

Audubon

COMMON BIRDS IN DECLINE

A State of the Birds Report
Summer 2007

WAKEUP CALL

Combing through 40 years of data, Audubon biologists find that today's common species may not be so common tomorrow—and that they're sending messages worth heeding. **By Greg Butcher**

If you live in the East or Southwest, a bird like the eastern meadowlark is synonymous with summer, with its clear, comfortably familiar whistle and brilliant yellow plumage. But the skies are becoming a little quieter and the landscape a little drabber these days because the eastern meadowlark and many other species we enjoy, and at times take for granted, are slowly but surely declining.

Since 1967 the average population of the common birds* in steepest decline have fallen 70 percent, from 17.6 million to 5.35 million individuals. These are the alarming findings of Audubon biologists, who for the first time ever have combined data from

the world's longest-running uninterrupted bird census—Audubon's Christmas Bird Count (CBC)—with information from the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)—organized by the U.S. Geological Survey—to get a handle on how populations of common North American species have fared during the past 40 years. Both surveys depend on volunteers—citizen scientists—to collect the data, which are then analyzed by ornithologists.

Much of the concern stems from the wide variety of birds affected. As a result the joyful sights and sounds of birds that we shared as a matter of course with our parents a generation ago are already harder for our children to experience today. Will they be all but impossible to spot with our grandchildren in decades to come? Or will we heed the warnings of their precipitous drops and address significant threats to the birds and to the quality of our own lives?

Fortunately, there are many things you can do for the birds and for our future (see the "What You Can Do" section). By working together for bird conservation, we can provide the birds with the planet they deserve and the one we need as well.

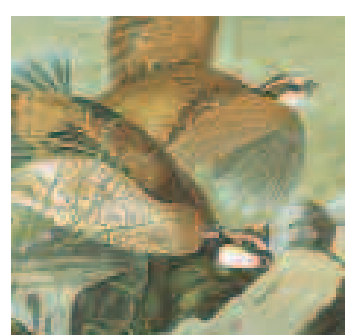
Greg Butcher is Audubon's Director of Bird Conservation.



*Common birds are species with more than 500,000 individuals worldwide, with a range of more than 385,000 square miles, and that do not qualify for Audubon's WatchList of at-risk species. The birds featured here are those suffering the most severe declines over the past 40 years. For an additional 10 species, go to Audubonmagazine.org.

LOSING GROUND

THE TOP 10 COMMON BIRDS IN DECLINE



1. NORTHERN BOBWHITE COLINUS VIRGINIANUS

Population decline: 31 million to 5.5 million (82 percent)
ID: Chubby, robin-sized bird that runs along the ground in groups. Brown body and striped face (black-and-white facial stripes in males; brown and tan in females).
Voice: A clear, whistled *bob-white*.
Habitat: Grasslands mixed with shrubs or widely spaced trees.
Threats: The loss of suitable bobwhite habitat—from large-scale agriculture, intensive pine-plantation forestry, and development—is the most dominant threat to the long-term survival of these common grassland birds. Losses to nest

predators, and even fire ants—competing for food, attacking nests, and prompting humans to spray pesticides—also seem to be contributing to the bobwhite's decline.

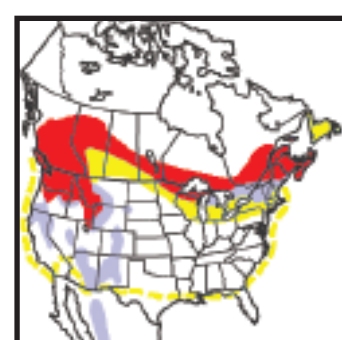
Outlook: Major efforts under way to increase good bobwhite habitat, including the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, should reverse drops in the populations of bobwhites and other grassland birds.



