

12 Little Brown Grassland Birds

Every Montanan Should (Kinda) Know

The “good enough” guide to identifying prairie songbirds

BY SNEED B. COLLARD III



A western meadowlark (aka “flying potato”) takes flight off a sagebrush in Park County.

PHOTO BY BECCA WOOD

Heather Harris turned her truck up a two-track that led to a line of low hills. Thanks to recent rains, lush grass surrounded us, and the birds seemed to be celebrating the first season of vegetative abundance in several years. Loud, sweet calls of meadowlarks blasted through our open windows. Vesper sparrows and chestnut-collared longspurs flitted along a fence line. Overhead, the bold black-and-white wings of a Swainson’s hawk rode the early

morning thermals rising off the prairie.

None of these were our primary target, however. That honor belonged to a small, elusive bird that few people get a chance to see.

Atop the hills, Harris parked the truck, turned off the engine, and climbed out. Then the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife biologist stopped and said, “I hear one.”

Even with my hearing aids in, I knew I wouldn’t be able to pick up what Harris was listening to. But thanks to previous encoun-

ters, I knew what to look for.

“It’ll be a little black dot in the sky,” I told my buddy Scott, who had flown up from California to join me and Harris on this grasslands expedition.

“I hear a second one!” Harris exclaimed. We all stared up at the summer sky. But none of us could detect movement until, finally, Harris and I simultaneously shouted, “There’s one!”

I helped Scott find it, pointing out the

small speck about 500 feet overhead.

“That’s it?” Scott asked in astonishment.

“That’s it,” Harris replied. “Sprague’s pipit.”

PRAIRIE BIRD STRONGHOLD

Wildlife biologists consider Sprague’s pipit one of America’s most iconic prairie birds. A sparrow-like bird with short, stubby wings, Sprague’s pipit is famous for performing long courtship displays. The males hover, singing, high in the sky for 30 minutes or

more before plunging like a dropped lead weight toward earth.

Unfortunately, the species also has gained notice for its plunging population. Due to farmers converting grasslands to agriculture, trees encroaching on open areas from lack of historic prairie wildfires, and other habitat losses, grassland species are the most endangered group of birds in North America. According to the 2022 *The State of the Birds* report published by a consortium of

private and government conservation organizations, grassland birds have collectively suffered a massive 34 percent population decline since 1970.

The good news? With millions of acres of prairie still untouched by the plow, Montana serves as a stronghold for many of these birds—including Sprague’s pipit.

“We are so lucky in Montana to have what we have,” Harris says. “And that’s because we have quality mixed-grass prairie habitat,

a lot of which is privately owned, and the landowners have taken care of it. Ranchers with good management practices do good things for grassland birds. So if we can keep our ranchers going, we can keep grasslands in grass and not see them converted to row crops or housing developments.”

As FWP’s grassland and wetland coordinator based in Glasgow, Harris works with ranchers, biologists, and other partners to conserve grassland habitats. Before taking her current position, she worked as FWP’s northeastern region nongame biologist. During that time she developed a strong appreciation for the state’s grassland birds—especially the “little brown birds,” or LBBs, that so many people overlook.

APPRECIATING THE LBBs

Despite the fact that Montana provides vital breeding grounds for dozens of grassland bird species, few Montanans recognize or appreciate these prairie songsters. Most grassland birds live far from human population centers, making it difficult for people other than ranchers and farmers to

Sneed B. Collard III’s newest book is Birding for Boomers—And Everyone Else Brave Enough to Embrace the World’s Most Rewarding and Frustrating Activity.



BLACK DOT IN THE PRAIRIE SKY FWP wildlife biologist Heather Harris and the author watch a Sprague’s pipit far overhead. Rarely seen on the ground, the species is best identified by its call.

hear or see them. These birds also stay hidden whenever possible to avoid hawks and other predators. Even when a person sees one, many grassland birds look frustratingly similar to each other, causing even experienced birders to pull out their hair in frustration.

When I first began birding a decade ago, I despaired at ever being able to identify even a few grassland species. They all looked the same to me, and they were so danged small.

But after years of effort, and inspired by the patient enthusiasm of my teenaged son (himself a budding birder), I slowly began to appreciate and pick out the details of these fascinating creatures. I also learned of their enormous ecological value.

“Grassland birds eat insects, providing pest control” Harris says. “They also disperse seeds and provide prey for predators. And they are indicators of grassland ecological health. When species like Sprague’s pipit start disappearing, you know a prairie is in trouble.”

Up close, many prairie birds are surprisingly beautiful to see and hear. “I love the songs, and I love when you can hear them in the prairie as it comes alive in the spring,” Harris says, explaining that most birdsong is by males defending territory or wooing mates. “People come from all over the world to see and hear these species—and we Montanans have them right here in our own backyard!”

