

# Birder's Guide to the Traverse City Area

By

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First Edition

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## **About this Guide**

One of the frustrations for beginning birders is where to go once they're ready to expand beyond the backyard. Where do the birds live? Where do other birders usually go? This guide is an attempt to capture some of that information for the local beginner, for the new resident, and for the visiting birder. Birding "trails" have been established for Leelanau County to the west (<http://sleepingbearbirdingtrail.org/>) and for the counties to the northeast (<http://www.sunsetcoastbirdingtrail.org/>), but comprehensive and user-friendly recommendations for Grand Traverse County are harder to find. This guide seeks to fill that gap.

In this guide, you'll find some well known birding spots, some less so but still public, and some "pull off the road" locations on private land. Each site description includes habitat information, and lists of birds to be expected, with a few less common species thrown in to tempt you and make you keep your eyes open. Directions are provided in good old-fashioned words, starting from Traverse City in most cases, and latitude and longitude are given for GPS users. Links to websites for the sites, including trail maps, are given if they are available. For each location, I have included a description of the walking surface you will encounter, and a note about the closest restrooms.

If the site is a hotspot on eBird, a link is provided. One of the most useful features of these hotspot pages is the "Illustrated Checklist" tab. This leads to a list of species seen in the area, frequency (% of checklists reporting that species) by month, and a date on which the species was last seen by an eBird user.

Finally, in your birding travels, please consider supporting local businesses. Often the closest restroom to a birding spot is in a small store or restaurant that would appreciate your patronage. Also, if you enjoy a visit to a particular area, please take a minute to contact the managing agency. They would like to hear from you! In the case of the area land conservancies, your financial support would be greatly appreciated.

## **Birding in the Traverse City area**

Located in northwestern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, this region features many species found in eastern North America, but surprises often turn up for those who get out in the field. Nearby locations like Whitefish Point and Leelanau County may account for more rarities, but the Grand Traverse area affords excellent birding nonetheless.

Since the area is more heavily populated than counties to the east or west, natural habitats are often separated and may hold concentrations of birds. The Boardman River Valley is one example of a sizeable habitat corridor. Grand Traverse Bay, a 30-mile extension of Lake Michigan, attracts a number of waterfowl and gull species. The forests are mainly mixtures of maple and beech, or oak and pine. Lowlands contain cedar forests, alders, cattail marshes, and a few bogs. Numerous lakes dot the region. In the fairly urban area around Traverse City, birders can expect the usual urban and suburban species, but more natural habitats penetrate to the center of town, so Rock Pigeons live quite close to Merlins and Barred Owls.

The typical annual cycle begins with resident passerines (chickadees, titmice and finches) and woodpeckers in winter, with occasional irruptions of Bohemian Waxwings and winter finches. A few Snowy Owls often show up in late December or January and remain for the winter. Spring waterfowl migration starts in early to mid-April, as the ice melts of the inland lakes. The passerine migration begins building in early April when blackbirds, Tree Swallows and Eastern

Bluebirds arrive, and reaches a peak in mid-May with the arrival of thrushes, flycatchers, and 15 to 20 species of warblers. In June and July, birds are busy with breeding activities. Southbound shorebirds can be found regularly beginning in late July through August, mostly along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Larger inland ponds attract a few also. In September and October, birders will be challenged by “confusing fall warblers”, and sparrows, immature and adult. The last three months of the year hold the promise of sea ducks on Lake Michigan, and occasional uncommon gulls on Grand Traverse Bay.

Water levels on the Great Lakes have been known to fluctuate several feet over multi-year cycles. As of 2017, Lake Michigan is at levels near the record high seen in 1986. Shallow water habitats for shorebirds are almost nonexistent. Vegetation that grew on exposed areas during the most recent low-water years is now flooded. Given the current levels, expect to find shorebirds on inland ponds, wet meadows, or not at all. Recently exposed areas along the Boardman River may attract some shorebirds in the next few years, but these areas are small, and will be revegetated. Sleeping Bear Point remains a good spot for shorebirds (see Sleeping Bear Birding Trail), but get out there early, before the beach-walkers.

A **checklist** has been assembled by the Grand Traverse Audubon Club:

<http://69.195.124.149/~grandtr4/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/checklist2.pdf>

On a final note, property owners in the area are quite wary, probably due to the many liberties taken by summer tourists. Please be respectful, and if confronted, explain that you’re birding. Many of those who live here are also very fond of the natural world, and might just share a story with you, or offer advice.

### **From the Northwest**

**(and overlapping with the Sleeping Bear Birding Trail <http://sleepingbearbirdingtrail.org/>)**

#### **DeYoung Natural Area (44.809632, -85.653403)**

This area is listed on the Sleeping Bear Birding Trail, but it’s close enough to Traverse City to be worth mentioning here. The Natural Area features a trail that passes through an area of alder shrubs and cedars on its way to a fishing dock on Cedar Lake. Several species of waterfowl may be found on the lake in early spring, with Mute Swans, Common Loons, Canada Geese, gulls and Mallards remaining most of the summer.

The trail continues through a cedar forest as it winds along near the lake. Watch for passerines and woodpeckers. Sharp-shinned Hawks may breed in the area. As the trail loops back to the start, it passes through an old field. Eastern Kingbirds, meadowlarks and various sparrows are frequently seen.

Before leaving, take a short walk south on the Leelanau Trail to check out the small pond. Blackbirds, Swamp Sparrows, Wood Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, teal, kingfishers, and flycatchers may all be found in season. In spring, Caspian Terns often fish in the pond.

The walking surfaces are paved bike path, gravel trail, boardwalk, and mostly level natural terrain in the cedar forest and fields.

Directions: Head north from Traverse City on M-22 along West Bay to the light at Cherry Bend Road. Turn left and follow Cherry Bend a couple miles north to the driveway by the old barn on the right. Park on the far side of the barn.

A porta-potty is available at the parking area. More civilized facilities are available at the convenience stores on M-22.

