

BIRD WATCHING AT THE NEBRASKA STATE CAPITOL

Many different kinds of birds are at home in the Capitol. They are used to represent the state and its history. Capitol artist Hildreth Mei re and sculptor Lee Lawrie created over 25 images of birds throughout the building. This handout is a guide to finding and viewing these birds and real birds too.

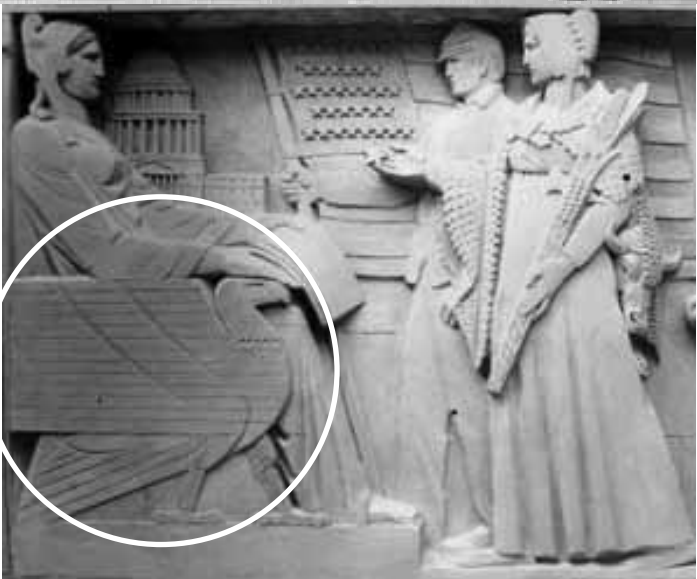
EXTERIOR--NORTH ENTRANCE

Look up, beneath the gold glazed tile dome, eight mosaic thunderbirds circle the Capitol. Nebraska’s first farmers, Native Americans, believe the thunderbird brings rain and causes thunder and lighting. The blue background tile mimics the blue sky.

There are four eagles on the **north facade** of the Capitol. On the north portal eagles represent the United States of America. The eagle was chosen as a symbol of the United States in 1782. On each corner pylon an eagle rests on the shield of the United States opposite Capitol architect Bertram Goodhue’s bison seal of Nebraska. Above the door an eagle leads pioneers westward. Best viewed from the promenade deck at the northeast corner of the base, Columbia, a female representation of America, sits on an eagle throne in front of the federal Capitol in Washington, D.C. Nebraska, portrayed as a pioneer woman wearing a bison robe and carrying a corn scepter, holds the 37th star symbolizing statehood for Nebraska on March 1, 1867.



Once you’ve found four eagles on the Capitol’s north side, walk to the **south facade** and find more eagles. Across the upper wall of the south pavilion, great lawgivers through the ages are shown. The eagle has been used as a symbol of courage, strength and power since ancient times. The Roman Empire’s legions, or armies, carried banners topped with eagles. Roman emperor Julius Caesar is carved with an eagle insignia on his belt.



Another great lawgiver sculpted on the south pavillion is Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor. He is represented with an eagle at his side. This eagle is a reference to the unification of Western European land once part of the Roman Empire by the Frankish leader Charlemange. The Germanic tribes, including the Franks, used a black eagle as a symbol, as does modern Germany.



A Peregrine falcon pair call the Capitol home. Their custom-built nest box is on the **northeast side** of the tower just below the Thunderbirds. The nest box was designed to fit the geometry of the limestone buttresses. Below, the left circle locates the nest box, the center circle indicates the location of the camera installed by Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to monitor the pair. The arrow points to one of the Peregrine falcons sitting on a ledge and shows the size of the bird. The Peregrines often perch on the tower’s many facets to survey their territory. When on the 14th floor observation decks, look up, rather than out. Careful observation may reveal a falcon perched above. For information about the falcons at the Capitol and other interesting non-game birds, check out Game and Parks bird blog.

