

**The Secret Life of Grassland Birds** (Reprinted from the Saskatchewan Forage Council's *Saskatchewan Hay and Pasture Report* – October 1, 2009 issue)  
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Sensible grassland birds have confirmed their reservations and headed south to Texas, Mexico and into Central and South America. The Burrowing owls are the first to leave.

Grassland birds are decreasing more than any other group of birds in Canada and all of North America. Even monitoring the population change is a challenge. Many of them live in sparsely populated areas so the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) does not cover these species well. However there is now a Grassland Bird Monitoring program underway that collects information in sparsely populated areas to supplement the BBS and helps to better understand habitat needs. Between the two surveys there is enough information to know that the population trends are downward for almost all of the species.



*Sprague's Pipit*  
*Photo Credit: Stephen Davis, CWS*

Some of these grassland birds are pretty picky about where they hunt and nest. Others, like the Western Meadowlark, are labeled generalists. They will make the best of what they find. The male meadowlarks usually have two mates at the same time. The nest is a partially covered cup of dried grasses or bark, usually woven into surrounding vegetation on ground. They nest in open country but it can be native or planted pastures, agricultural fields, roadsides, and desert grassland. They are often seen on fences posts. Their familiar song and bright yellow breast with a black "V" makes them the most easily recognized grassland bird.

On the other hand the Sprague's Pipit is a very fussy little bird coloured like the grass it lives in. It is a threatened species and has been studied a fair amount in the last while. It's rarely found in cultivated lands and is uncommon in most areas where native grasses have been replaced

with introduced forage. They have been documented nesting in non-native hayfields lacking in alfalfa at Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area in Saskatchewan, but not in most other hayfields in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Generally, they prefer native grasses of intermediate height (4 -12 in/10–30 cm) and density and few shrubs. These tend to be areas of light to moderate grazing. They like to nest in areas of relatively tall (10 in/27 cm), dense grasslands. There is often an overhanging roof of grass over the nest.

Biologists say that it's the structural (e.g. height and thickness of standing dead grass) differences between a planted pasture and a native pasture that matters to the birds, particularly in the configuration of standing dead grass and in the litter layer right at the ground. Dead native grasses droop to provide overhanging cover for nests while the wiry stems of crested wheatgrass stand upright. When you look at the ground of a planted pasture you will often see bare ground. Not exactly the best place to put a nest unless you are a killdeer. When you look at the ground on your native pasture you better see lots of litter or get yourself some grazing advice. That lack of litter means poor future forage production, less water absorption and less grassland birds.

*The average grassland bird catches an estimated 74,000 grasshoppers over the summer. Every hopper they don't eat takes grass away from your cows.*

Interestingly, to a bird alfalfa equals shrub because the structure is similar. Clay-colored sparrows nest in alfalfa like they would a shrub. Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrows avoid alfalfa like they would shrubs.

So it's different strokes for different folks as each bird species likes a slightly different amount of

grazing and tolerates different plants. Chestnut-collared Longspurs sometimes find crested wheatgrass attractive but it's been found that their nesting success is reduced. Burrowing owls like to nest in areas of golf green-like native grasses but their hunting grounds are taller grasses and slough edges. Burrowing owls are, of course, the prairie panda bear. Everyone loves them. But their needs make them vulnerable. A road to them is an open area with highly visible insect and rodent food but unfortunately it is also an area where they have a good chance of getting smacked. Other birds avoid the area near road, or even trails, for a variety of reasons. So one way or another, roads, and sometimes trails are bad news for most birds. Their numbers increase out to about two kilometers from a road.



There is much unknown about the migratory birds of the Canadian grasslands. But we do know that habitat loss is the major issue in their decline. In Canada about thirty per cent or 14 million hectares) of the northern plains native grassland remains. That's about 43 per cent in Alberta, 24 per cent in Saskatchewan and 21 per cent in Manitoba. There is less known about the effect of habitat loss in the birds' migration routes and wintering grounds.

Work is ongoing to develop strategies to address the population declines. Cattle producers will be part of that solution because without cattle little grassland can remain. Virtually all grassland birds need grazing to create the right kind of habitat conditions. Good grazing management puts dollars in your pocket and little brown grasshopper eating birds in your pastures.