



BIRD WATCHERS'

# Roundtable

## BIRDS OF THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

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One of the most interesting areas for bird watching in North Carolina is the Blue Ridge Parkway. This elongated park of 469 miles follows the Appalachian crests from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. The Parkway is primarily for the motor recreationist, but numerous trails are designed to offer scenic vistas that make ideal areas for bird observation.

As a Park Ranger for the last three years I have become familiar with many birds of the Gillespie Gap area of the Parkway. This section begins at Grandfather Mountain (Mile Post 305) on the north and extends southward to Mt. Mitchell (Mile Post 355). The changing elevation (2,700 feet to 5,300 feet) and varying climate account for a wide range of habitats—seven major forest types, open fields, rivers, and streams.

Come with me on an imaginary field trip in early June and discover some of the bird life in these mountains. Let us begin at the Beacon Heights Trail (Mile Post 305) at the base of majestic Grandfather Mountain. Can you feel the coolness of the northern environment? It supports a forest of northern hardwoods and some spruce. Thus, the birds that we will see here have northern affinities. Watch and listen for the Winter Wren, Veery, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Solitary Vireo, Black-throated Green, Black-throated Blue, Chestnut-sided, and Canada Warblers. Approaching Beacon Heights, a large open outcrop of quartzite, we may see Carolina Slate-colored Juncos flitting in the Sand Myrtle. This is also an excellent vantage point from which to observe fall hawk migration.

Let us return to the cars and travel south to Flat Rock Nature Trail. The self-guiding leaflet provided for you at the beginning of the trail will help to interpret this forest. Can you feel the difference in the temperature here as compared to Beacon Heights? The intermediate to dry environment is ideal for the Closed-Oak Forest (formerly Oak-Chestnut Forest). This habitat is ideally suited for many of our woodland species—Downy Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Wood Thrush, and several warblers. The Flat Rock is similar to the outcrop at Beacon Heights, consisting of gray quartzite criss-crossed with "stringers" of white quartz. Listen for the "tip-churr" call of the Scarlet Tanager as we descend the trail.

Linville Falls Recreation Area is our next stop. Various habitats are found here including open fields, forest edge, river, Hemlock Forest, and Oak-Pine Forest. At this elevation (3,200 feet) we will see many of the middle elevation birds. First we will stop at River Bend parking area to look for the Louisiana Waterthrush, Parula, Yellow, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers. The Belted Kingfisher has often been seen at the nearby river. Let us continue on to the parking area to the falls.

Linville Falls Recreation area is 440 acres and was acquired through the donation of John D. Rockefeller Jr. The Linville River pours over the falls and flows through the Linville Gorge Wilderness. There are two trail systems that lead to several views of the falls. We will take the trail that leads from the right of the parking area. As we walk along observe the unusually large White Pine and both Carolina and Canada Hemlocks. Sections of the trail pass through a climax Hemlock Forest. Some of the largest Carolina Hemlocks in the world are found here. This mature forest has several layers of vegetation each supporting all kinds of animal life. The layers are the canopy (top), understory, shrub, herb, and finally the forest floor. Several species of birds can be observed nesting in each of these layers.

Insects may attract Scarlet Tanagers and Cerulean Warblers in the canopy. The understory layer is composed of low-growing trees such as dogwoods and hornbeams which attract nesting Catbirds, Solitary, and Red-Eyed Vireos. The shrub layer in this forest is composed mostly of Rosebay Rhododendron with some Mountain Laurel and Catawba Rhododendron, favorite nesting sites for the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Other species such as the ground-nesting Ovenbird and Ruffed Grouse build their nests beneath the shrubs. The herb layer is composed of green plants that have soft stems—flowers, ferns, mosses, and mushrooms. Kentucky Warblers are often found nesting here. The forest floor provides nesting sites for Rufous-sided Towhees and Brown Thrashers and also acts as a wastebasket for all the layers above. Erwin's View marks the destination of this trail with an excellent view of the falls. Linville Falls originated 12 miles downstream and over the past million years has gradually cut upstream to its present location.

The fields at the entrance to the Linville Falls spur road are ideal habitat for Eastern Kingbirds, Eastern Bluebirds, American Goldfinches, Brown-headed Cowbirds, Indigo Buntings, Chipping, Song, and Field Sparrows. How many of these did you see? Even unusual birds such as the Cattle Egret have been found here.

Our last stop will be at Crabtree Meadows Recreation Area, 23 miles south on the Parkway. The Carolina Rhododendron near Chestoa View and Bear Den Overlook should be in bloom. We should see several additional species—hawks, Yellow-shafted Flickers, Pileated Woodpeckers, and crows as we travel south. Pileated Woodpeckers can often be seen from Mile Post 318 to 320.

The Crabtree Meadows Recreation Area is 253 acres in size. There is a two-mile loop trail to Crabtree Falls through an Oak-Hickory Forest. In early May the Meadows and adjoining forests are ideal for spring wildflowers. Over 100 species bloom at this time of the year including Crested Iris, Pink and Yellow Lady Slippers, Showy Orchis, trilliums (many species), violets, and Fire Pink. May at Crabtree Meadows is also an excellent time for spring migrants. Some of the migrants that have been seen are Sora Rail, Blue Grosbeak, and Blackpoll Warbler.

As we walk to the falls you will see many species of birds we have already seen. The Black-billed and Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Least and Great Crested Flycatchers, and Brown Creepers have also been observed along the trail. Crabtree Falls marks the end of our field trip. Relax and enjoy the coolness and beauty found near the waterfalls before beginning the trail back.

I hope you will remember to include the Blue Ridge Parkway as one of your favorite birding areas. No promise is made that you will see all the aforementioned species on the various trails. However, what you do discover will more than likely surprise and delight you.

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