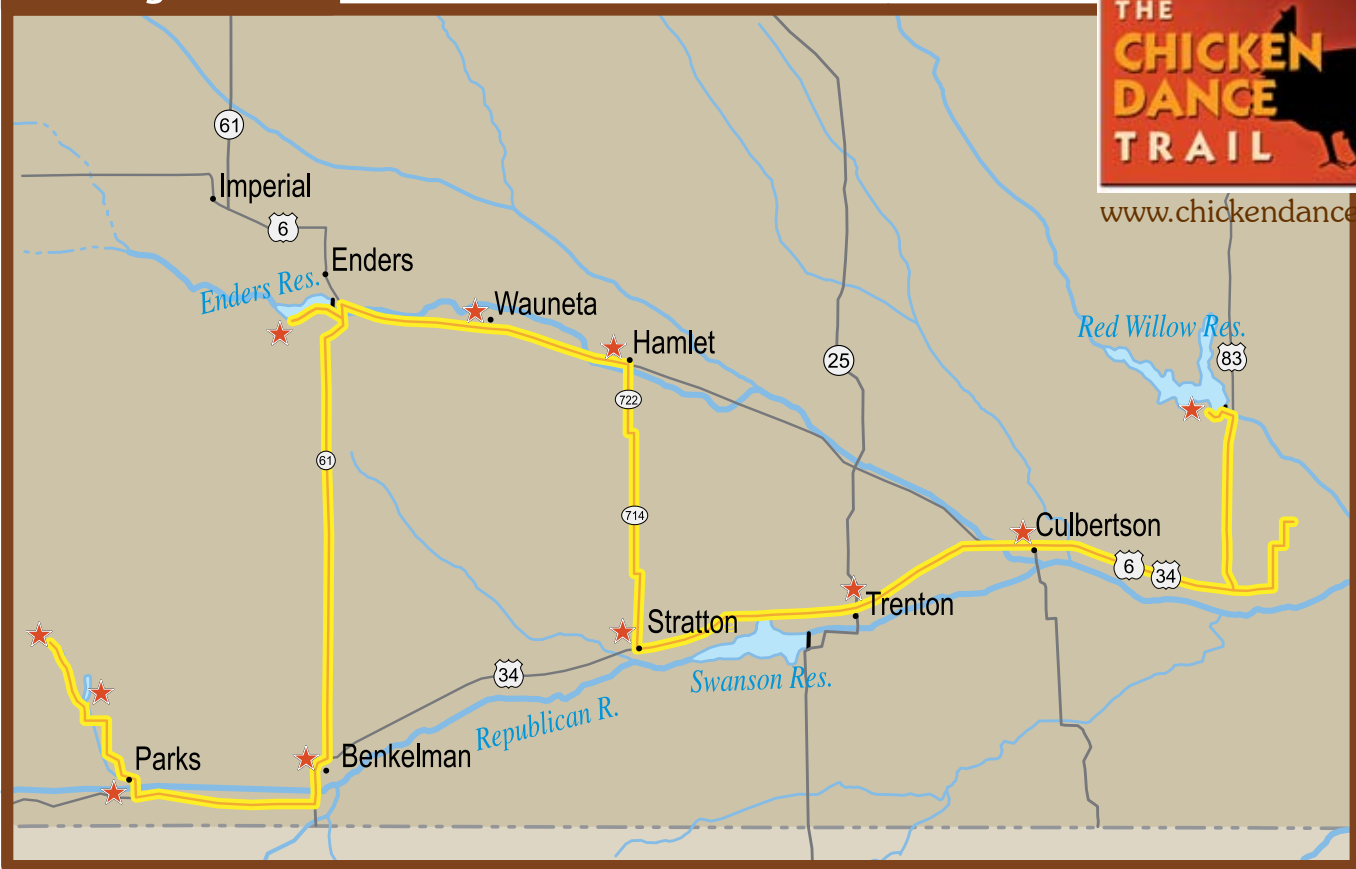


## Sandsage Prairie



## The Sandsage Prairie Adventure

If a real honest-to-goodness American birding adventure is what you're looking for, there are few better places to start one than in McCook, Nebraska. For one thing, native sand-sage prairies of this type are rare except in southwest Nebraska. Due to the rough topography and rocky soils, many parcels of sand-sage prairie have been left undisturbed, attracting – depending on the season – a remarkable variety of some of North America's most interesting birds, including Greater Prairie Chickens, Cassin's Sparrows, burrowing Owls and Lark Bunting.



### Barnett Park and Red Willow Diversion Dam

Approximate GPS Coordinates:  
40.492915 N  
-100.621033 S

We're starting our adventure in cool-crisp of early morning at Barnett Park, just a few minutes south of U.S. 6 and 34 on Highway 83. Right on the Republican River, Barnett Park is a favorite spot for local birders to look for water birds and song birds in the temperate months.

According to T.J. Walker, Nebraska Game and Parks biologist and an expert birder, the park is "good for water birds when it is not too busy, and the trees along the river are a good place to look for migrating warblers and other songbirds."

From Barnett Park, we drive to another favorite local birding site just a few minutes outside of town. Sometimes described as a "birdwatcher's paradise," the Red Willow Diversion Dam, comprises 56 acres of good birding habitat located east of the McCook airport. Use your odometer to get there: drive three miles north, one mile east, two miles north, and one mile east again.

