

FINAL REPORT

WPF GRANT #06-019W

Grassland Birds: The Habitat Connection

Project Description

Development of a brochure highlighting the important connection between habitat and the success of breeding birds in Illinois dependent on grasslands. Designed to educate the general public on this ecological concept.

Method

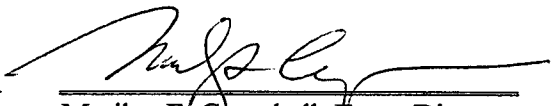
Text written, photos obtained, and layout completed by I.A.S. staff with input from I.D.N.R. staff and contract worker (Scott Simpson, Jeff Walk.)
Printed by contract with I.A.S.

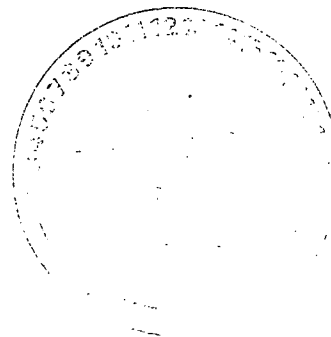
Copies of finished product enclosed.

Budget

Printing Costs	\$1491
I.A.S. match	- 500
Grant Request	\$ 991

Submitted for reimbursement of funds by


Marilyn F. Campbell, Exec. Director
Illinois Audubon Society



To see greater prairie-chickens, you will need to visit the Prairie Ridge State Natural Area. Each spring, several opportunities to view these rare birds close-up from observation blinds are available, but reservations must usually be made a year in advance. There are also opportunities for roadside viewing of the birds in both Jasper and Marion Counties. For specific information on prairie-chicken viewing and to make reservations, contact the PRSNA office at 618-783-2685.

The Illinois Audubon Society sponsors an early spring trip for viewing prairie-chickens each year, and also a summer field trip for viewing breeding grassland birds. For details, visit www.illinoisaudubon.org

Grassland birds can be viewed at two I.A.S. sanctuaries which are adjacent to state properties at Prairie Ridge SNA. A trail and wetland observation deck is located at Robert Ridgway Grasslands Nature Preserve, south of Newton, and is open all year. The Karl Bartel Sanctuary Land & Water Reserve in Marion County, near Kimmunity, has a trail which is also open all year. Both are good areas to see a variety of both grassland and wetland birds. Other areas noted on the map in this brochure also provide fine birding opportunities.



THE ILLINOIS AUDUBON SOCIETY

Established 1897
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GRASSLAND BIRDS: The Habitat Connection

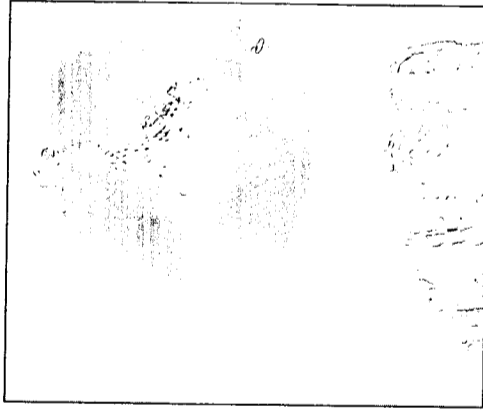


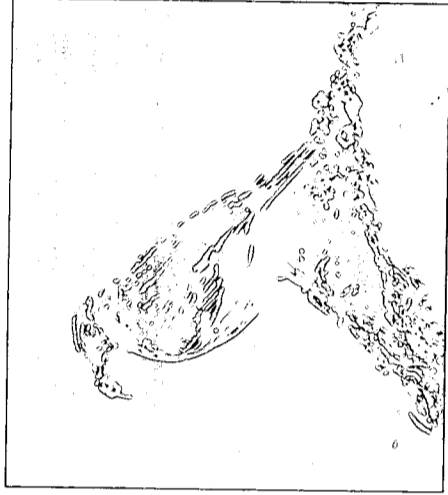
Photo courtesy of Bill Glass

Birds and other wildlife are dependent on forests, wetlands, grasslands and other kinds of ecosystems for their survival. In looking at the decline in many kinds of wildlife populations, loss of high quality habitat emerges as a primary problem. Years of changing agricultural practices, urban sprawl, and the manipulation of natural resources has had a large impact on many wildlife species.

