



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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GRASSLAND BIRDS DECLINING, RESEARCH FINDS

Native birds in North America's grasslands have suffered steeper, more consistent, and more widespread declines over the past 25 years than any other U.S. bird group, according to research by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

According to data from the Service's annual Breeding Bird Survey, seven of the 12 bird species considered endemic to the Great Plains grasslands declined during the past 26 years, with declines of four (mountain plover, Franklin's gull, Cassin's sparrow, and lark bunting) being statistically significant. The mountain plover has been identified as a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

In addition, 16 of 25 more widespread birds that are considered "secondarily" evolved to grasslands also declined, with six showing significant declines (eastern meadowlark, and grasshopper, Henslow's, lark, Brewer's, and clay-colored sparrows) considered statistically significant. Across all grassland species, only upland sandpiper and McCown's longspur have increased significantly since 1966.

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"These birds are part of America's history," said Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. "They evolved with the bison, they were known to the Native Americans, and their songs were heard by the pioneers when the wagon trains rolled across the prairies.

"The discovery that the grassland birds are declining shows the importance of surveying our biological resources, and the need to consider entire ecosystems in our wildlife conservation programs," Babbitt said.

The findings are outlined in a paper by Fritz L. Knopf of the Service's National Ecology Research Center in Ft. Collins, Colorado, to be published in a fall issue of the journal, "Studies in Avian Biology."

The grassland birds spend the summer in North America. Many remain in the United States, wintering in grasslands of Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona, and California's Central Valley. Others -- like many forest birds -- are considered "neotropical migrants" because their winter ranges extend into Mexico, Central, and South America. Unlike the forest birds, these species winter in Latin American grasslands which are experiencing similar problems to those occurring in North America.

The reasons for the population declines among grassland birds are not fully understood, but are believed to be caused by changes in the grassland ecosystems of the Great Plains over the past 100 years, according to Knopf.

The Great Plains extend from south central Saskatchewan to central Texas. The grasslands include shortgrass prairie in the west, and tallgrass prairie in the east.

Only 5 percent of all North American bird species are thought to have evolved within the Great Plains. The native birds evolved with specific ecological niches within the grasslands. Species like Baird's sparrow and McCown's and chestnut-colored longspurs evolved with grazing mammals like bison, while species like the ferruginous hawk, prairie falcon, and burrowing owl are associated with prairie dog towns. Some species depended upon periodic rejuvenation of their habitat by wildfires that swept the prairies.

Over the past 100 years, the Great Plains have changed enormously. Systematic slaughter reduced the plains bison from a population of 30 million or more to about 300 by 1889. The other major grazer -- the prairie dog -- also was exterminated on a wide scale. The prairie dog ecosystem of the Great Plains has been reduced from an estimated 700 million acres in the late 1800s to about 2 million acres today.

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Plowing also changed the plains landscape. In North Dakota, for example, less than 25 percent of the native prairie remains. In Iowa, where 30 million acres of tallgrass prairie are estimated to have existed at the beginning of the 19th century, only a small fraction remains in isolated tracts scattered throughout the state. Fire control and water management practices also altered the grasslands by making conditions favorable for the growth of shrubs and small trees.

According to Secretary Babbitt, new ecosystem conservation efforts can help North American's native grassland birds. The Great Plains Initiative is a program spearheaded by the Western Governors Association and involving State, Federal, and Provincial governments of the U.S. and Canada. Aimed at conserving the Great Plains ecosystem and preventing more species from becoming endangered, the initiative offers promise for native grassland birds.

Projects underway to enhance waterfowl and other bird habitat under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan have already helped wetland-associated birds like the marbled godwit and Wilson's phalarope. Under the plan, State, Federal, and private organizations in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are working together in joint ventures to restore wildlife habitats.

And because grassland birds evolved along with grazing mammals, researchers believe grazing of domestic animals can be compatible with and even help populations of some native grassland birds.

"The important thing is that we have identified the problem and we have already begun tackling it on an ecosystem-wide basis through cooperative partnerships," Babbitt said. "Conservation came too late to save the passenger pigeon or the great bison herds --- but there's still time to save the birds of the American prairies."