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Contact

Diane Hutsell, Special Projects Coordinator
Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association
(423) 263-7232
dhutsell@tennesseeverhill.com
<http://www.tennesseeverhill.com>

Exploring the Wild Side : Bird Watching in the Tennessee Overhill

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The Cherokee National Forest in southeast Tennessee is well known for many of its outdoor activities from whitewater rafting to fly-fishing. However, there is a growing segment of outdoors enthusiasts to the region that are as elusive as their prey- birders. And with over 17 million individuals taking bird watching vacations annually, bird watching is rapidly becoming one of the most popular outdoor activities in the United States.

Home to 262 bird species such as the black-capped chickadees, ravens, woodpeckers and the everpopular warblers the Cherokee National Forest offers a variety of bird watching opportunities. From backwoods trails to paved scenic byways, the Tennessee Overhill in southeast Tennessee offers excellent vantage points to see everything from sandhill cranes, blue herons and other lowland birds to the most popular of the region, the colorful warblers that skirt the mountain tops of the high country.

The high-elevation of the Cherohala Skyway offers numerous opportunities for bird watching. Among the species are a variety of winter wrens, golden-crowned kinglets and warblers. During late spring and the first portion of summer, warblers are in their breeding plumage — their boldest, most vivid colors — and males are actively singing to proclaim their territory. While some warblers are uncommon or difficult to locate, there are several species that most anyone can find.

Stratten Gap along the Cherohala Skyway is an excellent place to watch for the brilliant orange flash of a male Blackburnian Warbler. At Whigg Meadow and Mud Gap, birdwatchers can relish in the beauty of a scenic grassy meadow overlooking the mountains from an elevation of 5,000 feet where one can see several species of warblers in the spring. The prothonotary warbler is one of only a few warblers that nest in tree cavities and are becoming harder to locate due to destruction of its wetland habitat. They prefer flooded river bottoms and wooded swamps and can be seen in the Overhill region on Hiwassee Island.

For even more birding, go to the Gee Creek Trail section of the John Muir National Recreation Trail. This trail follows an abandoned forest road to the wilderness boundary and meanders through wooded areas and grasses. Shrubs and trees have been planted and as nest boxes have been installed to attract wildlife for viewing.

Travel Forest Service Road 108 to Hood Mountain Overlook or to Big Bend Overlook when the forest comes to life during April as many types of warblers nest to raise their young along with veery, wood thrush, scarlet tanager, brown thrasher and the Louisiana waterthrush. If you have a quick eye you could spot hummingbirds

feeding on cardinal flower, jewel weed and bee balm. It is also the ideal place for viewing wading birds, such as blue heron on the shores of the Hiwassee State Scenic River or maybe even an eagle or an osprey flying high.

For more information contact the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association at 423-263-7232 or online at www.tennesseeoverhill.com.

Photos available on request.