

A Guide to Birding in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi

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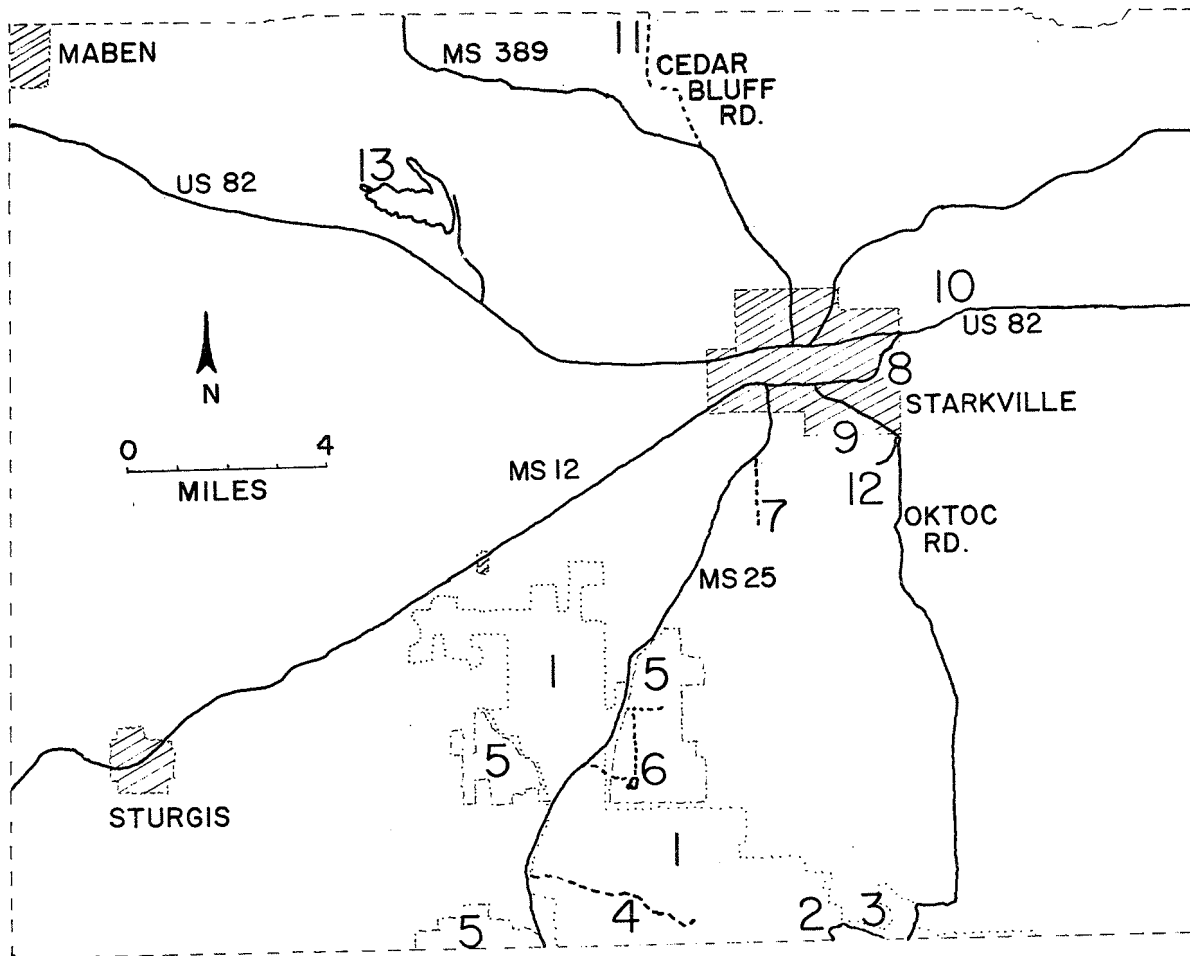
Oktibbeha County in east-central Mississippi includes an edge of the blackbelt prairie to the northeast, but, before human settlement, was primarily what Kuchler (1964) refers to as oak-hickory-pine forest. Bernard Romans (1962:313) in 1771 briefly characterized what is probably now partly Oktibbeha County: "...we went to the Chickasaw nation, through a road leading in general over stiff clay land; saw very little else but white oak, and that no where tall, occasioned by the stiffness of the land; crossed only two rivers of note, one Nashooba, the other Oka tebbe haw; no remarkable ascent or descent on the whole road; crossed many savannahs.."

