pectoral Sandpiper	t	r	u			7/25
105___ Dunlin	t	r	v			5/06
106___ Curlew Sandpiper	(1)	v				
107___ Stilt Sandpiper	t	r	r	r		6/07
108___ Short-billed Dowitcher	t	r				
109___ Long-billed Dowitcher	t	c	u	c		5/07
110___ Wilson's Snipe	b	c	u	u		4/21
111___ Wilson's Phalarope	B	c	c	c		4/29
112___ Red-necked Phalarope	t	u	u			5/18
113___ Red Phalarope	(2)	v	v			

SPECIES	STATUS	SP	S	F	W	FIRST
114___ Franklin's Gull	B	c	c	c		4/10
115___ Little Gull	(2)		o			10/11
116___ Bonaparte's Gull	t	o	r	u		5/18
117___ Ring-billed Gull	B	c	u	u		3/12
118___ California Gull	B	c	u	u		3/09
119___ Herring Gull	t	v	v			7/14
120___ Glaucous Gull*	(1)		v			
121___ Sabine's Gull	t		v			9/27
122___ Caspian Tern	B	r	r			6/01
123___ Black Tern	B	u	c	u		5/23
124___ Common Tern	B	c	c	c		4/26
125___ Forster's Tern	B	c	c	u		4/30
126___ Parasitic Jaeger*	(2)		v			9/04
127___ Rock Pigeon	b,W	o	o	o	r	2/26
128___ Eurasian Collared-Dove	(1)		v			
129___ Mourning Dove	B	u	u	u		4/25
130___ Great Horned Owl	B,W	u	u	u	u	Res
131___ Snowy Owl	t,w		v			
132___ Burrowing Owl	B	r	r			6/25
133___ Long-eared Owl	B	u	u	v	v	6/06
134___ Short-eared Owl	B,w	u	u	u	o	3/29
135___ Common Nighthawk	B	u	u			6/23
136___ Rufous Hummingbird	(1)	v				
137___ Belted Kingfisher	(2)		v	v		7/14
138___ Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	(1)		v			
139___ Red-napped Sapsucker	t	v	v			4/24
140___ Downy Woodpecker	t		v	r		8/16
141___ Hairy Woodpecker	(2)		v			
142___ Northern Flicker	t,w	r	r	r		5/02
143___ Western Wood Peewee	B		o	r		6/04
144___ Least Flycatcher	t	r	r			6/07
145___ Say's Phoebe	b	o	u	r		5/14
146___ Western Kingbird	B	o	o			5/27
147___ Eastern Kingbird	B	c	c	u		5/16
148___ Loggerhead Shrike	t	v				5/16
149___ Northern Shrike	t,W	r		u		1/17
150___ Warbling Vireo	(2)		v	v		8/12
151___ Red-eyed Vireo	(2)	v	v			
152___ Black-billed Magpie	B,W	c	c	c	u	Res
153___ American Crow	t	o	r			3/26
154___ Common Raven	t,w	o		o		2/25
155___ Horned Lark	b,W	u	u	u	c	
156___ Tree Swallow	b	u	r			4/18
157___ Violet-green Swallow	(2)	r	r			5/22
158___ Northern Rough-w Swallow	(2)	r				5/16

SPECIES	STATUS	SP	S	F	W	FIRST
159___ Bank Swallow	t	u	u	u		5/22
160___ Cliff Swallow	B	c	c	o		5/14
161___ Barn Swallow	B	c	c	u		4/28
162___ Black-capped Chickadee	(2)	v				3/12
163___ Mountain Chickadee	(2)		v			10/11
164___ Red-breasted Nuthatch	(2)	v	v			6/04
165___ Brown Creeper	(2)		v			10/09
166___ House Wren	B	o	o	o		5/20
167___ Winter Wren	(1)		v			
168___ Marsh Wren	B	c	c	o		4/07
169___ Golden-crowned Kinglet	(1)		v			
170___ Ruby-crowned Kinglet	(1)	v				5/15
171___ Mountain Bluebird	t	r				3/23
172___ Townsend's Solitaire	(2)	v				5/06
173___ Swainson's Thrush	(2)	v				5/16
174___ Hermit Thrush	(2)	v				5/14
175___ American Robin	B	c	c	u		3/17
176___ Gray Catbird	t	v	v	v		7/03
177___ Northern Mockingbird	(1)	v				
178___ Brown Thrasher	(1)	v				5/21
179___ European Starling	B,W	c	u	c	o	3/03
180___ American Pipit	t	o	r			5/01
181___ Sprague's Pipit	(2)		r			
182___ Bohemian Waxwing	(1)	v				
183___ Cedar Waxwing	t	r	r			5/18
184___ Tennessee Warbler	(2)	v	v			5/09
185___ Orange-crowned Warbler	t	v	r			5/19
186___ MacGillivray's Warbler	(1)	v				
187___ Nashville Warbler	(1)		v			
188___ Yellow Warbler	B	c	c	o		5/19
189___ Yellow-rumped Warbler	t	o	o			5/05
190___ Townsend's Warbler	(2)		v			9/13
191___ Palm Warbler	t		r			9/18
192___ Blackpoll Warbler	(2)	v				
193___ Black and White Warbler	(1)		v			
194___ American Redstart	(3)	v				5/28
195___ Northern Waterthrush	(2)	v				5/17
196___ Common Yellowthroat	B	u	u	u		5/18
197___ Wilson's Warbler	t	r	r			9/15
198___ Spotted Towhee	(1)	v				
199___ American Tree Sparrow	t,W	o		o		1/29
200___ Chipping Sparrow	t	o	o	r	o	5/22
201___ Clay-colored Sparrow	b	u	u	r		4/27
202___ Brewer's Sparrow	(1)		v			6/21
203___ Vesper Sparrow	B	c	c	u		5/01
204___ Lark Sparrow	t	r	r			5/19
205___ Lark Bunting	B	r	u	o		6/07

SPECIES	STATUS	SP	S	F	W	FIRST
206___ Savannah Sparrow	B	a	c	c		4/28
207___ Grasshopper Sparrow	(3)		r			
208___ Baird's Sparrow	b		o			
209___ Song Sparrow	t	r	r			4/10
210___ Lincoln's Sparrow	(2)		r			7/02
211___ White-throated Sparrow	t		v			9/24
212___ Harris' Sparrow	(3),w	v	v	v		2/02
213___ White-crowned Sparrow	t	o	r			5/03
214___ Dark-eyed Junco	t	r	r			4/08
215___ McCown's Longspur	B	r	r			