When nearly all the native grasslands in Illinois were converted to cropland, birds and other wildlife in "The Prairie State" which depended on this unique habitat went from abundance to near extinction. Had it not been for a dedicated group of people beginning in the late 1960's, our native grouse—the greater prairie-chicken—would have completely disappeared.

Some species managed to hang on by using hayfields, pastures and fallow fields. But as agriculture further changed to primarily row crops, wildlife was left with fewer places to live and—more importantly—to raise young. Grassland birds began a precipitous decline, with a loss of about 3% per year.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED



In the past 30 years, some species have plummeted to a mere fraction of their former numbers. Breeding Bird Census routes confirm that bobolinks have decreased by 96%. Grasshopper and savanna sparrows have declined by more than 90%. Dickcissel populations are down 68%. The evidence is clear: if birds do not have a place to nest and raise young successfully, their numbers cannot be sustained.

With the inception of the Conservation Reserve and the Conservation Reserve Easement programs, biologists thought that bird numbers would improve. Currently, 750,000 acres of former cropland have been set aside in Illinois, with much of it planted in grasses. Even so, most populations of grassland birds have continued to lose ground. Several are now listed as threatened or endangered in the state. This tells us that additional acres of habitat, alone, has not solved the problem. Some other factor, or factors, must be affecting the nesting success of short-eared owls, Northern harriers, meadow-larks, upland sandpipers and other birds of open fields, meadows and prairies.

Studies have shown that the size of the habitat available is critical to the nesting success of some grassland species, just as it is to some forest-dwelling birds. If blocks of habitat are too small, or too isolated from similar habitat, these species do not reproduce well enough to sustain their populations.

Fragmented habitat creates more "edge," which allows more predation by raccoons, domestic and feral cats, skunks, opossums, foxes, blue jays, crows and other species attracted to woody edges. These areas also allow more nest parasitism by the brown-headed cowbird. We now know that in both forests and grasslands, the size and shape of habitat and the amount and type of edge can all have a negative effect on nesting success.

The diversity of grassland types also plays a role in nesting. Some species, such as upland sandpipers, prefer short vegetation. Other species require medium-tall cover for nesting. Still others seek out taller prairie vegetation, especially those birds with foraging young which feed on grasshoppers and other insects that are abundant in that habitat.

Therefore, successful management for grassland birds must focus on maintaining a mosaic of grasses and forbs in varying combinations which will satisfy the needs of all species using the habitat.

