

## A GUIDE TO BIRDING IN THE OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI, AREA

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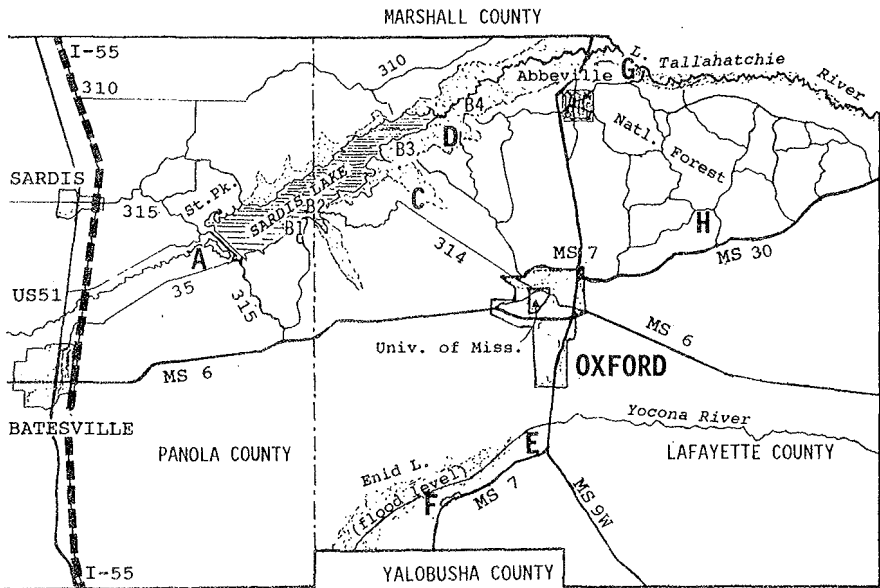
Oxford, Mississippi is located in central-north Mississippi, nearly equidistant from the Mississippi River to the west and the Alabama state line to the east, and 40-45 miles south of the Tennessee state line. The area is included in the sand-clay hills physiographic region. To the west about 35 miles is the border between "the Hills" and the region comprising the alluvial plain of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, known as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, or simply "the Delta" region of Mississippi. Birding sites to be described are mainly confined to the Hills and riverine bottomlands of Lafayette County and the eastern 60% of Panola County to the west (Figure 1).

A 1987 field checklist of birds found in this vicinity and compiled by the author under the title, Birds of Sardis Lake, Mississippi, was published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and made available at the Sardis Dam headquarters. This list included 258 primary species plus 13 that were of only casual status. Since 1987, another 14 species have made their first-known appearance in the area, for a total of 285 species. As a measure of winter birding potential, the 17-year cumulative species list through 1991 for the Sardis Lake Christmas Bird Count was 138 species.

A. Sardis Dam Area

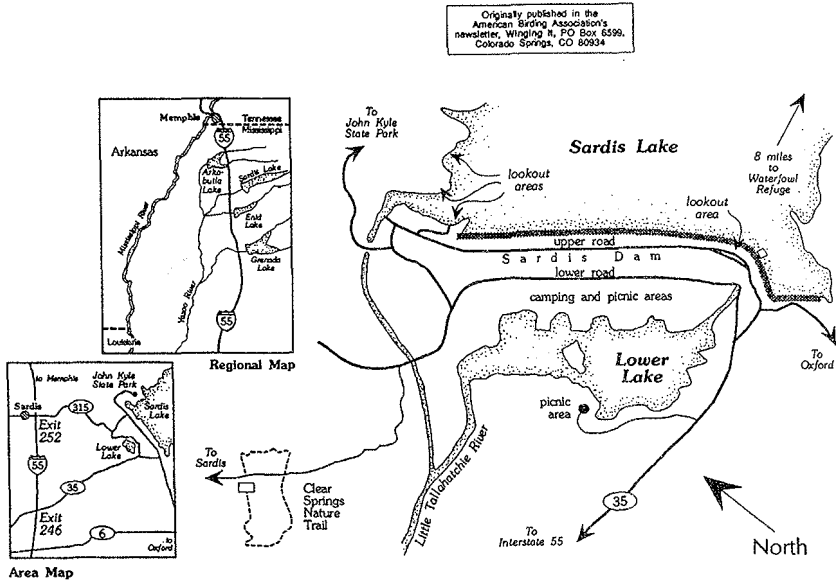
The most noteworthy birding habitats near Oxford are those associated with the flood control reservoir, Sardis Lake, created on the Little Tallahatchie River by completion of Sardis Dam in 1940 by the Corps of Engineers. For many years after its construction, this 2.9-mile long structure remained the world's largest earthen dam. Public lands below (and at the ends of) Sardis Dam exceed 2400 acres; these enclose the 350-acre Lower Lake, which was a primary source for the fill dirt used in constructing the dam. Extensive general recreational activity, as well as boating and fishing, focusses on Lower Lake, which has three beaches and is surrounded by picnic, recreation, and camping areas administered by the Corps and by John Kyle State Park.