**Fulton Park/ Carter Road** (44.780645, -85.641805)

This area is part of a long, narrow strip of habitat along the Leelanau Trail. North of Carter Road, the trail passes through a damp area and into a sedge-and-tamarack forest, perhaps reminiscent of northern Canada. Dead cedars and tamaracks attract woodpeckers and flycatchers. The area begs for an Olive-sided Flycatcher, but so far, none have been reported. White-throated Sparrows are common singers though.

A note: watch your back and keep an eye out for bicyclists; they come along in fast-moving packs at times. Don't step back without looking.

South of Carter Road a couple hundred feet, you'll notice a footpath heading west. It makes a loop through the old Fulton Park, once owned by Traverse City. You'll pass through a forest of maple and older aspens, with an understory of Tartarian Honeysuckle and other shrubs. A clump of cedar marks the crossing of a small stream.

Expect chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers, sparrows and warblers in season. The layers of habitat hold a variety of species. The area is close to Grand Traverse Bay, so keep an eye out for gulls and an occasional Bald Eagle flying over.

The walking surface on the Leelanau Trail is paved and level. The Fulton Park Trail is forest floor, damp or muddy most of the year, and may have fallen trees.

Directions: Head north from Traverse City on M-22 (S. West Bayshore Drive) and turn left on Carter Rd. The best parking is on the south side of Carter, just before it crosses the Trail, about 200 yards from M-22. Left turns from Carter Rd. onto M-22 may require a great deal of patience at some times of day.

Restrooms are available at convenience stores on M-22.

**Hickory Hills & Hickory Meadows** (44.766676, -85.659765)

Hopefully, this area gets more birding attention than the two checklists reported by ebirders. The variety of habitats alone makes it worth a visit. Hickory Hills is one of Traverse City's ski areas. During the rest of the year, the mature beech-maple forest hosts a number of vireos, flycatchers, warblers, Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, and others. In recent years, Barred Owls have nested in the area.

Just across the dirt road is Hickory Meadows, with loops trails through grassy meadows and woods edges. One trail takes you by a small pond lined with cattails. For beginning birders, this area provides a chance to practice new skills. Few, if any, grassland sparrows have been reported, but a variety of edge and shrub-dwelling species live here, such as Indigo Bunting, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Baltimore Oriole, and others. In past years, Eastern Screech Owls and Great Horned Owls have been found here.

While you're in this part of town, spend a few minutes at **Ashton Park**, a few acres of mature woods, with beech, maple, hemlock and other species. A few other forest birds may be found here, including warblers in spring migration.

Directions: From downtown Traverse City, proceed west on Randolph Street. At the end of Randolph, you'll find an unpaved parking area. The dirt road is gated except during ski season. Park here and head into the mature forest, or walk toward the gate, where you will find the Meadows trailhead on the other side of the parking area. The pond is about ¼ mile from the trailhead.

Note: this area has a popular disc golf course. Beware of flying discs!

Ashton Park is close by. Follow Randolph back down to Monroe. Turn left, then left again on Hill St. Park along Hill St. and explore the park.

The walking surfaces are gravel and natural-surface trails. They are fairly level for the most part, with a few undulating sections.

Restrooms are available at businesses in Traverse City; this area is largely residential.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L4637685?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

### **Boardman River Valley**

This natural area is one of the finest contiguous areas of riparian and riverine habitats in northwest Lower Michigan. It offers wildlife a habitat corridor stretching from well south of the city almost into downtown. It offers birders excellent opportunities for watching from the middle of town to the outskirts. The valley runs from north to south, then turns east a few miles south of Traverse City, where the river runs through the Traverse City State Forest.

A significant portion of the river valley near Traverse City is managed as the Grand Traverse Nature Education Reserve. The Boardman River Nature Center sits almost in the center of the preserve.

Currently, a project is underway to restore the Boardman to its former channel, and hopefully, former glory. At this writing, Boardman (a.k.a Keystone) Dam and Brown Bridge Dam have been removed (with a little help from the river). Sabin Dam is slated for removal.

<http://natureiscalling.org/parkland/grand-traverse-natural-education-reserve/>

### **Boardman River at 8th St. (44.760034, -85.616424)**

For waterfowl in winter, this is one of the best places to go. When ice has covered Boardman Lake, the river usually remains open, and a variety of ducks get pushed into this stretch of open water. Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser and Mallard often stay through the winter, with Redhead, Canvasback, scaup, and Ring-necked Ducks joining them in early spring. Wintering finches, robins and sparrows are often found in the streamside brush.

Directions: Make your way to the intersection of Eighth St. and Boardman Ave. in Traverse City. About a hundred feet north on Boardman Ave. is the entrance to the Grand Traverse County Governmental Center. If possible, park on the west edge of the parking lot, overlooking the river. This is one of those locations best visited on a weekend.

The walking surfaces are paved and level, although snowbanks are usually present when the ducks are here.

Restrooms are available at local businesses. One of the closest is Rare Bird Brewpub, on Lake St., just off 8th, west of the bridge. Warm up with an excellent microbrew!

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L2032490?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

### **Boardman Lake Trail**

The two main access points for this 2.6-mile trail are in very different habitats. From Medalie Park, follow the paved walkway to the east, around an arm of Boardman Lake and into a forested section of the trail. Cedars and riparian vegetation mingles with upland forest for several hundred yards. A variety of warblers, flycatchers, woodpeckers and sparrows can be seen here.

From the Lake Street end by Oryana Natural Foods Cooperative, the trail winds down through scattered scrub and riverside trees, then crosses the Boardman River as it leaves Boardman Lake. From there, the trail goes between the sewage treatment plant and a local sailing facility. Hull Park provides another access point at the northeast corner of the lake. Diving ducks seem to linger close to shore here, offering excellent views.

