

BIRDS

Status: Native Summer Residents

SOUTH DAKOTA MEADOWLARKS

Western Meadowlark (*Sterna neglecta*) Eastern Meadowlark (*Sterna magna*)

Description

The western meadowlark is one of the most numerous and most conspicuous birds of South Dakota grasslands from mid-March through October. They are often seen perched on fences or chasing other meadowlarks in flight, either in defense of nesting territory or in courtship. How could it have been missed by Lewis and Clark? The fact that it was not mentioned in their journals was the basis for John James Audubon giving it the scientific species name of "neglecta" in 1844.

Meadowlarks are 8 to 11 inches (20-28 cm) in length, streaked brown above and bright yellow below, with a broad black "V" on the yellow breast. Male and female birds look the same. The juvenile birds have black spots on their breast, rather than a solid black V of the adult.

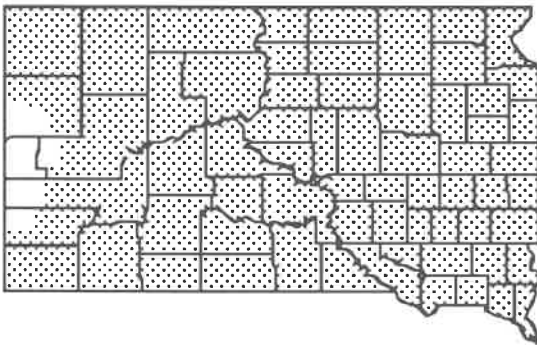
A meadowlark's characteristic flight is alternate quick flaps and glide, very similar to that of quail and grouse. When on the ground meadowlarks are much less noticeable, but their presence is usually apparent from the song which broadcasts their territorial defense. A male may sing from the ground or from perches on fences, tall weeds, shrubs or trees. Each male western meadowlark



has from 5 to 9 song patterns, so variation in the song may be confusing, but the loud melodious notes with a flute-like quality are quite distinctive. Some listeners think the western meadowlarks' song asks the question, "Have-you-planted your wheat yet?" In addition to its song, the male western meadowlark gives a rattling flight call and an alarm call described by some as an "explosive chupp". Female meadowlarks have several calls, but do not sing.

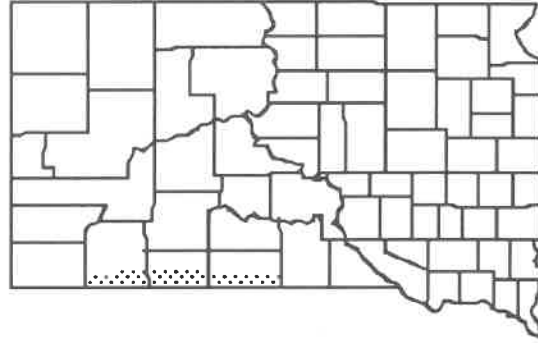
The western meadowlark only can be confused with the eastern meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*). The general size, color and behavior of the two species are the same. The western meadowlark is usually paler and grayer than the eastern, and has more yellow in its cheek, but the only certain way to distinguish the two meadowlark species is by their voice. Compare the description of the western meadowlarks' voice above, with this description of the eastern meadowlarks' voice: song is a clear whistled "see-you see-yeer," and the *call* a buzzy "dzzert." The *call* of each species is less variable than the song and should be the primary clue used to distinguish western and eastern meadowlarks.

Distribution



Map 1. Western Meadowlark Distribution

In South Dakota the western meadowlark is widespread. The only area of the state where the western meadowlark's song cannot be heard constantly during the breeding season is the pine forests of the Black Hills. In the Black Hills, the western meadowlark is restricted to the larger grassland areas within the forest, such as Reynold's Prairie, which is just north of Deerfield Reservoir.



Map 2. Eastern Meadowlark Distribution

In South Dakota, the eastern meadowlark is found regularly only in the sandhills region of southern Shannon, Bennett, and Todd counties. In this area both western and eastern meadowlarks can be found. LaCreek National Wildlife Refuge is one place to look for both species.

