



North Carolina

Birding Trail

mountains • piedmont • coast

Nantahala

1 Needmore Game Land

Owner: NC Wildlife Resources Commission

NC 28 and Lower Needmore Road, north of Franklin, NC
919-707-0050

Macon, Swain Counties

www.ncwildlife.org

Site Description: The 4,400-acre Needmore Game Land follows along a 27-mile stretch of the Little Tennessee River and is home to several rare native plants and aquatic animals. The Game Land consists of one contiguous 4,000-acre tract and twelve smaller tracts, some of which are accessible only by boat. Consult a North Carolina Game Lands Map Book for more information. Habitat management across the Needmore Game Land, including prescribed burning, timber harvest and thinning, mowing, herbicide applications, nest box programs and food plot management, supports a variety of forest and shrub-scrub bird species. The Queen Branch access - adjacent to a property by the same name owned by the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee - provides nice opportunities to view early successional species in habitats consisting of native warm season grasses with scrub/shrub and food plots intermixed. Watch for Northern Bobwhite, Indigo Bunting, Yellow-breasted Chat, Prairie Warbler, Eastern Meadowlark, Field Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow and Eastern Kingbird. Along Lower Needmore Road, the Little Tennessee River parallels the Game Land for about a mile and offers opportunities to watch for migrating waterfowl and waterbirds. Continue to the end of Lower Needmore Road to access the 50-acre Brush Creek Farm, where early successional habitat, prescribed burn areas and beaver ponds are available for exploration.

Species of Interest: Wild Turkey, Bald Eagle, Prairie Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Eastern Meadowlark, Grasshopper Sparrow

Habitats: oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, early successional, floodplain forest, river/stream

Special Concerns: While on the Game Land, be sure to keep clear of tractors and other agricultural equipment. Numerous barbed wire fences run thru fields and forested areas. Entry is prohibited in and around any structures such as barns, houses, spring houses, old home site foundations, etc. Hunting is allowed on Needmore Game Land during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

Access & Parking: The Game Land can be accessed daily during daylight hours.

Directions: From Main Street in Franklin, travel 11 miles north on NC 28 to the Queen Branch parking area (owned and managed by the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee) on the left. Access to the state-owned land is approximately 100 feet down the gated access road. From the Queen Branch area, travel 4 miles north on NC 28 and turn left on Lower Needmore Road. Travel 1.4 miles to the parking area near the swinging bridge over the river. Additional parking can be found at the end of the road.

Coordinates: N 35° 19' 33" W 83° 31' 21" (Lower Needmore Road access)
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2 Queen Branch

Owner: The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee

Across from 11366 Bryson City Road (NC 28), north of Franklin, NC
828-524-2711

Macon County
www.ltl.org

Site Description: The Queen Branch property sits on the banks of the Little Tennessee River, on scenic NC 28, 11 miles north of the town of Franklin. This Land Trust for the Little Tennessee (LTLT) property adjoins the greater Needmore Game Land, owned by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. Starting at the parking lot, facing away from the road, observe the habitat to the left and enter through the fence opening to the bramble habitat. The lower field provides excellent birding opportunities. From the field, a trail leads into an oak and mixed hardwood forest and then along the river front into the Needmore Game Land. The free-flowing Little Tennessee River between the town of Franklin and the Fontana Reservoir is the “Noah’s Ark of Blue Ridge Rivers,” sheltering an extraordinary diversity of rare and endangered fish and mussel species. The valley was the center of the mountain Cherokee in the 18th century, and the rich farmlands along the river have sustained agriculture for thousands of years. Since 1999, LTLT has led in the conservation of 5,200 acres along the Little Tennessee River, protecting over 35 miles of river frontage, including the Needmore Tract.

Species of Interest: Acadian Flycatcher, Hooded Warbler, Indigo Bunting

Habitats: oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, early successional, floodplain forest, creek/wetlands

Special Concern: Hunting is allowed on the Queen Branch property during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

Access & Parking: There is ample parking just off the highway at Queen Branch, with a sign indicating the identity of the property. The site is open daily year-round during daylight hours. Trails can be overgrown at times, particularly early summer. Please call the LTLT office if you have any question about accessibility.