2. EVENING GROSBEAK COCCOTHAUSTES VESPERTINUS

Population decline: 17 million to 3.8 million (78 percent)
ID: Rotund, robin-sized black-and-yellow songbird with black-and-white wings and a triangular yellow beak; females drabber than males; usually seen in flocks.
Voice: Loud *peer*.
Habitat: Breeds primarily in coniferous forests, secondarily in deciduous forests. In non-breeding season, it feeds on both coniferous and deciduous tree seeds and buds, and on sunflower seeds in birdfeeders.
Threats: Evening grosbeaks, as birds of boreal and montane

forests, are susceptible to anything that affects those habitats: logging, mining, drilling, global warming, acid rain, and development for transportation and housing. Chemical control of spruce budworm and other tree pests reduces this species' food supply and may cause secondary poisoning. Competition and the spread of disease among house finches, goldfinches, and other feeder birds may also hasten the fall.
Outlook: The evening grosbeak teaches us how bird populations can change dramatically. Virtually unknown east of the Mississippi River until about 1850, it expanded east—peaking in the mid-1980s—then plummeted. Its future will depend on maintaining healthy habitat in the boreal forest.

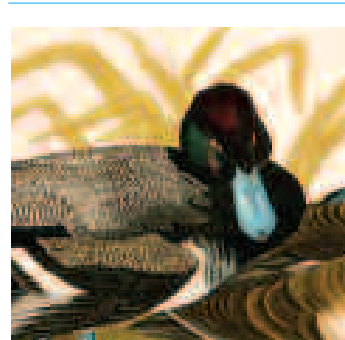
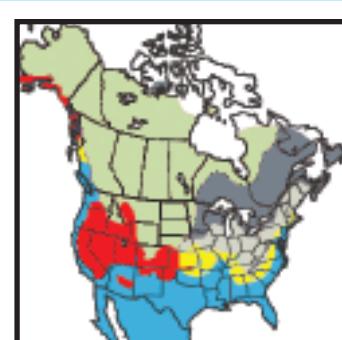


3. NORTHERN PINTAIL ANAS ACUTA

Population decline: 16 million to 3.6 million (77 percent)
ID: A mallard-sized "puddle duck," with a slim body. The male is distinctive, with a long, pointed black tail, a gray body, and a brown head, with a white streak pointing up the side of the neck. The female is nondescript but tan and slim.
Voice: Females quack like mallards; males most often make a high-pitched *wbeee*, like a train whistle.
Habitat: Nests in grassy uplands and untilled crop fields near shallow seasonal and semi-permanent wetlands. Winters in shallow wetlands; often forages in harvested grain fields.

Threats: Pintail population declines reflect the spread and intensification of agriculture in North America's prairie-pothole region. (Alaskan breeding populations seem more stable.) Pintails nest earlier than most ducks, often in stubble fields, and thus suffer high nest losses when those fields undergo spring cultivation. The conversion of natural grasslands to row crops in the western Dakotas is especially harmful.

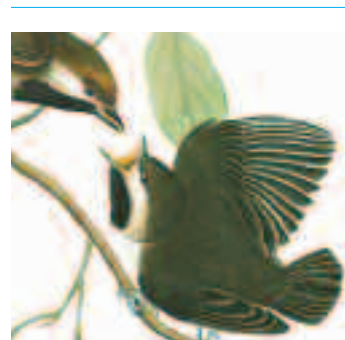
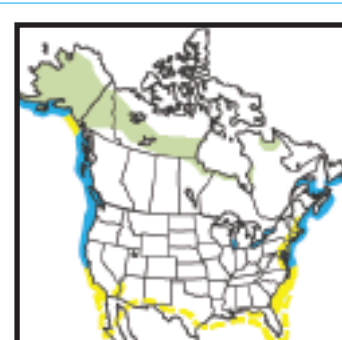
Outlook: Improving pintail populations will require maintaining existing grasslands and wetlands, converting marginal croplands to grasslands through farm bill conservation programs, and encouraging fall planting in areas that remain in row crops.



