

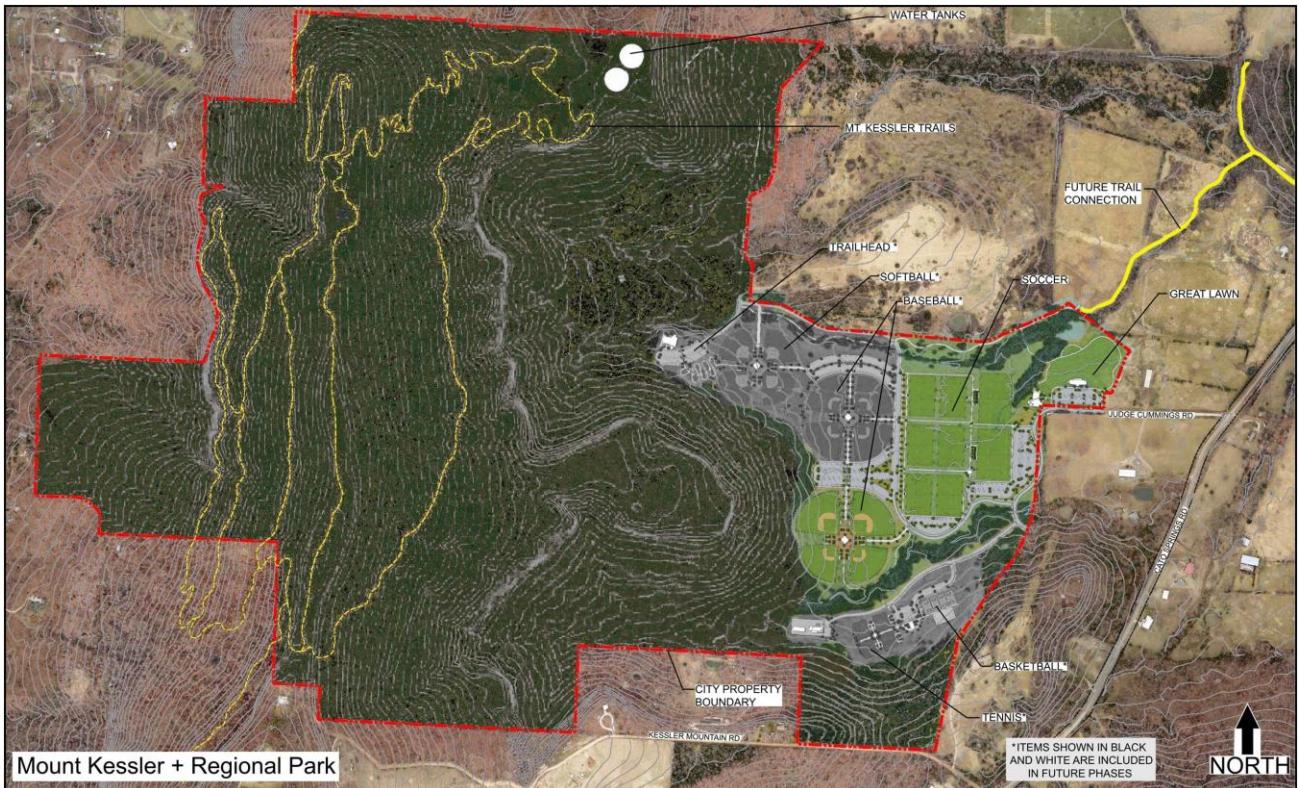


KESSLER MOUNTAIN FOREST and REGIONAL PARK

City of Fayetteville owns about 600 acres associated with Kessler Mountain. The trail system has been extended so that it is possible to ride or walk a trail that safely passes over I-49, making it easy to travel to this park from the rest of Fayetteville.

The park includes about 400 acres of mostly mature upland hardwood forest managed by Northwest Arkansas Land Trust. Parts of the mountain are accessible via mountain bike trails; all users including hikers are welcome on these trails.

Adjacent the forest, a regional park is being developed on roughly 200 acres of former farmland at 2600 W. Judge Cummings Road. Soccer fields, baseball fields, parking lots, etc now occupy former pastures, old overgrown fields, bottomlands with flowing streams, and a modest amount of development at the urban interface. The park officially opened in August 2016 and is still under development (summer 2018).