Directions: Drive north from Franklin on NC 28 for approximately 11 miles. The Queen Branch property is on the left, with parking and signage visible from the road.

Coordinates: N 35° 17' 01" W 83° 28' 01" DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 51





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3 Little Tennessee River Greenway

Owner: Macon County; Friends of the Greenway, Inc. (site manager)

Multiple access points along the Little Tennessee River, Franklin, NC
828-369-8488

Macon County

www.littletennessee.org

Site Description: The 4.5-mile Little Tennessee River Greenway follows the Little Tennessee River through the town of Franklin, then continues along Cartoogechaye Creek. Most of the Greenway is paved and handicapped accessible, with seven access points from various parking areas. Beginning at Suli Marsh at the northern end of the greenway, the trail passes through open grassland, farm fields, old railroad cuts and wooded areas. Explore by canoe or rowboat along the Greenway for more intimate views of bird habitat. A dam on the river forms Lake Emory in the town section, assuring consistent water levels in all but extreme drought conditions. Three picnic shelters and two playgrounds with a water park provide family fun and group opportunities. Located only 50 miles south of the present Cherokee Reservation, the area was once part of early American Indian villages and the Cherokee influence is still strong. Mild winters ensure excellent year-round birding opportunities. Natural vegetation is maintained along some of the Greenway sections, affording good nesting and viewing areas.

Species of Interest: Bald Eagle, Common Raven, Green Heron, Cliff Swallow, Eastern Kingbird

Habitats: oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, floodplain forest, river, wetlands

Access & Parking: The greenway is open daily during daylight hours. The visitor center at Frog Quarters is open 8am to 5:30pm, Monday – Saturday; 1pm to 5pm, Sunday. There are seven access points to the greenway, including Suli Marsh (the northern terminus) and Walasi Trail at Southwestern Community College (the southern terminus). Visit the Website for maps and more information.

Directions: Suli Marsh, the northern terminus of the greenway, offers parking and access to the trail. From US 441 Business/NC 28/East Main Street in Franklin, just west of the bridge crossing the Little Tennessee River, turn left (north) on Depot Street. Follow Depot Street for 0.5 miles, when it joins Riverview Street. Bear right on Riverview Street. In 0.6 miles, turn right on Arthur Drake Road at the Greenway sign. The entrance to Suli Marsh is immediately on the right. The visitor center at Frog Quarters is located at 573 E. Main Street, in Franklin.

Coordinates: N 35° 11' 02" W 83° 22' 15" (Suli Marsh) DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 51





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4 Tessentee Bottomland Preserve

Owner: The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee

Next to 2249 Hickory Knoll Road, Otto, NC
828-524-2711

Macon County

www.ltl.org

Site Description: The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee (LTLT) acquired this 60-acre bottomland and river bluff at the junction of Tessentee Creek and the Little Tennessee River in November of 1999, in cooperation with the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the Lyndhurst Foundation. This reach of the upper valley has been called the “true head of the Tennessee.” The diverse habitats in the Tessentee Bottomland Preserve, including wetlands, red cedar savannah, rivercane breaks and yellow pine/blackjack oak forest, is home to a wide variety of birds. Park outside the gate at the entrance to the preserve and walk to the interior of the property. There are approximately 2 miles of trail that begin to the left of the gate. The trails pass mature montane oak-hickory and pine forest and follows along Tessentee Creek, where birders may find nesting swallows and Belted Kingfisher in spring. The trail continues on to open field habitat in the Little Tennessee River riparian zone. The upper loop leads to wetland habitat and red cedar savannah. The old farmhouse and silo on the property - remnants of the original farmstead - and the plantations of white oak, butternut, and rivercane are part of LTLT’s restoration work.

Species of Interest: Belted Kingfisher, Tree Swallow, Rough-winged Swallow, Indigo Bunting

Habitats: oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, early successional, floodplain forest, creek/wetlands

Special Concerns: Please do not access the old farmhouse or any outbuildings, as they are in no condition for exploration.

Access & Parking: The site is open daily during daylight hours. Trails can be overgrown at times, particularly in early summer. Please call the LTLT office with any question about accessibility. When entering the driveway, please be sure to park immediately on the left. A map and information about the property is available in a kiosk at the gate to the property. Information is also available from the LTLT office or on the Web site.