Figure 1. Map of birding-finding areas in Lafayette County and eastern Panola County, Mississippi. Sites indicated by capital letters are described in the text under those letters.



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Figure 2. Map of the Sardis Dam-Lower Lake birding sites, plus insert maps of the nearby Panola County area and of the northwest Mississippi region. (Reprinted by permission from Winging It, a newsletter of the American Birding Association.)



Birders find the area below Sardis Dam to be a favored spot (Figure 2). In winter, gulls feed extensively over the outlet channel of the dam into Lower Lake, and often rest on the nearest beach. Three gull species are usual and six other recorded species are casual or rare and irregular. Forster's Tern has been present in each month of the year, and four other tern species occur in migration.

The Fish Crow consistently is present through the warmer months in small numbers (and sometimes even in mid-winter) around Lower Lake and Sardis Dam. Twenty-four species of dabbling and diving ducks have been seen on Lower Lake or nearby above the dam. They become most numerous on Lower Lake in January, especially during the rare instance of a general icing-over of Sardis Lake. Viewing for ducks, grebes, and loons is good at points overlooking Sardis Lake at each end of the dam (see Figure 2). Canada Geese are present throughout the year because of a game management program that involved releasing several thousand of the species exported from the Tennessee River area in the latter 1980s. They have subsequently appropriated the Lower Lake area as "their own."

From December through February, visiting northern Bald Eagles often can be seen flying about the area or perched near the margins of Lower Lake, especially in a large conspicuous cottonwood "eagle tree" on the island at its west end. A first nesting by a pair of Bald Eagles was confirmed in 1992 on the Sardis (State) Waterfowl Refuge nine miles up the lake. Similarly, in addition to spring and fall migrants, one or two pairs of Ospreys have nested on the lake for the past several years, but without known success in the fledging of offspring.

Varied habitats for finding landbirds also are available in the Corps areas and John Kyle State Park near Sardis Dam. The recreational areas around Lower Lake are most favored in the winter season when human traffic is reduced. A year-around opportunity is offered by the Clear Springs Nature Trail about 2.5 miles below the dam, reached from a gravel road to the left off MS 315, leaving the dam toward the city of Sardis. The nature trail overlaps the junction of floodplain and uplands. Most attractive is the portion that extends via an elevated boardwalk into a cypress-tupelo swamp and past a beaver lodge--headquarters for the "engineers" whose structures retain the spring-waters to produce this habitat. In spring and early summer, songs of the Acadian

Flycatcher and several breeding warblers and vireos resound, along with the piping of Wood Thrushes through the bottoms. Much standing deadwood makes it a nesting haven for woodpeckers, most prominently the abundant Red-headed Woodpecker.

