

# Dakota Life

SPOOKY HOLIDAY

South Dakota state parks to host Halloween weekend events **C5**

## OPEN SEASON

There are more than 700 species of birds in America. He gets to hunt them all.  
 Story by Alyssa Small  
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**J**UST BEFORE DAWN, DOUG Backlund points his truck east toward the rising sun. Sunlight shines in the blue sky, burning the wisps of cloud a pale pink. Turning onto Farm Island Road, he rolls down his window and slows to a crawl, scanning the trees and water for birds.

Pulling to a stop, he reaches into the back seat for his camera and his iPod, which holds all of the bird calls in North America. Playing a few calls, he manages to entice a sparrow he's spotted onto a branch close enough to fill the frame of his camera. He snaps a few photos and moves on, hunting for something new.

### The hunt

Backlund, 58, spent 20 years working for South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks studying rare and endangered species before retiring early to focus on his photography. It's from his work with GFP where he garnered his extensive knowledge of birds.

Through his binoculars and his scope he can indentify birds by sight, and when he can't see them, he listens for their calls.

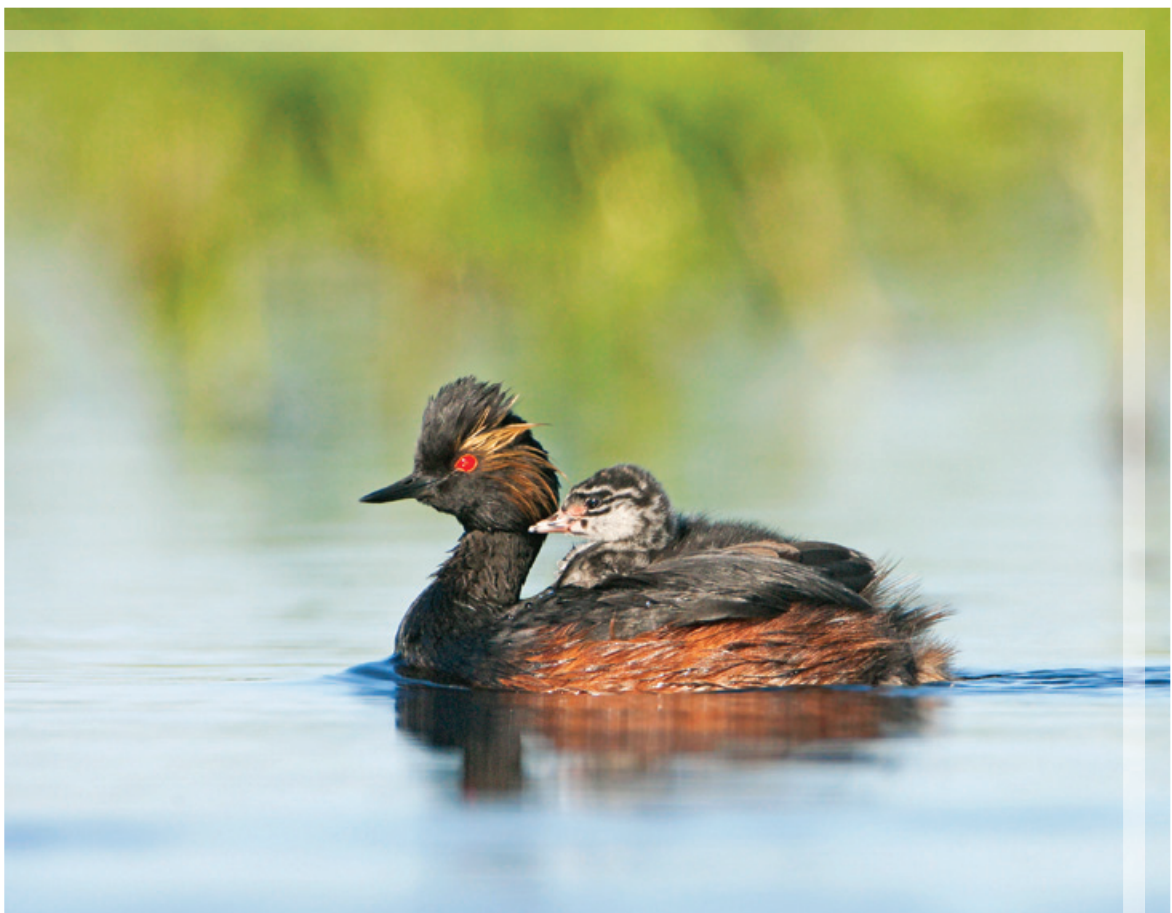
It's hunting, he says, just not with a gun.

See **BIRDS**, C6



Top: Sandhill cranes in Bosque del Apache NWR, N.M.  
 Center: Wildlife photographer Doug Backlund poses with his camera Oct. 9 above the Oahe Dam.  
 Bottom photos, clockwise from left: Eastern screech owl in Harding County, S.D. • Ring-billed gull eating a crawfish in Hughes County, S.D. • Lazuli bunting in Weston County, Wyo.  
 (Wildlife photos by Doug Backlund. Portrait of Backlund by Alyssa Small/Capital Journal)





## Birds

From C1

"It's hunting without a license," he says. "There are over 700 species of birds in America, and I get to hunt them all."

