

Integrating Bird Conservation into Range Management

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Situation:

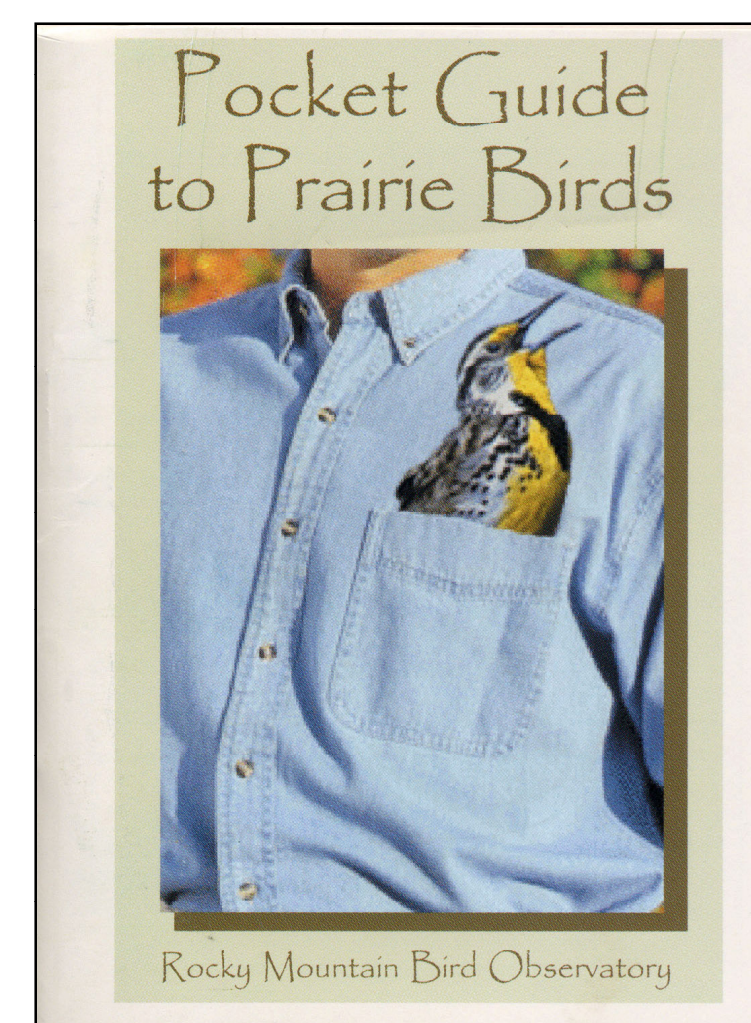
Grassland birds are showing the steepest and most consistent population decline of any bird group in North American, making them the highest conservation priority.

Prairie Partners, a program of the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, was developed to help reverse the decline. It forms partnerships with private landowners, agencies and private groups to help conserve prairie birds and their habitat. Prairie Partners goal: *Keep common species common and less common species from being listed as threatened or endangered.*

With more than 80% of shortgrass prairie in private ownership, assistance from landowners is critical to prairie bird conservation. A program that familiarizes landowners and managers with birds in the region, along with their habitat requirements and how to use bird evaluations as an indicator of land health, can improve the overall health and condition of the land.

Objectives:

1. Develop a **teaching manual** that is usable by university Cooperative Extension programs, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Soil Conservation Districts and wildlife managers that integrates bird conservation into range management and monitoring
2. Develop a **bird evaluation protocol**, which will help resource managers and landowners tie range habitat and condition with birds and other wildlife
3. Conduct four train-the-trainer **workshops** – one each in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico
4. Develop, print and distribute an illustrated, easy-to-use **bird pocket guide**, which will greatly enhance awareness of birds with private landowners and resources managers
5. Implement eight **pilot programs** with trained natural resource professionals, two programs per state in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico



Teaching Manual

The manual addresses “Why Prairie Birds?” by discussing the economic, ecologic, management and conservation concerns for birds in the Great Plains. It includes habitat information on 30 species, how species respond to range management activities and how to enhance bird habitat.

Evaluation Protocol

The protocol, field tested before workshops in 2003 and 2004, is flexible enough that landowners can adapt it to their situations. It focuses on ‘indicator birds’ to help users relate species to habitat features on the landscape. And it includes an interactive CD-ROM of sounds of 120 Great Plains birds, accessible by state. The CD-ROM also offers quizzes and natural history information for all 120 species.

Workshops

Workshops, attended mainly by NRCS as well as other agency professionals, included a morning introduction on the importance of birds, identification tips by sight and sound and an afternoon field exercise on birds, habitat needs and range management at the ranch and landscape scales.

2003 workshops:

- Chico Basin Ranch, Hanover, Colorado
- Weaver Ranch, Milensand, New Mexico
- Barlett Ranch, Hawk Springs, Wyoming
- Padlock Ranch, Hardin, Montana

2004 workshops:

- Jay Butler Ranch, Douglas, Wyoming
- Ute Creek Cattle Company, Bueyeros, New Mexico
- Negley Farm and Ranch, Eads, Colorado
- Banister Ranch, Wibaux, Montana



Western Meadowlark,
Sturnella neglecta.
Nebraska Game & Parks
Photo

Pocket Guide

“The Pocket Guide to Prairie Birds,” designed to fit in a shirt pocket, covers Great Plains species representing those that occur in grasslands, wetlands and near homesteads. Each species in the guide is characterized by:

- Photo
- Habitat map
- Identification tips
- Habitat description
- Feeding behavior



Long-billed Curlew,
Numenius americanus.
Tony Leukering Photo



Greater Sage Grouse,
Centrocercus urophasianus. Ron
Daines Photo

Pilot Programs

These workshops were conducted in all four states with assistance from prior workshop participants. More than half of the 180 participants were landowners. Content included:

- Grassland birds and their habitat requirements
- Partnership programs available for habitat enhancement
- Discussion and exercises in field evaluation
- Group discussion and recommendations for habitat work and partnership opportunities



A field exercise at Negley Farm and Ranch,
Eads, Colorado.



A workshop in the classroom at Banister
Ranch, Wibaux, Montana.

Results:

- Nearly 40,000 copies of the pocket guide, the first of its kind, have been distributed.
- Point Reyes Bird Observatory in California used the pocket guide as a model for similar guides in California.
- Pocket guides on fish and grasses, modeled on the bird guide, are being developed.
- Around 1,000 copies of the Bird Reference CD-ROM are being used by resource professionals and landowners.
- More than 200 Great Plains resource professionals have participated in bird surveys and discussed management practices that benefit birds.
- Landowners in all four states have requested follow-up visits.
- Ratings of pilot program workshops averaged 4.625 on a 5-point scale.

Potential Benefits

Train-the-trainer and pilot program workshop attendees:

- Became more aware of grassland birds, the first critical step toward conservation
- Gained experience in bird and habitat identification
- Learned to think about bird species’ needs and incorporating those into range planning and management
- Received the tools to help build on lessons learned

In addition, the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory strengthened relationships with NRCS, Bureau of Land Management, National Grasslands, U.S. Forest Service, Cooperative Extension, private consultants and private landowners.