

# **Birds of Conservation Concern 2002**

## **Descriptions of Representative Species**

More than 800 species of birds spend all or part of their lives in the United States, migrating from summer breeding grounds in the Canadian arctic and northern U.S. to winter in the southern U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean. On their journeys, these birds routinely cross the boundaries of States, nations, watersheds, and ecosystems. Dozens of other bird species are nonmigratory, spending their entire lives in a particular ecosystem. Because they depend on habitat that is often scattered across thousands of miles or otherwise crosses natural and political boundaries, protecting these birds requires a coordinated conservation effort by people and organizations throughout the hemisphere.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is the principal Federal authority responsible for the conservation and management of migratory bird populations. To accomplish these goals, the Service works cooperatively with a variety of other Federal agencies, State wildlife agencies, and non-governmental organization.

### **How are birds are doing?**

Today, many waterfowl populations have reached historic highs and many other species formerly on the brink of extinction have stable or increasing populations. Federal and state environmental laws and grant programs have contributed to a cleaner environment and preserved millions of acres of important habitat for birds. But the news isn't all good.

During the past 30 years, about one-fifth of native U.S. bird species have declined more than 50 percent. These losses are not restricted to just one or two groups of birds; birds of grassland, wetland, scrubland, and woodland habitats have all been affected. Non-migratory permanent residents have been affected, as have long-distance neotropical migrants that spend winters in Central and South America and the Caribbean. The primary reason for these declines is loss of habitat due to urban, agricultural, and industrial development.

By identifying species of conservation concern, the Service hopes to stimulate additional conservation actions that will lead to long-term stability of populations. Such preventive management will help preclude the costly and disruptive measures that invariably accompany the listing of a species as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. There are already several major bird conservation initiatives at work in North America, and the 2002 list reflects their priorities as well. Below, we profile 14 representative bird species from the *Birds of Conservation Concern 2002* list.

## **Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The Reddish Egret has the most restricted range of any of the regularly occurring herons in the United States. It is essentially confined to southern Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, where it is a permanent resident and local breeder. Like several other of the herons and egrets, the Reddish Egret has two color phases, dark and white. In the more common dark phase the head and neck are deep reddish brown, hence the common name.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

The Reddish Egret is restricted to coastal salt pans and shallow tidal flats. The Egret nests on dry coastal islands in brushy thickets of yucca and prickly pear in Texas, and in mangrove thickets in Florida. It eats a variety of small fishes, frogs, tadpoles, and crustaceans. It exhibits a characteristic and unique manner of feeding, dashing or lurching about erratically in shallow waters like a drunken sailor, alternately flapping its wings in and out and sometimes holding them aloft to form a canopy.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

Reddish Egrets were sought by plume hunters beginning in the 1880s; the birds were killed and their feathers were sold for use in adorning ladies hats, a trend that was quite fashionable at the time. This commercial exploitation resulted in the destruction of most south Florida breeding colonies by 1910. Even following Federal protection from market hunting in 1916, the species continued to decline, being virtually eliminated from south Florida by 1935. The south Florida population has recovered since then, but the U.S. population remains extremely small, with only 2,000 to 3,000 breeding pairs.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

The extremely small size of the U.S. population makes it vulnerable to unpredictable and random catastrophic events such as storm tides, hurricanes, and oil spills. A single such event could conceivably wipe out a significant portion of the population.

## **Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

In the United States, the Swallow-tailed Kite occurs only in the extreme southeastern United States, from coastal South Carolina south to Florida and west to Louisiana, but is found mainly in peninsular Florida. By mid-September, these kites migrate south, where they winter in southern Mexico, Central America, and northern South America.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

The Swallow-tailed Kite prefers wetland habitat, where it ranges over swamp and lowland forests as well as freshwater and brackish marshes. Flying insects are the mainstay of its diet for most of the year, although nesting birds feed their young a diverse array of small vertebrates, including tree frogs, lizards, nestling birds, and snakes. The Swallow-tailed Kite is a gregarious species, with birds often nesting in close proximity to one another and communally roosting in large groups at night.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

The Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a positive population trend in Florida, the only State with a sample size large enough to measure population trends. In the western portions of its range (Louisiana), populations are declining sharply in the Atchafalaya Basin but stable or increasing on the Pearl River. There is a lack of demographic data needed to predict population trends.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

The Swallow-tailed Kite is of conservation concern because of its disappearance from most of its historic range. Once occurring throughout the south-central United States north to Minnesota, this species is now found in healthy numbers in only one state, Florida. Although its numbers in Florida show an increase, destruction of their wetland breeding habitat is a constant threat. Breeding habitat on publicly owned lands is most likely insufficient to ensure this species' survival. Little is known of migration routes or wintering destinations of the Swallow-tailed Kite. Habitat destruction on their wintering grounds in Central and South America, coupled with heavy use of pesticides in these areas, pose additional threats.

## **Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The Black Rail is the smallest and most secretive of the North American rails. It is much more likely to be heard than seen. This rail has a relatively broad distribution across North America, but is highly concentrated in suitable habitats. The eastern population summers in salt marshes along the Atlantic Coast from New Jersey to south Florida, with concentrations in southern New Jersey, Chesapeake Bay marshes, the coastal Carolinas, and Florida's St. Johns River. It also lives in freshwater marshes in the Midwest, but there are few breeding records in the last 70 years and the bird's status there is poorly understood. It winters along the coast sporadically from New Jersey south to Florida and west to Texas. The California population resides year-round in remnant coastal marshes in such places as Bodega Bay, Tomales Bay, Bolinas Lagoon, San Francisco Bay estuary, and Morro Bay. Isolated populations breed in the foothills of the western Sierras in California and along the lower Colorado River in California and Arizona.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Preferred habitats include low marshy meadows, dense freshwater marshes, and thick marsh vegetation near the high tide lines. The bird's diet consists largely of snails, amphipods, spiders, and a variety of insects (including beetles, ants, earwigs, aphids, true bugs, flies, and grasshoppers), along with cattails and bulrush seeds when they are available.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

Population trends are poorly known, but can be inferred by trends in wetland habitats over the past 100 years: 50% loss nationwide, 95 percent loss of tidal marshes in San Francisco Bay.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Populations are poorly known and localized. The greatest threat is continued loss, modification, and degradation of suitable wetland habitats due to dredging and filling. Other threats include potential rise in sea level, ditching of salt marshes for mosquito control, and contamination of coastal wetlands.

## **Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The Black Skimmer is almost strictly coastal in distribution, occupying a narrow range along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Massachusetts to Texas and Mexico. Since 1962, it has extended its range into coastal California and inland to the Salton Sea.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

The skimmer's preferred nesting habitat is open sandy areas, gravel or shell bars with sparse vegetation, or broad mats of dead vegetation in salt marshes. It generally nests in colonies with various species of terns. The birds' main food items are a variety of small fish in the range of 1-5 inches (3-12 centimeters) long, but may occasionally take crustaceans. It feeds in shallow tidal waters of bays, estuaries, lagoons, rivers, and salt marsh pools by "skimming" low to the water with its bill open and the tip of the lower mandible slicing the surface. When the lower mandible touches a fish, the upper bill snaps down instantly to catch it.

### **What are the population trends of this species?**

Populations were probably severely depressed in the mid- to late 1800s when Black Skimmers were subjected to commercial eggging and market hunting. Their current status is poorly known, with available information providing seemingly contradictory views. Colony surveys suggests general stability over the past 30-40 years with a total U.S. population of about 35,000 pairs, but Breeding Bird Survey data indicate substantial declines since 1966. Additional research and monitoring are needed to resolve these contradictions.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

The tendency to nest near the high tide line makes some colonies vulnerable to storm surges and floods. The species could be especially vulnerable to even slight increases in average sea level. Increased commercial, residential, and recreational development of coastal areas has made much formerly suitable beach habitat no longer available. Human disturbance (and attendant predators such as feral cats and dogs) and intrusion into nesting colonies are major factors affecting Black Skimmer breeding success. Off-road vehicles are a major threat on some beaches, as are hikers and joggers, as these activities can disrupt nesting and loafing birds and trample eggs. Small population size, clumped breeding distribution, and concentration of breeding adults into a relatively few large breeding colonies makes the species vulnerable to human disturbance.