Directions: Two of the access points are in Traverse City:

Lake St. and 10th. St. (44.756969, -85.616837), park in the gravel lot near the Coop;  
Parking area on Hannah Ave., just west of Woodmere Ave., at Hull Park (44.756121, -85.608987)

Medalie Park (see below)

<http://traversetrails.org/trail/boardman-lake-trail/>

### **Medalie Park (a.k.a. Logan's Landing) (44.735470, -85.615919)**

This grassy park is well known as the best access to the south end of Boardman Lake. In late winter and spring, sizeable and diverse flocks of diving and dabbling ducks stop in the lake just north of the park. Common Loons frequently linger on the lake, and have attempted to nest. Mute Swans nest here, and Trumpeter Swans are seen occasionally. Check the numerous Canada Geese for the occasional Snow Goose or Cackling Goose in spring and fall. As ice shrinks the area of available open water, Snowy Owls may be seen on the ice. A Peregrine Falcon was seen near here in February 2007.

Take the time to follow the paved path along the east side of the park, which follows a backwater of the lake. Warblers, sparrows, and other songbirds frequent the bushes along the water, and Wood Ducks occasionally hang out in the backwater. This trail crosses the water along South Airport Road and winds north along the east side of Boardman Lake (see Boardman Lake Trail).

The west side of Logan's Landing (the name of the shopping complex) is well worth a stop. You can walk around the north side of the buildings and cross the Boardman River on a plexiglass-sided bridge, or you can drive back out to South Airport Rd., turn right, then turn right into the parking lot at the light. Head for the water on the west side. In spring, it is often teeming with waterfowl, cormorants, swallows, and turtles.

Directions: There are two entrances, as noted above, from South Airport Rd, which is a divided roadway at this point. The entrance to Medalie Park does not have a traffic light. Note that the

entrance to Racquet Club Drive, and the YMCA South (see below), is directly across from the west side of Logan's Landing.

The walking surfaces are level and paved or grassy, but watch for goose droppings. At times, there might be standing water along or over the paved walking trail to the east.

Restrooms are available at Medalie Park, and nearby fast food establishments.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L859757>

#### **YMCA South** (44.7316, -85.6167)

This wetland is a local favorite, and rightly deserves its acclaim. Migrants and breeding birds are attracted to this pond and cattail marsh beside the Boardman River. Waterfowl including geese, swans, dabbling ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, as well as Pied-billed Grebes are frequently found here. Shorebirds sighted regularly include Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, and both Yellowlegs. The riparian shrubs around the pond and along the river attract a wide variety of swallows, warblers, sparrows, finches and blackbirds. In April 2017, a flock of Rusty Blackbirds was spotted here. Raptors including accipiters, Merlin and Bald Eagles occasionally fly over. Because the pond is situated behind an office park with lawns, numerous suburban species are common here too.

Directions: Turn south at the light from South Airport Road onto Racquet Club Drive. Follow it back to the parking lot at the YMCA building and walk back to the pond. Stay alert for cars as you bird, and be aware that traffic on South Airport Rd. is quite heavy at certain times of day.

The driveway is paved and level.

Restrooms are available at fast food and convenience stores on South Airport, or across South Airport at Medalie Park.

#### **Boardman Valley Trail** (North end 44.728781, -85.617418; South end 44.708066, -85.623255)

This remarkable trail follows the Boardman River for 1.3 miles, between the YMCA South facility and the Boardman River Nature Center (BRNC). The main trail and its side branches wind through riparian shrubs, cedar forest, mixed northern hardwoods, alongside cattail marshes, and via a boardwalk, through a boggy section near the south end. Take the time to explore the side branches!

Birders are likely to encounter a variety of resident songbirds including flycatchers, finches, wrens, warblers, woodpeckers, and sparrows. The trail crosses a meadow in the southern half where bluebirds and Tree Swallows have nested. Because this area is part of a greater trail system, the contiguous habitat along the river forms a migration corridor, attracting several species of warblers in the spring and fall. Waterfowl and raptors also follow the river, and may be present at any time of year.

At the north end, you will find the trail by parking at the YMCA South parking lot and walking south along the edge of the soccer field. The trail is damp in places, and may have standing water a few inches deep in the spring. At the south end, the trail meets a paved driveway that forms the access to Sabin Dam. (Note: this is likely to change in the future with the removal of

the dam.) Walk up the short, steep hill to the Boardman River Nature Center. Birding with others and dropping off a vehicle at the far end of your walk is a great way to explore this area.

Walking surface is forest floor and grassy, depending on the habitat, and mostly level. As mentioned, a boardwalk traverses a wetland in the southern section.

Restrooms are available at the BRNC pavilion at the south end.

### **Boardman River Nature Center & Sabin Pond (44.707983, -85.625404)**

This is a favorite with local birders. eBirders have listed 165 species found here. Located at the midpoint, more or less, of the Boardman River Nature Education Reserve, the Nature Center provides birders with answers to questions, restrooms, and bird feeders. Behind the Center, just past the feeders (check for woodpeckers, juncos, titmice, sparrows and Pine Siskins in season), the trail heads quickly to a platform overlooking Sabin Pond. In spring, Hooded Merganser, Bufflehead and Ring-necked Duck are frequently seen.

From here, the trail descends to the level of the pond. Another platform, at pond level, provides excellent views of waterfowl, Belted Kingfishers, Spotted Sandpipers, and possibly, Pied-billed Grebes. The trail continues along the pond, through a few pockets of hemlock with Yellow Birch on shadier exposures, and oak and pine on the sunnier slopes. Birds to watch for include thrushes, warblers, sparrows, kinglets, and woodpeckers.

After about 0.3 mile, the trail climbs back up the hill to another platform, where you can look out over the Boardman. Take a few minutes here; foxes and deer may be visible on the far side of the river in the early morning. Eagles, Osprey, and Trumpeter Swans have been known to use this area.

To return to the Nature Center on the more level trail, follow the trail as it winds through stands of young pine instead of dipping down to the pond.

The walking surfaces are a natural trail with wooden steps in the steep places, and boardwalks over the wet places.

Directions: From Traverse City, follow Cass St. south across South Airport Road. After another 2 miles, the road crosses a railroad track. The Nature Center is on the left immediately after the crossing,

The trail along Sabin Pond can also be reached from the park just south of the school bus garage (44.702898, -85.624959). This area serves as parking for bus drivers, so it's quite busy in the early mornings and afternoons on weekdays.

