

Pocket Guide to Prairie Birds



Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

Key to the Range Maps

Maps in this guide are color-coded to indicate where each bird species may be found during different times of the year:



*Cover photo of Western Meadowlark
courtesy of Rick Bohn, USFWS
Mountain Prairie, CC BY 2.0*

Pocket Guide to Prairie Birds

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

Scott W. Gillihan and Tammy VerCauteren

The mission of *Bird Conservancy of the Rockies* is to conserve birds and their habitats through science, education and land stewardship.

Our Stewardship Program was developed to address prairie bird conservation through voluntary cooperative partnerships with private landowners and resource professionals. We help raise awareness for prairie birds and their habitat needs through outreach and by providing technical assistance for habitat conservation. Please visit www.birdconservancy.org to find a partner biologist near you.

Please consider supporting our bird conservation efforts by becoming a member. Visit us online at www.birdconservancy.org



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The diet icons were created by Chris Jordison of Coventry Design Studio and originally appeared in the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation publication, "A Land Manager's Guide to Grassland Birds of Saskatchewan." Many thanks to Sharon Metz for allowing us to use them.

Introduction

Not all bird species found on the Great Plains are included in this guide. Instead, the guide focuses on commonly seen birds and birds that are representative of specific habitats. The emphasis is on adult birds in the breeding season; many species look different in other seasons, when they adopt a duller plumage. Also, birds in their first year of life often look different from adults. More extensive information, including examples of these birds in different seasons and information about other prairie species, can be found in bird field guides, available at most bookstores. Many excellent guides are available including *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, and the *Peterson Field Guide Series*.

The bird species in this guide are organized according to their primary habitat. Within each habitat, the birds are organized based on their relationships to each other. For example, hawks are grouped together, shorebirds are together, sparrows, etc. This makes it easier to identify a bird by comparing it to similar birds on nearby pages.

Each species account includes icons showing

the main components of the diet. The meaning of the icons is described at the back inside cover.

The maps on each page show the distribution of the species throughout the year. However, birds are very mobile and some species move around quite a bit. As a result, they could easily turn up in regions that are beyond the limits shown on the maps. Therefore, the maps should serve as a *general guide* to a species' distribution, rather than as the final word.

Conservation

Together, the shortgrass, mixed-grass, and tallgrass prairies cover about one-fifth of North America. In spite of their large size, the prairies support a bird community with few members. The Great Plains, the westernmost region of North America's grassland, have some of the driest conditions. These semi-arid conditions support only limited plant growth that has historically been shaped over time by climate, grazing, and fire. These forces left a patchwork of vegetation in a variety of growth stages and conditions that have supported a diverse and highly specialized group of birds.

In addition to the shortgrass, the Great Plains also consists of mixed-grass and tallgrass prairies where moisture is adequate. Also, as you will see from the habitats we have emphasized in the guide, the prairie is diverse and includes rivers, shallow wetlands, shrublands, homesteads, etc. These areas are important for migrating birds as well and must also be considered. Thus the guide includes more than 80 species which can be seen migrating through or nesting in the region.

Nine bird species are restricted to the Great Plains, and only 20 others are closely linked with it. These 29 species are a small fraction of the approximately 650 bird species that breed in North America north of Mexico. Such a small group of birds is easily overlooked, especially in comparison with the more numerous and colorful species of forested lands. As a result, population declines among prairie bird species have been largely overlooked until recently. Grassland birds are now arguably the highest conservation priority—they have shown the steepest population declines of any group of North American birds. These declines can be attributed to the loss of high-quality habitat resulting from the conversion and

fragmentation of native prairie due to agriculture, urban development, and suppression of naturally occurring fire.

Many grassland birds are still here due to a long tradition of careful and effective management of the land, a necessity in a dry region where so little vegetation grows. We want to extend our gratitude to landowners who play a pivotal role in our productive grasslands both for food and fiber and well as wildlife habitat. Different grassland birds will require management for different vegetation structure. Careful stewardship includes maintaining healthy, diverse ecosystems upon which livestock, wildlife, and humans depend. The management recommendations made in this guide reflect this (see Conservation in each species account). With so much of the prairie habitat in private ownership, assistance from landowners is critical to prairie bird conservation. If you are interested in learning more about the birds using your land, habitat conservation opportunities, etc., please visit our website (www.birdconservancy.org) and check the pages for our Stewardship Program.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS



Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

Identification: North America's largest heron, with a wingspan of six feet. Blue-gray body, black stripe over the eye.