## **Kittlitz's Murrelet (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The distribution of the Kittlitz's Murrelet is centered in the Bering Sea. It breeds along the coastlines of Alaska and the Russian Far East. In North America, this murrelet is restricted to Alaska. The highest murrelet densities can be found along the glaciated coasts of southern and southeastern Alaska. Little is known about the species' winter distribution. Most North American murrelets appear to spend the winter in the open waters of the Gulf of Alaska or the Bering Sea. Russian-breeding birds winter in ice-free waters of the Bering Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk, perhaps as far south as northern Japan.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Kittlitz's Murrelets are unusual among seabirds in that they nest on vegetation-free rock scree or on steep, rocky slopes. Nests are usually located near coastlines. Although murrelets nest on land, they feed in nearshore marine waters. In glaciated areas, they can often be found foraging in bays that have tidewater glaciers or outflows of glacial streams. The murrelet's habit of nesting on nunataks (rocky peaks uncovered during the last glaciation) suggests a strong influence of past and present glacial conditions on nesting behavior. Food items taken during the breeding season mainly include small fishes (sand lance, herring, capelin) and some large invertebrates. Little is known about their winter diet. Murrelets capture their food by diving underwater and using their wings for propulsion.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

Information on the current status and population trends for Kittlitz's Murrelet is unavailable for many parts of their range. The total population likely numbers less than 20,000 individuals. More than 50 percent of the population breeds along the northern and eastern coasts of the Gulf of Alaska. Preliminary evidence suggests that populations in this region have declined 50 to 80 percent over the last decade. More complete surveys are needed to verify these trends.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Kittlitz's Murrelets are considered highly vulnerable to the detrimental effects of marine oil spills. Murrelets were killed in the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill, but their low numbers and scattered distribution precluded accurate determination of the extent of mortality. Because of their nearshore foraging habits, murrelets are vulnerable to being caught and drowned in gill nets used for salmon fisheries. Tidewater glaciers are popular destinations for tour boats operating in coastal Alaska, and repeated visits may disrupt feeding birds. Current evidence indicates that high boat-use disrupts the foraging behavior of murrelets. Glacial changes, either natural or human-induced, could also alter feeding and nesting habitats of the murrelet.

## **Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

In North America, the breeding range of the Burrowing Owl currently includes much of the western half of the United States and the extreme southern portions of the Canadian prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Individuals of the more northern populations migrate south for the winter, heading to southern and central California, southern Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and central and western Mexico. A separate subspecies, the Florida Burrowing Owl, occurs locally throughout much of Florida, including the panhandle, and on islands such as the Bahamas, Cuba, and the island of Hispaniola.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

The Burrowing Owl's habitat is grasslands and deserts, usually in association with animals such as the black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*). There is a strong preference for short vegetation in and around burrows, probably for increased visibility of potential predators. Diet generally includes insects such as grasshoppers and crickets, small mammals, and birds, but reptiles and amphibians are taken on occasion.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

Throughout the United States, Burrowing Owl populations have generally been in a slow decline since the late 1800s. A recent status assessment revealed that only Idaho--among all the states within its U.S. range--had a positive population trend. Breeding Bird Survey data suggest a long-term (1966-2000) population decline of about 1 percent annually. The most severe declines appear to be in mixed-grass and short-grass prairies from Texas north to Alberta and Saskatchewan and west to the Rocky Mountains, as well as in Florida. Populations in the Great Basin area and parts of southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado appear to be increasing or stable. Populations in Canada have been plummeting for years, and Breeding Bird Survey data currently shows a 12 percent annual decline.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

In the western and midwestern United States, there is great conservation concern for Burrowing Owls due to continued habitat alteration and destruction, active control of prairie dogs and related animals, and the continuing effects of pesticides, automobile collisions, and shooting. In addition, disease can wipe out entire prairie dog colonies, which are a major food source for Burrowing Owls. Little is known about the fate of migrant birds or of the biology of wintering owls in Mexico.