Directions: Coming from Franklin and parts north, from the US 64 Bypass junction, take US 23/US 441/Georgia Road south for 5.2 miles. Turn left on Riverside Road and follow it for 0.5 miles to its end. Turn right on Hickory Knoll Road and follow it for 1.8 miles. Turn right at 2249 Hickory Knoll Road. There is a sign on Hickory Knoll Road indicating Tessentee Bottomland Preserve; the red farm gate to the left is the entrance to the property.

Coordinates: N 35° 04' 07" W 83° 22' 47" DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 51





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5 Ranger Falls Trail

Owner: Nantahala National Forest

Flat Mountain Road to Cliffside Recreation Area, near Highlands, NC
828-524-6441

Macon County

www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/

Site Description: The Ranger Falls Trail runs between Flat Mountain Road and the Cliffside Lake Recreation Area. Start at the Flat Mountain trail head and the adjoining field. Scan the tree tops and edges for warblers, vireos, wrens, woodpeckers and other woodland birds. This is an excellent area to visit during spring and fall migration. At the end of the first field, follow the old road bed through the forest approximately 0.7 miles to another series of large fields and old apple orchards. This is a good area for observing Eastern Towhee, Blue-headed Vireo, Indigo Bunting, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Canada Warbler and Scarlet Tanager. To reach the Cliffside Recreational Area, continue across the fields into the forest and follow the trail approximately 0.5 miles to the parking area. Ranger Falls, a 40-foot waterfall, can be viewed from a spur of the main trail approximately 0.5 miles from the Cliffside Lake trail head. Dry Falls, a 75-foot waterfall, is a short drive from the NC 28/US 64 entrance to Cliffside Lake Recreational Area.

Species of Interest: Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Canada Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Scarlet Tanager

Habitats: northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, early successional, lake/stream/waterfall

Special Concern: Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest lands during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

Access & Parking: The trail runs between Flat Mountain Road and the Cliffside Lake Recreation Area. It may be accessed from either Flat Mountain Road off US 64 or from the Cliffside Recreation Area off NC 28. The site is open daily during daylight hours. There is no charge for parking at the Flat Mountain trail head, but there is a \$2 fee for parking at Cliffside Lake Recreation Area. Restrooms are available at the Cliffside Recreation Area trail head.

Directions: *Flat Mountain trailhead:* From the main intersection in Highlands, take US 64 East approximately 2.4 miles to Flat Mountain Road (SR 1544). Turn left on Flat Mountain Road and continue 2 miles to the site of the old Highlands Ranger Station, which is the second road on the left past the red house. Then proceed to the trail head at the back of the lower parking lot. *Cliffside Lake Recreation Area trailhead:* Travel NC 28 North/US 64 West approximately 4.4 miles from the main intersection in Highlands to the entrance of the Cliffside Lake Recreation Area. Turn right at the entrance and proceed approximately 0.9 miles to the main gate. Continue on the road along the left shore of Cliffside Lake, approximately 0.4 miles, to the picnic parking area on the left. The trailhead is at the back of the parking lot.

Coordinates: N 35° 05' 09" W 83° 13' 03" (Flat Mountain Road trail head)

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6 Highlands Nature Center

Owner: University of North Carolina, Highlands Biological Station

930 Horse Cove Road, Highlands, NC 28741
828-526-2602

Macon County

www.wcu.edu/hbs

Site Description: Start your visit to the Highlands Nature Center by following the Nature Center Trail, which begins to the left of the building. Detour through the azalea garden adjacent to the amphitheater, and continue past the amphitheater to the Botanical Garden entrance. The Botanical Garden displays more than 500 species of the native flora of the southern Appalachian mountains. Inside the garden, follow trails on the left to the Lindenwood Lake Loop Trail. Follow the Loop Trail along the eastern shore to the boardwalk. Along the boardwalk, scan the lake for waterfowl, the tree tops for warblers and other forest birds, and the open sky for ravens and hawks. At the end of the boardwalk, cross Lower Lake Road to continue up Coker Rhododendron Trail, which protects an old-growth hemlock-hardwood forest, to watch for breeding songbirds. Return to Lower Lake Road on the Coker Rhododendron Trail and turn right to walk along the road parallel to the north end of Lindenwood Lake. Turn back on the trail over the dam at the Chimney Swift tower and proceed along the west side of the lake to return to the Highlands Nature Center. The dam area offers excellent birding opportunities for waterfowl, and spring and fall migrants. Also stop in to view the wildlife displays in the Nature Center.