Restrooms are located in the Center, and in the pavilion out back, though these may be closed in late fall and winter.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1365219>

### **Lone Pine Trail (44.6843°, -85.6256°)**

This area along the Boardman River has been impacted heavily by the dam removal project described above. The landscape on the side of the river opposite the trail has been basically stripped of vegetation as of Sept. 2017. The trail side of the river is largely untouched. Instead of

a small lake at the end of the trail, there is now a river finding its way through the exposed bottom, complete with old stumps and mounds of sediment.

At present, you may expect the songbirds, woodpeckers, and other species typically found in second-growth forest and open meadow. Belted Kingfishers and Rough-winged Swallows may continue to breed along the river if suitable banks remain. Keep an eye directed upward for passing Bald Eagles and other raptors, as well as migrating waterfowl.

Directions: From Traverse City, head south on Cass Road. (The Boardman River Nature Center will be on your left if you aren't already starting from there.) Cass Road will meet Keystone Road at a light; turn right. After a quarter mile or so, start watching for the small parking area on the right side. The paved trail leads downriver from the parking lot.

The walking surface is paved, and level for the most part.

No restrooms are found in the immediate area.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1365210>

#### **Shumsky's Landing, Boardman River** (44.6508, -85.5902)

Shumsky Road is a quiet little dirt road that runs between a mixed pine and hardwood forest and a brushy wet meadow on the floodplain of the Boardman River. Just about at the end of the public road is a DNR-maintained canoe launch and parking area.

Known locally as the place to go for nesting Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers, the willows and alders along the river and across the road attract dozens of species of songbirds, raptors, waterfowl, Ruffed Grouse, and woodpeckers. eBirders have listed 119 species from the area. The morning chorus in spring will include, most likely, Baltimore Oriole, Purple Finch, White-throated Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Common Yellowthroat and House Wren.

Directions: From the west, follow Beitner Rd. from U.S. 31/37 (Chum's Corners), or from the east follow Keystone Rd (farther south from Lone Pine Trail). They meet at River Rd., which goes south. At 2.3 miles, turn west on Shumsky Rd. Look for the little brown canoe launch sign.

The walking surface is hard-packed dirt road.

An outhouse is located in the boat launch parking area.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1569546?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

#### **Mayfield Pond Park** (44.626410, -85.531444)

This little wetland may be another underappreciated wonder. eBirders have only reported 52 species on 13 checklists, perhaps because it's a little out of the way. By the look of the habitat, more effort would yield great results.

The pond and park were originally created as a fishing spot by a few folks passionate about fly-fishing. A small tributary of the Boardman River was partially diverted and dammed to create the pond. The main area of the park is grassy with a few large trees, perfect for nesting Baltimore Orioles. Benches provide comfortable pond-viewing. On the far bank of the pond, a strip of cattails is flanked by cedar and spruce. Behind that, the land rises quickly to a forested upland.

If you're in the mood for a walk after checking out the pond, head back toward the bridge to the parking area, but turn right before you cross. You'll find yourself flanked by aspen and spruce on the left, and alder and conifers on the right. The clearing where the creek splits would be a fantastic place to linger for a while on a spring morning. Just upstream, cedar, spruce and hardwoods come down to the creek.

To continue on the walk, cross the metal bridge and head up the trail. It will lead you through mature beech and maple, and up to the top of the hill. After a hundred yards or so of second-growth aspen and maple, you'll come to a platform overlooking the pond. The trail continues around the edge of the hill and meets a wider track. This leads you back down the hill, while giving you mid-canopy views into a stand of hemlocks, perfect for looks at Blackburnian Warblers.

The trail eventually crosses the creek below the pond, via some wooden steps and a foot bridge. The total loop is about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a mile.

As mentioned, there are few reports from this area. eBird checklists and historical records confirm presence and breeding of Common Nighthawks, and Whip-poor-wills have been found here. Common breeders and migrants can definitely be expected.

Directions: Head south from Traverse City on Garfield Road 9.4 miles after crossing South Airport Rd., or 11.5 from Front St., and you'll come to the little village of Mayfield. Turn right on E. Blair Townhall Rd., then take the first left. The park is on the right. If you miss that turn on Garfield Road, take a right on Church St., after the Country Store. Turn right after one block (there's only one), then left on Mill St. to the park.

(Note: the park is about 5 miles from Shumsky's Landing if you follow River Road out to its intersection with Garfield Rd. and turn right.)

The walking surfaces around the pond are grassy. The trail is forest floor with wooden steps in the steep places.

An outhouse is present at the picnic pavilion. There is a convenience store another  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile south on Garfield road.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1456410>

### **Grand Traverse Bay Access Points**

Aside from the gorgeous blue water of summer, what draws birders to the Bay are waterfowl and gulls. Fortunately, this doesn't conflict with tourist season. Loons (Common and rarely Red-throated), Double-crested Cormorants, grebes, scoters and other "sea ducks", mergansers (including Red-breasted in spring), and an assortment of diving ducks can be spotted from locations on shore. Among the usual Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, watch for Iceland, Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, and Glaucous Gulls. Bonaparte's Gulls and Caspian Terns

are more frequently seen in spring. Caspian Terns nest up the bay on Gull Island (yes, really) near Northport. Bald Eagles may be present through much of the year, as long as the fishing is good.

### **Clinch Park Marina**

Directions: From east or west, proceed toward downtown Traverse City and turn north at the light at the foot of Union St. Parking is a challenge in the busy summer season, but if you're here for waterfowl, you won't have a problem. Park by the Open Space and walk to the water on the north side of the open area, or drive east to the marina parking lot and walk out on the pier. Both places afford wide open views of West Grand Traverse Bay. In addition to the water birds, Snow Buntings have been seen from time to time in the Open Space. Barn, Tree and Rough-winged Swallows are frequently seen around the Marina in spring and summer.

