

## BEAVER LAKE: FROM ROCKY BRANCH TO THE DAM

Beaver Lake, completed in 1966, was impounded by damming the White River just west of Eureka Springs. It serves as northwest Arkansas's chief supply of fresh water. It is also an important for recreation. With approximately 28,000 surface acres, Beaver is our largest lake. Buffer land around the lake involves a significant extent of publically-owned forest. At some 12,000 acres, Hobbes State Park-Conservation Area on the south side of the lake is a wonderful landscape supporting native flowers, birds, and other parts of our natural history.

This guide mainly involves birding on public roads or parks from about the middle of the lake to the dam site. It includes one site on the lake's south side (Rocky Branch), but is mainly concerned with the lake's north and northeast, from Slate Gap Road to the dam site. Much of the birding is scope work. You really need a decent spotting scope to hope to see the water birds very well. Of course even a scope gets you only so far: there is often that interesting *something* just beyond even a good scope view.



**FEES:** Beaver is managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Most of the spots mentioned in this guide are included in their fee program. Currently (2011) there is a \$4/car entrance fee (half price for golden age passports). Once you've paid this fee, it is good for the whole day for visits to any of the parks.

**DIRECTIONS:** Popular on-line and published maps shows this area in enough detail that I'm not going to provide more than the bare essentials here. The Arkansas Atlas & Gazetteer published by DeLorme (I'm looking at the second edition, 2004) provides enough details on pages 22-23. Basically, you just need some details that show Rogers (and highway 12 east) in the west, Garfield (and high 62) in the north, and Eureka Springs in the east.

**BIRDING:** We concentrate most of our birding in the winter months, starting in mid-November to February or early March. This is the main migrating and wintering water bird season and that is what we mainly go to see. Travel is easy most of the winter, but this is a mountainous landscape and the roads can be impossible and hazardous during ice and snow. In saying winter birding, and directing most of my comments to waterfowl, I don't mean to downgrade land birding all year. Cedar glades provide a fascinating habitat, as do the big stands of shortleaf pines. These are fascinating habitats and we hope in future years to take better advantage of them.

**A TYPICAL BIRDING ADVENTURE:** If you have all day, a typical winter trip can depart Rogers around 8 AM and go until 5 PM, usually enough time to visit each of the sites listed below. You have to decide whether to start with Rocky Branch on the lake's south shore, or go north and east eventually toward the dam. In the following narrative I'm going to visit Rocky Branch first, but this is purely a matter of personal choice; other times, especially when there is a sharp north wind, I may just skip Rocky with its eyeball freezing north wind.

**ROCKY BRANCH:** Find highway 12 EAST in Rogers and drive to the intersection with 303. Go NORTH since this leads to Rocky Branch. The view north, east and west from Rocky Branch is extensive and impressive. This area is pretty well protected from south wind, but choppy when wind is from the north. On a clear day with calm wind, you can see water birds all the way across the lake at Slate Gap! As in other places under discussion here, a winter season trip is often rewarded by good views of Bald Eagles, Pied-billed Grebes, Horned Grebes, often both Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls, and in migration, Common Loons. We have seen Western Grebes here and elsewhere on the lake, and a Surf Scoter once. One of the first Arkansas records for Pacific Loon involved a Rocky Branch bird.

From Rocky Branch you can drive east through Eureka Springs and then to the dam site. It is about as easy to backtrack through Rogers and head north. Take your pick. It's a lot of driving either way.

**SLATE GAP ROAD:** From Rogers take highway 62 north and east to Garfield, then highway 127 that goes toward the Lost Bridge area. Note the turn onto Slate Gap Road before you reach the Corps of Engineers parks at Lost Bridge. On Slate Gap Road, stop toward the bottom where

there is a big clear view of the lake from right alongside the road. This area is pretty well protected during days with north wind. You can see all the way over to Rocky Branch. During migration you may see big rafts of ducks, but often way, way out and hard to ID. This has always been an interesting place to bird in winter. Bald Eagles watching ducks and American Coots are easy to spot. Horned Grebes are often plentiful and we saw three Western Grebes here in 2011. I have also had a few sightings of Long-tailed ducks. You can see Common Goldeneyes here, as elsewhere on the lake.

**LOST BRIDGE SOUTH AND NORTH:** After you visit Slate Gap, return to the intersection of Slate Gap Road and 127, then south a short ways to the two park areas managed by the Corps of Engineers at Lost Bridge. I usually go to the south park first. There are two coves to view here plus a big open area of the lake. All of the typical winter season water birds may be seen here, but I've had better luck overall at the north park. In Lost Bridge North there are coves to scan, plus a wide open area with a view of part of Indian Creek area to the dam site. It can be dead calm when the wind is from the south, choppy when wind is from the north. It's a good spot to see goldeneyes, Pied-billed Grebes, and Bonaparte's Gulls. We saw two Long-tailed Ducks with goldeneyes in December 2011. Common Loons are spotted during migration, but scarce to absent in mid-winter.

**INDIAN CREEK:** Backtrack up to 62 and keep going east through Gateway to the turn off for Indian Creek – watch for the sign; it's approximately 1.4 miles east of Gateway. Head down Indian Creek Road and along the way notice the intersection with Dam Site Road (we'll come back). Indian Creek park provides a big view of the main pool visible to the northeast. All of the area's typical birds can be viewed here.

**DAM SITE:** Some pretty interesting birds have turned up in the deep pools at the dam site. For example, Mike Mlodinow found a Yellow-billed Loon here 20 years ago. This is such a big area of open water it always seems anything is possible. During winter, the Corps closes gates on the 3 spots shown on the associated map, but you can park and walk into them. These 3 spots provide views of the dam pool from a variety of angles and allows you to adjust viewing depending upon wind direction. The most extensive single view is in the park labeled Dam Site 3 – you can see the water from all angles, like you're out on an island. In recent years, at least two active Bald Eagle nests have been found near the dam. Horned Grebes, Western Grebe, Common Goldeneyes are all possibilities here. Keep an eye out for the gulls, especially Bonaparte's. They make their livings finding food stirred up by diving birds like loons, ducks, and grebes. Where there is an actively feeding flock of gulls, you may find other interesting species of birds.

**BEAVER SPILLWAY:** With the river, open grasslands, big rocky areas associated with the dam, forest, and riparian woodlands, it seems likely to have many possibilities. However, I haven't birded this area much, so the information provided here is admittedly sketchy, dated, and can be vastly improved. That said, the spillway and White River below the dam provide an opportunity to see various herons, cormorants, gulls, Fish Crows and Cliff Swallows, kingfishers, waterthrushes, etc depending upon the season. Both Turkey and Black Vultures frequently soar

overhead. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Eastern Bluebirds perch on the high wires. It has been a decent place to see Bald Eagles. The left fork goes through a marshy area with ponds and pines. It dead ends in a wooded bottomland. In summer, check the ponds for Wood Ducks. The pines have Pine and Yellow-throated Warblers. Check for kinglets and finches in winter. Russell Graham found Swainson's Warbler here in May of 1988 (up to seven singing males) and at least one bird was still present during the nesting season at least through 1990. Acadian Flycatchers are common here, too.



Three Western Grebes (front), Horned Grebes (top). From Slate Gap Road, December 19, 2011.  
Photo: J Neal

--Joseph C. Neal, December 2011