Habitat: Shorelines and shallow water. Builds a stick platform nest in trees, with many pairs nesting close together.

Feeding: Stands or walks slowly through shallow water with the neck outstretched, capturing prey with a quick stabbing motion of its sharp beak.

Conservation: Stable or increasing. Retain trees adjacent to water for nesting sites. Minimize use of pesticides.





Doug Backlund

American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*)

Identification: Reddish or cinnamon head and neck, white body, black back and on part of the wings, grayish legs. Long, thin, upturned bill.

Habitat: Shorelines, shallow water. The nest is a shallow depression in dried mud or sand.

Feeding: Sweeps bill back and forth through the water, capturing small aquatic insects.

Conservation: Stable overall, but declining in parts of the Great Plains. Maintain wetlands and shallow open-water areas.



Tom Grey



Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Wetlands

Identification: White chin, breast, and belly contrast with two black bands, which no other North American shorebird has. Reddish-brown rump is obvious when the bird is flying or doing its broken-wing display to distract predators near the nest.

Habitat: Shorelines, other open areas with short vegetation and bare ground. Nest is a bare area scraped out in gravel, where the eggs are extremely well camouflaged.

Feeding: Picks food items from the ground.

Conservation: Stable. Minimize use of pesticides.





male



female

Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*)

Identification: Thin black bill, white face, sides, and belly. Female has broad dark stripe through the eye that extends down the neck, and a gray cap; male has black cap and lacks the broad dark stripe. Contrary to most birds, the drab-colored male incubates the eggs.

Habitat: Wet meadows near lakes or ponds. The well-concealed nest is on the ground.

Feeding: Often seen spinning in circles in shallow water to stir up aquatic insects.

Conservation: Stable or increasing. Maintain wetlands and wet meadows. Defer livestock grazing until after 15 July in pastures containing wetlands.



Andy Reago & Chrissy McClarren, CC BY 2.0, Flickr.com



Marbled Godwit (*Lemosa fedoa*)

Identification: Large shorebird, about 18" tall. On the breeding grounds, the breast and belly are marked with dark barring. The slightly upturned bill is pink and black.

Habitat: Moist meadows and grasslands. The nest is a shallow hollow on the ground.

Feeding: Collects food items from the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain wetlands and large tracts of grassland.





Bill Schmoker

Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*)

Identification: White body, gray back, wings are white below and gray above, black head with a red bill, and white crescents above and below each eye.

Habitat: Lakes and ponds in prairie regions. Builds a floating nest, anchored to emergent vegetation such as cattails.

Feeding: Often follows farm equipment through fields to pick up worms and insects.

Conservation: Stable. Maintain wetlands with open-water areas. Minimize use of pesticides.



Wetlands



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

Identification: Deep blue back, wings, and head, rusty throat and forehead, buffy breast and belly. The long forked tail is distinctive.

Habitat: Open areas near buildings. Sometimes seen gathering mud from the edges of puddles. It uses the mud to build a cup nest on bridges and buildings.

Feeding: Captures flying insects in the air.

Conservation: Declining. Minimize pesticide use. Outside of nesting season, attach narrow strip of wood to walls or under eaves to help support nests.





Robert Shantz

Canyon Wren (*Catherpes mexicanus*)

Identification: Brown on the back, wings, and head; white throat and breast; chestnut belly. Fairly long bill. Beautiful, liquid, descending song.

Habitat: Areas of steep, exposed rock, such as canyon walls and cliffs. Nests in crevices of rock walls, occasionally in buildings.

Feeding: Eats spiders and insects captured on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Promote healthy canyon ecosystems by maintaining water flow and native habitats. Minimize use of pesticides.



Wetlands



Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)

Wetlands

Identification: Reddish brown and dark brown on tail, back, and wings; reddish brown and gray stripes on head; white breast with brown streaks, usually forming a central dark spot; white belly.

Habitat: Shrublands or riparian areas with dense vegetation. Nests on the ground or in a low tree or shrub.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain shrubby areas, especially near water.





male

female



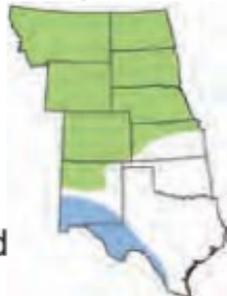
Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*)

Identification: Male is unmistakable: lemon yellow head and breast, black elsewhere except for white patch on the wing. Female is brown overall with some yellow on the face; yellow chin and breast.

