



Grassland Birds

What are grassland birds?

- Grassland birds require grasslands to live and reproduce.
- Of the 233 confirmed breeding bird species in Wisconsin, 105 species, or 45%, regularly or occasionally use Wisconsin grasslands for breeding activities.
- Grassland birds have declined more than any other suite of birds in North America (*i.e.*, those that use other habitat types, such as forests or wetlands).

Why are grassland bird populations declining?

- After European settlement, native grasslands were almost completely lost because of their conversion to agricultural usage, including grazing and small grain crops, but grassland birds were able to adapt to these changes.
- Since the late 1950s, large acreages of pasture and small grains were converted to row crops, which provides suitable habitat for only a limited number of grassland bird species.
- Conversion of late-harvest grass hay to alfalfa, which is harvested early and often, causes significant mortality of nesting grassland birds.
- Habitat fragmentation resulting from development, parcelization, and tree growth limits the available habitat available for breeding grassland birds.
- The loss of breeding habitat and harvest-associated mortality are suspected to be the primary causes of grassland bird population declines.
- There are also problems along migratory routes and in wintering habitat.

Where is the best opportunity for conserving habitat for grassland birds?

- The WI Department of Natural Resources identified a 50,000-acre area in southwestern Wisconsin, now called the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area (MRPHA), as the best place in the state for retaining and recovering habitat for upland prairie/grassland species on a landscape scale.
- The MRPHA has a rare combination of significant amounts of original prairie and extensive 'surrogate' grassland bird habitat in the form of pastures, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) grasslands and hay.
- Grassland conservation efforts should not focus solely on the MRPHA. Some species, such as the Greater Prairie Chicken, rely on grasslands in other parts of the state.

How can I help protect grassland bird populations and their habitats?

- Many groups, including The Prairie Enthusiasts, The Nature Conservancy, and the WI DNR are working to protect and conserve Wisconsin's grasslands.

The Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area is a cooperative project of 9 partner groups representing the private, state and federal sectors. Goals of the partnership include: 1) Provide and maintain viable prairie, savanna, grassland, and aquatic habitat, for the many plants and animals that depend on these habitats for their survival; 2) Maintain an economically viable rural and agricultural landscape; 3) Provide and encourage traditional recreational opportunities which are compatible with the conservation goals; and 4) Integrate best applied science through the use of continued monitoring and adaptive management. For more information, contact Katie Abbott, Project Coordinator, at (608)935-2791 ext. 134, or at katie.abbott@rcdnet.net.



- The public can volunteer with these groups to help with prairie seed collection and planting, invasive species control efforts, tree and brush removal, and prescribed burning. They can also make donations to support land acquisition and management efforts.
- Conservation groups can provide guidance and sometimes assistance in managing privately-owned grasslands.
- Preserve grasslands that are undisturbed during breeding season, and create new ones:
 - Remnant/restored prairies
 - Wet meadows
 - Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands
 - Lightly grazed pastures
 - Old fields and marginal croplands
 - Wet meadows
- Promote conservation of large, expansive landscapes of **continuous** grassland.
- Minimize grassland bird mortality during nesting season by not mowing until at least July 15, ideally after August 10.
- Keep cover of woody plants below 5% in grassland blocks. Prioritize removal of hedgerows that fragment grasslands.
- Get involved! Join a local conservation organization, educate others about grassland birds, promote wildlife-friendly agricultural policies like CRP, prevent your cats from roaming, and work to incorporate grassland conservation into local land use planning.

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