<http://magazine.outdoornebraska.gov/category/nongame-bird-blog/>



Lincoln Monument--West Side

Dedicated on the grounds of the second Capitol in 1912, Henry Bacon’s plaza design for Daniel Chester French’s first statue of Abraham Lincoln features two granite eagles flanking the Gettysburg Address.



For more information about the Nebraska State Capitol visit www.capitol.org or call tour staff at (402)471-0448.

INTERIOR

Start your birdwatching in the **Vestibule on second floor**. In the oil on canvas murals representing pioneers settling Nebraska, artist James Penney placed black birds in *The First Furrow* and domesticated birds, the chicken and turkey, in *The House Raising*. Around the Vestibule dome in the arches, Hildreth Meière’s Guastavino tile mosaics depict native animals. At the top of each arch are birds. They include a Great Horned Owl, a Bald Eagle, a Mallard Duck and an unknown raptor.



East



North



South

The **Foyer or Great Hall** leads to the Capitol’s 110-foot tall Rotunda. Walking through the Venetian glass mural lined hall, the basketball player in the center left arch represents one of the many activities of society portrayed in the ceiling mosaics. The little girl sharing the arch with the basketball player gathers flowers as birds fly above her. Together they represent recreation. In medieval and renaissance art, birds were often used as a symbol of freedom and spiritual gifts. The birds add a sense of joy to the image.

The center doors in the Great Hall lead to the balconies overlooking the **Courtyards**. Many different birds use the Courtyards for nesting. Some use the trees and shrubs; some use the vents around the top of the courtyard walls. Kestrels have nested at the Capitol and have been known to hunt in the courtyards.



Once you arrive in the **Rotunda**, birds and winged things surround you. Look up into the dome. Winged figures representing *Virtues Which Sustain Society* soar upward. Carved into the third floor’s onyx balcony railing bird watchers will find Nebraska’s state bird, the Western Meadowlark. The singing bird alternates with a bison skull and corn motif to symbolize the Native American heritage of Nebraska. Birds hold special and sacred meaning for the Lakota. The meadowlark is a messenger of the south wind and carries the happiness and warmth associated with summer.



The **Rotunda floor** features a large central figure, *Earth as Life-giver*. Classical elements fill the four smaller medallions and a ribbon or guilloche of fossil life surrounds them. Birds are encountered as one follows the ribbon from *Water* to *Fire* to *Air* to *Earth*. The fossil birds represent the Jurassic, Cretaceous, and Paleogene Periods of Nebraska’s geology. Meière also included modern birds and a flying mammal in her black and white marble tile mosaics. Start at water, the flightless aquatic hesperornis was a powerful swimmer as indicated by its large flipper-like feet. It had teeth to hunt and hold its prey. After circling fire and the reptiles, amphibians, insects and dinosaurs, flying creatures appear around air. The butterfly and dragonfly have wings but are insects; the pterosaur was a winged reptile. The first bird in the ribbon around air is a toothed ichthyornis, a gull-like bird. Next, the flightless gastornis grew up to 6 feet tall. Three modern birds follow. The Western Meadowlark has his wings spread in flight. Next is a falcon with markings similar to a Peregrine falcon. The last bird in the ribbon is a Great Horned Owl. The bat, a winged mammal, leads to the great fossil mammals found in Nebraska.



Lawrie’s design for the hand-carved mahogany **Warner Legislative Chamber doors** on the east side of the Rotunda includes a Thunderbird at the center of the corn-like tree of life. Many western tribes believe the Thunderbird spills the rain from the lake it carries on its back. It produces thunder by flapping its wings and lightning sparks from its eyes. In the mosaic on the floor in front of the Warner Chamber (formerly senate), ancient Rome is represented to remind visitors of the Roman influence on modern western governments. The eagle is pictured as a symbol of the power and strength of the Roman Empire.



On the west side of the Rotunda, in the walnut beams of the **George W. Norris Legislative Chamber**, there are gold-leaf symbols of the three nations which have claimed Nebraska. The central beam features the Napoleonic bee, a flying insect, a reminder of the Louisiana Purchase. Barely visible in the bottom of the front beam, the Bald Eagle, left, represents Nebraska’s statehood March 1, 1867.