NOTE: Walkways near the water can be VERY ICY! Proceed with caution!  
Also, parking is metered except on Sundays.

Walking surfaces are paved.

Restrooms are available at the Pavilion in Clinch Park, but may be closed in the winter. In that case, head for downtown.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1305694>

### **Greilickville Harbor Park and Discovery Pier (44.786472, -85.637812)**

The "old coal dock" has been converted to a public space thanks to the efforts of [Rotary of Traverse City](#), ensuring waterfront access. In the summer, you can wander among the masts of three locally-operated schooners. In the winter, you can freeze in the wind and sort through the rafts of diving ducks that linger over the shoals just off the dock. From late fall through mid-winter, concentrations of over 1000 ducks have been seen, predominantly Redhead, with Common Goldeneye, scaup, Bufflehead and Common Mergansers mixed in. Check the flocks of Canada Geese just to make sure a Cackling Goose hasn't slipped in. South of Discovery Pier about a quarter mile, check the big willow at the water's edge. It's a favorite perching spot for Bald Eagles in winter and early spring.

Directions: Discovery Pier lies on M-22, 0.8 miles north of the intersection with M-72. There are a few parking spaces on the right side of the road, with more room across the road at the Discovery Center, or just north of the Pier at the Greilickville Harbor Park (though this is closed in the winter). Access onto the pier is closed in winter, but you can bird from the beach and the land-side of the harbor by the schooners.

WARNING: M-22 is very busy! Cross carefully and at your own risk!! (You'll wish you had wings.)

Restrooms are available at convenience stores north and south of the Pier.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L883028>

### **Four Mile Road**

Public access to East Grand Traverse Bay in the fall and winter can be very limited. The numerous parks and boat launches tend to close for the winter. The hotels and other businesses that line U.S. 31 tend to frown on the use of parking lots by non-customers. The north end of Four Mile Road is one public site that allows access to the water late in the year. Enter this short section of street at the traffic light at U.S. 31 and Four Mile Road. Scan the bay to the east and west.

Walking surfaces may be icy in the winter. The pavement ends at the beach, which is private on either side of the access.

Restrooms are available at the convenience store across U.S. 31.

A hotspot page for a nearby location on East Bay: <http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1370220>

### **In Traverse City and Southwest**

#### **Grand Traverse Commons**

This large area of public land on the west side of Traverse City contains the former State Mental Hospital, and several buildings have been successfully redeveloped without losing their characteristic architecture. The grounds feature an arboretum-like collection of trees, so don't be surprised to see something out of place. The buildings are surrounded by wilder areas, from mature hardwood forest stretching to the top of the ridge to the west, to damp level lowlands filled with cattails. Kid's Creek winds through this part of the Commons. Open areas of different sizes mark what were farm fields (the State Hospital used to have a working farm). A thick stand of Norway Spruce is located along Division St., and a stand of cedars lines a small stream, tucked between the hills. The area also has some unusual hydrology: an artesian spring on top of a small hill, and several perched wetlands on the hill above the main trailhead.

As a large area with varied habitats, the Commons hosts an amazing diversity of bird life. eBirders have found over 100 species here. In appropriate habitats, one may expect most of the local and migrating passerines and woodpeckers. Woodcock and Wilson's Snipe call from the wetlands in spring. Several species of hawks and falcons have been recorded, as have Barred and Great Horned Owls. Turkey Vultures have been known to roost on or in one of the old buildings, and Chimney Swifts occupy many of the old chimneys.

It is worth noting that the area is very popular with walkers, mountain bikers and cross-country skiers. To get a little peace while birding, it's best to go early!

Directions (since this is a large area, GPS coordinates will be given for several access points): The easiest access to this rabbit warren of drives labeled with colors is from West Silver Lake Road, across from Franke Road. From U.S. 31 a.k.a. Division St., turn west on W. Silver Lake Road, then right at the first traffic light. Turn left after only 200 feet or so onto a dirt lane that leads to the Historic Barns Park and the Botanical Garden (44.748372, -85.647361). Continue ahead to wander the grassy areas of the Commons. To reach the main trailhead (44.751518, -85.646615), turn right from the Barns Park. After a 200-yard journey down a bone-jarring,

suspension-testing dirt road (5 mph limit suggested!), park across from the building with the copper roof.

For more direct access to the forested slopes of the upper part of the Commons, go to the small parking lot along N. Long Lake Road (follow W. Front St. out of Traverse City; 44.755293, -85.654690).

The best access and parking for the lower, wetter section is near the old power house (44.753257, -85.642917). A level trail leads east and crosses a grass-and-gravel two-track. Kid's Creek winds through this area as well. Unfortunately, parking spots close to the trailhead are reserved for employees and residents. Spots are unmarked in the lot just across Silver Drive.

Walking surfaces range from level gravel two-tracks (old farm roads) to well-packed trails in the forest. There is a significant elevation change from the main trailhead to the upper part of the trail system! Some trails are moderately steep. Others can be damp and muddy most of the year.

Restroom facilities are limited! If businesses around the Commons are closed, they are nonexistent! Your best bet is a nearby grocery or convenience store on or near Division St. (not 7-11).

[Click here for trail map!](#)

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1506768>

### **Miller Creek Nature Reserve** (44.7223, -85.6355)

The area may be one of the best under-utilized spots in the region. It encompasses the upper reaches of a side drainage that connects to the Boardman River, and habitats include a small pond, brushy and wet floodplain, an extensive cattail marsh, and a cedar swamp forest. While the species list is rather typical for the region, the preserve seems quite wild, considering the Grand Traverse Mall is nearby, and the walk can be very enjoyable. The cattail marsh may hold American Bitterns, and Winter Wrens have been found in the cedar swamp. More inventory work is needed for this site.

Directions: From South Airport Road in Traverse City, turn into the Grand Traverse Crossing complex across from the mall. Find your way past Burger King and behind the building with Aldi's Market and Planet Fitness (on the west end). The trailhead is marked with a sign.