Species of Interest: Blue-headed Vireo, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Black-and-White Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Northern Parula

Habitats: northern hardwood/cove forest, bog/wetlands, lake

Access & Parking: Parking is available behind the Nature Center and on the street. The trails are open daily during daylight hours. The Nature Center has seasonal hours of operation. Day time and evening nature programs are held at the Nature Center throughout the summer.

Directions: Proceed east on Main Street in Highlands. The street name will change to Horse Cove Road. The Highlands Nature Center is approximately 0.5 miles from the main intersection.

Coordinates: N 35° 03' 08" W 83° 11' 17"

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7 Sunset Rock Trail

Owner: Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, Town of Highlands

Horse Cove Road, Highlands, NC
828-526-9938

Macon County

www.hicashlt.org

Site Description: Begin at the trail head across from the Highlands Nature Center and walk 0.8 miles to the summit on the gravel road. There is excellent birding all along the trail, which runs through a mature mountain forest. The trail is an especially good area for viewing migrating songbirds in spring and fall, including warblers, vireos and other woodland species. At the summit, follow a short trail to the west to Sunset Rock for a view overlooking the town of Highlands and the surrounding mountains. On the summit, watch for soaring vultures, hawks and ravens. Follow the short trail to the east that affords a view of the Highlands Plateau escarpment and Horse Cove Valley.

Species of Interest: Blue-headed Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Canada Warbler.

Habitats: northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, rocky outcrop

Special Features & Concerns: Private residences are adjacent to portions of the trail and visitors should not cross gates or fences. Part of the trail runs along a road with occasional vehicular traffic. Be careful of ledges and uneven rock faces at the summit. Check lists are available on the summit in the brochure box and at the Highlands Nature Center.

Access & Parking: The site is open daily during daylight hours. Park at the trail head on Horse Cove Road. You may also drive to the summit, although this will bypass good birding areas. Also, the road is narrow and uneven and there is limited parking.

Directions: Travel east on Main Street in Highlands, approximately 0.5 miles from the junction NC 28 and US 64. The street name will change to Horse Cove Road. Parking is located across the street from the Highlands Nature Center.

Coordinates: N 35° 03' 07" W 83° 11' 17"

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8 Padgett Poplar Tree Trail

Owner: Nantahala National Forest

Rich Gap Road, near the junction of Horse Cove Road, Highlands, NC
828-524-6441

Macon County

www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/

Site Description: The forest edges and openings along Rich Gap Road provide excellent birding opportunities for a variety of breeding and migrating songbirds, especially during spring and fall migration. Start near the Forest Service kiosk on Rich Gap Road, near its junction with Horse Cove Road, and proceed down Rich Gap Road on foot or by car. The road has relatively infrequent vehicle traffic and there are numerous pull-offs for parking. The gated Forest Service road (FR 4662) on the west side of Rich Gap Road, approximately 1.5 miles past the beginning of Rich Gap Road, provides good birding away from the road. The four-century old “Bob Padgett” Tulip Poplar, across from the Forest Service kiosk at the beginning of Rich Gap Road, measures 20 feet in circumference and 127 feet tall, with a crown spread of almost 76 feet. It is the third largest tree of its kind in the US. The Chattooga River, designated a Wild and Scenic River, is nearby. To reach the river, continue on Horse Cove Road 1.8 miles past Rich Gap Road and turn right on Bull Pen Road. Continue 3 miles on Bull Pen Road to the river, where there is access to a trail running along the river.

Species of Interest: Blue-headed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Worm-eating Warbler, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager

Habitats: northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine

Special Concerns: Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest lands during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

Access & Parking: Additional parking is available at pull-offs along Rich Gap Road. The site is open daily during daylight hours.

Directions: From downtown Highlands, proceed east on Main Street. The street name will change to Horse Cove Road (SR 1603). Continue on Horse Cove Road for 2.2 miles, past Highlands Nature Center and down into Horse Cove Valley, to the junction of Rich Gap Road (FR 401). Turn right on Rich Gap Road and proceed approximately 300 feet to a parking area and kiosk on the left side of the road.