### **Miscellaneous**

The Burrowing Owl is currently the subject of joint conservation efforts in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The Canadian populations have declined to the point that they are facing extirpation within a few years.

## **Chuck-will's-widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

Chuck-will's-widow occurs throughout the southeastern United States from the Atlantic coast and southern Illinois west to central Texas and Oklahoma. This species has recently expanded its range into the mid-Atlantic States of Virginia, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Chuck-will's-widow migrates to the Caribbean Islands, southern Mexico, Central America, and South America for the winter.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Chuck-will's widow is a nocturnal species whose distinctive song is well-known to people in the South. Their preferred habitat is deciduous, pine, oak-hickory and mixed forests. They also inhabit live oak groves, forest edges, and riparian areas. Chuck-will's-widow normally forages at dusk or dawn, flying silently a few feet above ground along edges of woodlands, pastures, and in forest gaps. The birds' diet consists mainly of crepuscular flying insects, including moths and beetles, which are scooped up using their rictal (facial) bristles, which serve as sensory mechanisms and help funnel insects into their large bill. In addition to insects, they occasionally take small passerine birds and bats as well. They have an unusual habit of roosting on dirt roads at night, thereby increasing their chance of being killed by vehicles.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

There are few data regarding population trends of this species. The Breeding Bird Survey has documented a significant long-term (1966-2000) population decline of 1.6% annually. However, this data may not be especially reliable for this nocturnally active species. Other means of population monitoring are needed.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Scientists lack information on the biology of this species, including nesting ecology, breeding success, habitat use, and population status. Monitoring efforts such as the Breeding Bird Survey and Christmas Bird Count may not be adequate to monitor the nocturnal Chuck-will's-widow. Because we do not have reliable information on population numbers or trends, we do not yet have a good understanding of the conservation status of this species. For example, although Chuck-will's-widows are known to nest in suburban habitats, the high degree of urban sprawl and intensified agriculture in the southern U.S. may have caused (or may still be causing) population declines that are as yet undetected. Data indicate that urbanization creates unsuitable habitat for Chuck-will's-widow, which is a major concern in the rapidly growing southern U.S.



## **Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

Lewis's Woodpecker occurs from the Black Hills west to southern British Columbia and Alberta south to southern New Mexico and Arizona. They do not occur in the desert areas of Utah, Idaho, and Nevada, and have been largely eliminated from the coastal northwestern United States. Fall and winter movements are unpredictable, but the more northern populations generally migrate south to New Mexico, Arizona, and California for the winter.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Lewis's Woodpecker favors open forests and recent burns, ranging in altitude from low-elevation areas near rivers to higher-elevation burns and pine forests. Like all woodpeckers, it requires standing dead wood for nesting. In the spring and summer, woodpeckers forage on insects, mainly from the air, as well as fruit. In the winter, when insects and fruit are not available, they forage on acorns and other nuts. They store acorns, which they first shell, in tree-bark crevices.

### **What are the population trends of this species?**

The sporadic distribution and relatively uncommon status of this species within much of its range present a serious challenge for existing local-scale censusing methods. Broad-scale population trends indicate that numbers have declined markedly throughout the species' range since the 1960's, and many reports of local reductions in distribution exist. Current Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a 3.6% annual population decline throughout the U.S. over the past 35 years.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Long-term population declines throughout its range and an already fragmented distribution clearly make Lewis's Woodpecker a species of conservation concern. Possible reasons for population declines include loss of suitable habitat, heavy use of pesticides, and competition for nest cavities from the non-native European Starling. In addition, many aspects of the biology of Lewis's Woodpecker remain poorly known or known from only limited geographic areas.

## **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher has a relatively small breeding range, breeding only in the southern Great Plains states of the U.S., mainly Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. It also breeds in small portions of eastern New Mexico, western Louisiana and Arkansas, and western Missouri south of the Missouri River. Since the late 1800s, the flycatcher's breeding range has expanded into these areas east and west of the southern Great Plains as forests were cleared for agricultural fields and pasture. It is migratory and winters in southern Mexico and Central America, although a small number remain throughout the winter in extreme southern Florida.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher favors open areas, such as savanna, grassland, shrubland, agricultural, and urban habitats with sufficient perches for feeding and trees and shrubs for nesting. Its diet consists of insects—mainly grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, bees, and wasps—which it catches from the air.