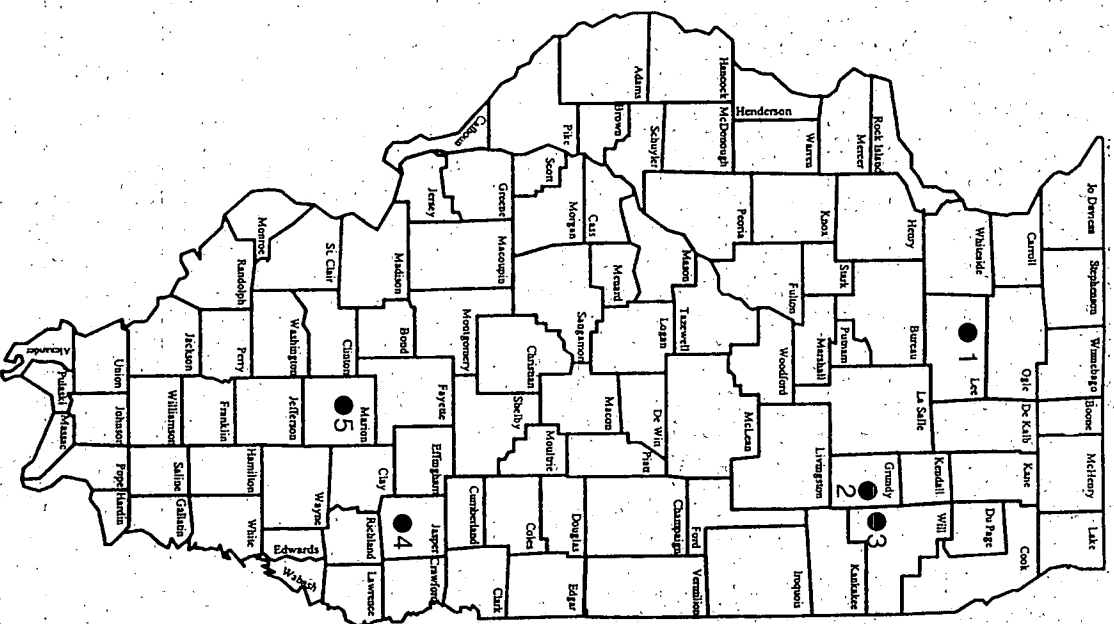




GRASSLAND BIRDS TODAY

Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, with about 4,000 acres in Jasper and Marion Counties, is the last stronghold of the greater prairie-chicken in Illinois. While it was once known only as the "Prairie Chicken Refuge," PRSNA's management now focuses on 17 species of state-threatened and endangered birds and wildlife which reside there. In addition, the site is a core breeding area for 21 bird species in greatest need of conservation in Illinois. Prairie Ridge SNA, which has several wetlands interspersed among grasslands, is also an important stop-over for many migrating birds such as Smith's longspur, black and Forster's terns, Wilson's snipe, dowitchers, bitterns, American golden-plover and many more species of shorebirds and waterfowl. In June, 2005, the critical habitat provided at Prairie Ridge SNA was recognized as an Important Bird Area in Illinois.

Besides Prairie Ridge SNA (sites 4 & 5 on the map below), other important grassland sites in the state, which also host several species of threatened and endangered species, include Goose Lake Prairie State Park (2), near Morris; Nachusa Grasslands (1), near Franklin Grove; and the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (3), near Joliet.



THERE IS MORE TO BE DONE...

If grassland birds are to survive in Illinois, we must restore more large blocks of cultivated ground to hayfields and grasses. Individual landowners can help by delaying mowing of grassy areas until after August 1st each year.

Maintaining current grasslands in good condition is vital to the future success of our birds of meadows and fields. Using prescribed burns at 3-to 5-year intervals, or introducing *light* grazing will provide the diversity needed by some species.

Planting new areas in native grasses, legumes and forbs (herbaceous broad-leaved plants) will increase good nesting habitat. Care should be taken to avoid invasive species, such as fescue, sweet clover and reed canary grass.

Prairie Ridge SNA and the Illinois Audubon Society have formed an important partnership for the benefit of grassland birds. Since 2000, the Society has acquired hundreds of acres of land which have been added to the Prairie Ridge site, as well as developing three of its own grass-

land sanctuaries within the project area. This activity has played a major role in the recent increase in numbers of greater prairie-chickens censused on the spring booming grounds in 2005.

According to *A Plan for the Recovery of the Greater Prairie-Chicken in Illinois*, published in 2004, at least an additional 2,000 acres of grasslands or grassland easements are needed within the Prairie Ridge SNA project area to ensure the long-term success of our native grouse. Otherwise, it will remain endangered.

Illinois Audubon Society is continuing to focus on this critical grassland habitat, and readily accepts donations for both land acquisition and on-going management. You can help grassland birds directly with a gift to purchase more land, or to assist with continued maintenance of this important habitat.

For further information, contact Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, 4295 North 1000th St., Newton, IL 62448, or call (618) 783-2685. To learn more about what Illinois Audubon is doing to protect birds and their habitats, visit its website at www.illinoisaudubon.org.



ENJOYING GRASSLAND BIRDS

There are many places to see the more common grassland birds, including state and county parks, conservation and forest preserve district properties, and other similar areas in Illinois.