

Saskatchewan Grassland Habitats Resound with Songbirds

Carolyn Gaudet

Grassland songbird populations have declined by 53 per cent in North America since 1970. Anecdotally, this decline has been apparent since the 1950s. The several years of drought we've been experiencing likely haven't been easy on them or the ranchers managing the grasslands these birds inhabit. Years of monitoring and research have produced useful information on how we can improve habitat and help prevent grassland birds from further decline.

Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP) is working on a guide to help manage grasslands for multiple species that have a variety of habitat needs (more details are in the PCAP article published in the May 2021 edition of Beef Business). A handful of grassland songbirds are specialists, requiring native grassland in good condition and free of anthropogenic impacts, which often reduces the quality of habitat. Grassland songbirds are known to be good indicators of prairie health due to their specific nesting and foraging needs, and they are more likely to occur in grasslands with higher integrity and better range condition.

Some preferred habitat attributes overlap between species, whereas other habitat needs may not, requiring pasture management to vary over the landscape. Understanding the individual needs of species can help guide management of these lands in a way that provides suitable habitat for more than one species at a time. Land managers are in a unique position to manage grasslands through grazing and create heterogeneous habitat to benefit many species. Here are a few details on three songbird species that you may see on nearby pastures.

Sprague's Pipit

The Sprague's Pipit is six inches tall and weighs less than an ounce. It has plain buffy plumage with no distinct features, other than a thin beak. No other grassland songbird in Saskatchewan



Sprague's Pipit on the ground

looks quite like it, but your chances of seeing them out in the pasture are pretty slim. They are inconspicuous, but if they are present on your pasture, you'll be able to hear them. They are known for their prolonged singing displays, where the average male may sing for 30 minutes at a time; circling their territory up to 100 metres above ground, so that all you see is a dot overhead, moving in circles against the sky.

The Sprague's Pipit is often considered the "Goldilocks" bird of the prairies; they prefer their habitat just right. They require some disturbance such as grazing, but not too much. Sprague's Pipits prefer to nest in mixed or short grass prairie throughout most of the northern Great Plains; they prefer grassland vegetation of intermediate height (i.e., 15-30 centimetres), and medium density with moderate litter and few shrubs.

Baird's Sparrow

The Baird's Sparrow is generally a sandy-brown colour with fine black and chestnut streaks on the back and flanks. The belly is clean white, with a necklace of thin black streaks across the chest. The head is a buffy yellow colour featuring subtle black markings.

Baird's Sparrows are partially nomadic, with breeding populations often shifting locations from year to year, which likely evolved in response to the effects of roaming bison herds, fire and drought.

Similar to Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrows can be difficult to see as they often escape predators (and bird biologists), by running

on the ground, rather than taking flight. However, males often sing at or near the tops of grass clumps or scattered shrubs.

Baird's Sparrows prefer tall grass or mixed grass native prairies, but they are less picky than the Sprague's Pipit as they can sometimes be found in managed hayfields or ungrazed pastures. They prefer grasslands that are 15-30 centimetres that have a moderate amount of litter. They avoid very short grass, bare ground, dense litter and vegetation. They select grass they can run through.



Baird's Sparrow perched on a fence wire

Chestnut-collared Longspur

Chestnut-collared Longspurs are one of my favourites, after the Sprague's Pipit. Like the Baird's Sparrow, the Chestnut-collared Longspur is stocky with a thick bill, large head, short tail, a black belly, yellow throat and a rusty-chestnut-coloured nape. Males sing a melodious warble, similar to the Western Meadowlark, and will sing perched on top of small shrubs, taller grass or fence wires. To defend nesting territory, a male performs a flight-song display, fluttering up about six metres, flying in undulating circles while singing, then fluttering down again.

Longspurs will nest in an open cup. These longspurs prefer to breed in short (i.e., 7-15 centimetres), sparse, open vegetation; meaning, low amounts of litter and more bare ground. They are more likely to occur in grazed habitat rather than mowed or burned grassland.

All three species are found throughout southern Saskatchewan, being more common in the southwest, but Sprague's



Chestnut-collared Longspur perched on a rock

Pipits and Baird's Sparrows can be found all the way up to the Aspen Parkland and boreal-grassland transition.

PCAP's multi-species guide will provide more detailed information about habitat attributes for each of these species. The guide will be going out for review shortly and we would appreciate any feedback from land managers and owners. Please contact pcap@sasktel.net to volunteer!

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