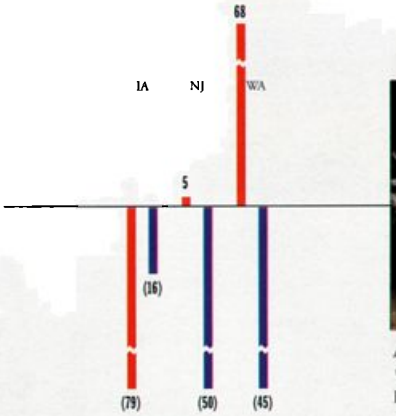
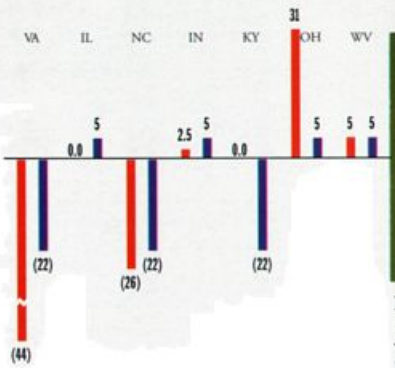


AMERICAN GOLDFINCH
Carduelis tristis
Iowa, New Jersey, Washington



NORTHERN CARDINAL
Cardinalis cardinalis
Virginia, Illinois, North Carolina, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia

What is the State of State Birds?

IS IT A COINCIDENCE, or the embarrassing reflection of an inferiority complex, that each of our two smallest states, Rhode Island and Delaware, chose as its "state bird" a chicken? Such questions trouble the observer who tries to find meaning in the heraldic symbolism under which our constituent political entities hope to present a prestigious face to the world.

In other words, what kind of birds turn people on when they are looking for symbols, and how are the birds themselves making out? It is widely known that if Ben Franklin had gotten his way, our nation's emblem would have been a turkey. And yet, though martial sentiment prevailed in that case, not one state emulated the Founding Fathers by opting for a majestic bird of prey. Not one even considered a member of that gorgeous avian family unique to our hemisphere—the hummingbirds, such as the Calliope of the west.

So the list of state birds includes seven Northern Cardinals, six Western Meadowlarks, five Northern Mockingbirds, three American Robins, and three American Goldfinches. When asked why his state had adopted the latter, Pete Dunne of the New Jersey Audubon Society shrugged and replied, "Just lack of imagination."

The idea of celebrating a bird was foreign to most legislators of by-gone eras. They scorned "dickey birds" and joshed that their state bird was a mosquito, a black fly, or whatever other winged

beast plagued them when they went out into the swamps to shoot hawks. Birds only came into their own after World War I when Audubon Societies, garden clubs, and even school kids began to flex their political muscles. According to Arthur Singer, who illustrated all the state birds for a 1982 issue of commemorative postage stamps, the Kentucky legislature was the first to act officially when it adopted the cardinal in 1927.

There were unofficial ties between states and birds, of course, much earlier. Because its black and orange plumage echoed the colors of Lord Baltimore, the first proprietor and colonizer of Maryland, a common member of the blackbird family came to be called the Baltimore Oriole and has always been associated with the state. The Black-eyed Susan, with similar colors, is the Maryland flower, and a baseball team continues to flout the lumpers in the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), who insist that the state's mascot is simply a subspecies of the Northern Oriole.

Five states south of the Mason-Dixon Line, including Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas, adopted the Northern Mockingbird (before the AOU sullied the name with the abominable prefix). In 1927, the Texas legislature adopted a resolution proclaiming the mocker "a fighter for the protection of his home, falling, if need be, in its defense, like any Texan."