The trail surface is forest floor, with a boardwalk traversing the cedar swamp. The beginning section is a bit steep, but the trail levels out on the valley floor. Several sections are damp, and the trail winds and climbs around trees and cutbanks as it follows the stream on the section near the parking area.

Restrooms are available at the aforementioned Burger King.

[Miller Creek Nature Reserve](#) (from Grand Traverse County)

[Click here for trail map!](#)

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L909508>

**Kid's Creek Park** (44.7352, -85.6479)

This riparian area is the product of restoration efforts on what was an Oleson Farms buffalo pasture. Extensive planting along Kid's Creek has created a stand of willow and tag alder, with cedars and several large cottonwoods. The gravel trail is laid out roughly in a figure-8. Watch for Common Yellowthroat and Yellow Warblers as you wind through the thick vegetation. On the north side of the creek, the trail follows the edge of the old pasture, so watch for meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows, and other birds of more open country. As you proceed downstream, go slowly to avoid flushing any ducks or wading birds that might be at the fishing pond. In spring and summer, Warbling Vireos frequently sing from the cottonwoods by the pond.

Directions: Head south on Division Street (U.S. 31 South) and turn right into the Kohl's parking lot, just south of the Great Wolf Lodge. The trailhead is on the west side of the building.

The walking surface is gravel and mostly level.

Restrooms are available in nearby stores.

**[Kid's Creek Park](#)**

**[Click here for trail map!](#)**

**Wuerful Park area** (44.679360, -85.662392)

Unofficially named for the stadium where the Traverse City Beach Bums play, this area is under development. Slowly, which benefits us birders. Unused weedy and grassy areas are accessible by paved roads. Some of these areas are grassy enough to invite meadowlarks, Horned Larks, grassland sparrows, and Upland Sandpiper. A pair of Red-tailed Hawks appears to be resident. In winter, this is one of the best spots in the area for Snowy Owls. Check the tops of the utility poles, even the highest ones. In 2017, a colony of Brewer's Blackbirds frequented the area, mostly around the water tower and the fenced area surrounding the cell phone tower.

Directions:

Follow U.S. 31 south of Traverse City, 3.3 miles from the intersection with South Airport Road. Turn right on Chum's Village Drive west of U.S. 31 (look for the large sign on the west side of the road), just north of Chum's Corners.

Park and look from the dead end section of Chum's Village Drive, west of Village Park Drive. Also explore the north end of Stadium Drive by the ball park; don't leave your car by the "Do Not Block Road End" sign. Exit the area by way of Heartland Drive S to East Silver Lake Road, or by W Commerce Drive south to U.S. 31. Similar grassland habitat can also be reached on Rennie School Road; from East Silver Lake Road, go north about 0.25 mile and turn east on Rennie School Road. Continue east back to U.S. 31 South.

The walking surface is paved road, with possible excursions into ditches and grassy or weedy flat ground.

Restrooms are available at nearby fast food and convenience stores.

### **Lake Dubonnet**

For those seeking a wilder birding experience, this is a great place. The lake is an impoundment surrounded by state land. For the most part, the forest is made up of second-growth maple and pine and older aspen with a few large white pines and oaks scattered throughout. Birders can expect a variety of woodpeckers, flycatchers, warblers, vireos, and other forest songbirds.

Ruffed Grouse are also likely, along with Bald Eagle and Red-shouldered Hawk. Barred and Great Horned Owls have both been recorded here.

A boat ramp (see Directions) provides access to the lake. Several species of dabbling and diving ducks can be found during migration. Canada Goose, Common Loon, and Trumpeter Swans are present through the breeding season. Sandhill Cranes inhabit the marshy shorelines around the lake.

The area of the dam is worth a visit. Upstream, the open water is lined by forest. Downstream, the outlet passes through a wet area with alders, cattails and other wetland plants.

Directions: From Traverse City, head south on U.S. 31 past Interlochen Corners. On the way, pull off and check the osprey platform in the wetland on the south side of the highway (44.662901, -85.713157), west of Grawn. Turn north on Gondor Road, 7.3 miles west of Chum's Corner, just past the Interlochen Golf Course. Gondor Road goes past a couple roads that lead into a subdivision, then turns to dirt.

Note: from here on, the roads are dirt, less than two lanes wide, and not plowed. They may be impassable until the snow melts in the woods (mid-April?). Four wheel drive, or at least higher ground clearance is suggested in the spring due to the numerous wet spots.

To reach the boat ramp (44.682574, -85.797783), continue north on the dirt road, called Campground Road after it crosses Fewins/ Mud Lake Road. A right turn at the campground entrance will take you to the boat ramp.

From there, the dam (44.683846, -85.807699) can be reached by returning south to the intersection of dirt roads. Turn right onto Fewins Road, then bear right two times, and follow Camp Trail Road north. Signs will direct you to the Trail Camp, and you may see signs of horses. The dam is 0.7 mile north of the second right.

Walking surfaces are dirt roads and forest trails.

Another note: this area is open to hunting! Wear some orange clothing if you visit in October or November.

An outhouse is available at the campground, though it may be closed later in the season. There is a convenience store back at Interlochen Corners.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L322643?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

### **Old Mission Peninsula**

**Northwestern Michigan College, Front Street Campus** (entrance at 44.764480, -85.588761)

On a quiet morning, the NMC campus can offer quite a few bird species in a variety of habitats. Part of the campus is a stand of mature White Pine mixed with Red Pine and a few hardwoods. Merlins have nested here in the past, and Pine Warblers often sing here in the spring. In the mature oaks just to the east of campus, watch and listen for Red-headed Woodpeckers. Red-bellied and Pileated Woodpeckers are often found anywhere on campus. Flocks of chickadees, nuthatches and titmice are present year-round, and warblers and thrushes migrate through in spring and fall.

A brushy wetland is located between Cherry or Elm parking lots, just past Cedar lot on College Drive. Pick the side that allows viewing with the sun behind you (Elm in the morning, Cherry in the afternoon). Blackbirds, sparrows and Yellow Warblers frequent the wetland.