The developed area includes mitigation wetlands, forest edge, expansive, closely-mowed soccer fields, and other aspects of an urban landscape. Paved trails are designed for bicycles, but are also easy to slow-walk for birding. Private farmlands adjacent the park provides more habitat for many birds typical of those habitats (example: Blue Grosbeak).

The 400 acres of upland predominantly hardwood forest is expansive enough to support a very diverse bird community typical of Ozark forests.

Here is an overall look at birding potential:

PERMANENT RESIDENTS are species present in all seasons. These total about 40 species. Examples include Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Pileated and Downy Woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, and House Finch.

SUMMER RESIDENTS are birds present primarily or exclusively during the nesting season. These total about 43 species. This include Broad-winged Hawk, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireos, Wood Thrush, Black-and-white Warbler, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Indigo Bunting, Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.



TRANSIENTS include at least 24 species that pass through on their northward and southward migrations, but do not remain for either summer or winter. Examples include Olive-sided Flycatcher, Philadelphia Vireo, Tennessee and Nashville Warblers (and other warblers), Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Swainson's Thrush.

WINTER RESIDENTS include those birds present here only during cold weather. These total at least 17 species. Examples include Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco, White-throated Sparrow and occasional overflights by Bald Eagles.

There are several ways to go birding in the park and the adjoining areas:

BY VEHICLE Public roads like Smoke House Trail, Judge Cummings Road (access to Regional Park) and Kessler Mountain Road (WC 201), all provide views to the mountain and cover habitats in or adjacent to the park. On the west side in the Farmington area, public roads including Holland, Archie Watkins, and Wolfdale all provide a way to find birds on Kessler's lower slopes and in the urban interface. Since examples of all Kessler habitats are visible along these roads, roadside birding makes it

possible for those with mobility limitations to enjoy a high percentage of birds that may be found anywhere on the mountain.



ON FOOT The trail system on Kessler was developed for mountain biking, but these trails are open for all other uses, too. It is possible to use them to walk loops of several lengths and include both the mountain top and forested slopes. A birding hike can include crossing the entire top of the mountain from the towers area in the south (off Kessler Mountain Road) through the upland forests of the park and then down into the Regional Park. The regional park with its athletic fields is the place to seek birds of pastures, hayfields and old fields with thickets and fencerows.

KESSLER OUTDOOR CLASSROOM AND NATURE CENTER

Northwest Arkansas Land Trust, 1725 Smoke House Trail, coordinates **Kessler Mountain Outdoor Classroom and Nature Center**. “The mission is to raise the next generation of conservationists through research, outreach and education. This unique program provides an outdoor learning experience for students of all ages, with a vision of teaching K-Ph.D. learners. Facilities include a $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile interpretive loop trail, native plant and raingarden, and a 1,500-square foot indoor nature center. The interpretive

trail is open to the public sunrise to sunset daily. The nature center is available to schools and community groups through scheduled programs."

MANAGEMENT AND LONG TERM PROTECTION OF THE UNIQUE ECOLOGICAL VALUES OF THE

KESSLER ECOSYSTEM is a big challenge in a rapidly urbanizing region and also an ongoing process.

Here are Joan Reynolds, David Oakley, and Theo Witsell with one of the unique plants, Prairie Rattlesnake-Root, during a plant survey on Kessler April 23, 2014:



(prepared by Joe Neal, July 23, 2018)

Kessler Mountain Regional Park from Front to Back (and a Lark Sparrow)

By Mitchell Pruitt (originally posted to the ARBIRD list June 2, 2019)

Birds in this episode: Lark Sparrow, White-winged Dove, Painted Bunting, and more! If you want the quick version, then I heard, saw, and thoroughly photographed a Lark Sparrow at Kessler Mountain Regional Park, in south Fayetteville this evening.

Ah, Kessler Mountain. I first met this property—from the north end—way back in early spring 2013(?), when Joe Neal took me on my first expedition to find Spotted Salamanders. These woodland Ambystomatids breed in ephemeral ponds, brought on by warm rains of late winter. Intrigued, Joe showed me around via the trail system later that same spring. I was enthralled by the upland woodland birds that breed here, many rare in city limits; like Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, Kentucky Warbler, etc. At the time, the property had just been acquired by the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust, who sought to clean things up and make the trails available to the public. Thanks to their efforts and the now long ago introduction by Joe Neal, I've spent a lot of time up on "Kessler" in all seasons.