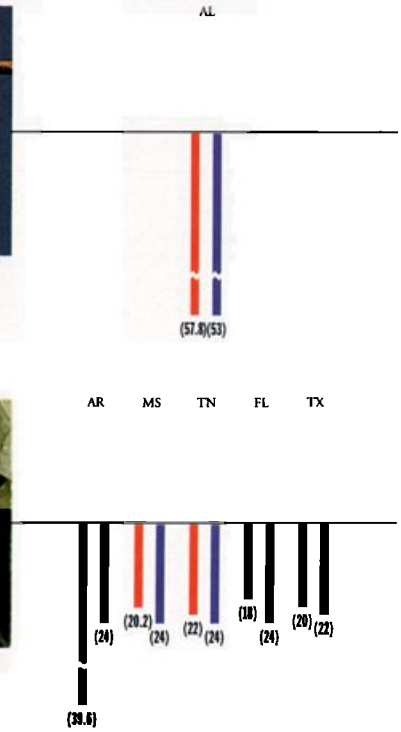
But orthodox ornithological nomenclature sometimes takes a back seat to states' rights. Alabama lists its bird as the Yellowhammer, a vernacular name for the Yellow-shafted Flicker which is said to have been so honored because its flashing underwings brought to mind the yellow-trimmed uniforms of the Confederate cavalry. And Washington State at least put a novel twist on its 1951 designation of the American Goldfinch when it identified it as a Pacific subspecies, the Willow Goldfinch

Delaware has remained committed to the Blue Hen, named for an avian matriarch whose offspring gained renown as fighting cocks and provided amusement for a company of Delaware soldiers during the American Revolution. When the soldiers proved their grit in battle, their admirers began referring to them as Blue Hen's Chickens, and the name has been passed down through Delaware's history—to distinguish another indomitable fighting force during the Civil War, appear on the state flag, and serve as mascot for the university's various athletic teams.

Utah settlers singled out the California Gull for another kind of glory. In 1848, when the new

NORTHERN FLICKER
(YELLOW-SHAFTED)
Colaptes auratus
Alabama

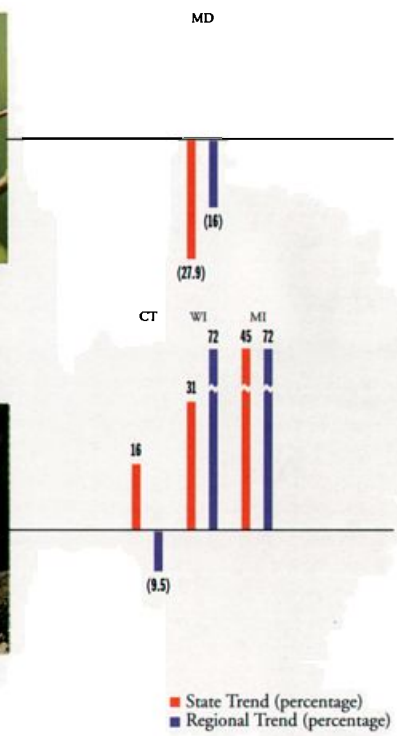
NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD
Mimus polyglottos
Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, Texas



The news? In 22 states, the official bird had a decreasing population over the past 25 years. In another 22, the state symbol was stable or increasing. **By Frank Graham, Jr.**

NORTHERN ORIOLE
(BALTIMORE)
Icterus galbula
Maryland

AMERICAN ROBIN
Turdus migratorius
Connecticut, Wisconsin, Michigan



Data for the charts is taken from Breeding Bird Surveys coordinated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Figures indicate the percentage increase or decrease over the 25 years from 1966-1991. Regional trends represent the area in which the state is located. Data is strongest for areas with extensive road systems; it is weakest for states with large roadless areas and fewer volunteers, often in the west.

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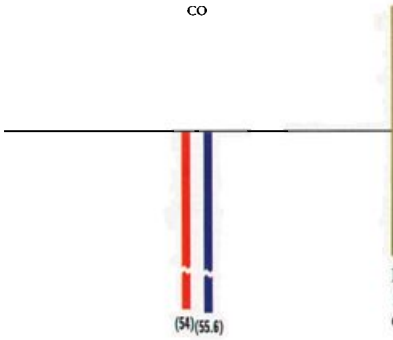
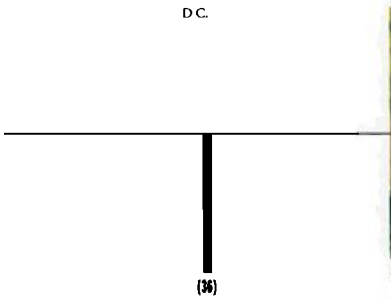
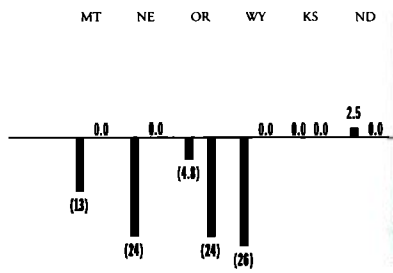