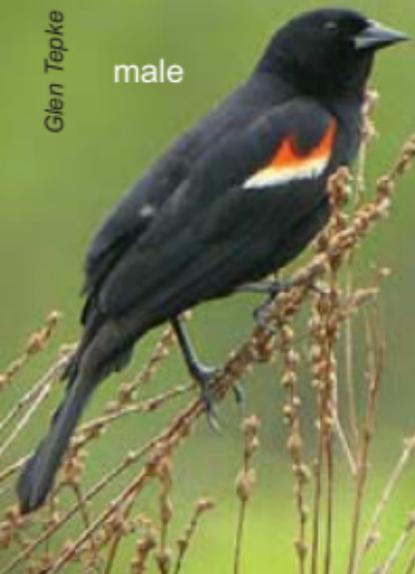
Habitat: Breeds in marshes, winters in grain fields. The nest is placed in emergent wetlands vegetation, such as cattails.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Stable or declining. Maintain wetlands and wetland vegetation.



male



female

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Janet Forjan-Freedman

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

Identification: The male is black overall with a bright red patch on each shoulder. The female looks like a very large sparrow, with thick brown streaks on the breast and belly, and a buffy eyebrow.

Habitat: Marshes, wet meadows, hayfields, grainfields, and towns. Nests in emergent wetland vegetation, shrubs, or trees.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground or in low vegetation.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain wetlands and wetland vegetation.





male



female

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)

Identification: In flight, male is gray above and white below, with black tips to the wings; female is brown above with brown streaks below. Both have a long tail with a rectangular white rump patch. Formerly known as the Marsh Hawk.

Habitat: Marshes, grasslands, other open areas. Builds a well-hidden nest of sticks and reeds, supported on marsh vegetation.

Feeding: Often seen gliding low over the ground with its head down, scanning for prey.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands and wetlands. Avoid activity near nest sites. Minimize pesticide use.



Grasslands





Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)

Identification: Typical adult has a white chin and belly, contrasting with brown head and bib. The wings are white and dark brown.

Habitat: Open areas with scattered trees, shelterbelts. The large nest is usually placed high in a tree. Spends the winter in Argentina.

Feeding: Usually soars while hunting for small animals, but sometimes walks on the ground to catch grasshoppers and crickets.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grassland; retain existing trees for nesting; stay away from active nests. Minimize pesticide use.





Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*)

Identification: Typical adults viewed from below look almost all white; the back and other upperparts are rust-colored. The legs are rust-colored, also, and form a sharp contrast with the white belly and tail. The tail lacks the dark bands seen on most hawks.

Habitat: Open areas. The large nest may be placed in a tree or shrub, or on the ground, and is built of sticks, bones, and grass.

Feeding: Hunts while soaring or from a perch.

Conservation: Increasing. Maintain open grasslands and small mammal populations, including prairie dogs. Protect existing trees. Avoid activity near active nests. Minimize pesticide use.



Allan Claybon



Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)

Grasslands

Identification: Typical bird has mostly white wings with distinctive black rectangular patches at the wrist, a dark belly, and a broad dark band at the end of the tail.

Habitat: Nests in arctic regions; spends winters in open areas of the Great Plains.

Feeding: Hunts while soaring or from a perch.

Conservation: Population fluctuates in response to fluctuations of lemming populations on the breeding grounds; overall, the population appears to be stable. Retain populations of small mammals.





Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Identification: Adult is very dark brown all over with a golden brown head; immature birds have a white patch toward the end of each wing (visible while in flight) and at the base of the tail. Much larger than hawks and vultures.

Habitat: Nests in mountainous areas or open country, spends winters in open areas. The bulky stick nest is placed on cliffs, rock outcrops, or in trees.

Feeding: Hunts primarily by soaring.

Conservation: Stable or increasing. Maintain open grasslands and rabbit, jackrabbit, and prairie dog populations. Avoid activity near active nests. Minimize pesticide use.





Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*)

Grasslands

Identification: Pointed wings typical of falcons. When seen from below, the wings and body are pale, contrasting with dark brown “armpits” under the wings, close to the body. A narrow, dark brown bar extends below each eye.

Habitat: Open areas. Nests on cliff ledges.

Feeding: Hunts while flying, catching birds in midair and small mammals on the ground.

