

Loop 2 – Playa Lakes Loop

What to Expect: Within the well-mowed-lawn look of the shortgrass prairie are found playa lakes, the most important wetlands you've never heard about. Playa lakes, (shallow, usually round basins with clay floors) lie in the lowest points of watersheds and hold water only after rainfall or runoff from the surrounding prairie. Playas' natural wet-dry cycles support a diverse plant community as well as specialized plankton and aquatic insects. These high levels of productivity make playas vital wintering and stop over places for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds such as **long-billed curlews, greater yellowlegs, black-necked stilts, and American avocets**. When you travel the playa lake loop you are experiencing a wetland-type incredibly unique- 95% of the world's playa lakes lie on the western Great Plains! Prairie dog towns also located within this loop support a unique set of wildlife species including **burrowing owls, badgers, swift fox, and ferruginous hawks**. Learn more about playas at www.pljv.org.

Lodging: Guymon: <http://www.guymonokchamber.com/visitors/> **Hooker:** Hooker Chamber of Commerce <https://www.hookerokcofc.net/>; Pheasants Unlimited, LLC. toddogletree@yahoo.com, 580.461.0796. **Beaver:** Hillcrest Motel (580.625.4561); [Midtown Motel](#) (580.527.1677), Camping & RV Hookups: Beaver Dunes Park-contact info below

One-Day Outings/ Birding Routes:

Special Note: As rainfall events occur infrequently in this area, please contact the Optima Wildlife Management Area biologist at 806.339.5175 to find out if playas are holding water.

Playa Lake Route: These shallow depressions in this seemingly flat landscape irregularly fill with rain, producing an impressive but ephemeral show. In wet years these fields could host thousands of geese of four species. Sandhill Cranes can also drop in from time to time and Great Blue Herons and Killdeer regularly feed in the shallows. When it's holding water, the playa acts as a magnet for all water birds passing through the area, so always be ready for a few surprises. In dry years the playa appears as an almost imperceptible dip in the sea of grass. This route is approximately 75 miles long and begins on Hwy 136 north out of Guymon. Continue north to County Road 7 and drive east (approximately 9 miles) to the first stop, **McKinley Playa (2-2)**. Head east into Hooker to the next stop south of Hooker on Hwy 94, **Balzar Playa (2-3)**. Continue south to Hwy 412. Go east (left) on Hwy 412 to Road 49 east of the town of Hardesty and turn north (left) to visit [Optima Lake \(2-6\)](#) for an overview of the "lake".

Optima Lake (2-6): Go east (left) on Hwy 412 to Road 49 east of the town of Hardesty and turn north (left). Low-water levels have kept this impoundment from becoming a lake but is instead an outstanding wetland and very important for migrating shorebirds

and wintering waterfowl. The road and parking areas along the [Optima Lake \(2-6\)](#) provide an excellent overview of this wetland. The overgrown picnic areas offer some excellent birding opportunities. Check out the cholla cactus and shrubs for Greater Roadrunner nests and the scattered trees for Bullock's oriole nests. Return to Hwy 412 and travel east to County Road 53. Turn north and travel to Road T (~7 miles). Turn west and follow to County Road 49, follow south into [Optima WMA \(2-4\)](#). This area covers over 8,000 acres of sagebrush, buffalo grass, sand plum thickets, mixed-grass prairies and cottonwood trees. The many gravel roads within the WMA will take the visitor to different access points. **Caution: After a rain these roads can be difficult to drive.** Turn left onto Hwy 94 to visit [Optima NWR \(2-5\)](#) which traverses through bottomland hardwoods and prairie grasslands. Visit [Shultz WMA \(2-7\)](#) by following Road 47, 5 miles south of Hwy 412. This is a walk-in only WMA which offers creek-side habitat, mixed-grass and shortgrass prairies, and sandplum thickets. **Please Note:** there are no restrooms on Optima Lake.

[Sunset Lake & Game Reserve \(2-1\)](#): Pack a picnic and spend the day relaxing at this exceptional park, maintained by the city of Guymon. Named for its view of beautiful sunsets, the 32-acre lake offers a 1 mile concrete walking trail around the lake through a diversity of trees and shrubs which provide an oasis for songbirds. Fishing in winter for trout and year-round for catfish is exceptional and fishing licenses can be purchased at City Hall and other locations in Guymon (580.338.5838). Just north of the Lake across the dam is the Wild Game Reserve. Drive around the enclosure around the Reserve to view bison, prairie dogs, elk and exotic wildlife.

[Beaver Dunes Park \(2-8\)](#): Offers a variety of family recreational activities including a 1-mile interpretive hike through the dunes, horseshoes, volleyball, picnicking areas and of course there is the Off-Road Vehicle dune area for motorcycles, dune buggies, ATV's and 4 x 4's. Park Permit Required. Contact Information above.

[Beaver River Wildlife Management Area \(2-9\)](#): With a high-clearance vehicle a traveler can truly experience the sagebrush and shortgrass prairie, the classic western river bottom and the shrubby sand dunes within this 17,000 acre area. For travelers without a high-clearance vehicle, drive the main north-south area road (11 miles west of Beaver, south side) through this amazing wildlife area. Note: No Public Restrooms.