Coordinates: N 35° 02' 41" W 83° 10' 33"

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9 Whiteside Mountain

Owner: Nantahala National Forest

Whiteside Mountain Road, between Highlands and Cashiers, NC
828-524-6441

Jackson County
www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/

Site Description: Rising 700 feet from the valley below, the sheer cliffs of Whiteside Mountain are perfect nesting habitat for the endangered Peregrine Falcon. Falcons were reintroduced to this area in 1985 and have been nesting here ever since. In March, listen for their vocalizations and observe their aerial displays and aggressive defense of the cliff from vultures and ravens. The falcons become less vocal in April, while incubating eggs, but once the eggs hatch in May the adults are busy feeding their young and can often be seen flying back and forth from the cliff face. On still mornings, listen for the youngsters begging for food. In early June, watch the fledglings honing their flying and hunting skills as they chase dragonflies, songbirds, and their siblings. To access the viewing platform, begin the 2-mile loop trail from the steps at the parking area and continue on the old roadbed up the mountain to its end. At the viewing platform near the junction of the road bed and ridge line, scan the cliff face and sky for Peregrine Falcons. Turn right on the trail running along the ridge line. At the end of the ridge line, follow the descending trail back to the road bed near the parking area. Watch for woodland species along the trail while ascending and descending the mountain, and scan the sky along the ridgeline for hawks and ravens, especially during the fall migration.

Species of Interest: Peregrine Falcon, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Common Raven, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Canada Warbler

Habitats: oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, dry coniferous woodlands, rocky outcrop

Special Features & Concerns: Peregrine Falcon nest at the site. Take care not to disturb the birds and observe all signage. Portions of the trail are uneven due to rocks, roots, and boulders. There are sheer cliffs near portions of the trail; use caution with children and pets and do not cross barriers. Steep side trails are hazardous, especially during cold and wet weather when ice is present. Do not throw rocks over cliffs, since there may be climbers below. Lightning may be dangerous; get off the mountain if you hear thunder. Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest lands during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

Access & Parking: The site is open daily during daylight hours. There is a \$2 fee for parking; Golden Passport is accepted.

Directions: From Highlands, take US 64 East for 6 miles and turn right on Whiteside Mountain Road (SR 1600). Proceed 1 mile to the Whiteside Mountain parking area on the left.

Coordinates: N 35° 04' 50" W 83° 08' 37" DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 70





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10 Gorges State Park

Owner: NC State Parks

17762 US 64 West, Sapphire, NC 28774
828-966-9099

Transylvania County

www.ncparks.gov

Site Description: Gorges State Park is located along the Blue Ridge Escarpment, where the Blue Ridge Mountains fall away to the hills of the piedmont. In the upper reaches of the escarpment, mountain streams gradually descend, but near the state line, the water plunges over waterfalls and rushes through steep-walled gorges. The western end of this newly created park is currently in the planning stage, and roadside grassland habitats are under development. The eastern end of the park, accessed from Frozen Creek Road, provides nice birding opportunities along the Auger Hole Trail and the Canebrake Trail. Here, the lush forests of the gorges provide abundant habitat for the largest North Carolina mountain population of Swainson's Warbler. The extensive forest also provides excellent habitat for many other breeding and migrating songbirds.

Species of Interest: Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Swainson's Warbler, Indigo Bunting

Habitats: northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, rocky outcrop, waterfalls

Special Features: Because Gorges State Park is so new, the park is still in its planning and development phase. Currently, the park staff is working with local citizens, the park's advisory committee and design/engineering contractors, to develop permanent facilities. The road and infrastructure project, begun in the Spring of 2007, affects use at the Grassy Ridge Access. Please call the park office or visit the Website before visiting for current park conditions.

Access & Parking: The park is open from 8am to 6pm, November – February; 8am to 8pm, March – May, September; 8am to 9pm, June – August; 8am to 7pm, October.

Directions: From US 64 in Sapphire, take NC 281 south approximately 0.7 miles. The park entrance is on the left.

Coordinates: N 35° 06' 03" W 82° 57' 33" DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 70