Like many of Fayetteville's naturalists, when the city proposed Kessler Mountain Regional Park at the foot of the mountain's southern slopes, I was skeptical. But the property formerly consisted of hay fields and pastureland, so if there weren't going to be extensive restoration efforts, it was the best place for a park. Now, a great percentage of the former hay fields are covered in ball fields, paved trails, and parking lots...sounds dismal, right? That was my initial perspective too. Allow me to take you on a journey of Kessler Mountain Regional Park from front to back.

Pulling through the entrance, off Cato Springs Road in south Fayetteville, you meet a piney treeline. Back in winter, it was the Red-breasted Nuthatch mecca. Now, Yellow-throated Warblers live there, the male greeting birders, bikers, ball-players, and the likes. Next, you come to part of the old fields, now grown up and prairie-like. This spring, I've never once missed the **Dickcissels** and **Scissor-tailed Flycatchers** that call this patch of grass home. And then there is the playground, a personal favorite—no, not for the Bald Eagle statue perched on top, or the Eastern Screech-Owl forever peeking out of its concrete tree—but for the fact this is within the territory of at least one of the **Orchard Orioles** that calls the nearby treeline home. I see one singing regularly in the young oaks of the parking lot. Just the other day, an **Eastern Kingbird** was foraging from the ground, as children screamed down the slide nearby. It was also here that a **White-winged Dove** called in secrecy last week, likely concealed within a large eastern red cedar.

From the playground, there are several options. Downhill, to the north is a marshy pond home to multiple Red-winged Blackbird pairs, and Great Blue and Green Herons. When there are too many people, the latter two are likely in the adjacent riparian area, complete with burbling stream. From the pond, a paved trail could take you north to Bentonville, should you wish, but more immediately it hosts Indigo and **Painted Buntings**, and more **Orchard Orioles**. A wetland

mitigation area just before crossing the first bridge is home to **Common Yellowthroats**. You may continue north through more old fields, or you could head west, towards the mountain. A brisk walk along the paved trail takes you alongside seemingly boring ball fields, but don't get too disengaged here! **Blue Grosbeaks**, more **Painted Buntings**, **White-eyed Vireos**, and a **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** have all set up shop in this area. Speaking of grosbeaks and buntings, the whole park is overflowing with them; a cornucopia of vibrant blues, greens, and reds. The genus *Passerina* is as well represented here as it is anywhere in the state.

Continuing on this trail, you will come to the end of the regional park and the beginning of the mountain park. This is one of my favorite areas. First, there are Killdeer (adults and young) running around EVERYWHERE, and more nests being built all the time. Cross the narrow parking lot and you will come to a gated gravel road. Bypass this gate and you will come to more heavenly habitat for *Passerina*. At least one pair of Blue Grosbeak and several of Indigo Bunting have set up shop here. In addition Field Sparrows are well-represented out in the field to the north and in the early successional “forest” to the south. Tonight it was here, as I pondered a male Blue Grosbeak, that a **Lark Sparrow** snuck into the picture. I was so stuck on the grosbeak that I almost didn't give the poor sparrow a second glance. It spent time singing just beyond the gate, both on the ground and in small oaks, as well as across the parking lot on a soccer goal!

Try as I might, I rarely make it far down this dirt road. The trip from the playground parking lot usually takes me too long, in a good way, because of all the stopping and looking! But should you wish (and I highly recommend it) you can continue up this road to the mountain's southern trailhead. Here, the gates open to The Woodland. Just tonight, I heard sounds from Black-and-white Warbler and Pileated Woodpecker floating down the slopes. Earlier this week, Broad-winged Hawks soared just on the edge of one of the fields before disappearing back into the dense canopy.

Don't forget to visit in the late evenings, too, to see the emergence of Common Nighthawks. I counted at least 16 tonight.

In short, Kessler Mountain Regional Park is a true gem. I have always been thankful for the mountain and its various trails, but not so much the regional park. However, I am convinced. Grassland, shrubland, wetland, early successional forest, riparian area, and woodland make for a great variety of avifauna. Go check it out!