

# Overview

*Welcome to Alberta's grasslands!* Many hard-to-spot species of birds inhabit these vast, rolling prairies. With good roads and generally sunny weather, you have a great opportunity to tally some unusual sightings.

This guide covers the area between the US border and the Red Deer River, from Hwy 36 to the Saskatchewan border (shown on the overall Southeastern Alberta Birding Trails map, page two). The landscape includes the largest expanses of native grasslands in Alberta, as well as riparian forests along the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan Rivers. Surprisingly, this dry region boasts of numerous wetlands of various sizes. Along the Saskatchewan border, the Cypress Hills rise up as a coniferous island in the midst of the sea of grass. The Canadian Badlands is a tourism destination region that includes this area. A more complete listing of facilities and services can be found at the website: [www.canadianbadlands.com](http://www.canadianbadlands.com)

Medicine Hat, with a population of 63,000 people, is the main service centre. Full services are also available in Brooks and Taber, with tourist supplies available in Bow Island, Foremost and Elkwater.

This guide identifies 15 birding trails, each with a detailed map, and a description of the best sites. A clear description guides people along an easy itinerary. Expert birders from the region have combined their experience to describe both the typical species that may likely be encountered, while teasing with some rarities that have been spotted over the years. Other natural features and wildlife, museums and historic sites are mentioned.

The Grasslands Naturalists have published a comprehensive Checklist of the Birds of Southeastern Alberta. This checklist is available on-line at ([www.natureline.info/gn](http://www.natureline.info/gn)). Hardcopies are available at the Police Point Park Nature Centre in Medicine Hat and from the Cypress Hills Provincial Park Visitor Centre ([www.cypresshills.com](http://www.cypresshills.com)) in Elkwater. Remember that spring comes early, and fall stays late, on the grassland. The earliest migrants (Horned Lark, Tundra Swan, Mountain Bluebird) may return in late March. The birding year draws to a close with spectacular aggregations of Snow Geese in early November.

Several annual bird counts offer a chance to meet local experts and get personal viewing tips. Consider joining these events:

- Medicine Hat Spring Bird and Wildflower Count → Last Sunday in May
- Brooks Spring Bird Count → → → → → → → → → Long Weekend in May
- Writing-on-Stone Prov. Park Spring Bird Count → Weekend after the Brooks Count
- Medicine Hat Christmas Bird Count → → → → → Sunday before Christmas
- Cypress Hills Christmas Bird Count → → → → → Saturday after New Year's
- Manyberries Christmas Bird Count → → → → → No fixed date

For more information regarding these counts and current sightings contact the Police Point Park Nature Centre or visit the website ([www.natureline.info](http://www.natureline.info)). Please call 403-529-6225 to report new sightings, or if the guide needs updating.

Roads are generally well maintained. Please observe the 80 km/h speed limit on all gravel roads. Although the visibility is generally excellent, a sudden stretch of washboard can send a speeding vehicle into the ditch. Most gravel roads will be very muddy but passable when wet, but take only a day to dry out after a rain. Please drive only on the designated range and township roads that are indicated by blue signs at intersections. Unnamed roads are mostly private, and require the owner's permission for access. Do not cross fences unless this guide indicates that land is open for walking.

### A few safety tips:

- Always leave with a full gas tank. Service stations are available in Elkwater, Empress, Jenner, Foremost, and Milk River. Limited hours and special conditions can apply particularly at Foremost.
- Always carry several litres of drinking water, and some emergency food along with an emergency kit and extra warm clothing, blankets, candles, etc.
- Always park on a gravel surface. Tall dead grass can easily catch fire if it touches the muffler.
- Avoid blocking any gate with your vehicle.
- Save your windshield by slowing down for oncoming traffic.
- Only smoke when standing on gravel or pavement, as prairie grass will burn very easily. Never throw butts out of the vehicle.
- **Some of the remote areas do not have cell phone coverage, particularly south of the Cypress Hills.**

South Saskatchewan River  
*Dwayne Myers*