

Bird Finding Guide

Sod field farms for the “grasspiper” birder in Illinois and nearby regions

by David B. Johnson

It's like birding on a giant pool table!

— Jeff Sundberg (at Wind Lake Sod Farms)



Few places in fall are as unique for birding as sod fields or farms with verdant expanses of turf waiting to be transplanted in suburban yards, golf courses or corporate lawns. But for birders it's the rare Buff-breasted Sandpiper that is the “grasspiper” magnet to these green sod fields. The Buff-breasted Sandpiper is rarely encountered in Illinois or the Midwest during spring, since at that time, the species migrates west of us through the Great Plains states. In fall, however, Buff-breasted Sandpipers migrate over a much wider North American path and are partial to very short grass or dry areas interspersed with grass. Sod fields that mirror this habitat seem to attract this stately small shorebird. Thus birders and “buffies” unite in fall over this unique artificial habitat.

It was at Wind Lake Sod Farms in Racine County one early September day that Jeff Sundberg exclaimed, “It's like birding on a giant pool table!” Come mid-August to mid-September nearly every birder worth their salt makes a trip to the sod field (farm) of their choice to find this small but elegant shorebird and other “grasspipers.”

Other “grasspipers” that use the sod fields and are to be expected in fall include Upland Sandpiper (mid-July through August), American Golden-Plover

(mid-August through mid-October), Killdeer (July through October), Baird's (August through September), and Pectoral (late July through mid-November) Sandpipers. In addition, heavy rains or prolonged use of sod field sprinkler systems can create additional habitat, outside of the shortgrass, for a wider variety of shorebird species. Newly formed pools of standing water may attract other shorebirds in smaller numbers such as Black-bellied Plover (also in stripped black soil), Semipalmated Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Common Snipe. Rarities (and not to be expected) that have occurred on sod fields include Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Dowitcher, White-rumped Sandpiper and Wilson's Phalarope. These fields often support large numbers of Horned Larks, European Starlings, and American Pipits. Other more unusual landbirds include Western Meadowlarks and a specialty bird – Brewer's Blackbird. Additionally, Peregrine Falcons, Cooper's Hawks and American Kestrels can be noted taking advantage of the sometimes large aggregations of birds found on sod farms.

One way to find a local sod field might be to look up the nearest field/farms in your local yellow pages or on the internet—print off a “mapquest” and you're on your way. One note of caution while birding these areas: Given that most, if not all turf farm owners would not appreciate birders trampling their valuable turf, birders should restrict their observing to the roadsides. Most sod farms, include large ones such as HESOD in McHenry and Momence, have either private or public roads, which are close enough

Above: Dave Johnson birds a sod farm in Illinois. Photo by Karen Lund.

Right: One of the rare shorebirds to be seen in Illinois during migration is the Baird's Sandpiper. Lucky birders find it on sod farms or at Montrose Harbor in Chicago, as Jerry Kumery did when he photographed this Baird's 26 August 2003.

