United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS

Song Birds:

Songbirds in Indiana:

Western meadowlark

Grassland birds, or those birds that rely on grassland habitats for nesting, are found in each of the 50 United States and worldwide. Various species of waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, upland game birds and songbirds rely on grasslands for nesting and other habitat functions. Historical population fluctuations in grassland-nesting bird species have coincided with changes in land uses and agricultural practices. Many North American grassland-nesting birds' species have experienced marked population reductions in recent decades. Continued nationwide declines in some grassland-nesting bird species have increased awareness for the need to preserve, manage, and re-store grassland habitat in order to recover and maintain viable grass-land-nesting bird populations.

Area:

1. Estimates of the minimum size of suitable nesting and breeding habitat required to support populations of grassland birds vary greatly among species.
2. A general rule may be to maximize the size and interconnectedness of grass-land habitat patches available, while conducting management actions that maximize the habitat quality within these habitat patches.

Cover:

1. On agricultural landscapes, in the form of hayfields, small grains fallow and old fields, pastures, and idled croplands provide nesting habitats.
2. Strip habitats such as right-of ways for utility lines, highways, railroads, and secondary roads; and field borders, grassed waterways, filter strips and similar linear habitats.
3. Adequate cover of undisturbed grassland is among the greatest factors affecting songbird populations.

Diet:

1. Insects are likely the most common food source, a wide variety of plant and animal matter is consumed.
2. Grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars, ants, katydids, alfalfa weevils, cutworms, wasp, spiders, snails, earthworms, and sow bugs.

Refer to fact sheet 645

3. Wild berries, seeds of sedges, weed seeds, tame grass seeds, corn, oats, wheat, barley, and other small grains.
4. Big bluestem, little bluestem, switch grass, Indian grass, green needle grass, western wheatgrass, and side oats grama

Recommended practices for a regular habitat disturbing are:*

If you are interested in attracting Quail to your farm you should remember to have regular habitat disturbance like fire, timber harvest, grazing, and disking. **Disking** with adjacent strips 10 to 20 feet wide and no less than 100 feet long should be disked rotationally along woodlot, grassy field, and fence and hedgerow edges.

Burning returns valuable nutrients to the soil and maintains grasslands and open woodlands as open habitat while promoting new growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs preferred by bobwhites. Although beneficial, prescribed burning **is a highly regulated activity** and should only be conducted in cooperation with assistance from licensed burners. Prescribed burns should be conducted on a 4- to 5-year rotational basis in late winter or early spring.

- Provide 30 to 50 days of rest between **grazing**.
- Defer grazing in some nesting areas until late in the nesting season and restrict livestock from nesting areas.
- Graze the entire pasture at a light rate all summer and put the entire herd on just one half of the pasture during the late season.
- Avoid heavy continuous grazing.
- Rotationally graze cool season grasses in spring and fall and warm season grasses in mid-summer to maximize productivity while minimizing habitat disturbance.

Rotational **mowing** can be used to maintain grassland communities in various stages of growth and vegetation diversity. Landowners should work closely with local NRCS field officers, state department of natural resource officers, and other wildlife professionals when planning grassland management to determine mowing dates and techniques that minimize impacts to nesting birds.

Use no-till practices to provide residual nesting cover and waste grain availability for winter food. Minimize the number of equipment passes through conservation tillage practices. Allow 35 to 40 days if possible between equipment passes to allow for complete nesting cycles. Use contour buffer strips and strip cropping practices to provide some undisturbed habitat adjacent to crop fields that are disturbed by equipment passes. Reduce the use of pesticides and inorganic fertilizers through Integrated Pest Management practices. Explore use of alternative crops and cropping practices such as native grass biomass crops and inter-cropping practices. Make use of set-aside programs that idle sensitive cropland and establish and maintain high-quality cover consisting of a diversity of native grasses and forbs.

Linear woody cover that fragments large blocks of grassland habitat may be more detrimental to grassland birds than scattered patches, due to their use as travel corridors by nest predators. Landowners and managers should care-fully consider bird species habitat objectives before proceeding with woody vegetation removal actions.