Romans (op. cit.) also mentions considerable cultivation of the land by Choctaw Indians. During the past two centuries most of the remaining forest land was cleared for agriculture. By the 1930's depleted soils and economic depression resulted in much of the land reverting to second growth forest, though considerable acreage was kept in pasture and the county became known as the dairy capital of the south. Today there are fewer than half the number of dairy herds in the county that there were in 1956 and Oktibbeha County does not seem to be a major center for any agricultural product (Scott 1976). Various forest industries are important in the county and over 148 thousand acres (51%) of the county are forested (Scott op. cit.). Much of the forested area is loblolly pine (Pinus taeda), but along the many stream bottoms there are still sizeable stands of hardwood. Unfortunately, as a result of current and past forest management practices, there is little old forest.

While there are no major rivers which flow through the county, a number of smaller streams, a few large lakes, and numerous small lakes add important aquatic components to the environment. These, combined with the various forest types, pastures, and other agricultural land, provide habitats for a great diversity of resident and transient birdlife. Some of the better birding areas in the county are described below and are indicated on Figure 1. Bird names refer to species as listed in the AOU Checklist (1957) and recent supplements.

1. Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge.--Slightly less than half of this 46,000 acre refuge is located in Oktibbeha County. This includes extensive pine-hardwood forest along Mississippi Highway 25 and bottomland hardwood forest and cypress swamps along Cypress Creek, the Noxubee River, and Oktoc Creek. Approximately 1200 acres of bottomland hardwood between Oktoc Creek and the Noxubee River have been proposed for wilderness status. The northern end of Bluff Lake, a 1000 acre reservoir, is in Oktibbeha County. There are many good birding areas on the refuge, some of which will be specifically mentioned here. For detailed maps, bird checklists, and additional information, visit the refuge headquarters near Bluff Lake (open only on weekdays). Information can also be obtained by writing to the Refuge Manager, Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge, Brooksville, Ms. 39739.

Fig. 1. Good birding areas in Oktibbeha County. Numbers refer to the areas described in the text



2. Bluff Lake.--Only the northern end of this 1000 acre lake on Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge is in Oktibbeha County. This lake is a winter home for several thousand ducks and geese each winter. Nonmigratory descendants of a former captive flock of Canada Geese can be seen here at any time. Wood Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, Screech Owls, and Great-crested Flycatchers nest in the nest boxes placed around the lake. In the 1950's Bald Eagles used to nest in the cypress trees at the west end of the lake. Bald Eagles, Golden Eagles, and Ospreys are now occasionally seen near the lake during the winter. In late summer the lake level is lowered to allow growth of food plants for wintering ducks. The resulting mud flats attract large numbers of wading birds - including post-breeding Wood Storks and several species of herons and egrets. Up to 200 Black and Turkey vultures also congregate around the lake in late summer and fall. Common Loons occasionally spend a few days on Bluff Lake during migration. Gulls and terns are not common in the area, but a few individuals can show up at almost any time of year.

3. The Bamboo Trail.--This trail extends along the top of the north levee at Bluff Lake. Willows line the lake shore and bottomland hardwood forest borders the trail on the north for about half a mile before the trail enters a beautiful tunnel of bamboo. The bamboo is not native, but has been in the area since the 1940's. Some of it is nearly 30 feet tall and six inches in diameter. Barred Owls, Wood Ducks, Pileated Woodpeckers, and Red-shouldered Hawks nest in some of the larger hardwood trees to the north of the levee. Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Prothonotary Warblers commonly nest in dead willow stubs along the lake shore. White-eyed Vireos often suspend their nests from low branches overhanging the trail. For each of the past three years Black Vultures have nested on the ground in the bamboo on the south side of the levee - within 4-6 feet of passersby. During the winter months Cardinals and White-throated Sparrows can be found here by the hundreds. A word of caution: cottonmouths are also common in this area and can be found at almost any season!

4. Pete's Slough.--This cypress slough is not readily accessible but is an attractive birding area for the birder willing to hike through brambles and do a little wading. In past years Great Blue Herons and Yellow-crowned Night Herons have nested in the tops of the cypresses in the slough. The slough begins about two miles east of Highway 25 and 150-200 yards south of the Keeton Tower Road. Before entering this area please check with Refuge headquarters.

5. Mississippi State University Forest.--This forest borders Highway 25 and its boundary adjoins Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge in many areas. While primarily managed for forest products and used as a training area for forestry students from Mississippi State University, the area also provides a lot of good birding. Much of the area is pine-hardwood forest, though bottomland hardwood habitats occur along Chinchahoma Creek. An easily observed Red-cockaded Woodpecker colony can be found on the MSU Forest at the northeast corner of the junction of Highway 25 with a gravel road, 8 miles south of Starkville. The gravel road is the first one on the east side of Highway 25 north of the Dorman Lake Road.

