



Birds of North Alabama



Many Kinds of Birds Call North Alabama Home

The northern tier of Alabama has two distinct landforms—the Tennessee River Valley and the Appalachian Plateau. A variety of terrain provides wonderful birding habitat and offers excellent year-round birding opportunities. The area is rich in waterfowl in the winter. The river dams provide excellent sites for observing gulls, terns, and birds of prey. Extensive mudflats are great areas for viewing wading birds and shorebirds. Colorful breeding songbirds fill the upland forests in the spring and summer.

Paying for the Privilege

The birds of North Alabama have had no better friend than the American hunter. In 1937, the Pittman-Robertson Act, also known as the Wildlife Restoration Act, earmarked an excise tax on firearms and ammunition, and later, archery equipment. Since that time, millions of acres of habitat have been conserved and managed nationally. The money is available to state wildlife agencies for wildlife management on a 3:1 matching basis. Wildlife management efforts benefit both game (hunted) and nongame (unhunted) species. It is no coincidence that many sites on the North Alabama Birding Trail are located on Alabama Wildlife Management Areas where hunting is allowed. Perhaps the single most important way a citizen can contribute to conservation and management of “all birds” is to purchase a state hunting license—pay for the privilege whether you hunt or not.



Belted Kingfisher/Alan Murphy

Signature Species

Belted Kingfishers, as their name suggests, subsist mostly on fish. They have huge bills, large heads with shaggy crests, and a distinctive blue-gray coloring on their heads and upperparts that contrasts with white underparts. Females have a chestnut band across their bellies that is absent in males. The large bill also comes in handy when digging its nest burrow in a stream bank.



Blue-winged Teal/Bob Sargent

Waterfowl

Some ducks dive for food, others dabble or “tip up” to nibble aquatic plants. Look for dabblers like Mallard and Blue-winged Teal in shallow, marshy waters. Watch for diving ducks like Common Goldeneye, Mergansers, and Bufflehead as they disappear hunting for fishes, small mussels, and aquatic plants.



Great Egret/Walt Burch

Wading Birds and Shorebirds

With quiet attentiveness and a little luck, you can see statuesque Great Blue Herons or Great Egrets hunting in the shallows. In the summer, look for Green Herons perched on low branches overhanging the water, as they stealthily hunt fishes and frogs. Along the shoreline, plovers and sandpipers such as Killdeer and Greater Yellowlegs search the mud and shallow water for insects, worms, tiny crustaceans, and mollusks.



Dark phase Red-tailed Hawk/Cornell Lab of Ornithology, D. Robert Franz

Birds of Prey

Hunting over open fields, raptors such as Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel keep an “eagle eye” out for rodents and small birds. At night, Great Horned and Barred owls, as well as Eastern Screech-owls take over hunting duty. During the winter months, look for Bald Eagles hunting fish in the river. During spring, summer, and fall, Ospreys can also be seen soaring over the shallows for fish.

Bird Watching Tips

- Respect wildlife homes—leave nests and their occupants as you found them.
- In no-hunt areas, blend in with your surroundings—wear neutral-colored clothing and move slowly and quietly.
- Share your lunch only with other humans.
- Limit the use of recordings, calls, or whistles to attract birds.
- Use binoculars or a spotting scope so you can view birds from a distance.
- Leave pets at home.
- Obtain permission before birding on private land.