LARK BUNTING
Calamospiza melanocorys
Colorado

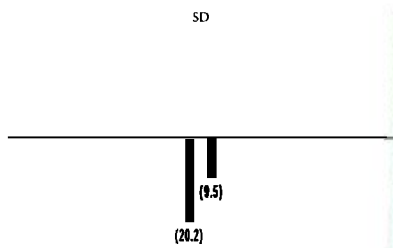


WOOD THRUSH
Hylocichla mustelina
District of Columbia

Many states require a high level of service of their bird. The six that adopted the Western Meadowlark are said to have been swayed by its capacity for devouring grasshoppers.



WESTERN MEADOWLARK
Sturnella neglecta
Montana, Nebraska, Oregon, Wyoming, Kansas, North Dakota



RING-NECKED PHEASANT
Phasianus colchicus
South Dakota

Mormon colony was struggling to harvest its first food crop, the fields were overrun by wingless katydids (*Anabrus simplex*, now called the "Mormon Cricket"). The disaster that confronted the settlers was described by Orson F. Whitney in his *History of Utah:*

"Just in the midst of the work of destruction great flocks of gulls appeared....All day long they gorged themselves, and when full, disgorged and feasted again...until the pests were vanquished and the people were saved. The heaven-sent birds then returned to the lake islands whence they came."

Utah's people erected a handsome monument to the gulls in Salt Lake City, "in grateful remembrance of the mercy of God to the Mormon pioneers." In 1955, the state legislature designated the species their state bird.

Another bird to which a state has dedicated a monument, also for culinary reasons, is the Rhode Island Red. In the late nineteenth century, Isaac Wilbour, a poultry dealer in Little Compton, acquired some red roosters from a local man named Tripp, who in turn had first bred the birds from a cock brought home from southeast Asia by a sailor. Turning the roosters loose in his barnyard with some common buff hens, Wilbour was delighted by the results—hardy, good tasting fowl whose big brown eggs were just what the New England market was looking for. Dubbed Rhode Island Reds, the new breed gained wide favor around the country and its statue can be viewed today in the village of Adamsville, which is part of Little Compton.

"We promoted the Black-capped Chickadee for state bird," says Eugenia Marks of the Rhode Island Audubon Society, "but the historic and agricultural forces prevailed."

Obviously, many states require a high level of service of their bird. The six that adopted the Western Meadowlark—North Dakota, Wyoming, Oregon, Montana, Kansas, and Nebraska—are all said to have been swayed by its capacity for devouring the dreaded grasshopper. Other states seem to have chosen a species not for service, but just because it fits. What, indeed, could be fitter than these match-ups? Alaska/Willow Ptarmigan; Arizona/Cactus Wren; Minnesota/Common Loon; New Mexico/Greater Roadrunner; South Carolina/Carolina Wren. And should Oklahoma even have to give a reason for favoring the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher?

Ornithologist Stanley E. Senner attended a meeting in Colorado not long ago and came away wondering exactly why the Lark Bunting was the

PHOTOGRAPHS TOP TO BOTTOM A. MORRIS/VIREO, ROB SIMPSON, SHERM SPOELSTRA, ROB & MELISSA SIMPSON

state bird. During a discussion on the subject, someone had ventured that the mountain regions of the state received most of the publicity, so the bunting was picked to draw attention to its grasslands. No, another party interjected: The selection was made during the depth of the Depression (1931), when the state had neither the technology nor the spare change to illustrate its bird in full color. Thus the Lark Bunting's black-and-white plumage proved decisive. It's a nice bird, anyway.