Conservation: Increasing. Maintain open grasslands and small mammal populations. Minimize pesticide use.





Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*)
Lesser Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*)

Identification: Chicken-like birds with dark brown barring, yellow patches of bare skin above the eyes. During courtship displays, male expands air sacs on sides of the neck; Greater has yellowish sacs, Lesser has reddish-orange sacs.

Habitat: Greater inhabits tallgrass and midgrass prairie; Lesser inhabits sandsage and shinnery oak habitats.

Feeding: Collected on the ground.

Conservation: Both species are declining. Maintain medium and tall grasslands for Greater, sand sagebrush-bluestem and shinnery oak-bluestem for Lesser. Control invasive grasses such as cheatgrass and encroaching trees and shrubs. Minimize surface impacts, including fragmentation from roads, and other disturbance during development of energy and other resources.



Greater



Lesser

Grasslands





Grasslands

Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*)

Identification: Mottled, mostly dark brown back and wings, dark brown spots on white breast and belly. Most distinctive feature is the pointed tail, a result of the central tail feathers being longer than the rest. During courtship displays, male inflates purplish air sacs on sides of the neck.

Habitat: Grasslands, shrublands.

Feeding: Collects from the ground or low shrubs.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of native grasslands mixed with shrublands.





Tom Grey

Scaled Quail (*Callipepla squamata*)

Identification: Gray overall—the black-tipped feathers give the appearance of scales. White-tipped crest on the head. Sometimes called Blue Quail or Cotton-top.

Habitat: Grasslands and scrub, old homesteads. Nests on the ground, usually under a shrub or other tall vegetation.

Feeding: Collects food items from the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open native grasslands; control invasive grasses such as cheatgrass; use prescribed burns to control encroaching trees and shrubs. Avoid long-term overgrazing, which causes the loss of grasses and forbs that provide food and cover.





Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*)

Identification: Pale tan back and wings, white breast and belly, a black patch above the white forehead, and a black stripe between the black beak and eye.

Habitat: Very short grasslands, freshly plowed fields, other areas with vegetation shorter than about 2" and areas of bare ground.

Feeding: Collects insects from the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands with extensive bare ground, and native herbivores such as prairie dogs. When cultivating, watch for lone adult sitting on ground or if one suddenly flies up from the path of the equipment—the plover may be on a nest—go around the nest or pick up the implement to miss the nest (you need only miss it by a few inches). Minimize pesticide use.





Doug Backlund

Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*)

Identification: Brown feather tips give mottled appearance. Small head, thin neck, short beak, large eyes. Often seen perched on fenceposts.

Habitat: Grasslands, often near water. Nests on the ground, with surrounding vegetation pulled over the nest for concealment.

Feeding: Collects food items on the ground. Often forages on burned prairie.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of open grasslands. Avoid burning, mowing, or plowing during the nesting and brood-rearing seasons (roughly mid-April to mid-July). Control encroaching trees and shrubs.





Tom Grey

Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*)

Identification: Very large shorebird, standing about 24" tall. Extremely long (6–8" long) downcurved beak. Body and wings are colored with browns and cinnamon. The call is a loud *cur-lew* or *cur-lee*.

Habitat: Grasslands. The nest is a shallow hollow on the ground.

Feeding: Feeds by walking slowly, watching for grasshoppers and other large insects, toads, bird eggs, and nesting songbirds.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands and prairie wetlands. Avoid activity near known nesting sites. Minimize pesticide use.





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Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)

Identification: White face, breast, and belly; rust and gray head, back, and wings; dark eyes.

Habitat: Open areas, such as pasture interspersed with cropland, also open woodlands; avoids extensive cropland. Nests in buildings or in hollows of banks or cliffs.

Feeding: Hunts at night, primarily for small rodents but also large insects, bats, and reptiles.

Conservation: Population status difficult to assess, but appears to be declining. Minimize use of pesticides, especially those targeting rodents.



Grasslands



Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*)

Grasslands

Identification: Small, 8–10" tall, with long legs, brown with white spots on back and wings, dark brown barring on the light brown breast and belly, yellow eyes.

Habitat: Treeless areas with short vegetation (less than 4" tall), usually where there are prairie dogs.

Feeding: Captures grasshoppers and other insects during the day; usually captures birds and small mammals at night.

Conservation: Population has declined significantly. Maintain open grasslands and populations of prairie dogs and other burrowing mammals. Minimize pesticide use.





Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)

Identification: Medium-sized owl (about 15" long) with dark areas around the eyes, dark brown streaks on the breast, and a light belly. The short ear tufts area difficult to see.

Habitat: Open fields and marshy areas.

Feeding: Soars low over the ground at dusk to hunt for voles and other small rodents; occasionally captures songbirds.

Conservation: Declining at an alarming rate. Maintain wetlands and open grasslands. Minimize pesticide use. Remove unused fences.





Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*)

Identification: Grayish overall, usually seen flying at dusk or dawn but occasionally in midday; sometimes seen perched on fenceposts. The wings are tapered and bent back at an angle; in flight, a white bar near the end of each wing is obvious. The wingbeat is stiff and the flight erratic, like a bat.

Habitat: Open areas, woodlands. Does not build a nest but lays its eggs directly on the ground, especially amongst gravel on hills, ridges, and even on rooftops.

Feeding: Captures insects in flight.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands. Minimize pesticide use. When driving at night, watch for them roosting on gravel roads; try to avoid hitting them.





Tom Grey

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*)

Identification: Pale gray back, head, and breast, black wings, pink sides. The extremely long tail is unmistakable.

Habitat: Open areas with scattered trees. Nests in a tree or on a utility pole.

Feeding: Captures flying insects in the air, other insects on the ground.

Conservation: Stable overall, but declining in parts of its range. When removing brush, leave strips or patches to preserve nest and perch sites. Minimize pesticide use.





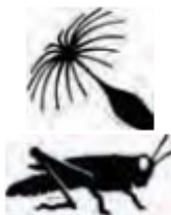
Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*)

Identification: Brown back, wings, and tail, white breast and belly, bold black markings on brown and pale yellow head, black crescent under throat. Small black “horns” are often difficult to see.

Habitat: Open areas with very short vegetation and bare ground. Nests on the ground, usually adjacent to a clump of vegetation.

Feeding: Eats seeds and insects collected on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands. Control encroaching shrubs and trees. Minimize pesticide use.





Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

Identification: Blue-black back, wings, and tail, buffy rump patch and collar, blue-black crown, reddish brown face, white belly. The prominent white forehead is distinctive. As with all swallows, the flight is fast and acrobatic.

Habitat: Open areas near water. Builds mud nests in colonies under bridges and highway overpasses and on buildings.

Feeding: Captures flying insects in the air.

Conservation: Population is increasing, but is affected by competition with the invasive non-native House Sparrow.





Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*)

Grasslands

Identification: Black overall, larger and with a heavier bill and deeper voice than a crow. A nearly identical species, the Common Raven, may be present on the Great Plains in winter. The Common is slightly larger and has a slightly larger bill than the Chihuahuan.

Habitat: Grasslands.

Feeding: Wide array of foods, including carrion, rodents, insects, seeds, fruit, birds, and bird eggs.

Conservation: Stable. Maintain grasslands.





Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*)

Identification: Back, head, and wings brown with fine black and white marks, fine brown marks on pale breast, buffy belly. Bobs up and down, as though doing deep knee bends.

Habitat: Dry, rocky, open areas. Nests in rock crevices.

Feeding: Eats insects captured on the ground.

Conservation: Declining, in part due to nest parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird. Minimize pesticide use.





Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*)

Identification: Sparrow-like but with a thinner bill. Brownish above, streaked breast, whitish belly. White outer tail feathers are obvious when in flight. The male sings while circling high overhead.

Habitat: Areas with medium-high grasses. The nest is a domed structure on the ground.

Feeding: Collects insects and a small amount of seed from the ground.

Conservation: Declining at an alarming rate. Maintain open grasslands and control encroaching shrubs and trees. Delay mowing until after mid-July.





Doug Backlund

Cassin's Sparrow (*Peucaea cassinii*)

Identification: Plain gray overall, dark marks on the back give it a faintly spotted appearance. White tips on the outer tail feathers can be seen when the bird flies. The male sometimes sings while flying almost vertically above his territory, then fluttering back down to a perch.

Habitat: Grasslands with shrubs or cholla, fencerows. Nests on the ground or low in a shrub.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands with scattered shrubs.



Grasslands



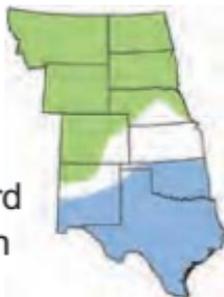
Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

Identification: Gray and brown with black markings on back and wings, fine black streaks on the breast. White outer tail feathers are conspicuous when the bird flies. At close range a small reddish brown shoulder patch is sometimes obvious.