SLOW DOWN AND PAY ATTENTION

As with any group of birds, a good place to start is with what you already know. One species almost everyone recognizes is the western meadowlark. Famous for their stunning yellow breast and black “necktie,” meadowlarks make themselves highly visible on fence posts or power lines, where they perch with a distinctive “hunched over” posture. Harris calls them “flying potatoes” for

their bulky bodies and the less-than-elegant way they power through the air. My favorite thing about meadowlarks is the loud musical songs they belt out over the prairie.

Other prairie birds generally take more study to identify, but don’t be intimidated. “It mainly comes down to taking the time to slow down and pay attention to what’s around you,” Harris says. “If you think you hear something, stop and listen. If it sounds

like a bird, move closer to the sound to see if it’s perched on vegetation or a fence post or wire. Use your binoculars and bird book and look for identifying traits.”

To help you out, the following pages contain a “good enough” guide to 12 grassland LBBs. “Good enough,” because even the experts misidentify these notoriously similar-looking species, so don’t be surprised if you have to make a best guess occasionally. 🐾

Grassland bird basics

Short, stout bill



Savannah sparrow

SHAPE

Grassland birds often have stocky bodies with broad wings, and a rounded head and tail.

CAMOUFLAGE

Stripes, spots, and patterns help these small birds blend in with their surroundings.

SIZE

Grassland birds are relatively small: 5 to 7 inches long, and weighing 1 to 2 ounces.

COLOR

Most are brown, tan, and white, often with a light-colored underbelly.

NESTING

Many are ground nesters, building small, well-hidden nests.



Chestnut-collared longspur in flight



Grasshopper sparrow nest



Lark sparrow

Best places to find grassland LBBs

You don’t need to do as I did and drive practically to North Dakota to see grassland birds. Yes, Bowdoin and Medicine Lake national wildlife refuges are hot spots, as is American Prairie’s nature reserve south of Malta. But centrally located Freezeout Lake Wildlife Management Area and Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Great Falls also are great places to spot LBBs. In fact, most species can be found across the state.

“The key is to find good grassland habitat,” says Heather Harris, FWP grassland and wetland coordinator. “I locate them a lot easier by sound than I ever would by looking for them. Then, once you hear one, you can try to focus in and get it in your binoculars.”

Driving rural roads can offer up any number of surprises—but drive safely. Ranchers and other local residents use these roads to get around, so constantly check your mirrors. If you’re driving slowly, put on the hazard lights, and if you stop, pull well over to the side. ■



Sprague’s pipit

GATEWAY SPECIES (Some easier ones to get you started)



WESTERN MEADOWLARK

Largest grassland LBB, with a brown back, an often brilliant yellow breast, and a black “necktie.”

► **Key ID tips:** Loudest and one of the prettiest grassland songs; white outer tail feathers that clearly show in flight.

Body length: 9.5 inches.

Song: Several clear notes followed by gurgling warble.

Habitat: Grassland, sagebrush, and pastures with intermediate-height vegetation.

Worth knowing: Though a breeding-season species in Montana, western meadowlarks are found year-round from Iowa to the West Coast. They winter as far south as central Mexico.

Best places to see them: Mostly east of the Continental Divide, but also in western fields, farms, and ranches.

Montana conservation status: Common and secure.



HORNED LARK

Intermediate in size, between a meadowlark and a sparrow. Smooth, light brown and gray back with striking black, white, and yellow facial markings. Male raises two feather “horns” on his head during mating displays.

► **Key ID tips:** Those “horns.” Also, these birds often congregate along roads and have a bad habit of flying out in front of passing cars.

Body length: 7.25 inches.

Song: Sweet sequence of higher, stuttering notes transitioning to a jumbled finale.

Habitat: Shorter grassland, open sagebrush habitat, and cropland stubble.

Worth knowing: Horned larks are the only lark species native to North America. They also are native to Asia and Europe. Present in Montana year-round.

Best places to see them: Almost any non-mountainous rural area with good habitat.

Montana conservation status: May be declining, but of lower concern than species with documented precipitous declines.



BOBOLINK

Male has a dramatic black plumage with white wing and lower back patches, and unique cream-colored nape of neck. Females and non-breeding males are overall brown and “sparrow-ish” in color with dark head stripes and a dark stripe behind eye.

► **Key ID tips:** Males are nicknamed “skunk birds.” Look for a black bird with white wing markings and a pale back of the head.

Body length: 7 inches.