Well, how are these birds doing? Trends revealed by the Breeding Bird Survey, annually conducted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service show that the mixed results can hardly be called encouraging. Of those covered by the data, he found 22 states had increasing or stable populations for their state bird, and 22 declining. Seven state birds did not have appropriate BBS data. (The figures appear in the accompanying charts.) Here is a random sampling.

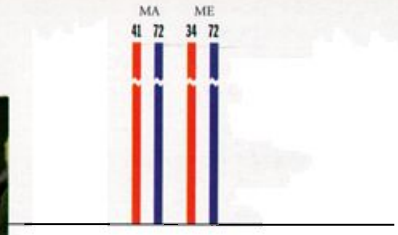
Hawaii, of course, started with the bleakest of prospects, a little like a family that adopts a child in an iron lung. The Nene, or Hawaiian Goose, was once abundant. But it is a queer goose, avoiding water and feeding much like an upland bird. Modern Hawaii is not conducive to its health, and hunters, habitat loss, and introduced predators such as the mongoose took their toll. Only 50 or so geese survived in the wild by 1951.

Hawaii officially adopted the Nene in 1957, two years before statehood, and a captive breeding program rescued it from extinction. But the species remains dependent, still prey to habitat loss and predators, and kept alive by frequent injections of recruits from the rearing pens.

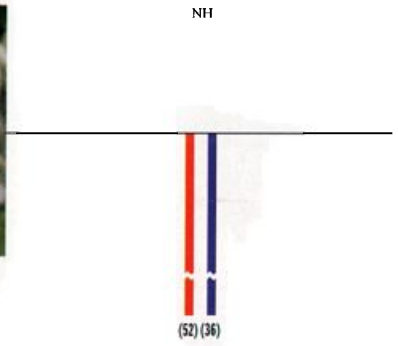
Whether this sort of life-support system can ever be brought into play for America's grassland species, and the state birds among them, is a question for the future.

"All the grassland birds are taking it on the chin," says Sam Droege of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "The Western Meadowlark is down across the board. The Lark Bunting shows a big drop on both the Breeding Bird Survey and the Christmas Bird Count—it's still super-abundant in some places, but those places are getting harder to find."

If the Common Flicker only behaved like the woodpecker it really is, it might be doing all right. But the species takes to the grasslands, too, in search of ants and has come to grief in Alabama and elsewhere. Heavy pesticide spraying in the fields, sometimes against fire ants, seems implicated in the decline. The Wood Thrush (honored in the District of Columbia) is another bird that

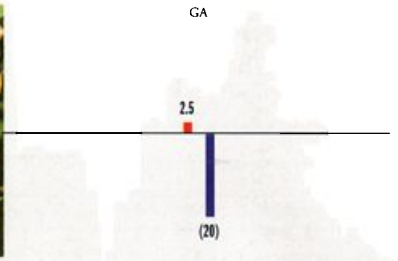


BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE
Parus atricapillus
Massachusetts, Maine

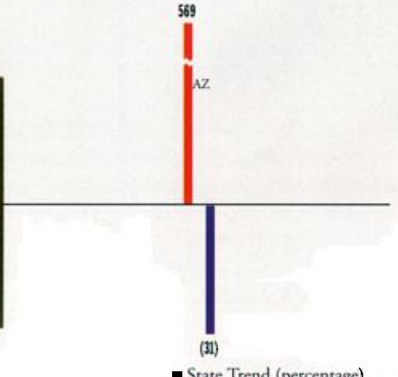


PURPLE FINCH
Carpodacus purpureus
New Hampshire

The Nene, or Hawaiian Goose, was once abundant. Modern Hawaii is not conducive to its health, and hunters, habitat loss, and introduced predators have taken their toll.