This time of year, a lot of his hunting happens from the driver's seat. The birds he wants are close enough to the road for him to get the shot, and stepping out of the car can scare the birds away.

But that's not always how it looks. Sometimes he'll bring his 9-foot flat-bottomed boat and float out into the wetlands around Farm Island, lying low until something creeps out. He might hide out in a hunting blind, waiting to capture some more skittish bird. Sometimes he'll use a great horned owl decoy. Every bird hates them, he says, so they come out to attack it until they figure out it isn't real. Backlund can also be found lying low in a gilly suit, waiting several hours in one place for the perfect opportunity. Other times, he's hiking, camera attached to his tripod and slung over one shoulder.

### The drive

Parking the car on the road to Farm Island, he retrieves a large green thermos from the back seat of his truck. He pours a strong cup of coffee into a blue ceramic mug and watches some sparrows hop in the tree branches. Looking past them into the water below, he sets his mug on the dashboard, trading it for his binoculars.

It's a snipe, standing still as stone by a small stump. The bird's a bit far away for Backlund's liking, but that won't stop him from trying. He silently positions the camera and snaps a few photos. Setting his camera in the back seat, he takes the mug off the dash, where it has fogged up a portion of the window. Placing the mug in a cup holder, he whips the truck around, moving on to his next destination.

He follows a path most days, driving from Farm Island to LaFramboise Island, then driving out

north to explore the Oahe Downstream area and above the Oahe Dam. By making this daily loop, he knows when there's a new bird in town. If he doesn't succeed in photographing it one day, he tries again the next.

He's photographed other animals, too, when they've happened along his path. But he doesn't hunt the mammals, reptiles or amphibians as he does birds.

"I won't turn down the opportunity if it presents itself, but I'm not going to focus on it, either," he says.

One of those moments that stumbled upon him happened in Arizona. He was staking out a watering hole, waiting to see what birds would drop in for a drink. Along with a few bird photos, he managed to get some images of a bobcat that also crept by for a drink.

"I guess that's why birding is so much fun," he says. "You never know what you're going to get. It drives you to keep looking."

### The rules

Out on the road to LaFramboise Island, he whips his truck around to grab an unusual photo of a common bird. A ring-billed gull paces on the edge of the road, a crawfish in its mouth.

He doesn't need another photo of a gull. He already has plenty. But a gull with a crawfish in its beak – that's a shot he doesn't have.

Angling his lens out the window, he snaps a few shots before the bird finishes its meal.

The LCD display on the back of the camera disappoints him. "If only I could've backed up five more feet," he says. He'd taken the photo in time, but hadn't been able to fit the bird's tail in the frame.

"In this hobby, you can go days without taking a great photo," he says. "Sometimes you get lucky and get a photo quickly, but most of the time a photo takes hours and hours."

After 10 years of practicing wildlife photography, he has rules of what a good picture needs. Make sure the bird fills the frame without having to crop later on. Don't harass the birds too long

with calls – they've got better things to do than hunt for intruders. And they need the glint in their eyes that only a morning or twilight sun can give.

He remembers shooting film – four rolls a day, not knowing if he had any success until the film was developed. He spent a while digiscoping, or placing his lens up to a scope and photographing through it, giving his camera more zoom. "Sort of a Rube Goldberg method of photography," he calls it.

Today, it's a telephoto lens with image stabilization, which means he can use it hand-held and nearly every image comes out sharp. He still rests the 2-foot-long lens on his window when he's in the car and uses a tripod, but that's more because the camera's heavy than to keep it steady.

### The future

Backlund doesn't know how long bird photography will be his focus. He talks about trying to photograph every woodpecker in North America. He's traveled a bit for his photography, most notably to Alaska and Arizona.

He's stuck with photographing birds in large part because of his knowledge of them, but also because so few photographers center on them. His images have been published in magazines and books, on websites and in trail guides. Some of his images have been useful for scientific purposes, capturing birds that rarely have been photographed or seen in unusual conditions.

"I've always been a biologist at heart," he says. "But for the most part I do it for the art."

He's also begun honing his skills with macro photography with insects. It's easier in some ways because the camera is lighter, though it presents the challenge of manual focus and requires a stillness to maintain that focus. As hefting the equipment for birding becomes more difficult, he says macro photography might be his next concentration.

But until then, he'll continue his quest for the best bird photos, shooting stills through his viewfinder to capture his prey.

To see more of Backlund's photos and to purchase or inquire about usage, visit [www.wildphotosphotography.com](http://www.wildphotosphotography.com).



Top left: Le Conte's sparrow in Hughes County, S.D.

Top right: Eared grebe taken in Hughes County.

Bottom photos, from left: Spotted towhee in Stanley County, S.D. • Chestnut-sided warbler in the Black Hills of South Dakota. • Townsend's solitaire in Stanley County.



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