Both species spend their winter months in the southern United States and Mexico. They begin arriving in South Dakota during March and remain here throughout the summer. By mid-November most meadowlarks have returned to their southern home.

Natural History

The male meadowlarks arrive at the nesting area a couple of weeks before the females to establish breeding territories of 3 to 15 acres (1-6 hectares). They can often be found in the same territories as the previous year. Meadowlarks require large open areas with good grass cover for nesting habitat. The large areas of grasslands remaining west of the Missouri River in South Dakota are prime western meadowlark habitat. They will also use alfalfa fields, edges of cultivated fields, and road ditches where more suitable habitat is unavailable. Meadowlarks are a relatively adaptable grassland bird and can be found in all types of grasslands, from short to tall. However, the western meadowlark is most abundant in mixed grasslands where mid-height grasses, like western wheatgrass, are dominant, and where clumps of *residual cover* of 4 to 12 inches

(10-30 cm) remain to conceal the nest. Where western and eastern meadowlarks co-exist, the western will more often use the drier upland sites while the eastern species nests in the wet meadows of lowland sites. The territories of the two species never overlap.

Song is the primary territorial display; however, this is not always sufficient to repel intruders. When a competing male enters an occupied territory the resident male will land near the intruder and the two will compete with bill-tilt (bill pointed skyward), and fluff-out (body feathers fluffed and tail spread) displays. Following the displays, the two males may engage in a long chase flight over the territory. If the intruder fails to depart, more displays on the ground may occur - only rarely does actual physical combat take place.

The arrival of the females is difficult to determine because they look like the males. They arrive on a territory quietly and the resident male does not confront them as he would another male. When two birds walk about, feeding quietly together on the territory, it can be assumed that one of them is a female. Courtship displays of the male are similar to the territorial displays described above. There are displays on the ground and chase flights. Most male meadowlarks are *polygamous*; each male having two, but rarely three mates.

The female selects the nest site on the ground and builds the nest. The cup-shaped nest is usually in a depression, such as a hoof print, lined with dried grass, and covered with a woven grass dome. It takes 4 to 8 days for the female to complete the nest. The female lays 3 to 7 eggs, 5 the most common number, and does all the incubating of the eggs, which takes 13 to 15 days. During incubation,

she leaves for only short periods during the day to feed. After the eggs hatch, the nestlings are fed by both parents, but often the male is distracted by a second mate and/or territorial defense, so the female does most of the feeding. The young meadowlarks leave the nest after 11 or 12 days, but remain dependent on the adults for another 3 to 4 weeks.

Significance

Both species of meadowlark are very beneficial from a human perspective. As two of the most abundant grassland species, they play an important role in reducing damage to grasslands and adjacent crops by feeding on injurious insects and their eggs. Overall, 60% to 75% of a meadowlarks' diet consists of animal matter, such as grasshoppers, Mormon crickets, cutworms, various caterpillars, etc. But just as importantly, they enliven the grasslands with their activity and songs, and enrich our lives in the process.

Conservation

Meadowlarks are migratory songbirds, and as such are protected by state and federal laws. It is illegal to disturb their nests or harm the adults.

The best meadowlark habitat consists of large areas of grassland with low to moderate grazing intensity. Overgrazed grasslands with no *residual cover* make poor habitat for meadowlarks and many other grassland species. In areas that are already mostly cropland, adding or maintaining wide grassed-waterways in fields, leaving wide unkempt fence rows and road ditches, and leaving some unmowed strips in alfalfa fields, are conservation practices that would help to maintain some marginal meadowlark habitat in areas with few remaining pastures or native grasslands.

Glossary

Calls - bird vocalizations that are brief series of relatively simple sounds, rarely more than 4 or 5 notes. Unlike bird songs, which are often melodious and are always associated with breeding and territory defense, calls are used to coordinate non-sexual behaviors such as flocking, feeding, migration, and announcing the presence of predators.

Polygamous - having two or more mates at the same time.

Residual cover - the grass and forbs that remain standing from one growing season to the next.

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