### B. Sardis Lake Landings

Access to Sardis Lake margins, other than in the immediate locale of Sardis Dam, is most available at four boat launching ramps or "landings" along the south shore--(1) Pat's Bluff, (2) Clear Creek Recreational Area, (3) Coontown Crossing, and (4) Hurricane Landing--plus three on the north shore. These sites provide viewing points, in addition to those near Sardis Dam, for water birds on the lake--loons, grebes, cormorants, herons, geese and ducks, shorebirds and Bald Eagles, Ospreys, or an occasional Peregrine or Merlin. Not only that, the approaches and adjacent Corps lands give access to good birding spots in public picnic and camping areas and surrounding woodlands consisting largely of pine- and oak-forested uplands.

### C. Toby Tubby Creek Area

Interesting habitat also accessible without a boat, other than at times of exceptionally high lake level, is found in the bottomlands of several creeks flowing into the reservoir. The flatlands and bottomlands near Toby Tubby Creek are the most-birded example of this. They include extensive fields in which are grown cotton or soybeans, barring excess wetness in the planting season, plus some that are usually uncultivated weed-fields. Access is most available for birders in the immediate bottoms and the croplands to the south and west of the creek. One may cross the creek, and then continue parallel to it, on MS 314, which runs northwestward from the NW part of Oxford (see Fig. 1). Only one access road (2.6 miles beyond the creek-crossing bridge) enters the bottoms [caution required after heavy rains]. However, other points allow roadside parking and foot access to both croplands and fallow weed-fields, which may yield 9 or more species of sparrows in the winter. Northern Harriers occur regularly, Red-tailed Hawks are common and the Rough-legged Hawk has occurred casually. [Clear Creek Landing area, described above (B2), on the Clear Creek arm of Sardis Lake lies 6.5 mi. beyond the Toby Tubby Creek bridge, at the end of MS 314 in the Clear Creek Recreation Area.]

Such lowland areas, as well as the wooded uplands, are mostly open to public hunting in season, which is especially relevant to birders during winter deer-hunting and waterfowl seasons. Birding during that time calls for cautionary tactics, such as wearing a hunters-orange vest and/or cap.

#### D. Sardis Waterfowl Refuge (SWR)

The road to SWR and Coontown Landing (B3), is Lafayette Co. 102, which leaves MS 314 at a point 0.9 mile NW of its junction with Business MS 6. At 4.8 miles along this road, across from a Refuge sign on the left, is a gravel road (Lafayette Co. 141) that leads northward 3.5 miles to the refuge headquarters and an overlook area on a hilltop above the Sardis Lake basin. This is the only access point ordinarily available to visitors. From this spot an extensive area used by wintering geese and ducks may be viewed by means of a spotting scope. Snow and White-fronted geese winter here, besides up to 5000 Canada Geese. Single Brant and Ross' goose both occurred in early 1992, along with Mississippi's second-known record of Trumpeter Swan. A few Tundra Swans occur sporadically. Peregrine and Merlin are seen here occasionally between September and early May. Large numbers of Double-crested Cormorants at times roost in dead trees across the lake toward the north shore. Herons, gulls, terns, and shorebirds may be found if favorable shoreline conditions occur at the appropriate season. Wood Stork and White Ibis each have been found once.

#### E. Turf Farm (A & D)

This locality is reached by driving 6.3 miles south on MS 7 from its junction with MS 6 Bypass, and turning right at the junction of MS 9W with MS 7. The turf fields will be readily visible on the right (north side) of highway 7. Scoping of the area may be done at several points along its 0.35 mile extent along the highway, especially where a gravel access road leaves the highway. Grassland species such as Horned Lark and Eastern Meadowlark are present all year, and a few Lapland Longspurs (rarely Smith's) often may be found here in winter. In prime migration times, particularly after heavy rains, the site may be very attractive to shorebirds, of which 22 species have been recorded here by Gene C. Knight. This has included small numbers of Upland, Baird's and Buff-breasted sandpipers with regularity; Am. Golden Plovers arrive in March. Peregrines and Merlins are known to visit occasionally.