### **What are the population trends of this species?**

According to the Breeding Bird Survey, population trends are mixed, with decreasing numbers in Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma, and increasing numbers in Texas, New Mexico, and Missouri. Of particular interest is the fact that populations at the center of the range are declining while populations at the periphery of the range are increasing.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Loss of suitable habitat in both the breeding and wintering range is the main reason this species is of conservation concern. On breeding grounds, herbicide application and brush management practices aimed at decreasing the amount of certain small trees and shrubs may reduce availability of nest sites. Relatively little is known about this species on its wintering grounds, but the scale of habitat destruction or alteration in their wintering grounds is of major concern. In addition, heavy pesticide use in breeding and wintering habitats can reduce food levels and result in increased injury or death rates.

## **Bicknell's Thrush (*Cathartes bicknelli*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The breeding range of Bicknell's Thrush in the United States is limited to mountainous spruce-fir forests of New England and New York. In Canada it is found in highland spruce-fir forests in Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. As the only breeding songbird endemic to high-altitude and maritime spruce-fir forests in the northeastern United States and Canada, Bicknell's Thrush could be a valuable indicator of the overall health of alpine bird populations and their associated forest habitat.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Breeding habitat includes high-elevation, stunted spruce-fir and deciduous forests. While migrating, it is found in a variety of forests and open woodland habitat as well as park-like settings. Most of the wintering population is found in the wet, broadleaf forests of the Dominican Republic and (formerly) Haiti. During the breeding season, the diet of Bicknell's Thrush consists almost exclusively of insects, with ants the preferred fare. In the autumn, their diet includes various berries.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

Despite drastic changes at their wintering grounds and possible problems near nesting sites, scientists lack enough information to determine if population changes are occurring across the species' range. Baseline and long-term monitoring data are needed to evaluate the conservation status of the species across its naturally fragmented, high-elevation breeding range. Because of the bird's unique natural history and remote habitat, traditional population monitoring schemes, such as the Breeding Bird Survey, are not appropriate. With these problems in mind, the Service has begun to enlist volunteers to visit mountaintops each year to conduct bird counts and gather information on the relative abundance Bicknell's Thrush.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Over the past 30 years, the high-elevation, stunted spruce-fir and deciduous forests that provide breeding habitat for the thrush have been reduced to less than 8 percent of their historic range. Potential problems on the thrush's breeding grounds include atmospheric deposition (mercury, cadmium, acid precipitation), recreational development, communications tower construction, and wind power development.

### **Miscellaneous**

Bicknell's Thrush, recognized as a subspecies of the Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*) since its discovery in 1881, was given full species status in 1995. Significant differences between the two taxa in morphology, vocalizations, genetics, and breeding and wintering distributions contributed to this designation. The new classification has led to the recognition of Bicknell's Thrush as one of the most at-risk passerine species in the eastern United States. Bicknell's Thrush is currently ranked by the national Partners in Flight coalition as the top conservation priority among Neotropical migrants in the northeast.

## **Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

Although native to North America's grasslands, this is one of the least-known birds in the United States because of its highly cryptic plumage and habits. Although likely to be dismissed by the casual observer as just another "little brown bird," the males give elaborate territorial flight displays that often last for more than 30 minutes. Sprague's Pipit breeds in native prairies of the northern Great Plains of the United States and Canada and winters in the south-central United States (east of the Mississippi River) and northern Mexico.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Well-drained areas in open grasslands are the preferred habitat for breeding. Grasslands with even low densities of shrubs are avoided. Native grasses are preferred over introduced grasses. The diet consists of a wide variety of invertebrate prey, mostly insects.

### **What are the population trends of this species?**

This species has suffered greatly throughout the breeding range from conversion of short- and mid-grass prairies to agriculture by European settlers. While major declines are thought to have occurred during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, populations still continue to disappear at an alarming rate. Figures from the Breeding Bird Survey suggest that continental populations may have declined up to 80 percent since 1966.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Conversion of prairie to cultivated crops and over-grazing in much of the species' range continue to cause declines on breeding and wintering grounds. The large-scale introduction of non-native plant species has also had a negative effect on breeding populations.