Habitat: Present in a wide variety of habitats, including grasslands and open shrublands. Nests on the ground, next to a clump of vegetation.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands. Use no-till or reduced-till practices in croplands.





Doug Backlund

Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*)

Identification: Gray, black, and tan on the back and wings, grayish breast with central black spot, white belly, white stripe through a reddish brown cap, reddish brown check patch, and striking black and white pattern on the face. Large white corners on the tail are obvious when the bird flies.

Habitat: Grasslands with short vegetation, patches of bare ground, scattered shrubs or trees. Usually nests on the ground, but occasionally in a shrub or tree.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grassland with scattered trees and shrubs, especially in mountain foothills areas.



Grasslands



male

female



Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*)

Identification: Male is all black with large white patch on each wing. Female is mottled grayish brown and white on the back and head, white breast with grayish brown streaks, white belly, large white patch on each grayish brown wing.

Habitat: Grasslands with some shrubs, also fallow fields, stubble, grainfields. Nests on the ground.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of open grassland with scattered shrubs. Minimize pesticide use. Use no-till or minimum-till practices in cropland.





Baird's Sparrow (*Centronyx bairdii*)

Identification: Buffy and black markings, buffy eyebrow, buffy central stripe on the cap, short dark streaks at the top and sides of the white breast. This is a secretive bird that rarely flies, preferring to walk on the ground.

Habitat: Open grasslands with medium or tall grasses. Nests on the ground.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands with medium or tall grasses. Control invasive plants and encroaching shrubs.





Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*)

Identification: Brown, black, gray, and white pattern on back and wings, brown head with thin white center stripe, stubby tail, buffy breast and sides, often with a yellowish orange spot in front of the eye. The head is fairly flat. The song is an insect-like buzz.

Habitat: Midgrass and tallgrass prairie, areas of taller grasses in shortgrass prairie, hayfields, grainfields. Nests on the ground at the base of a grass clump.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of open grassland with medium or tall grasses.





Andreasolitare, CC BY-SA 4.0

McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*)

Identification: Male: white throat, black upper breast, chestnut patch on the shoulder, gray head with a black cap. Female: brown and black overall, faint black upper breast, chestnut shoulder. Both sexes have an inverted black "T" in the white tail that can be seen when the bird flies.

Habitat: Grasslands, especially where the grass is very short and sparse. Nests on the ground, often near a cowpie or a clump of vegetation.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of open grassland with short grasses and minimal litter.





Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*)

Identification: Male: black and gray back and wings, chestnut-colored patch at the nape of the neck, black crown, white eyebrow, white throat, black breast and upper belly. Female: black and brown overall. Both sexes have a black triangle in the tail, visible when the bird flies.

Habitat: Grasslands, especially where the grass is short to medium height. Nests on the ground.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large areas of grassland with diverse vegetation structure. Graze mixed-grass prairie moderately to intensively; graze wet areas in shortgrass prairie at light to moderate intensity. Minimize pesticide use.





Doug Backlund

Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*)

Identification: Male has black triangle on throat, both sexes have yellow breast, whitish belly, rusty brown patch on each shoulder, cone-shaped bill. Male's song sounds like *dik dik dik-cissel*.

Habitat: Found in many habitat types, including open grasslands and shrubby areas, wherever grasses and forbs are dense. Nests on the ground or in shrubs, trees, or other vegetation up to 6 ft high.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of grassland. Delay mowing until after mid-August. Minimize pesticide use.



Grasslands



Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*)

Identification: Male is black overall with white patches on the wings and a large buffy patch on the back of the head; a white rump is noticeable when the bird flies. The female has black and brown streaks on the back and wings, white throat, thin brown streaks on the crown and the white breast, belly, and sides, and a thin dark brown line behind the eye.

Habitat: Grasslands (especially wet areas) and grainfields. Nests on the ground, often with other Bobolinks nesting nearby.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large tracts of open grassland. Delay mowing until after mid-July. Minimize pesticide use.





Western Meadowlark

Doug Backlund

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*)
Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*)

Identification: Black and brown on the back and wings, a yellow throat, breast, and belly with a black “V” on the breast. These species are virtually identical, and are distinguished by their songs: the Western’s song is flutelike, the Eastern’s is high-pitched whistles.

