

Sprague's Pipit

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What is the Sprague's Pipit?

Sprague's Pipits are grassland nesting songbirds about 5 1/2 inches in length. The wings and tail are dark brown with two pale indistinct wing-bars. The top and back of the head and upperparts of the body are buff with blackish streaking. The face is buff with a pale eye-ring creating a large-eyed appearance. The under-parts are whitish, the breast has fine blackish streaks, and the breast and flanks are often faintly washed with buff.

What is their "status"?

The Sprague's Pipit is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Candidate species are those for which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has sufficient information to list as threatened or endangered.

Candidate species receive no legal protection under the Endangered Species Act- that is; there are no legal prohibitions under the federal Endangered Species Act against taking candidate species.

The NRCS works with USDA program participants to implement conservation actions for candidate species that may eliminate the need to list the species as threatened or endangered.

Where in S.D. do they call home?

This species occur in grassy cover during the breeding and migratory seasons. While mainly occurring as a summer resident in northwestern and north central SD the species and its habitat may be found in:

Butte, Campbell, Corson, Custer, Dewey, Fall River, Haakon, Harding, Jackson, Jones, Lawrence, Lyman, McPherson, Meade, Pennington, Perkins, Shannon, Stanley, and Ziebach counties.

The bird is present on its breeding grounds between April 15 and August 15 and nests between June and July. The bird generally leaves the state by September or October.



Photo: Bob Gress

Where am I most likely to see this bird?

Sprague's Pipits are closely associated with native grassland and are less abundant (or absent) in areas of introduced grasses.

Generally, the bird prefers to breed in well-drained native grasslands with high plant species richness and diversity.

They prefer breeding sites with a range of vegetative structure and avoid trees.

Look for grassy cover of intermediate height and sparse to intermediate vegetation density and little or no woody vegetation.

The bird can occur within planted grasslands that closely resemble native grasslands. Planted fields with a low amount of alfalfa and suitable vegetation height should be attractive to breeding Sprague's Pipits. Within tame pastures, Sprague's Pipits occur more frequently in pure crested wheatgrass than in crested wheatgrass/alfalfa.

The bird is uncommon on non-native planted pasturelands with no documented nesting in cropland, CRP, or Dense Nesting Cover. However, territorial displays have been recorded in non-native grasslands where the structure of the vegetation was similar to that of native vegetation.

Pipits are generally absent from grassy patches less than 70 acres. However, they can and will nest on smaller acreages (<70 acres) if the habitat is “good.”

What are the threats?

- Habitat conversion, degradation and fragmentation
- Loss of native prairie.
- Grazing that decreases plant health and increases non-native species.
- Inappropriate fire management (lack of fire).
- Woody plant invasion and invasive plant species.
- Road construction, and gravel mining.
- Haying/mowing suitable nesting habitat before July 15th.

What are the opportunities?

Sprague’s Pipit and their grassland habitat are dependent on some type of periodical disturbance.

The SD NRCS provides technical and/or financial assistance to landowners to address threats to this species that may occur on their land.

Stop in and ask the local NRCS office to assist you with preparing land management plans which will achieve your objectives and help this bird.

Three specific actions landowners can take are:

Maintain and Improve Healthy Grazing lands:

Grazing maintains grassland habitats. However, preferred plants may disappear and excessive litter buildup may occur if grazing does not occur in a manner that sustains the grassland plants.

Ensure that a sustainable grazing system is developed and implemented that addresses both livestock and bird needs. The NRCS can help develop a grazing system that maintains and/or increases plant health and forage production while providing grassland nesting bird habitat.

Windbreak or Shelterbelt Placement: Installing woody vegetation (not native to the ecological site) in open grassland areas fragments otherwise suitable habitat. However, landowners can design their woody planting to avoid and/or minimize the threat to this bird while achieving their specific objectives.

Avoid installing disconnected and isolated windbreaks and/or shelterbelts in native grassland.

Locate the woody planting no closer than 300 feet to grassy areas greater than 70 acres in size. Or, install on the edge of a hay or crop field.

Locate woody plantings only in the vicinity of other plantings or existing infrastructure such as hay yards, farmsteads, bin sites, feed lots, and improved roadways.

The NRCS can help develop a windbreak and/or shelterbelt plan that provides livestock protection and grassland nesting bird habitat.

Grassland Establishment/Restoration:

Restoring prairie grassland habitats may help this species. Conversion of cropland to native prairie grasses and forbs (wildflowers), the species prefers, provides habitat when the restoration occurs in a location and size suitable to the bird’s needs. Ensure that native prairie restoration is developed and implemented that addresses both livestock and the species needs. The NRCS can help develop a prairie restoration plan that provides livestock forage and species habitat.

To learn more contact your local NRCS office, or go to www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov.