At the east end of College Drive (the road through the campus) lies a lowland forest of dying ash, old aspen, red maple, and hemlock. There is no trail access, but you can easily explore the edges from Maple parking lot and the Oleson Center. Barred Owls have been seen here on several occasions.

**Directions:**

Enter from the light at College Drive and Front Street, following College Drive around to the Cedar parking lot. Metered visitor spaces are available here, but are not necessary on the weekends or after 5:00 pm. Walk between buildings to the south to the large stand of White Pine between the campus buildings and Front Street.

Note: Classes usually end in early May, so after that time, the campus is less active and parking restrictions end for the summer.

Walking surfaces are level sidewalks and paved parking lots.

Restrooms can be found in campus buildings, if they are open.

**Pelizzari Natural Area (44.786254, -85.574303)**

This area near the base of Old Mission Peninsula is very popular with walkers, including many with dogs. The section near the parking area is a long rectangle that used to be an orchard. The vegetation is that of recovering, low-fertility soils: knapweed and some grasses, with a few planted spruces and small trees. Though open, it seems to lack the grass and grassland species one might expect. The various loops of trail pass through young to middle-age forest as you proceed farther to the east. Older aspen are dying and giving way to maple and oak. In this section, watch for woodpeckers, thrushes, vireos, and warblers in season. Near the eastern edge of the property, small meadows interrupt the forest. Check the nesting boxes for Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds.

When you reach the eastern part of the property, bear southeast, to a section attached to the main property by a corner (see the trail maps along the way). This area features one of the finest stands of older forest in the county. Large maple, hemlock and beech form a canopy broken only by fallen trees lost in recent storms. There are even a few large Yellow Birch. Expect thrushes, nuthatches, warblers and other forest passerines.

**Directions:**

From the intersection of Front St. and Garfield Ave. in Traverse City, head north on Garfield. Very shortly, the road bends and becomes Peninsula Drive. At the second traffic light, bend

right onto Center Road. Follow Center Road 1.3 miles north, and look for a small gravel parking lot on the right (east side).

The walking surface is natural, either a path worn in the field, or forest floor. It follows the contours of the land, and is rather steep in places.

Restrooms are available at businesses in Traverse City, including the Burger King at Front & Garfield.

<http://www.gtrlc.org/recreation-events/preserve/pelizzari-natural-area/>

**Pyatt Lake** (44.9028, -85.5255)

This under-birded gem is well worth the short drive out from Traverse City, particularly in the spring. Second-growth mixed hardwood forest surrounds a small lake and complex of shrubby wetlands. Sections of the trail wind through stands of hemlock as well. Observation platforms allow comfortable and quiet study of the lake and wetland. At the lake platform, there is even a rocking chair!

Birders can expect a wide variety of breeding and migrating songbirds and woodpeckers, including several species of warblers and thrushes, plus herons, waterfowl, Sora, and Barred Owl. The flute-like song of the Wood Thrush rewards the early riser!

Directions: Take M-37 N/ Center Rd to Seven Hills Rd in Peninsula Township (a.k.a. Old Mission Peninsula). Turn left on Seven Hills Rd. to Bowers Harbor Rd. After a left on Bowers Harbor Rd., bear slightly right on Neahtawanta Rd. After 0.4 miles, take Pyatt Rd. to the right. Follow this dirt, seasonal road and watch for the parking area on the right.

Note: access is limited in winter; Pyatt Road is not plowed!

The trail surface is forest floor, uneven in places, with short sections of boardwalk near the platforms.

There is an outhouse at the boat launch near the intersection of Bowers Harbor and Neahtawanta Roads. Facilities are also available at the market in Mapleton, just a mile or so to the north.

<https://www.gtrlc.org/recreation-events/preserve/pyatt-lake-the-bill-carls-nature-preserve/>

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L5464949?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

**Old Mission Lighthouse Park** (44.989960, -85.480708)

At the tip of Old Mission Peninsula, this forested park attracts spring migrants as they wait for favorable winds to cross Grand Traverse Bay. In spring and summer, the trail through the mature mixed forest is good for thrushes, Eastern Wood Pewee, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, vireos, and several warblers. A pair of Barred Owls has bred here in recent years. Most of the human visitors frequent the lighthouse and the beach. Here, you'll find

Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, Caspian Tern in the breeding season, and perhaps other beach-goers like shorebirds and pipits, most often in low-water years.

A bit south of the park, the village of Old Mission provides access to East Bay at Haserot Park (44.961599, -85.485443). Check for waterfowl, loons and the occasional Bald Eagle in season.

Directions:

From the intersection of Front St. and Garfield Ave. in Traverse City, follow M-37 north. The park is 18 miles from town, at the tip of the peninsula. You can't miss it.

Walking surfaces are a paved trail near the lighthouse, and natural forest-floor paths.

An outhouse is located near the parking lot. Other amenities, such as the Old Mission General Store, may be found in the charming village of Old Mission, just south and east of the park.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L1197287?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

## **To the East**

**Reffitt Nature Preserve** (44.743875, -85.540433)

This property, owned by the [Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy](#), preserves an area of "dune and swale" topography along East Grand Traverse Bay. The dunes are slight rises, only a few feet above the alternating swales, low areas with moister soils, or enough water to have wetland vegetation. Thus, oak canopy with white pine understory and a shrub layer of huckleberry alternates with cedar in some places, and tag alder and cattail in others.

The trail system consists of two loops: a 0.6 mile loop that follows two old dunes in an out-and-back fashion, and a 0.9 mile loop that traverses Mitchell Creek and surrounding wetland. To make the most of the mix of habitats, and to avoid parking headaches, start at the main parking area accessible from Oak Drive. Start on the loop to the south of the power line. When you get to marker post #3, make your way around the big loop (trail maps are posted at each intersection). Beyond marker #6, the swales are traversed by boardwalks. After the first couple hundred feet, though, the wider boardwalk gives way to one less than three feet wide. Be aware of your feet while looking through binoculars!

