

Grassland birds: habitat basics

Head and shoulders
Photo of DC or
Soil Conservationist
here

By _____,
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Grassland birds-- those that rely on grassland habitats for nesting, are found in all 50 states. They include the meadowlark, grouse, prairie chicken, dickcissel, sedge wren, killdeer, mourning dove, robin, bobolink, some sparrows, longspurs and many others.

As a group, populations of grassland birds have been declining-- as a matter of fact, more so than any other group. The factor most likely for the decline is loss of breeding habitat.

Each grassland nesting bird species has its own unique set of habitat requirements. Habitat that benefits one species may not benefit another. But some generalizations can be made.

Native grasses and prairies.

Prairie ecosystems and native grasses and forbs offer some of the highest quality nesting habitat to grassland birds. They are naturally adapted to this habitat; the problem is, in much of the country, native prairies are rarely found. But grassland birds can and do use "surrogate grasslands" in the form of hayfields, pastures, small grain fields, fallow fields and idled croplands.

They also use strip habitats including grass waterways, field borders, grass filter strips, utility and railroad right of ways, road ditches, and other linear habitats with early successional management. In heavily farmed areas,

these habitats are critical to grassland birds.

Most grassland birds can tolerate some woody vegetation within grasslands, but many species will avoid it. Grassland birds are split on their preference for short, medium and tall grass growth.

Food. Insects are the most common food source, but a wide variety of plants and animals are eaten. Insects include grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, ants, weevils, cutworms, wasps, spiders, earthworms, sow bugs, and many others. Big bluestem, little bluestem, switchgrass, sideoats grama, Indiangrass, wheatgrass, and green needlegrass are among the native grass seeds eaten.

Seeds of sedges and weeds, wild berries, corn, oats, wheat, barley and other small grains are among seed, fruit and crop diet items.

Grassland raptors prey on mice, gophers, voles, moles, shrews, prairie dogs, rabbits and others.

General needs. Where large blocks of undisturbed grassland occur, grassland birds will be able to court, nest, feed, loaf, raise young and survive.

For more information, stop at our office at (Number) (Street) in (city), or visit the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov

Or, visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute at www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov



Grassland birds are naturally adapted to native grasses and prairie ecosystems.

Wildlife Ways Did you know....



More than 20 conservation practices and programs of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service can be used to improve or develop habitat for grassland birds.