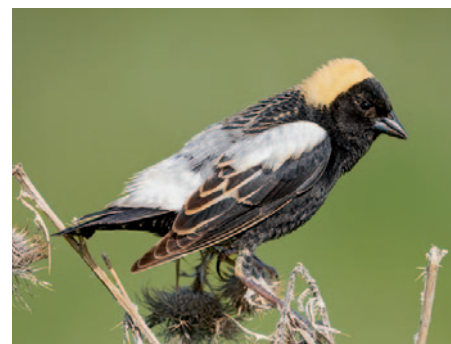
Song: Extended burbling “blackbird” song mixed with sharp, squeaky notes.

Habitat: Primarily unmown damp meadows with medium to tall grass.

Worth knowing: Though resembling sparrows, bobolinks are in the blackbird family. They undergo one of the longest migrations of any songbird, traveling to and from central South America each year.

Best places to see them: Moist, unmown hay meadows and pastures throughout the state.

Montana conservation status: Species of concern due to habitat fragmentation and destruction of nests by early season mowing.



MAIN GRASSLAND SPARROWS (Four worth knowing)



VESPER SPARROW

One of the larger sparrows with a chunky body and short beak. Brown and streaky colored. A thin white eye ring and white “handle-bar moustache” curving down and back from the bill.

► **Key ID tips:** In flight shows white outer tail feathers. Up close, look for the distinctive white eye ring and, in breeding, a rufous shoulder patch.

Body length: 6.25 inches.

Song: Slow introductory pairs of notes similar to a meadowlark’s, followed by varied combination of trills.

Habitat: Shortgrass prairie and dry, scrubby lands with some brushy cover.

Worth knowing: Unlike many other grassland birds, males often sing in the evening.

Best places to see them: Almost any dry, open places in the state.

Montana conservation status: Lower concern, though populations are slightly declining, likely due to conversion of grasslands to farmland, housing, and other development.



SAVANNAH SPARROW

Brownish with streaky breast and flanks. Easily mistaken for vesper sparrow, but smaller and with a weaker eye ring. Often has a dark spot on breast.

► **Key ID tips:** Look for faint yellow above the eye and between the eye and bill. Distinct harsh buzzy trill.

Body length: 5.5 inches.

Song: Quick distinct notes, followed by higher, and sometimes lower, buzzy trills.

Habitat: Open grasslands and fields, usually moister than what a vesper sparrow likes. Avoids forests.

Worth knowing: Often the most common sparrow in grasslands and farmed lands.

Best places to see them: Almost any roadside bordering moist grasslands, fields, or pastures.

Montana conservation status: Stable populations here, but declining in many other states.



LARK SPARROW

Rich chestnut, black, and white facial pattern makes this one of our most beautiful sparrows. Brown back and clean white breast with dark spot in center.

► **Key ID tips:** Boldest facial pattern of common sparrows, with contrast between light and dark areas creating a “harlequin” effect. In flight shows distinctive white tail feather tips that give the impression of a circular white arc.

Body length: 6.5 inches.

Song: Jumble of clear notes and trills with occasional churrs reminiscent of police car “phaser” traffic-clearing siren.

Habitat: Variety of mixed open habitats including grasslands, usually with nearby shrubs or trees. Mostly absent from pure prairie areas.

Worth knowing: In courtship, males strut “turkey-like,” holding their long tails upright and showing their white tail spots.

Best places to see them: Along roadsides in open country throughout the state.

Montana conservation status: Stable, but at risk from the loss of sagebrush habitat and nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOSHUA RUTLEDGE; DONALD M. JONES; DANNY J. BROWN; CRAIG BARFOOT; SHARON DEWART-HANSEN; DOUG MCPADDEN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHARON DEWART-HANSEN; BOB MARTINKA; SHARON DEWART-HANSEN; SHAWN T. STEWART; TRISH HUDDLESTON; STEVEN AKRE

MAIN GRASSLAND SPARROWS

IDENTIFICATION CHALLENGE

OF SPECIAL CONCERN

(four species to especially worry about)



GRASSHOPPER SPARROW

Small, “hunched-over” sparrow with flat head, thick bill, white eye ring, and no streaks on plain buff breast. Yellow or buffy wash on face.

► **Key ID tips:** During breeding, sits prominently on shrubs or fence wires and throws head back dramatically while singing.

Body length: 5 inches.

Song: High, faint, insect-like trill or buzz, preceded by two or three quick notes.

Habitat: Generally short or moderate grasslands with patches of bare ground, and occasionally shrubs for mating songs.

Worth knowing: A well-named bird with its grasshopper-like song and fondness for grasshopper prey.

Best places to see them: Rural areas with healthy grasslands throughout the state.

Montana conservation status: Stable in Montana, but a conservation priority in many places because of population declines resulting from habitat loss and early season mowing that destroys nests.



CLAY-COLORED SPARROW

This is one of the most difficult to ID. Fairly non-descript with clean, buffy breast. In breeding, crisp white stripe above the eye and white “moustache” coming down from tiny bill.

