

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.

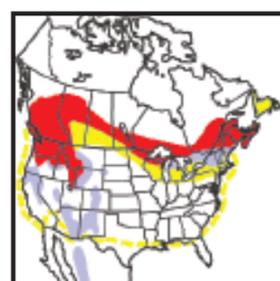
Outlook: Major efforts under way to increase good bobwhite habitat, including the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, should reverse drops in the populations of bobwhites and other grassland birds.



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

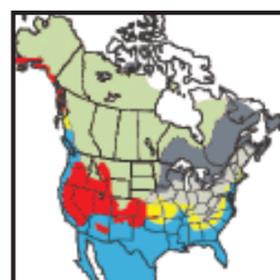
forests, are susceptible to anything that affects those habitats: logging, mining, drilling, global warming, acid rain, and development for transportation and housing. Chemical control of spruce budworm and other tree pests reduces this species' food supply and may cause secondary poisoning. Competition 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 pot-hole 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

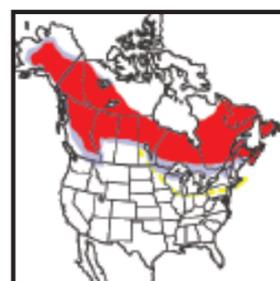
along ocean coasts, usually in large rafts.
Threats: Global warming is causing dramatic changes in the greater scaup's tundra breeding grounds, notably an earlier melting of permafrost and the invasion of formerly more southern species. In the Great Lakes, invasive species such as zebra mussels outcompete 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,

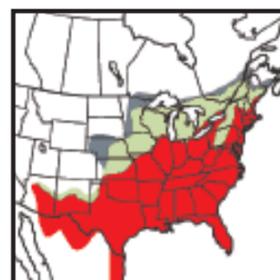
drilling, and mining. Boreal chickadees respond favorably to spruce budworm outbreaks unless the chemical control of spruce budworm or other pests in spruce-fir forests overwhelm the food supply those insects represent.
Outlook: A brighter future for the boreal chickadee will come with better logging,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

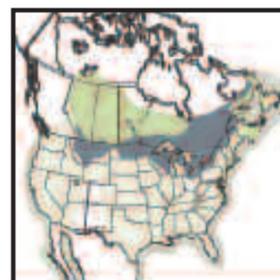
acres currently being protected under the farm bill's Conservation Reserve Program will be converted from the meadowlarks' prairie habitat to cornfields.
Outlook: The eastern meadowlark's short-term outlook isn't good because of the current push to grow more monocultures for ethanol as well as the continuing 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*.

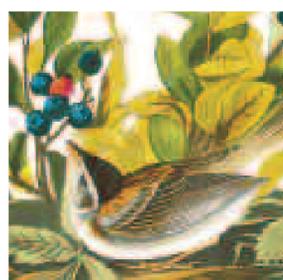
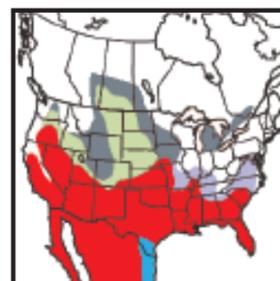
Habitat: Nests on islands with sparse vegetation; forages for fish (90 percent of its diet) near shore in oceans, lakes, and rivers. Feeds farther offshore in winter, mostly in saltwater.
Threats: Human development along lakes and rivers threatens nest sites; pollution can deplete fish in lakes and rivers; 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 *bzeek, bzeek* 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

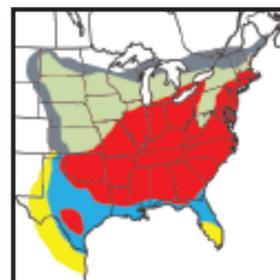
species. A lot of northeastern farmland has been abandoned and is either reverting to forest or being lost to suburbs or other human development. In the rest of the country, farmland is being used more intensively, leaving dwindling habitat for loggerhead shrikes and other grass-loving birds.
Outlook: 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.