## **Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)**

### **What is the range of this species?**

The Painted Bunting occurs in the southern United States in two disjunct populations; an eastern population along the Atlantic coast of Florida north to the Carolinas, and a western population in the south-central States of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, southern Kansas, and Missouri. Painted Buntings migrate south to southern Florida, the Caribbean Islands, Mexico, and Central America for the winter.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet of this species?**

Preferred nesting habitat includes partly open areas with scattered brush and trees, riparian thickets and brush, including swamps, weedy and shrubby areas, and woodland edges. Along the Atlantic coast, scrub communities and edges of maritime hammocks likely provide key natural habitats. Painted Buntings are also found in hedges and yards, roadside thickets, fallow fields, and shrubby areas. In their wintering range, Painted Buntings are found in dense cover of high grass, overgrown shrubby pasture, and areas with other similar low, crowded vegetation. The Painted Bunting diet varies between seasons. Outside the breeding season they are granivorous (seed eaters), but during the breeding season they eat mainly arthropods.

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

There is little data regarding population trends for this species, particularly for the eastern population. The Breeding Bird Survey (2000 data) has documented a significant long-term population decline of 2.7% annually for the overall Painted Bunting population since 1966.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Our limited knowledge of the biology of the species, ongoing habitat alteration and destruction, and the limited and narrow distribution of the disjunct eastern population are three major causes for concern for this species. We have little knowledge of most aspects of the Painted Bunting's life history. The eastern population faces loss and degradation of breeding habitat due to development of swampy thickets and woodland edges, its preferred habitat. In addition, the eastern population may be affected by parasitism from invading Brown-headed Cowbirds, which lay their eggs in Painted Bunting nests. Habitat is also being lost and degraded in the western population, particularly along the western edge of its range, and there is concern for habitat loss and degradation of its migration molt staging areas in Mexico. There is a great need for further information regarding habitat requirements on breeding and wintering grounds as well as on the molt staging areas used by western populations.

## **Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*)**

The Eastern Meadowlark is one of the most representative and easily identified birds of farmland and open country in the eastern United States. Despite the pleasing quality of its plaintive song, which is welcomed by many as a harbinger of spring, the meadowlark is not actually a lark but is, instead, related to the blackbirds.

### **What is the range of this species?**

The Eastern Meadowlark ranges from the Great Plains (roughly Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona) to the Eastern Seaboard, and from southern Canada to Panama. Birds in the northernmost portions of the range are migratory, but elsewhere the Eastern Meadowlark resides year-round. The birds' greatest population densities occur in the grasslands of Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

### **What is the preferred habitat and diet for this species?**

The eastern meadowlark is most commonly found in native grasslands, pastures, and savannas, but also occurs in hay and alfalfa fields, roadsides, reclaimed strip mines, grassy areas of airports, shrubby overgrown fields, and other open areas. The birds' diet consists mostly of insects (75%), with the remainder vegetable matter. The insects eaten are chiefly crickets and grasshoppers. The main winter diet consists of noxious weed seeds and waste grains (mainly corn).

### **What are the population trends for this species?**

Declines have occurred throughout the range, but have been most severe in the urbanized northeastern United States. Rangewide, populations have declined at a rate of about 2.9% per year from 1966-2000. That means that only about half as many Eastern Meadowlarks are being detected on standardized survey routes today than just 30 years ago.

### **Why is there conservation concern for this species?**

Although the range of the Eastern Meadowlark is extensive and populations relatively large, the severe population decline from 1966-2000 is cause for concern and indicates a need for continued monitoring its status. Meadowlarks are extremely sensitive to the presence of humans in their breeding territories and may abandon nests at the least disturbance. Abandonment of farms, resulting in their slow transformation from fields to woodlands, as well as conversion of farms to housing developments or shopping malls means less nesting habitat for meadowlarks. Agricultural practices (e.g., conversion of native grasslands to row crops, livestock grazing, early spring mowing of hay, and pesticide application) also have negative impacts on meadowlark populations.