4. GREATER SCAUP AYTHYA MARILA

Population decline: 2 million to 506,000 (75 percent)
ID: The male is a black, gray, and white duck that is smaller than a mallard. The head, chest, and rump are black; the back is gray; and the belly and wing stripe are white. The female is brown, with a white facial mask and a white belly and wing stripe like the male's.
Voice: A wide variety of vocalizations during active courtship; otherwise pretty quiet.
Habitat: The greater scaup breeds along lakes and large ponds in open tundra complexes; winters in large lakes and

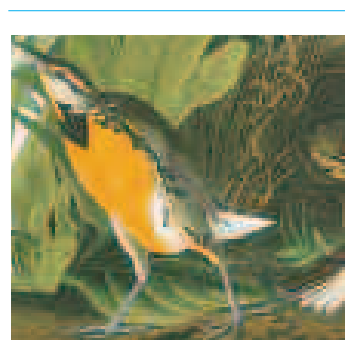
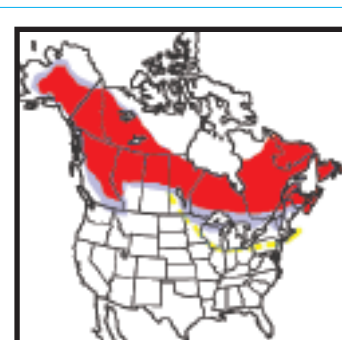
along ocean coasts, usually in large rafts.
Threats: Global warming is causing dramatic changes in the greater scaup's tundra breeding grounds, notably an earlier melting of permafrost and the invasion of formerly more southern species. In the Great Lakes, invasive species such as zebra mussels outcompete the native prey species on which the greater scaup relied. On the coasts, these birds are sensitive to oil spills and other water-quality issues that affect shellfish.
Outlook: The greater scaup may turn out to be among the species most at risk from climate change. Its long-term fate will likely depend on how this issue is dealt with during the next decade.



5. BOREAL CHICKADEE POECILE HUDSONICA

Population decline: 19.5 million to 5.2 million (73 percent)
ID: A small, active, grayish bird with a black chin, a brown cap, and brownish sides.
Voice: A hoarse, slow version of the *chick-a-dee-dee* call of other chickadee species.
Habitat: Mostly confined to black spruce and fir forests, including young and old trees; prefers wetter sites.
Threats: The boreal chickadee is endemic to the boreal zone's spruce-fir forests, and is thus tied to its fate. Major threats there are global warming and excessive logging,

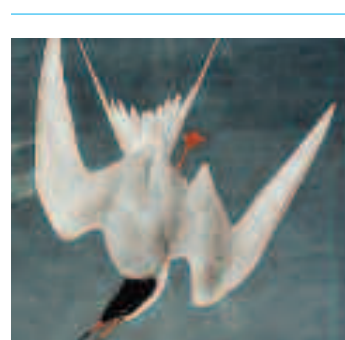
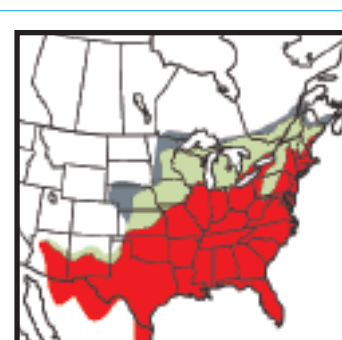
drilling, and mining. Boreal chickadees respond favorably to spruce budworm outbreaks unless the chemical control of spruce budworm or other pests in spruce-fir forests overwhelm the food supply those insects represent.
Outlook: A brighter future for the boreal chickadee will come with better logging, mining, and drilling practices, and by creating more protected areas within the boreal forest.



