

BAKER PRAIRIE NATURAL AREA (updated to June 2018)

LOCATION: Baker Prairie Natural Area is located on the northwest side of Harrison in Boone County.



DIRECTIONS: The main highway through Harrison is 65. On the northwest side of Harrison, find the big intersection and traffic light at highway 65 and Industrial Park Road. Turn west onto Industrial Park Road and travel about 0.9 miles to the intersection with Goblin Drive. Turn south onto Goblin and travel about 0.6 miles to public school buildings and parking lots. The first parking lot you come to is the one closet to Baker Prairie NA.



Notice the attractive Friends of Baker Prairie Norma Ellis Cutler Pavilion, a good place to relax and get out of the sun. The pavilion, whose main cost was underwritten by Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, is on school property. It also serves as an outdoor classroom, part of an effort to provide nature history information about the prairie and surrounding Ozarks region. Informational signs and maps are provided.

Baker Prairie NA is a joint project of Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and The Nature Conservancy. Martha Milburn Bird

Sanctuary is managed by Friends of Baker Prairie. Much of the birding activity at Baker is associated with the Disorganized Bird Club of Boone and Newton Counties.



Baker Prairie once encompassed about 5,000 acres in the Harrison area. What is left now is about 59 high-quality acres of unique tallgrass prairie. It is quite different than other protected prairie remnants in northwest Arkansas because it occurs on a substrata of limestone and chert. Floral displays in late May and June can be the best anywhere in Arkansas, with Pale Purple Coneflower, Prairie Larkspur, Compass Plant, Rattlesnake Master, Poppy Mallow, Royal Catchfly, to name just a few showy flowers of

more than 250 plant species.



Baker Prairie NA is bisected by Goblin Drive with mowed loop trails on each side. The Dayle McCune trail starts just north of the school parking lot below the Friends of Baker Prairie pavilion. It provides a good look at both the upper and lower portions of the prairie. On the opposite side of Goblin Drive, note the Baker Prairie sign providing information from the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. The other loop trail starts here. Martha Milburn Bird Sanctuary is adjacent this loop.

Many bird species associated with open grasslands can be found here in summer. In past years (at least through 2015), Baker Prairie NA was been the only known place where Willow Flycatchers continued to nest in Arkansas, though as of 2018, the status of this bird as a summer resident was unclear.

Bell's Vireo has disappeared from many of its former habitats in northwest Arkansas, but several pairs still nest at Baker. More common and widespread birds like Eastern Meadowlark, Dickcissel, Eastern Kingbird, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher are common in summer. Painted Buntings may be found along the edges. Baker may also provide a sort of refugium for Northern Bobwhites, a bird that has declined throughout the region. Other summer birds include Dickcissels, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, and American Goldfinches.



Those of you interested in the nesting season Willow Flycatcher situation in Arkansas may want to take a quick look at this:

<http://climate.audubon.org/birds/wilfly/willow-flycatcher>



When Doug James and I were working on Arkansas Birds in the 1980s, it was hard to grasp why efforts to protect particular parcels, especially the once productive Willow Flycatcher nesting habitat in what became Konecny Grove Natural Area at Slovak in Prairie County, didn't work out as intended. Brooke Meanley had documented 17 pairs in 18 acres in the early 1950s, but this number had fallen by half by the late 1960s and by 1983, none. (An interesting note by Meanley is in Wilson Bulletin volume 64: 111-112). Impacts of changing climate on bird distribution was not on my radar in the 1980s.

My point in resurrecting this history is to note that in Arkansas there has been a lot habitat change over the almost 200 years since Audubon collected his type specimen (April 17, 1822, at what is now called Arkansas Post), but it may well be that in addition to human-caused landscape change and habitat loss, a factor in Arkansas losing almost all of its nesting Willow Flycatchers is of more recent origin and involves changing climate, pushing the flycatcher's effective nesting range well to the north.

A VISIT TO BAKER PRAIRIE NATURAL AREA June 25, 2018

Before I jump directly into the birds yesterday at Baker Prairie Natural Area in Harrison, here's a little poem from by Emily Dickinson:

"To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few."

In all respect, I would add that to make a northwest Arkansas prairie, you also need Dickcissels. Yesterday, at Baker, Dickcissels had plenty of tall perches. Compass Plants were up and covered with brilliant yellow flowers, providing something in the way of an ideal perch a few feet above and therefore with a commanding view of the surrounding grasslands. Tall wands with Dickcissels whipped back and forth in the wind.

We walked both mowed trails through Baker. Between walks, enjoyed the shade in the attractive shelter built by Friends of Baker Prairie.

First birds: Scissor-tailed Flycatchers along the powerlines. Then, Mourning Doves (8) that flushed out of the shelter when we walked up. We also saw Eastern Meadowlarks (2), an American Kestrel (1), heard Common Yellowthroats (2), Indigo Bunting (1), Blue Grosbeak (1), Red-winged Blackbirds (6), Yellow-breasted Chat (2), Northern Cardinal (1), and Killdeer (2).

Even though Compass Plants are fairly common across the region of Tallgrass Prairies, we have lost most of our prairies in Arkansas, and seeing Compass Plants in an unmowed (or these days, un-herbicided) roadside ditch is not the same as native, natural – I'd almost say supra-natural Compass Plant skyscrapers – starting with their huge, ornately-sculpted basal leaves -- rising above a prairie landscape. They were spreading grace all over Baker Prairie NA.

We were looking out over the green mass of native grasses and there is this startling presence, masses of red trumpets – long green tubes and five deliriously fire engine red petals. My oh my. One of yesterday's best finds: cardinal red, flowering, Royal Catchfly (*Silene regia*). I saw one being visited by an equally brilliantly green tiny green bee, crawling right down into the fire of pollen.

One indicator of a prairie's quality is presence of a very, very strange "flower" called Rattlesnake Master, *Eryngium yuccifolium*. The Master was flowering in the many thousands, covering the entire landscape. Between, thousands of flowering Winecups – rich and colorful as the name suggests – and a lot of fun too -- an entire prairie-scape of them and a great wonder to walk through it all.

I'm pretty sure I missed a few things because I was also hoping for Willow Flycatcher and Bell's Vireo. I used playback in three likely spots for the little flycatchers, but no luck. This was a disappointment, but on the other hand, the prairie flora was so absolutely eye-popping that I was very, very happy I'd made the long drive from Fayetteville on this particular day.

Joe Neal (June 26, 2018)