



# Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION, INC.



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## Birding on DOD Lands: Fort McCoy, Wisconsin

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### Introduction:

Fort McCoy is located in west central Wisconsin, approximately 30 miles east of the Mississippi River (Figure 1). The towns of Sparta and Tomah are located off Interstate 90 approximately 3 miles to the west and east of Fort McCoy, respectively. Combined with Fort McCoy's 60,000 acres, the Black River State Forest, Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, Meadow Valley and Sandhill State Wildlife Areas, and various county forests comprise about 460,000 acres of public lands within a 30-mile radius of Fort McCoy. These areas provide habitat for vulnerable plant and animal species and are excellent areas for birding.

Humans have influenced the Wisconsin landscape for thousands of years. American Indian influences in the northern Great Plains date back 10,000 years, as they burned the land to aid hunting and gathering. As the tribes moved, so did fire which essentially created openings in forested areas to enhance their hunting. It is likely that the fire dependent ecotype of this area was greatly influenced by this practice. By 1830, increased populations of European settlers dramatically changed the landscape that was once dominated by prairies and savannas. The first settlers of the area cleared fields to grow wheat. As the wheat farms of the west became connected to the railroad lines, farming in Wisconsin turned to dairy, especially in the area

in and around Fort McCoy often referred to as the Driftless or unglaciated area. The lush herbaceous cover type of the barrens and the steep terrain were ideal for cattle. Croplands increased from 400,000 acres to 15.3 million acres. Prairies, which once covered about 6% of the total landscape, hung on in small fragmented patches, and oak barrens-savanna communities were reduced to 70,000-110,000 acres, less than one percent of their original 7-11 million acres.

The population boom of settlers leveled off around 1910, when Fort McCoy was designated a military camp. With this designation, active farming practices ceased and lands were maintained in a natural state to simulate real war-time scenarios. Consequently, the native plant community was less severely impacted by expanding settlement and increased farming intensity than in the surrounding landscape. This region has historical prairie areas that have the "proper topography and climatic conditions" for prairies, and 65% of the permanent grassland and barrens that exist today in southwest Wisconsin as large blocks occur at Fort McCoy. Fort McCoy's importance for many vulnerable species stands out in a state where land is rapidly being converted to an urban or developed setting.

### History

Colonel Robert Bruce McCoy, the installations namesake, started buying land in the Sparta area for the purpose of eventually becoming an Army installation. By 1905 he

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had acquired approximately 4,000 acres of land that was sold as part of a 14,000 acre purchase by the Army in 1909 and made into two camps, Camp Emory Upton and Camp Robinson. In 1910 the name was changed to Camp McCoy. Field artillery and some infantry units were trained there during World War I through 1918. In the 1930's the camp served as a Quartermaster Supply Base for the Civilian Conservation Corps.

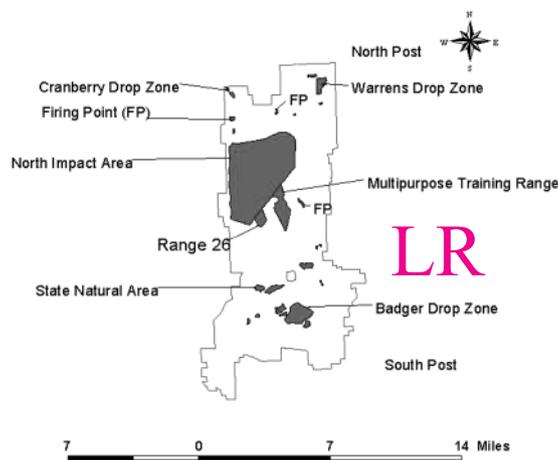
Between 1938 and 1942 Camp McCoy added 46,900 acres in preparation for World War II. The first unit to train at "new" Camp McCoy was the 100th Infantry Battalion, composed of Hawaiian National Guardsmen. Both Japanese and European prisoners of war were held at Fort McCoy during WWII. At the end of the war, 247,779 soldiers were processed through the Reception and Separation Center at Camp McCoy.

From 1951 to 1953 Camp McCoy was activated to train soldiers for the Korean conflict. In 1974 the installation was renamed Fort McCoy. During the 1980's the Reserve and National Guard mission of Fort McCoy continued to grow, reaching a milestone of training 100,000 soldiers. Today, Fort McCoy serves as a Total Force Training Center that annually supports the year round training of approximately 120,000 reserve and active component U.S. military personnel from all branches of the armed services. Fort McCoy also supports the mobilization/demobilization needs for military operations around the globe.

### Environmental Setting

Fort McCoy lies at the intersection of two major ecotones, and consists of a mix of forest and prairie-savanna-barren habitat associations (and bird species) indicative of both ecosystem types. On the east to west continuum, the transition from eastern forests to western prairies results in the savanna ecosystem that dominates on the Fort. In addition, on the north to south continuum, Fort McCoy lies just south of the "tension zone" (Figure 1), a relatively narrow band that separates the northern coniferous forests from the central deciduous forests. Many plants and trees reach their northern or southern limits within this zone. In addition to its unique flora, Fort McCoy is important for the federally endangered Karner Blue Butterfly and a rich community of grassland birds.

The northern part of Fort McCoy (North Post, north of Highway 21) is dominated by coniferous woods and mixed conifer/deciduous woods with sporadic grassland openings. The coniferous woods are reminiscent of the northern forests that exist north of the tension zone. Large tracks of contiguous forests dominate the Fort's 51,000 acres of forest landscape, including 8,300 acres of



Jack Pine forest. Although Kirtland's Warbler has not yet been observed on Fort McCoy, it has been seen as close as about 11 miles from the northwest corner of North Post.