Habitat: Grasslands, croplands, open shrublands. The Eastern prefers areas with taller and/or wetter vegetation. The ground nest is hidden by a dome of vegetation.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Both species are declining. Maintain open grasslands. Minimize disturbance during the reproductive season as they are very sensitive and easily abandon their nests. Delay mowing until after mid-July.



Eastern



Western

Grasslands





male

Doug Backlund



female

Bob Gross, BirdsInFocus.com

Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*)

Identification: Much larger than other grouse—as large as a small turkey. Mostly brown, mottled on the back and wings, with a black belly, white breast, and pointed tail.

Habitat: Sagebrush shrublands.

Feeding: In summer, eats insects. In winter, eats sagebrush leaves, shoots, flowers, and buds.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain extensive areas of sagebrush with understory of native grasses and forbs. Control invasive plants (such as cheatgrass) and encroaching trees. Minimize surface impacts, including habitat fragmentation from roads, and other disturbance during development of energy and other resources.





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Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*)

Identification: Brown and black streaks on head, back, wings, and tail; white belly. Long legs and tail. Rarely flies; is usually seen on the ground.

Habitat: Arid woodlands, shrublands.

Feeding: Captures prey on the ground, often after chasing it down.

Conservation: Stable. Minimize pesticide use.



Shrublands



Say's Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*)

Identification: Grayish head, back, and wings, lighter breast, cinnamon belly, black tail. Frequently perches on fences, where it can be seen bobbing its tail.

Habitat: Open areas, especially where streams or ravines are present. Builds a bulky nest of plant material in rock crevices, under bridges, or in openings of buildings or streambanks.

Feeding: Flies out from a perch to capture flying insects.

Conservation: Increasing. Minimize pesticide use.





Loggerhead Shrike

Tom Grey

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*)

Identification: Gray body, black wings with white patches, black mask. Northern Shrikes are present on the Great Plains only in winter.

Habitat: Open areas with some trees or shrubs, especially ones with thorns. Nest is placed in a tree or shrub.

Feeding: Watches from a fencepost or other perch, then swoops down to capture prey. Skewers prey on thorns or barbed wire.

Conservation: Loggerhead: Widespread, steep declines. Northern: Stable. Maintain open grasslands with scattered shrubs for nesting. Minimize pesticide use.



Loggerhead



Northern





Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Shrublands

Identification: Gray back and head, darker gray wings and tail, grayish white throat, breast, and belly. In flight, white wing patches are visible, similar to shrikes, but the mockingbird lacks the broad black mask of shrikes.

Habitat: Open areas with shrubs. Nests in tree or shrub.

Feeding: Picks its food from vegetation and the ground.

Conservation: Declining in parts of its range, increasing in others. Minimize pesticide use.





Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*)

Identification: Gray tail, back, wings, and head; white chin; white breast and belly with black spots and streaks; pale yellow eyes.

Habitat: Shrublands, especially sagebrush. The nest is placed 1–3 feet high in shrubs.

Feeding: Collects food items from the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain shrublands. Control invasive plants (such as cheatgrass) and encroaching trees.





Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*)

Identification: Male has a long black tail, black back, head, and breast, white belly, reddish brown sides, black wings with white spots; female is similar, but dark grayish brown where the male is black.

Habitat: Shrubby areas. Nests on the ground under a shrub or low in a shrub.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground. It is often very noisy as it rakes away dead leaves with both feet to find food.

Conservation: Stable or increasing. Maintain patches of dense shrubs.





Robert Shantz

Sagebrush Sparrow (*Artemisisospiza nevadensis*)

Identification: Grayish brown back, wings, head, with white eyebrows, throat, breast, and belly. Dark spot in center of the breast. White ring around the eye.

Habitat: Shrublands, especially sagebrush. Nests on the ground or low in a shrub.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain sagebrush stands; control invasive plants and encroaching trees.





Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*)

Shrublands

Identification: Gray and brown with black markings on back and wings, unmarked gray breast and belly, gray eyebrow. The tail is fairly long for a sparrow, and has a distinctive notch. The male sings from the tops of shrubs.

Habitat: Dry areas with yucca, sagebrush, or other shrubs. Nests low in a shrub or cactus.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain sagebrush stands; control invasive grasses (such as cheatgrass) and encroaching trees.





Tom Grey

Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*)

Identification: The male is deep blue overall with reddish brown patches on each wing. The female has a light brown body, gray wings and tail. Both sexes have a large, heavy beak.