With close vegetation and limited visibility, this is excellent habitat in which to linger and watch. Be quiet and let things come to you.

Directions: From Traverse City, head east (technically north) on U.S. 31. Just over 3 miles from the intersection with Garfield Road, turn south on Four Mile Road. After crossing the railroad tracks, take the first right on Oak Drive. Proceed through the subdivision to the dirt driveway and well-marked parking area.

Walking surfaces are natural forest floor and boardwalks, and level for the most part.

Restrooms are available at the convenience store at Four Mile and U.S. 31.

<http://www.gtrlc.org/recreation-events/preserve/reffitt-nature-preserve-george-ada-reffitt-nature-preserve/>

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L2124336?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

**Williamsburg Meijer fields** (44.769611, -85.484732)

This is another spot to bird while the birding's good. The "outlot" fields may be developed at some point in the future. The short-grass field west of the Meijer store can attract Upland Sandpipers and other shorebirds, particularly if it's wet, Lapland Longspurs, and grassland sparrows. Occasional flocks of Canada Geese can be found here too, during migration. There are two ponds near the field; both are worth checking for waterfowl and shorebirds in migration. Surrounding the grassy field are large fields of unmanaged vegetation that attract numerous species such as Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink, Northern harrier, Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks, and on a few occasions, Northern Shrike.

Directions: From Traverse City, head north on U.S. 31 to Acme. Turn east on M-72. Within a mile, turn right off the traffic circle. Proceed around the field; it's easy to pull off the road along the back side. Walk back to the pond in the southwest corner.

Walking surfaces are paved road, grass, and a bark-chip trail around one pond. There is one short, particularly steep section of this trail.

Restrooms are available inside the Meijer store.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L5100100?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

From here, connect with the Sunset Coast Birding Trail (<http://www.sunsetcoastbirdingtrail.org/>) at Deepwater Point and Petobego Marsh.

**Southeast Grand Traverse County, with a stop in Wexford County**

**Clous & Schneider Roads** (44.599460, -85.615113)

Located in southern Grand Traverse County, west of the village of Kingsley, this intersection of roads in farm country has become a favorite among local birders. These roads meet in a low area, with small wetlands on three corners. The surrounding farms grow mainly corn and hay, so grassy fields are mixed with cultivated land. All the land in the area is private, so please be respectful and bird from the roadsides.

The proximity of wetlands and open country uplands attracts a wide variety of bird species. Blackbirds, killdeer, snipe and other species frequent the wetlands, while meadowlarks, several species of sparrows, Sandhill Cranes, Horned Larks and others inhabit the fields. Canada Geese are regular, and Snow Geese have been reported during migration. Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks are often found in season. Bald Eagles may be found in early spring. Flocks of American Pipits have also been reported in fall migration. During the summer of 2017,

several Dickcissels were reported in the area. A small colony of Purple Martins nests at the farm on the northeast corner, but the martin house is near the farm house, so catch your views as the birds fly over the area, rather than staring at the house with binoculars.

Directions: From Traverse City, head south on M-37 from Chum's Corner. Turn left on Clous Road 5 miles south of Chum's Corner. Schneider Road crosses Clous two miles to the east. Park as far off the road as you can; there is enough room on the shoulders.

Walking (standing) surfaces are gravel roadsides.

Restrooms are back around Chum's Corner, or in Kingsley.

The area is not rated as a hotspot on eBird, but probably deserves to be.

**MDOT Wetland** (44.446166, -85.459703)

Located in Wexford County, south of Traverse City about 30 miles, this unmarked wetland along a dirt road is worth the drive. From the moment you turn onto N 37 Road, you'll know you're in great bird habitat. Buttermilk Creek crosses the road about ¼ mile south of the turn, and you enter mixed cattail and alder wetland, with numerous snags and live trees. A bit farther south, the wetland gives way to hay fields on the east side and a cattail marsh to the west. It's all private land, so bird from the road; there seems to be little traffic.

Look for dabbling ducks, geese, Pied-billed Grebes, Sandhill Cranes, Sora, several kinds of herons, including bitterns and possibly Great Egret, gulls, shorebirds, blackbirds, Swamp Sparrows, Marsh Wrens, and others. Barn, Tree and Cliff Swallows inhabit the local farms, and Bobolinks nest in the hay fields. Several warblers and other sparrows can be found in season. Short trails lead through the grass to the edge of the pond near the northeast corner, even though MDOT signs warn against trespassing.

Directions: From Traverse City and Chum's Corner, follow M-37 south about 15 miles to W Center Rd (a left turn where M-37 curves to the right). Continue on W Center Rd for 4.9 miles, then turn right onto Blackman Rd. At the "T" intersection, turn left (east) onto County Line Rd. The next significant right turn is N 29 ½ Rd; turn right and follow it about 5 miles to E 10 Rd, where you will turn left. After about 3 miles, turn right onto N 37 Road. The wetland is about 0.5 miles south on N 37 Rd., but the whole mile from E 10 Rd. south to E. 12 Rd. is excellent habitat.

The walking surfaces are a dirt road and uneven "trail" through grass on the dike.

Restrooms? Out here? You should have thought of that before we left!

<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L726126>

**Fall & Winter Birding Recommendations:**

From late October through early March, larger bodies of water attract migrating waterfowl, and open country sites hold the hope of Snowy Owls and Rough-legged Hawks. For those birding in the colder months, here is a short list of sites to explore. For waterfowl:

- Medalie Park on Boardman Lake
- Boardman Lake Trail north end (Hull Park)
- Boardman River at 8th St.
- Grand Traverse Bay (various points)

For open country raptors, check the Wuerful Park area and Clous Road.

**Birding and Biking:**

For young birders, and for those who prefer to bike instead of drive, several of these locations can be linked together into a bike-birding route. Using the TART trail, the Boardman Lake Trail, side streets, and a few sidewalks, a birder can get from Clinch Park to the YMCA South, or from the DeYoung Natural Area to Kid's Creek Park fairly easily and safely. Those interested in finding out more should contact [Norte](#), a local bicycling organization.