

A Prairie Calling

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FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS

The not-so-little, not-so-brown birds of the prairie

Standing before a great expanse of prairie, many have no idea of the life hidden in the grasses—mysteries waiting to be explored. Grassland birds are those that nest in prairies and grasslands. Unlike the backyard robin, they place their nest in an area without trees, so therefore their nest is on the ground or located not too far above ground in the

wildflowers and grasses that dominate the prairie. Grassland birds have often been considered little brown birds to a lot of newcomer bird watchers or “birders.” This is mainly due to the large portion of sparrow species that are varying shades of brown that nest in grasslands. This coloration does make them hard to ID for a lot of birders, and they receive the descriptive term of little brown bird or little brown job. However,

grassland birds are not all small, brown, or sparrow species. They can be as large as a pheasant or as small as a wren with various patterns and shades of yellow, black, gray, buff, and, of course, brown. They can be difficult to find when hidden in the prairie vegetation, especially in an area not touched with prescribed fire, but in the spring and summer you can find the brightly colored or patterned males singing for territory and for a mate. □



Lark Sparrow
© Dee Hudson



Grasshopper sparrow
© Dee Hudson



Eastern meadowlark
© Charles Larry



Henslow's sparrow
© Charles Larry



Dickcissel
© Dee Hudson

Grassland Birds



Stone Barn Savanna Trail © Charles Larry

Not just about Location, Location, Location

Grassland birds need a large swath of habitat to thrive, and Nachusa provides just that. You can find grassland birds anywhere there is prairie at Nachusa, so timing becomes more important in order to see these birds during your visit. Since the majority of these species migrate south beginning in the



Visitor Center Trail © Dee Hudson

fall until returning in spring, it is typically not good timing to look in the fall or winter. May-July

are the best months to look. Like most birds, they are most active in the dawn and morning hours around 5:30 AM–10 AM. This activity is important, because throughout the rest of the day they are likely to be covered from the harsh sun in the dense prairie vegetation and not singing in sight

on top of the vegetation. The best time to look is summer months early in the morning. My



Clear Creek Knolls Trail © Charles Larry

favorite trails are the Visitor Center trail, Stone Barn Savanna trail, and the Clear Creek Knolls trail. The Visitor Center trail offers a short walk, stunning views, and a variety of species. Stone Barn Savanna offers savanna, prairie, and wetland-associated birds. The Clear Creek Knolls trail has wide-open prairie views and remnant prairie hills. The creek is a place

for humans and birds to cool down in the hot sun. Whichever trail you take, don't forget to bring your binoculars, sunscreen, bug spray, and water! ☐

Sedge wren
© Dee Hudson



Turning a little brown bird into a full-fledged ID

A great bird identification book, such as a Sibley or Peterson, can be really helpful in learning how to ID species. However, this can be cumbersome when hiking on a trail and only getting a brief glimpse of a bird. Before heading out, get well versed in the app Merlin and the iNaturalist app

to take your bird ID skills to the next level. Merlin will allow you to enter the shape, size, and coloration of bird you saw and give you a list of possible species with pictures based on your location. Look through the photos and listen to their call to pinpoint the best


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Landscape © Charles Larry





choice. Bird calls are really important to learn, especially when you have a hard time seeing the bird's more subtle coloration differences. If you can get a photo, uploading it to iNaturalist is really helpful. Once uploaded, the photo will be reviewed by experts, and they will suggest a possible ID. The allaboutbirds.org website is also a great resource and great place to learn fun facts about our feathered friends. □



Tony De Valle collects bird survey data. © Dee Hudson

What the grassland birds at Nachusa can tell us

There are many grassland birds at Nachusa, so it may come as a surprise to find that we have lost hundreds of millions of grassland birds in North America in less than 50 years. Of the grasslands bird species remaining nearly three-fourths have populations that are in decline. A big factor in this loss and current decline has been the destruction of prairie habitat and its conversion into habitat not suitable for these species, such as agriculture fields, forests, cities, and sub-divisions. The wonderful staff and volunteer stewards of Nachusa Grasslands

have protected remaining prairie and restored the prairie that once existed to create suitable habitat for grassland birds and a host of prairie-dependent species. Current prescribed fire and grazing management are critical to keeping the prairie habitat healthy, but its impacts on grassland

birds needs to be monitored periodically to make sure these species are thriving. Grazing at Nachusa is from the bison that



Heather Herakovich measures the vegetation around a bird's empty nest. © Dee Hudson



A nest observed during Heather's research. A cowbird snuck in and laid one egg in the lark sparrow's nest. © Dee Hudson

were reintroduced about eight years ago. Recent research at Nachusa, including my own, has consisted of monitoring grassland bird abundance, number of species, and nest success responses in relation to bison and prescribed fire. I found minimal bison impacts on grassland birds three years after their reintroduction, with more nest predation in areas just burned. Antonio Del Valle just finished his Master's degree research looking at five years post-reintroduction and impacts of prescribed fire to see if there are any changes in the grassland bird community. Soon we will know those results! □

The Bobolink

The Bobolink is a peculiar-looking bird in the blackbird family, Icteridae. The males wear a reverse tuxedo—black in the front and a little white in the back with a straw-colored spot on the back of their head. The females are mostly a light yellow with light and dark brown stripes, which is a great camouflage in the prairie. If you are unable to see them, you may be able to hear them as they sound like a weird rendition of R2-D2 speaking to C3PO as they fly by. Bobolinks spend the summer in most of North America where they nest in large swaths of dense grasses and wildflowers. They migrate to and from a smaller area

in Central South America where they overwinter, making them one of the longest distance migrants in the Americas.

Bobolink populations are in decline due to habitat loss in both their wintering and breeding grounds. Why they travel thousands of miles to nest at Nachusa is unknown, but likely it is because Nachusa provides the right type

of habitat and plenty of seeds and insect food for them to raise young in a matrix of unsuitable habitat. □



Male Bobolink © Charles Larry



Swamp milkweed
© Betty Higby



Shooting stars
© Betty Higby

Bobolinks © Charles Larry



Heather Herakovich received her doctorate from Northern Illinois University in 2019. She is currently the Executive Director of Franklin Creek Conservation Association. She serves on the Board of Directors for Friends of Nachusa and strives to see the prairie at least once every season.

Photo © Dee Hudson

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