► **Key ID tips:** Rule out everything else. Then, if it is in shrubs and has a rather bright, slightly orange-ish face with a pale gray collar, it could be a clay-colored.

Body length: 5.5 inches.

Song: Flat, often repeating buzzy trills, each lasting about 0.5 to 1 second.

Habitat: Open areas with both grass and light brush; lives in shrubbier habitat west of the Divide.

Worth knowing: Closely related to Brewer’s and chipping sparrows and can look very similar. The Brewer’s is duller gray and favors sagebrush, while chipping sparrows prefer open woodlands and, in breeding, have brighter rufous stripes on crown.

Best places to see them: Almost anywhere with both grass and shrub or bush cover.

Montana conservation status: Stable but possibly declining due to habitat conversion to agriculture and encroachment by trees.



SPRAGUE’S PIPIT

Slightly larger than most sparrows, with longer bill and fine streaking on upper breast. Broad, “stubby” wings in flight.

► **Key ID tips:** Rarely seen on ground. Listen for descending, looping call up to 1,000 feet above the prairie. This “black dot” can stay airborne for 30 minutes to hours at a time before dramatically diving toward earth.

Body length: 6.5 inches.

Song: Fast triplet followed by up to 10 or more distinctive descending “glissando” pairs of notes, sounding as if they are running out of steam.

Habitat: Large tracts of healthy, shorter native prairie with few shrubs, including moderately grazed areas.

Worth knowing: Since 1966, Sprague’s pipit has lost about 80 percent of its overall population nationwide due to habitat loss and fragmentation, replacement of native prairie by invasive grasses, and overgrazing. Many winter in Texas and Mexico, where grasslands have also suffered severe losses.

Best places to see them: Large, continuous tracts of medium-height, native prairie in eastern Montana.

Montana conservation status: Stable here, but a species of concern due to steep population declines in neighboring states and provinces.



LARK BUNTING

One of the easiest to ID. In breeding, male is mostly black with prominent white wing patches. Non-breeding males and females are brown with heavily streaked breast and white wing patches. All have a large, bluish-gray bill.

► **Key ID tips:** Montana’s only all-black prairie bird with obvious white wing patches. Usually lives in small colonies.

Body length: 7 inches.

Song: Combination of same-note sequences, harsh, chirpy, high, and trill-like.

Habitat: Wide variety of open grasslands, brushlands, and fields. Shrubs generally required for breeding.

Worth knowing: One of the few sparrows in which the male undergoes a complete molt to a radically different breeding plumage.

Best places to see them: Eastern Montana with habitats listed above, though presence can vary dramatically from year to year.

Montana conservation status: Needs monitoring because of apparent population declines and documented loss of grasslands.



BAIRD’S SPARROW

Flat head and thick bill. Resembles the grasshopper sparrow, but with whiter breast and collar and fine, short streaks across breast.

► **Key ID tips:** Stays hidden most of the time, so key in on distinctive song.

Body length: 5.5 inches.

Song: Stuttering, tinkly sequence of notes followed by lower, often “bending” trill.

Habitat: Healthy prairie with taller grass and a few scattered shrubs for perching.

Worth knowing: This was the last bird to be described by John James Audubon, and its type specimens were collected in Montana.

Best places to see them: Large tracts of healthy grasslands such as at Bowdoin and Medicine Lake NWRs.

Montana conservation status: Stable, but of high concern due to rapid population losses in North Dakota and other parts of its range.



CHESTNUT-COLLARED LONGSPUR

Breeding males have stunning rich reddish neck nape, bold black-and-white head stripes, yellow or orange face and throat, and distinct black breast. Females and non-breeding males are brownish and much duller.

► **Key ID tips:** Chestnut neck nape. Black breast of male. In flight, mostly white tail feathers with black central feathers.

Body length: 6 inches.

Song: Sweet and gurgling, up and down with accented notes.

Habitat: Disturbed native grasslands with scattered shrubs, including areas recently hayed, burned, or grazed.

Worth knowing: In breeding, male performs undulating aerial displays while singing to defend territory. The similar-looking thick-billed longspur lives in drier, rougher habitat.

Best places to see them: Refuges and grazed sites with shorter, often slightly wetter grasslands.

Montana conservation status: Priority concern. Populations declined on average 3.3 percent per year in Montana from 1966 to 2010, and even more in other states. Still abundant in healthy habitat.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVID STIMAC; CRAIG BARFOOT; JOHN CARLSON; JOHN CARLSON; SHARON DEWARTHANSEN; DAN ELLISON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHARON DEWARTHANSEN; BOB MARTINKA; JOHN CARLSON; DAN ELLISON; DONALD M. JONES; ERIN BRAATEN