

# The Wrens of Spirit Mound

## Birds, History, and Tall Grass in South Dakota

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

History buffs give me the willies. I will go far out of my way to avoid re-enactors, creative anachronizers, and nostalgic television montages; it seems to me that we owe it to the past to respect its difference, and to let our dead rest in whatever peace they may have found. Besides, I have my own secret for time travel, one that doesn't need costumes or sentimentality or even garbage-guzzling Deloreans.

Me, I go birding.

Spirit Mound looms high above the Vermillion River lowlands in southeast South Dakota, an island promontory rising above a sea of beans and corn. On a cold, damp May morning, I climbed Spirit Mound with a group of birding friends. Dickcissels had just arrived, Bobolinks chortled and squeaked around us, and the weird trill of Upland Sandpipers cut through the fog. And then we heard it, the stuttering chatter that is the voice of the tallgrass prairie: Sedge Wrens, invisible in the greening vegetation. But patience and desire, always the most powerful weapons in the birder's arsenal, won out, and we eventually saw no fewer than eighteen of these earnest brown sprites along our three-quarter-mile hike.

A red-letter day for us, just as it had been exactly 200 years before for Merriwether Lewis and William Clark, when they climbed Spirit Mound. Not even Clark's wanton orthography can hide the explorers' excitement at finding "great numbers of Birds...black bird, ren, or Prairie burd, a kind of larke about the size of a Partridge..." The descendants of those "rens" of 1804, buzzing and trilling around us, took us two centuries into the past more immediately

than reading and study and *faux-coonskin* caps ever could; high atop Spirit Mound, we stepped into a world that few have seen—and only a birder would recognize.

Journeys into the past have been made easier by the creation of the Southeast South Dakota Birding Trail. A newly published guidebook, available online at <http://travelsd.com/events/birding/SEbirdingbooklet.pdf>, leads birding time-travelers to significant areas of grassland habitat, some of it (like Spirit Mound) carefully restored prairie, some of it almost untouched since before the days of Lewis and Clark. The 33 sites along the trail still harbor uncommon (even imperiled) birds such as Greater Prairie-Chicken, Short-eared Owl, Loggerhead Shrike, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

Two hundred years ago, Lewis and Clark relied not on guidebooks but on the advice of the Native Americans along their route. They climbed Spirit Mound in search not of birds but of *wakan*, the "little devils" rumored by the local Indians to live atop the hill. They didn't find any.

But on our way back down the hill, two centuries later, my birding group was suddenly surrounded by dozens of lively young spirits, disgorged from yellow buses. It is the prerogative of the middle-aged to look with disapproval on boisterousness; but the sheer joy of these children of the prairie took us back to a more recent past, when we too ran through the grass, still finding only pleasure where as grownups we see peril. And more importantly, the shouts and screams of these little devils transported us into the future—their future—where, I hope, at least some of them will learn to love and to protect what they now take so blissfully for granted.



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