6. Dorman Lake.--This 12 acre lake on the Mississippi State University Forest is surrounded by pine-hardwood forest on all sides. Brown-headed Nuthatches are common in the pines around the picnic area to the east. Prothonotary Warblers nest in several of the dead trees along the upper arms of the lake and Swainson's Warblers have been seen along the ephemeral streams that feed into and from the lake. Dorman Lake is about 9 miles south of Starkville and just east of Highway 25. The road to the lake is at the top of a hill. A sign directing you to the lake is on the east side of the road.

7. Starkville Sewage Disposal Ponds.--In fall and winter these are often used by a number of species of waterfowl. The ponds can be reached by taking the first gravel road to the south from Highway 25 as you drive toward Starkville from Emerson Elementary School.

8. Mississippi State University Campus-Ed Roberts Nature Trail.--The main campus of Mississippi State University is well-landscaped and provides habitat for many bird species. Warblers are abundant in the large water oaks and sugarberry trees during migration. Purple Finches and White-throated Sparrows are common on campus throughout the winter. Flocks of 200 or more Cedar Waxwings or American Goldfinches can often be found on campus from February through early May. Barn Owls nest on campus each year - sometimes under the stadium, sometimes in cavities in the old oak trees behind Rice dormitory. The wooded areas at the edge of campus and several ponds on university land provide attractive birding spots. The Ed Roberts Nature Trail completely encircles the campus, staying as much as possible in the wooded and undeveloped area around campus. One of the most enjoyable segments of the trail extends from behind the Methodist Student Center to Eckie's Pond. The trail is marked by yellow paint on trees and posts along the way. Habitat along the trail varies from pine woods to second-growth hardwoods, to grasslands. It's not really "wild" - but it is a pleasant trail along which birds of disturbed areas, hardwood forest, and forest edge can readily be found. A guide to natural history along the trail can be obtained from the Zoology Department, Room 300 Harned Hall. A campus map can be obtained at the Information Desk in the MSU Union.

9. Mississippi State University South Farm.--Located just south of the MSU campus and reached from Oktoc Road, the MSU South Farm is primarily pasture land. A large ditch through the center of the South Farm (Catalpa Creek?) provides habitat for hundreds of nesting Red-winged Blackbirds. Belted Kingfishers and Rough-winged Swallows excavate nest cavities in the steep banks of the creek. Marsh Hawks can usually be found in the fields during fall and winter and American Kestrels and Loggerhead Shrikes commonly use utility wires along the gravel roads as hunting perches. Water Pipits frequently winter in the fields. Black-bellied Plovers have been seen in the short-grass pastures during spring migration. During early May, Bobolinks frequently show up in large flocks along the roadsides and in the fields of the south farm. The 23 acre ecological research area of the Zoology Department is located on the south farm and provides habitat for Chuck-will's-widows and other woodland birds.

10. Highway 82-Sand Creek.--Just west of Clayton Village, U.S. Highway 82 crosses Sand Creek. The two bridges here and several box culverts under the highway in this area support large nesting colonies of Barn Swallows.

11. Cedar Bluff Road-Sun Creek.--The bridge just west of Sun Creek is the only known recent nest site of Eastern Phoebe in the county. The bottomland along the creek at this point often supports concentrations of ducks, geese, and wading birds during the winter months.

12. Hillbrook Subdivision.--The grassy hills of this subdivision are used each spring as a display ground by courting American Woodcock. The birds can be heard and sometimes seen in their display almost any evening from late January through early March. Displays begin shortly before dark and frequently continue until well after midnight. To reach the area take Oktoc Road toward Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. Approximately one and a half miles south of the MSU campus a paved road branches to the right just before Oktoc Road crosses a small creek. Take the right hand road. The woodcock can be heard from anywhere along the road.

13. Oktibbeha County Lake.--This 700 acre lake and the surrounding pine-hardwood forests provide good birding most of the year. During late summer the water level of the lake is lowered and extensive mud flats attract numbers of shorebirds. Waterfowl also winter on the lake, though not in the numbers to be found at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. Oktibbeha County Lake is approximately 7 miles northwest of Starkville and is reached by a county road which turns north from U.S. Highway 82 just east of Adaton. A sign on the highway directs you to the lake.

Literature Cited

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