#### F. Springdale Wildlife Management Area (WMA)

Traveling southwest from the A & D Turf Farm on MS 7 (5.25 mi. from its intersection with MS 9W) turn right on Lafayette Co. 375; go 0.75 miles to a gravel parking area on the right near a garbage dumpster. This is the main access point to Springdale WMA, which includes wetlands and wooded bottomlands. Lanes to both right and left begin beyond the abandoned railroad roadbed visible from this point. There also is a walking-path extending ca: 0.3 mile toward the northeast on the old roadbed. Spring migration season has been the most productive time for visits.

#### G. Holly Springs National Forest

To the north and east of Oxford, there is an extensive portion of the Holly Springs National Forest, which provides much opportunity for roadside birding or hiking along closed-off forest trails. The only specific site to be recommended is the Upper Graham Lake recreation area, ca. 4 mi. northeast of the town of Abbeville, which is 8 mi. north on MS 7 from the junction with MS 30. Take Business 7 for one block past the "business district," turn east on Graham Lake Rd. (Lafayette Co. 296) and go 3 mi. to a turnoff, Lafayette Co. 296, leading to the Graham Lake area. Despite its name, there is no lake here, except when exceptional rainfall causes Sardis Lake to extend upstream this far (22 mi.) from the dam, or even farther--at its record high, as much as 34 mi. There is a boat-launching ramp into the Little Tallahatchie River and provision for day-use or primitive camping, as well as birding opportunity.

#### H. University of Mississippi Biological Field Station

Just south of the Holly Springs National Forest is a 710-acre tract acquired by the University for use as an aquatic biology research and teaching facility. Included are over 200 spring-fed ponds and wetlands in a V-shaped layout along two arms of a creek drainage. They were originally constructed for use by a minnow-raising business. The ponds attract small numbers of varied types of waterbirds according to the season. There is a great deal of edge habitat, as the slopes above the ponds are heavily wooded. The habitat is attractive for several species of breeding warblers--N. Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler (or Vireo), Louisiana

Waterthrush and the reclusive and elusive Swainson's Warbler--as well as other characteristic woodland birds. Land bird migrants can be observed here in spring and fall.

It is possible to survey much of this edge via the roads and the pond dikes. Visitors should check in with the resident manager at the headquarters upon arrival, or in advance. They may wish to walk from the entrance parking lot since driving on station roads must be done with great caution, especially if wet. Passage for staff vehicles should not be blocked. During the day, birders may walk into the facility past the gates when they are locked. Arrangements for group visits may be made through the Station Manager (234-8021) or the Station Director at the Department of Biology (232-5479).

To reach the Station, drive east on MS 30 for 0.4 mi from the MS 7N crossover, then north on Lafayette Co. 215 for 1.8 mi. Turn east on Lafayette Co. 202 and go 4.6 mi., then right on 265 down a hill 0.2 mi to the station headquarters area to the right, and the access gate to the major area of ponds down the lane to the left past the picturesque Bay Springs Baptist Church building.

#### Farther Afield

North of Oxford ca. 25 miles on MS 6 is Wall Doxey State Park. Besides cabins, picnic grounds and recreation and camping areas, this state park offers a lake around which there is a 1.1-mile hiking trail. The habitat along the trail ranges from oak- and pine-forested uplands to a cypress swamp and creek, to bottomland deciduous woods. A wide range of land birds may be expected. The trail is especially worth covering for neotropical migrants from early April to mid-May and in September-October.

Another Corps of Engineers reservoir located one county to the south, Enid Lake, provides favorable access at the dam and at four sites off MS 32 along its south shore, including George Payne Cossar State Park. These spots provide the same mix of waterbird and landbird habitats as similar ones at Sardis Lake. To reach birding points on Enid Lake continue southwest from Springdale WMA on 375 for 1.1 mile back to MS 7, then south for ca. 4 miles to MS 32 West. The same potential exists at Grenada Lake, 20-25 miles farther south [reached from MS 7, Interstate 55/US 51 or MS 8], or for



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Arkabutla Lake 40-45 miles northwest of Oxford [west off I-55 at Coldwater or Hernando]. The 25-year cumulative total for the Christmas Bird Count at Grenada Lake reached 145 species in 1991.