6. EASTERN MEADOWLARK STURNELLA MAGNA

Population decline: 24 million to 7 million (72 percent)
ID: Meadowlarks are light brown on the back and a brilliant yellow on the breast, which has a big, black V. They are robin-sized and usually seen on the ground or flying near it.
Voice: The spring song is a melodic four-note whistle.
Habitat: Prefers native grasslands and open savannas but is found in many human-altered grassy habitats.
Threats: Like many grassland birds, meadowlarks are threatened by changes in farming. With the recent push for ethanol and other biofuels, there is a real danger that many

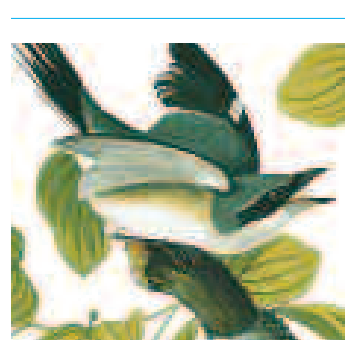
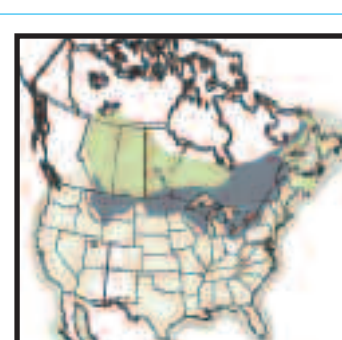
acres currently being protected under the farm bill's Conservation Reserve Program will be converted from the meadowlarks' prairie habitat to cornfields.
Outlook: The eastern meadowlark's short-term outlook isn't good because of the current push to grow more monocultures for ethanol as well as the continuing need for row crops to grow food. Improving this situation will depend on the inclusion of strong conservation provisions in the farm bill.



7. COMMON TERN STERNA HIRUNDO

Population decline: Managed colonies along the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes are stable or increasing (300,000 individuals now). Breeding Bird Survey data suggest that populations in smaller unmanaged colonies have dropped from 100,000 to 30,000 (70 percent).
ID: Slender, medium-sized, black-capped gray-and-white bird with a thin, pointed bill and a long, deeply forked tail. Often seen flying low along coasts, diving for fish, or sitting in groups on beaches.
Voice: Long, harsh *keeeerrrr*.

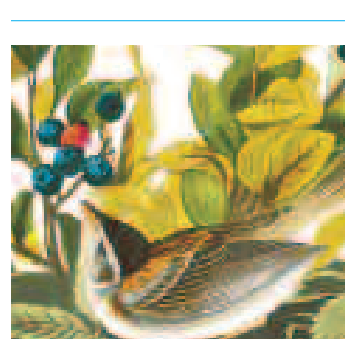
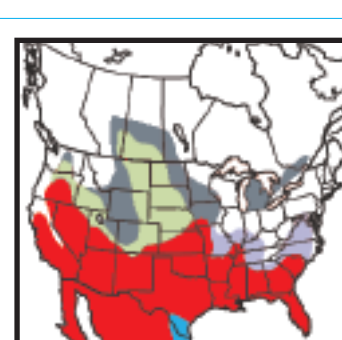
Habitat: Nests on islands with sparse vegetation; forages for fish (90 percent of its diet) near shore in oceans, lakes, and rivers. Feeds farther offshore in winter, mostly in saltwater.
Threats: Human development along lakes and rivers threatens nest sites; pollution can deplete fish in lakes and rivers; sea-level rise due to global warming endangers some coastal colonies. In South America common terns are illegally killed for food during the non-breeding season.
Outlook: Preserving the common tern will require intensive management of breeding colonies; the protection of lakes and rivers; helping terns compete with gulls for nest sites; deterring predators; and creating new colony sites.



8. LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE LANIUS LUDOVICIANUS

Population decline: 10 million to 3 million (70 percent)
ID: A robin-sized gray bird with black wings (and white wing patches), a black mask, and a black tail. A close look reveals a hooked beak.
Voice: Harsh *beeek, beeek* alarm call. Song is a very quiet combination of short trills, clear notes, and harsh notes.
Habitat: Short grass with isolated trees or shrubs, especially pastureland.
Threats: The decline of the loggerhead shrike is similar to that of other grassland and so-called early successional

