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In the reference list of best places for birding along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch is not mentioned. At least, not yet. In *The Birder's Guide to Montana*, author Terry McEneaney lists the Blackfoot Indian Reservation, Pine Butte Swamp Preserve, and Freezeout Lake Wildlife Management Area as regional hot spots for birding. For many birders

in the state, these are familiar places, but to date only few have experienced the excellent birding opportunities at TRM Ranch. This may be related to the ranch's foremost reputation as a spectacular

place for sightings of animals larger than birds, namely for the large herds of mule deer, elk, and, at times, grizzly bears. But this may change. Over the last two years, Dayna Ayers and myself have recorded more than 2,500 bird sightings of 102 different species on the ranch. So far, the list of birds includes species belonging to a variety of different

families including swans, geese, ducks, grebes, flycatchers, finches, warblers, woodpeckers, and hawks to name only a few. Many of the species we observed such as—Mountain Bluebird, Clark's Nutcracker, and Blue Grouse—are common not only along the Front but also in other regions of Montana. Others are rare and infrequently observed in the foothills of the Front: such as the American White Pelican and the Sharp-shinned Hawk. Our bird list also includes many species that are characteristic for northcentral Montana such as the Upland Sandpiper, Horned Grebe, and Golden Eagle.

Initially, it was a daily routine for us to add a few new species

to the growing list for the ranch, and for a while it seemed as if this list would eventually show as many species as other lists for more renowned birding areas such as Freezeout Lake Wildlife Management Area. To date, the bird list for Freezeout Lake includes 185 species. But after we had recorded about 80 species, the rate of detecting new species declined rapidly. To us this trend indicated that we may have accounted for most of the resident and migratory species on the ranch, and that only the most elusive species and infrequent visitors have remained undetected. I expect the final list for the ranch to include an additional 30-40 species for a total of about 140.

Two geographic factors are responsible for the great number of species that can be observed at the ranch. TRM Ranch is situated in the transition zone between the Northern Great Plains and the Northern Rocky Mountains. Compared to upland grasslands further east and conifer forests further west, this transition zone is floristically and structurally more diverse composed of prairie grasslands interspersed with conifer forests, aspen, and riparian corridors. It is a well-supported hypothesis that as the diversity of local vegetation conditions increases, more species find resources to meet their life requirements (e.g., feeding, resting, nesting), which increases the number of species in an area. Many of the species that are associated with upland grasslands or open conifer forests can also be found at TRM Ranch, in the transition zone of grasslands and forests.

The other reason for the great diversity of species on the ranch is the fact that the Rocky Mountain Front serves as one of the major north-south migration corridors in the state. The east slopes of the Rockies serve as a natural guide for most bird migrations east of the Continental Divide in central Montana. Each autumn, thousands of birds migrate along the eastern slopes of the Rockies to wintering areas further south, and return in

spring to breeding and nesting areas up north.

Depending on the time of year, a variety of different species of birds can be observed at the ranch. In spring and autumn, the assemblages of species change rapidly in a matter of a few days, sometimes hours. For example, last May I was able to document the overnight arrival of hundreds, if not thousands of American Goldfinches, and Eastern and Western Kingbirds. These types of unexpected sightings make birding exciting. But birding during migration can also be disappointing. During migration, birds tend to be weakly associated with certain habitats than during the breeding season, and are more opportunistic when seeking food and shelter. This makes it more difficult to focus on certain habitats and species during these times. The strategy for birding during migration is to visit key resting and feeding areas such as Freezeout Wildlife Management Area. The arrival of up to 300,000 Snow Geese and 10,000 Tundra Swans is a most spectacular event for many birders visiting Freezeout.

There are many birding opportunity on TRM Ranch. For an exciting day of birding, plan your trip well and familiarize yourself first with the natural history of the species you want to observe, including habitat use and migration patterns. References such as *The Birder's Guide to Montana* are excellent sources for fine tuning a birding trip to the Front. Spring is by far the best season for birding, birds are most noticeable. I make most of my field observations in late May and early June, towards the end of migration and the peak of courtship activities of locally breeding species. Unfortunately, the weather is unpredictable during that time. The hot, dry months of summer are a slow time for birding as many species hide in thick vegetation avoiding the heat and raising young. Starting in September, the flights of shorebirds, ducks, swans, and geese signal the onset of winter weather in the North, an excellent time to visit TRM Ranch, Freezeout Lake or Pine Butte for a day of birding.