

NEWS RELEASE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Mountain-Prairie Region

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For Immediate Release

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LISTING OF SPRAGUE'S PIPIT UNDER ESA FOUND WARRANTED BUT PRECLUDED

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has determined that the Sprague's pipit, a small grassland bird, warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act (Act), but that listing the species under the Act is precluded by the need to address other listing actions of a higher priority. The Sprague's pipit will be classified as a candidate species until a listing proposal can be prepared. Candidate species do not receive statutory protection under the ESA and remain state-managed species.

The Service has completed a comprehensive status review – known as a 12-month finding – and determined that there is sufficient scientific and commercial data to propose listing the species as threatened or endangered throughout its range. However, the Service is precluded from beginning work immediately on a listing proposal because its limited resources must be devoted to other, higher priority actions.

The Sprague's pipit both breeds and winters on the North American prairie. The breeding range includes parts of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota in the United States. In Canada, Sprague's pipits breed in parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The species' wintering range includes parts of Arizona, Texas, southern Oklahoma, southern Arkansas, northwest Mississippi, southern Louisiana, and northern Mexico.

The Sprague's pipit is one of the few endemic species to the North American grasslands. Once common, their numbers have now declined drastically. Grassland birds have declined faster than any other avian group in North America.

The Service determined that the Sprague's pipit is warranted for listing due to loss of habitat and the inadequacy of existing regulations to protect the habitat.

Sprague's pipits require grassland habitat for both breeding and wintering. Native prairie is one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the world, with a conversion rate faster than that of the Amazon rainforest. In addition to direct conversion, prairie habitat is being fragmented, especially by energy (oil and gas and wind) development. Sprague's pipits require relatively large patches of prairie for nesting (estimated at between 170-776 acres). They avoid non-prairie features in the landscape, so the impact of an object (for example, an oil and gas well) is much

larger than the actual footprint of the feature. Energy development is increasing rapidly throughout the breeding range of the Sprague's pipit, a trend that is expected to continue.

When a "warranted but precluded" finding is made for a species, the Service classifies it as a candidate for listing and reviews its status annually. When a candidate species is proposed for listing, the public has an opportunity to provide scientific information.

Sprague's pipits have buff and blackish streaking on the crown, nape, and underparts, a short bill with a blackish upper mandible and a buffy face with a large eye ring. Males and females are similar, as are juveniles, which are slightly smaller.

Sprague's pipits, their active nests, and eggs are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. However, this law does not protect habitat. Except for some discrete protected areas on the breeding and wintering grounds, prairie habitat is not protected anywhere on the range. Since habitat loss is the main threat impacting the species, the Service does not consider the existing regulatory mechanisms to be sufficient to protect the species.

Sprague's pipits use grassland habitat almost exclusively throughout the year. During the breeding season, Sprague's pipits favor relatively large grassland patches. The male has a high breeding flight display that can last up to three hours. On the ground, Sprague's pipits have very secretive behavior, landing several meters away from the nest and approaching on foot. Surveys have found a long-term (approximately 40-year) population decline of approximately 3.9 percent annually.

The Service made today's determination in response to a petition filed October 9, 2008 by WildEarth Guardians. The Service acknowledged receipt of the petition in a letter to the petitioners dated December 5, 2008, and advised that the petition finding would be completed in fiscal year 2009. In January 2009, WildEarth Guardians filed a notice of intent to sue citing the Service's failure to take action on the petition. The Service completed an initial review on December 3, 2009 and concluded that the petition contained substantial information supporting a full study of the Sprague's pipit's status. In a settlement agreement, the Service agreed to submit a 12-month status review finding to the *Federal Register* by September 10, 2010.

A copy of the finding and other information about the Sprague's pipit is available on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/spraguespipit/index.html>, or by contacting the North Dakota Field Office, 3425 Miriam Avenue, Bismarck, ND 58501, 701-250-4481.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.