The Red Willow Diversion Dam is a "must-see" for dedicated bird watchers because the habitat is rich and variable and attracts dozens of bird species. It is especially good for migrating sparrows and

# The Sandsage Prairie Adventure

warblers, and a small farm pond just over a mile east can be good for waterfowl and shorebirds.

---

## Red Willow Reservoir

Approximate GPS Coordinates:  
40.822124 N  
-100.643005 S

From the diversion dam, pick up U.S. 83 north and follow it to the well-marked entrance to Red Willow Reservoir and the Red Willow State Recreation Area.

Located 11 miles north of McCook, this reservoir, and the other reservoirs mentioned, often hold large concentrations of waterbirds such as grebes, ducks, geese, gulls and others with occasional rarities like Red-necked grebes and is considered one of Nebraska's prime birding areas. With some 4,320 acres of upland area to explore, you'll want to allow some extra time for Red Willow's varied habitats. As T.J. Walker writes, "The reservoir and the roads around it can take a day to bird thoroughly due to the diversity of habitats present at the reservoir." Look for burrowing owls in the prairie dog town near Spring Park. A white-faced ibis nests in the wetlands on the west side of the reservoir, and we spotted barn owls peering out of holes in the clay banks above the reservoir.



We see our job (and therefore the job of this Web site), as showing you as many great Nebraska birdwatching locations as we can get you to in a day, not taking into account how much time you might want to spend at each. How you decide to schedule the adventure is part of the fun. But on our adventure, this adventure, it

had been too long since our last meal, and luckily McCook has some great eating spots.

At the upper end, the Coppermill Steakhouse provides a full service restaurant, a gracious atmosphere and attentive service. Want faster food? Mac's Drive-In, is an old-fashioned drive-up/drive-in experience. Schmick's Market at the Junction of Highway 83 and U.S. 6 and 34, is a locally-owned restaurant serving tasty deli food along with traditional Midwestern breakfasts and lunches. (Try their Reuben sandwich, a meal in a sandwich and invented in Nebraska.)

For our part, we decide on the Sehnert's Bakery and the Bieroc Café located on historic Norris Avenue. Five generations of the Sehnert's family baked bread and served good food in Germany and now their restaurant is a favorite in McCook. We stopped at the Bieroc for some of their famous stollen bread, a sweet yeast bread containing fruit and nuts, a cappuccino and a picnic lunch to go.

---

## Swanson Reservoir and SRA

Approximate GPS Coordinates:  
40.647304 N  
-100.994568 S

At the risk of ruining our appreciation of these big, open reservoirs on the sand-sage prairie, we drive west toward Swanson Reservoir and Benkelman.

Now is the time to really appreciate the big-sky aspects of this Nebraska landscape. The dramatic, open country inspires us to stop to photograph the amazing scenery along with the picturesque villages rooted like wild plum thickets along the highway. In all of the sand-sage prairie region, keep your eye out any time of year for red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, Northern flicker, and horned lark. Sharp-eyed birders may also see black-capped chickadee or white breasted nuthatch.

Before long, we are able to see the eastern end of Swanson Reservoir. Swanson Reservoir SRA is the largest of the four state recreation areas in the region, comprising over 9,600 total acres. Situated right on the Republican River, Swanson SRA is a big area with lots of trails and good birding habitat. Check in at the marinas at the north shore or the south shore to pick up a map of the trails, lake, and wetlands. The trails are well marked, and we are told that not long ago, bird watchers noted 88 species of birds in one day on the trails around Swanson.



# The Sandsage Prairie Adventure

---

## Benkelman and Enders Reservoir

Approximate GPS Coordinates:  
40.726446 N  
-101.486206 S

When we get to Benkelman, a few more miles west, we stop at the Strikers Café for coffee. Reminiscent of its origins as a bowling alley, the diner and gourmet coffee restaurant retains the red-and-chrome tables in addition to the Strikers name. Customers may order fresh dough pizza, subway sandwiches from bread baked daily in the diner, salads and fruit smoothies, along with gourmet coffee items.



From Benkelman, it's just 25 minutes straight north on Highway 61 to Enders Reservoir and State Recreation Area. Altogether, Enders encompasses over 3,600 acres, nearly all of which is open grassland and surrounding hills that go from rolling to rugged. From early spring until well into the fall, it attracts large numbers of waterfowl.

---

## The Prairie Bell

Approximate GPS Coordinates:  
40.463666 N  
-101.703186 S

Now this is what we call a great way to close a Nebraska birding adventure. We are spending the night in one of the most unique bed and breakfasts we've ever heard of: an original 1880s sod house with 18-inch-thick walls and a wonderful Western ranch feel. Don't get a vision of grass growing through the cracks though, the Prairie Bell is beautifully decorated and finished, and situated in an ideal area to see some of many species of birds than inhabit and visit this part of the world.

The Prairie Bell has some five miles of its own trails along the Republican River, and these winding, scenic paths offer rich opportunities to see not only the many birds of the area, but also wildlife such as coyotes, deer, raccoons and others. We were amazed at the abundance and variety of life that we saw. We spotted vireos, flycatchers, a red-headed woodpecker, and a wild turkey on only a 20 minute walk.

There's plenty of other good birding sites in this area, including Rock Creek, Rock Creek State Park and the Rock Creek Fish Hatchery. But tomorrow is another day and now seems the ideal time for a glass of wine and view of the sun setting over the Nebraska's vast sand-sage prairie.