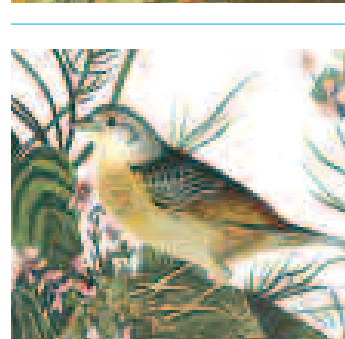
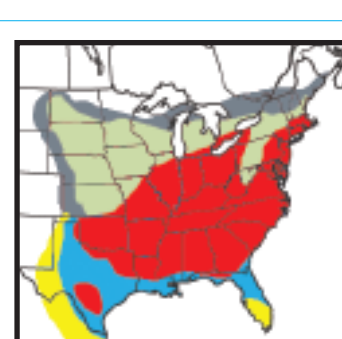
species. A lot of northeastern farmland has been abandoned and is either reverting to forest or being lost to suburbs or other human development. In the rest of the country, farmland is being used more intensively, leaving dwindling habitat for loggerhead shrikes and other grass-loving birds.
Outlook: In the southeastern United States, the best hope for loggerhead shrikes is the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, which is focused on restoring brushy habitat along field edges. Similar efforts should be pursued in other portions of the species' range. The landscape in the northeastern United States may already be too altered to allow the loggerhead shrike to return.



9. FIELD SPARROW SPIZELLA PUSILLA

Population decline: 18 million to 5.8 million (68 percent)
ID: Small brown songbird with a light rusty cap and a bright-pink bill.
Voice: A distinctive song is sung in minor-key notes that start slowly then speed up into a trill, then repeat.
Habitat: Found in abandoned fields with scattered shrubs and trees.
Threats: Habitat loss is the major threat to this species. Field sparrows require successional habitats that are steadily being lost to agriculture, forestry, and buildings.

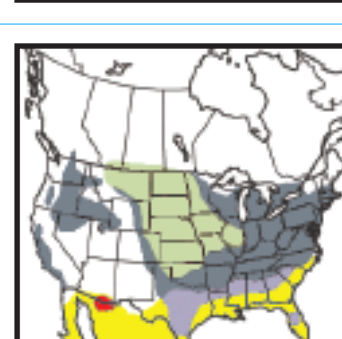
Outlook: Field sparrows may never regain their former abundance, but it might be possible to stabilize their populations by working to ensure the management of suitable habitat for this and other species that depend on successional grassland and shrub habitats.



10. GRASSHOPPER SPARROW AMMODRAMUS SAVANNARUM

Population decline: 31 million to 11 million (65 percent)
ID: A fairly nondescript, small brown bird with a short tail and a flat head that spends a lot of time hiding in the grass. Look for a plain buffy chest, a yellow-orange spot in front of the eye, and a white line on top of its head.
Voice: The song is an insectlike trill preceded by two short, quiet notes.
Habitat: Prefers larger patches of grassland, usually with few shrubs or trees; specific preferences vary in different parts of its range.

Threats: Conversion of grassland habitats to cropland continues in the Great Plains. Woody vegetation is penetrating natural grasslands in the East. Hayfields and other managed grasslands are often mowed during the breeding season when young birds are in the nest. Some grasslands are burned too frequently or grazed too heavily to retain enough cover for breeding.
Outlook: It is hard to imagine this grassland bird species will ever reach its historic highs before Europeans transformed the continent for modern agriculture. Increasing recognition of the importance of grassland conservation should bolster this species throughout much of its range.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Audubon COMMON BIRDS IN DECLINE

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PRESERVE FARMLANDS

Promote strong conservation provisions in the federal farm bill, especially the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to keep marginal farmlands idle and supports millions of acres of good bird habitat. Contact your county's office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service or the Farm Service Agency to find out how to increase the acreage devoted to helping birds dependent on working lands. (www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/crp/)

Winners: Northern bobwhite, northern pintail, eastern meadowlark, loggerhead shrike, field sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, lark sparrow, American bittern, horned lark, little blue heron