BROWN THRASHER
Toxostoma rufum
Georgia



CACTUS WREN
Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus
Arizona

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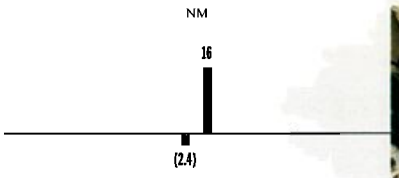
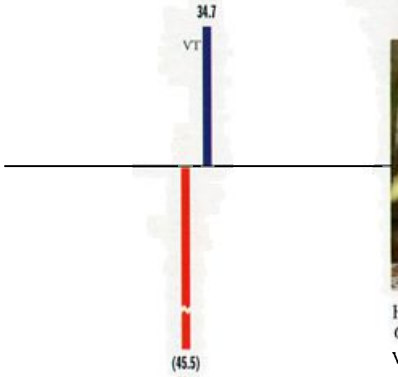
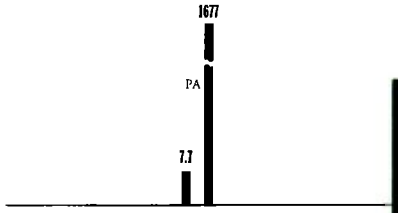


GREATER ROADRUNNER
Geococcyx californianus
New Mexico

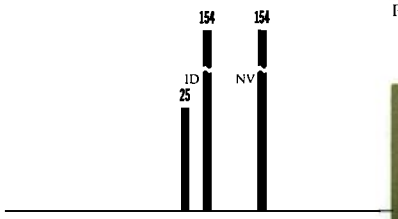


HERMIT THRUSH
Catharus guttatus
Vermont

There are bright spots in some states. The Eastern Bluebird is up, as is the California Quail and the Brown Pelican in Louisiana.



RUFFED GROUSE
Bonasa umbellus
Pennsylvania



MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD
Sialia currucoides
Idaho, Nevada

■ State Trend (percentage)
■ Regional Trend (percentage)

takes to the ground and is among the most beleaguered of all the neotropical migrants.

There are bright spots. The Eastern Bluebird (adopted by New York and Missouri) is "up, up, up," despite being hard hit during the past winter, according to Droege. The California Quail, emblem of the Golden State, was nearly wiped out by market gunners before finding it could make an easier living in urban parks. And Louisiana's state bird, the Brown Pelican, has made a remarkable comeback from its misfortunes during the DDT era, when it simply vanished from the state.

"The pelican had exactly zero reproduction here in 1960, and by 1963 it had disappeared from our coast," reports Louisiana biologist Larry McNeace. "In 1968 we began a reintroduction program with pelicans from Florida and the population has taken off. We had five sizable colonies in 1993, with 5000 breeding pairs and reproduction that ranged from 1.3 to 1.7 per nest."

And what about those chickens? The Rhode Island Red is probably a success story, if you aren't looking for purity. As a show bird, it lives on in very dark plumage, while its genes persist in a variety of hybrid forms in the poultry business. Pure lines exist, but they are not common.

"I kept a pure line going at the University of Rhode Island," says Richard Millar, a poultry specialist who retired last June."But the people at the university thought it was too much trouble and couldn't wait for me to leave. By last September, my line of 'Reds' was gone."

True Blue Hens no longer exist anywhere Derived from game chickens in England, the breed's original blood lines were lost after the Revolutionary War. A few years ago, the University of Delaware received some birds from the DuPont family that were the results of an attempt to reestablish the breed.

"There had been a lot of in-breeding and the cocks were pretty decrepit," says State Veterinarian H. Wesley Towers. "They had lost the blue color. Some people here tried to get the color back by breeding the bird with Blue Adulusians, which look something like Leghorns, but the result was nothing like a game cock."

Meanwhile, Robert Carpenter, the owner of the Philadelphia Phillies and a great fan of cockfighting, tried to maintain a string of his own blue fighting cocks.

"He didn't fight the Blue Hen Chickens, of course," says Towers, who helped Carpenter in his breeding experiments. "They weren't good enough, especially for the kind of money he was betting.