The southern part of Fort McCoy (South Post, south of Highway 21) features oak woods, oak savannas, and some of the largest patches of native warm season prairies on the Fort and in the state. Oak savanna and barrens habitat are a diverse natural plant community that is often associated with the east to west floristic transition. As the oak barrens complex gives way to the open grass-

lands, the bird community shifts to savanna habitat preferred by bird species such as Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Baltimore Oriole, and open grasslands preferred by Grasshopper Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark. In addition to the savanna habitat, Fort McCoy contains large areas of open grasslands, and ranks as one of the top ten priority landscapes for grassland birds in Wisconsin. The dominant warm season grasses are Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, and Indiangrass. Other major plant species associated with this community are Black Oak, Hills Oak, White Oak, Bur Oak, White Pine, Red Pine, Red Maple, American Hazel, Blueberry, Wild Lupine, Lead Plant, and Rough Blazing Star. The Fort is also a host to Rough White Lettuce, a state endangered species, and Yellowish Gentian, Prickly Pear, and Prairie Parsley which are state threatened species.

Controlled burns are used to manage and keep open the roughly 9,000 acres of large grasslands tracts and provide important habitat for grassland birds. Prescribed burns result in a shift in the bird community, and Lark Sparrow has been found to almost exclusively nest in savanna-grasslands that



Oak Barrens Savanna Natural Area. Photo by Chris Eberly.

were recently burned. Species such as Upland Sandpiper and Horned Lark also utilize the openness and bareness of a habitat after a prescribed burn. The largest warm season grass prairie on South Post is the 775-acre Badger Drop Zone, favored by Grasshopper Sparrow, Horned Lark, Eastern Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, and Upland Sandpiper. The biggest threat to maintaining the integrity of these habitats is exotic and invasive plant species. Many partnerships have resulted from these conservation efforts. Partnerships include state, local, and federal agencies as well as with academic institutions, conservation organizations, and private citizens.

About 4,000 acres of wetlands exist on the Fort, including nine impoundments and three lakes. Clear Creek and Silver Creek Natural Areas are pristine wetlands associated with floodplains along stream headwaters. These riparian communities have been designated as part of the Wisconsin State Natural Area Program due to their rare vegetation and excellent water quality. The North Flowage in the northern-most part of the Fort offers migration stopover habitat for various shorebirds and waterfowl each spring and fall. It is part of a 211-acre cranberry flowage complex that offers premier fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities. During the winter, the North Flowage is famous for ice fishing as well as tracking of wildlife such as White-tailed Deer and Fisher. This flowage complex is a host to such bird species such as Sandhill Crane, Double-crested Cormorant, Pied-billed Grebe, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Common Loon, Black Tern, Belted Kingfisher, Tree and Rough-winged Swallows, and up to 11 species of waterfowl. Other wetlands on McCoy have had Sora, Solitary Sandpiper, and Wilson's Snipe.

### Birding

At least 221 bird species have been recorded on Fort McCoy. The rich diversity of natural habitats attracts myriad shorebirds, waterfowl and songbirds during both spring and fall migrations. Winters can be a good time to find Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Goshawk, and owls such as Northern Saw-whet, Short-eared, and perhaps a stray Snowy.

In addition, 130 bird species have been confirmed as breeders. Common forest-associated breeders include Ovenbird, Red-Eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Veery, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Black-billed Cuckoo. Other good finds are Yellow-throated Vireo, Tennessee Warbler and Common Loon. However, Fort McCoy is most noted for its vast acreages of open grassland and



Sandhill Crane foraging at the North Flowage. Photo by Chris Eberly.

savanna habitat which has been the focus of much research. Up to 63 different bird species have been documented including 14 grassland bird species of management concern for the state of Wisconsin. Grasshopper Sparrow and Vesper Sparrow are the most common grassland bird species on the Fort. In addition, Eastern Meadowlark, Dickcissel, Upland Sandpiper, Lark Sparrow and savanna associated birds such as Orchard Oriole and Red-headed Woodpecker are common occurrences.

Birding on the three State Natural Areas of Fort McCoy is highly recommended. In addition to the two riparian

Natural Areas, the oak barren-savanna-sand prairie association of the 300-acre Oak Barrens Natural Area represents one of the rarest natural plant communities in Wisconsin and is of biological significance in the Midwest. The Badger Drop Zone should be visited to experience breeding Grasshopper Sparrow and Upland Sandpiper as well as the Prairie Smoke, Pasque Flower and many other flowering natives. Another priority should be the North Flowage. Birding on the flowage is well worth the trip, but searching the large tracks of forests on the drive to the flowage can also be quite productive during breeding or migration seasons.

### Access to Fort McCoy

Visitors must call the Wildlife Program in advance before planning a birding trip to the Fort. Please call (608) 388-5374, 388-2308, or 388-5766. The Wildlife Program will supply maps, directions to the sites mentioned in the article, a bird species checklist, and information regarding the base and the natural resources management program. There is currently no fee for visiting specific sites for birding. However, a valid driver's license is necessary to obtain a temporary pass to enter Fort McCoy. To reach the Wildlife Program office, enter at the main gate on the north side of Highway 21 and ask the guard for directions to the Wildlife Program in Building 103.



Upland Sandpiper, a common grassland species at Fort McCoy. Photo by Michael Guzy.

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