SAVE GRASSLANDS

Be proactive with your local, state, and national officials to increase the amount of habitat that can support breeding grassland birds. In particular, support smart growth and the protection of open space. Promote late mowing (preferably early August in most parts of the country) in hayfields and healthy public and private lands used for livestock grazing. Urge parks to devote large parcels to prairie restoration. Volunteer at an Important Bird Area (IBA) where it is appropriate to improve habitat for grass- and shrub-nesting birds. (www.audubon.org/bird/iba/; www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/GRP)

Winners: Northern bobwhite, eastern meadowlark, loggerhead shrike, grasshopper sparrow, black-throated sparrow, lark sparrow

CONSERVE WETLANDS

Support wetlands programs, including the Clean Water Act, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, and such farm bill conservation programs as the Wetlands

Reserve Program and the "swampbuster" rule (which restricts wetlands from being converted to agriculture). Encourage governments at all levels to enact and enforce wetlands protection and water-quality regulations. (www.epa.gov/OWOW/wetlands/vital/toc.html)

Winners: Common tern, northern pintail, greater scaup, American bittern, little blue heron

HALT GLOBAL WARMING

Back federal, state, and local legislation to cap greenhouse-gas emissions and spur the development of alternative energy sources. Practice what you preach at home and work. (www.audubon.org/globalWarming/BePartSolution.php)

Winners: Evening grosbeak, northern pintail, greater scaup, boreal chickadee, black-throated sparrow, snow bunting, horned lark

SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE FORESTS

Push for the protection, restoration, and expansion of large forest blocks—especially the Canadian boreal forest, where logging, mining, and drilling are taking a toll—to sustain the full range of forest-loving species. Back active management (including burns) to meet specific habitat requirements on government-owned lands, and incentives for active forest management on private lands. Promote deer management that sustains forest understory plants. (www.borealbirds.org/)

Winners: Whip-poor-will, ruffed grouse, northern bobwhite, loggerhead shrike. Boreal species: Common tern, evening grosbeak, northern pintail, boreal chickadee, common grackle, American bittern, rufous hummingbird, ruffed grouse

STOP INVASIVE SPECIES

Work with county ag officials to fight the spread of non-native grasses. Support federal, regional, state, and local regulations and research and management to curb exotic, invasive plants. (www.fws.gov/species/#invasive)

Winners: Greater scaup (by eliminating aquatic invasives), black-throated sparrow, lark sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, loggerhead

shrike, eastern meadowlark, northern bobwhite

PATROL BEACHES

Join beach watches to look for oiled birds or other signs of coastal pollution. Lobby federal, state, and local officials to maintain wildlife-friendly beaches and clean waters. (www.audubon.org/bird/cbcp/)

Winners: Greater scaup, snow bunting, common tern, little blue heron

MONITOR FEEDERS

If you see dead or diseased birds on or near your feeders, don't put out food for two weeks, so the birds can disperse. Also, clean feeders before reusing them. If you have rufous hummingbirds (in any season), offer hummingbird flowers and sugar-water feeders (change the water weekly or more often if it's hot). (www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/bird_feeding/index.html)

Winners: Evening grosbeak, boreal chickadee, rufous hummingbird

GET OUT AND COUNT

Join the Audubon Christmas Bird Count and the Breeding Bird Survey (if you know your local birds by sight and sound) to help collect the data that allows scientists to track bird populations, and contributes to reports like this one, as well as to the updated Audubon WatchList of all North American bird species at risk.

(www.audubon.org/bird/cbc; www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/)

TAKE OUR CUE

Many Audubon efforts aid birds mentioned in this report—from Project Puffin's work with common terns and Audubon Texas's conservation projects for bobwhite quail to Audubon Chicago's and the Arizona Research Ranch's grassland restoration programs to Audubon North Dakota's pintail projects. Work with your local Audubon chapter, center, or state office to help out at a local IBA (www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html). Visit our website (<http://audubonaction.org/audubon/join.html>) to become a national Audubon policy activist.