PHOTOGRAPHS, TOP TO BOTTOM: ROB SIMPSON, PETER LATOURRETTE, ROB SIMPSON, STEVE MASLOWSKI

After he died, most of the Blue Hens came to me—the hens are blue, but the roosters are really red. I've crossed a rooster with pullets from the University. They've still got too much red, but the body type is good."

Towers says the Blue Hens will be at the 1994 Delaware State Fair, the last week of July. Fanciers of this antiqued breed, and admirers of state birds in general, may want to be on hand.

JUST HOW DID WE MAKE THESE CHARTS that tell the story of state birds? It was an impressive process that involved Breeding Bird Surveys, some detective work by a 12-year-old in Colorado, and the generous use of a computer spreadsheet to help the math-impaired do calculations in a snap!

Nathan Senner, son of National Audubon Society's Stan Senner, suggested to his father that a story on state birds would be interesting for *American Birds*. Nathan promptly compiled the information that we used in our charts, using data from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Breeding Bird Surveys.

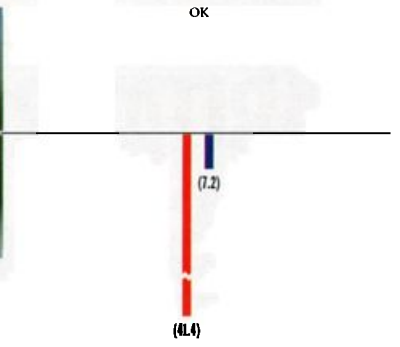
There are some 3000 BBS routes throughout North America. The surveys involve thousands of volunteers, who drive the established routes and count birds both by sight and, importantly, song. Male breeding birds are setting up territory at the time, thus singing birds defending their turf give a good indication of population density in an area.

Not surprisingly, the BBS gets the greatest coverage in the eastern United States, due to an abundance of volunteers and a well-developed road system in the more densely populated region. In the western states, wide-open territories with few roads and fewer volunteers make the sample somewhat weaker. But continuous coverage over the years makes trends apparent.

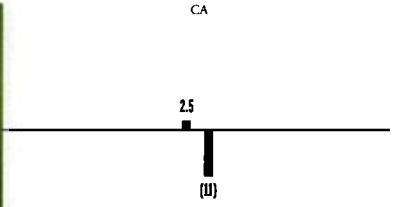
The Fish and Wildlife Service data are given in the form of percent annual change for each species. But by using the same formula that bankers use to compound interest on mortgage loans, we were able to calculate the overall decline during the 25 years between 1966 and 1991.

BBS data is not appropriate for some state birds, such as the two species of domestic fowl. Other birds not included are the Endangered Hawaiian Goose, Alaska's Willow Ptarmigan, Louisiana's Brown Pelican, the California Gull of Utah, and the Common Loon in Minnesota.

Frank Graham Jr. is author of Audubon Ark *and a frequent contributor to* American Birds.

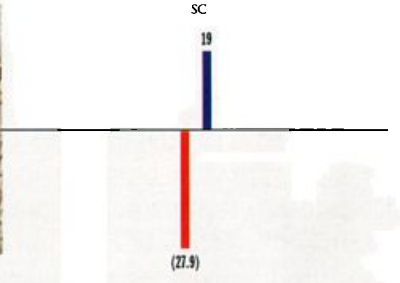


SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER
Tyrannus forficatus
Oklahoma

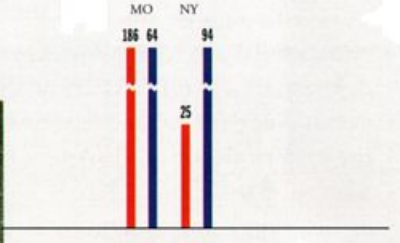


CALIFORNIA QUAIL
Callipepla californica
California

What about the chickens? Rhode Island Reds exist, but are uncommon. True Blue Hens were lost after the Revolutionary War.



CAROLINA WREN
Thryothorus ludovicianus
South Carolina



EASTERN BLUEBIRD
Sialia sialis
Missouri, New York

■ State Trend (percentage)
■ Regional Trend (percentage)

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