Habitat: Shrubby areas, streamsides, and woodland edges. Nests low to the ground in a shrub or small tree.

Feeding: Collects its food from the ground and in shrubs.

Conservation: Increasing. Maintain woody vegetation along waterways.





Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

Identification: The male is black overall with yellow eyes. The female is brown overall with dark brown eyes. Compared to the Common Grackle, the tail is shorter and the beak is shorter and straighter.

Habitat: Shrubby areas, open woodlands, homesteads. Nests on the ground or low in a shrub.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Conservation: Declining but still abundant.





Robert Shantz

Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*)

Identification: Pointed wings, gray overall with black tail, grayish-white head, and dark patch around the eyes.

Habitat: Open woods, such as along streams, shelterbelts, or in towns. Nests in trees, often with several pairs nesting close together; nesting birds may fiercely defend their nest site, even against humans.

Feeding: Catches and eats insects while flying. Occasionally catches small bats.

Conservation: Stable. Maintain existing trees. Minimize use of pesticides. Control invasive plants (such as tamarisk and Russian-olive).





Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Identification: Typical adult has a reddish tail, a dark brown band across the white belly, and a dark brown patch on the front edge of each wing, close to the body.

Habitat: Open areas with trees, which are needed as support for the large nest of sticks.

Feeding: Hunts by watching from a perch or while soaring.

Conservation: Stable or increasing. Maintain open grassland; retain existing trees for nesting. Minimize pesticide use.



Tom Grey



Tom Grey



American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

Identification: Small falcon with pointed wings and long tail. Male has blue-gray wings and a reddish-brown back; female is reddish-brown all over. Both sexes have two vertical black stripes on each side of the head.

Habitat: Open areas. Nests in tree cavities.

Feeding: Hovers by rapidly beating its wings; also hunts from perches such as trees, fences, utility poles. Because of its small size and predation on songbirds, this species was formerly known as the Sparrow Hawk.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands. Preserve existing trees and snags. Minimize pesticide use.



Woodlands



Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*)

Identification: Mostly brown mottled all over, with reddish streaks on the sides. Eyebrow and chin are white in males, buff brown in females.

Habitat: Farms, open areas with shrubs, and open woods.

Feeding: Seeds, leaves, fruit, insects that it collects on the ground.

Conservation: Declining at an alarming rate. Use no-till or minimum-till practices in croplands.





Tom Grey

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

Identification: Grayish-brown overall, with black spots on the wings. Long, pointed tail. The familiar cooing song gives the bird its name—it sounds as though it is mourning.

Habitat: Widespread, from open grasslands and croplands to open woodlands. The flimsy stick nest is built in a tree or shrub, occasionally on the ground.

Feeding: Picks seeds from the ground, eats some insects.

Conservation: Stable and abundant. Minimize pesticide use. Avoid using lead shot when hunting.



Woodlands

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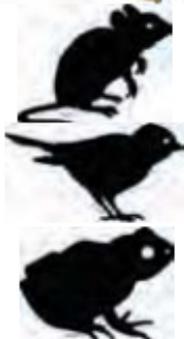
Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

Identification: Large grayish owl with a white throat, yellow eyes, and two prominent ear tufts (the “horns”). Often seen perched on utility poles or trees at dusk or dawn.

Habitat: Wooded areas; typically nests in trees in a stick nest built by crows or magpies.

Feeding: Hunts at night for squirrels, small rodents, skunks, reptiles, and birds.

Conservation: Stable. Minimize the use of pesticides, especially those targeting rodents.





Doug Backlund

Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)

Identification: Gray and brown head, black crescent below the throat, black spots on pale breast and belly, brown and black bars on back and wings. In flight, the underside of the wings may be yellow or reddish orange. The male has a black or red “moustache.”

Habitat: River woodlands, towns, homesteads with large trees. Nests in a tree cavity.

Feeding: Often forages for ants and other insects on the ground, sometimes catches insects in the air.

Conservation: Declining. Preserve existing trees and snags. Minimize pesticide use.





Western Wood-Pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*)

Identification: Light grayish on the head, back, and sides, dark wings, white belly. The song is a distinctive, descending *peer*.

Habitat: Open woods, especially near water. The simple cup nest is placed far out on a tree branch, 10–30 feet above the ground.

Feeding: Flies out from an exposed perch to capture flying insects.

Conservation: Declining. Minimize pesticide use.

