

Northern Great Plains



Bald Eagles continue to proliferate in the Dakotas. First county nestings were recorded for *Grand Forks*, ND 12 Jul (EEF, DOL) and in *Haakon*, SD 8 Jul (DB). Golden Eagles were noted nesting in *Morton*, ND 18 Jul, the first recorded nesting in cen. North Dakota in modern times (*vide* HCT). Merlins nesting in Fargo provided the first record for *Cass*, ND 7 Jul (DOL, KRC).

SHOREBIRDS THROUGH OWLS

A possible 6th record for Montana, a *Snowy Plover* was at Bowdoin N.W.R. 11 Jun (p.a., SJD). In South Dakota, a *Mountain Plover* was photographed 13 Jul in *Pennington* (p.a., BB, EC). This furnished the first record since 1977 and only the 2nd since 1950. A *Whimbrel* in *Kidder*, ND 6 Jun tied the latest date for a spring migrant in the state (p.a., GK, LK). A *Hudsonian Godwit* was at Freezeout Lake N.W.R. 21–25 Jul (p.a., BM); Montana records are now nearing 20.

Up to 2 *Lesser Black-backed Gulls* in *Pierre*, SD 1–20 Jun furnished the first summer records for the state (p.a., KM, RDO). Providing the first Jul and 2nd summer record for South Dakota, a *Black-legged Kittiwake* was seen in *Lawrence* 2 Jul (p.a., TJ, DGP); the bird was later found dead.

The first Jun record for North Dakota, an ad. *Sabine's Gull* was in *Grand Forks* 12 Jun (p.a., EEF, ph. BF).

White-winged Dove reports seem to be on the increase. This season, a single in *Phillips* 18 Jun would provide the 5th for Montana (p.a., SJD). Also in Montana, *Eurasian Collared-Doves* were recorded at five locations, with nesting confirmed in *Miles City* and *Malta* (LP, DP). The *Barn Owl* saga continued in the Region. After two reports this spring in North Dakota, another bird appeared in a *Mandan* yard 22 Jun (p.a., VG, ph. HCT).

Usually considered a rare summer resident in South Dakota, *Barn Owls* were detected nesting in an astounding nine locations along *L. Oahe* in *Sully* and *Hughes* (KM). *Short-eared Owls* were present in good numbers in North Dakota, w. South Dakota, and ne. Montana.

NIGHTHAWKS THROUGH KINGLETS

Several observers in Montana noted their first *Common Nighthawks* of the year from mid- to late June. A *Ruby-throated Hummingbird* in *Malta* 17 Jun was a very unusu-

Ron Martin

16900 125th Street SE

Sawyer, North Dakota 58781-9284

(jrmartin@ndak.net)

“Cool” was the operative word for the summer season. Glasgow, Montana saw its third coolest June on record, and *Grand Forks*, North Dakota marked the seventh coolest on record. July was also below average across most of the Region. Much of North Dakota saw frost in late June, with a low of 25° F in *Hettinger*. Precipitation was average in most areas, but southwestern North Dakota and western South Dakota remained dry. Rainfall was also well below average in northeastern North Dakota.

Vireo and *warbler* migration was still heavy the first week of June, and *Common Nighthawks* were very late moving into Montana. Several observers commented on the better-than-average shorebird migration. Nesting was generally very late, with many species still singing at the end of the period. Production was thought to be low for most passerines. Duck nesting was also late and not very productive in North Dakota. Changing water levels at *Freezeout Lake National Wildlife Refuge* in Montana resulted in almost total nesting failure for many waterbirds.



Providing only the sixth record for Montana, this *Snowy Plover* was photographed on 11 June 2004 at *Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge*. The species may well have benefited from drought conditions in the West in recent years. Photograph by *Stephen J. Dinsmore*.

IBIS THROUGH RAPTORS

A *Glossy Ibis* 14–20 Jul at *Freezeout Lake* N.W.R. furnished the first record for Montana (p.a., JN, ph. MS). A *Trumpeter Swan* at the *Hillsboro*, ND sugar beet ponds 6 Jun continued the now regular sightings of this species in the state (ph. DOL). A bird thought to be a possible *Cinnamon Teal* x *Mallard* hybrid was documented 17 Jun in *Grand Forks* (EEF). Also in *Grand Forks*, a male *Long-tailed Duck* 7 Jun provided the 2nd summer record for North Dakota (p.a., EEF).

SA Chase Lake N.W.R. in *Stutsman*, ND is the site of the largest breeding colony of *American White Pelicans* in North America. Over a period of days early in the season, the entire population of 28,000 birds abandoned eggs and young and dispersed from the colony. The reason or reasons for this abandonment are still unknown.



This adult Sabine's Gull on 12 June 2004 at Grand Forks, North Dakota provided a first summer-season record for the state. Photograph by Bob Freeberg.



Sightings of Barn Owl appear to be on the increase in the Northern Great Plains region, much in contrast to the sharp decline of the species in the East. This bird was photographed 22 June 2004 in Morton County, North Dakota. Photograph by Clark Talkington.

al record for summer in Montana (p.a., EA). About the 9th report for South Dakota, a Calliope Hummingbird was in Pennington 19 Jul (p.a., JF, JB). Broad-tailed Hummingbirds were seen for the 3rd consecutive summer in the Black Hills, with three reports 7 Jun–17 Jul (JC, RDO).

A new high for North Dakota, 9 Olive-sided Flycatchers were in Grand Forks 3 Jun (EEF). Providing the 5th and 6th reports for Montana, Great Crested Flycatchers were near Medicine L. 27 May (p.a., SS) and at Westby 7 Jun (p.a., BM, MW). A Cassin's Kingbird in Phillips, MT 1 Jun was well n. of known breeding range (SJD). The 8th report for North Dakota, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was in Stutsman 21 Jul+ (p.a., RK, DNS, ph. REM). In South Dakota, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Custer 3–21 Jul provided the 12th report for the state (p.a., TJ, m.ob.).

A Common Raven at Medicine Lake N.W.R. 17–18 Jul was far from known nesting areas (EM). Brown Creepers were feeding young at Pierre 12 Jun (KM); this constitutes the first nesting record for South Dakota away from the Black Hills. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers continue to increase in South Dakota. This summer, the species was found nesting in three of the four corners of the state. A first for Roberts, a nest was found 26 Jun (p.a., JSP). In Union, nesting was confirmed 20 Jul (DS), and the Black Hills got its long-awaited first nesting in Custer 17 Jul (p.a., JB, DGP). The 3rd nesting for North Dakota, Golden-crowned Kinglets were feeding young in Ward 18 Jun (p.a., REM).

THRUSHES THROUGH GROSBEAKS

A Wood Thrush 15 Jun along the Tongue R. in Custer would, if accepted, furnish the 5th record for Montana (p.a., JM). A Sprague's Pipit nest being monitored with a camera at Bowdoin N.W.R. was depredated by a Western Meadowlark (PG).

An Orange-crowned Warbler carrying food for young in the Pembina Gorge 20 Jul provided the first confirmed nesting for this locally fairly common species in North Dakota (DOL). Small numbers of Lark Buntings appeared ne. of the Missouri R. in North Dakota, and the species was noted in Minnehaha, SD 31 Jul (RD). Baird's Sparrows have begun to re-occupy areas in cen. and e. North Dakota where they had been absent during the recent wet years. Le Conte's Sparrows were noted in low numbers in North Dakota, but Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows had another banner year. Just the 5th Jun report for North Dakota, a White-crowned Sparrow was at Valley City 23 Jun (JL). For the 3rd consecutive year, Blue Grosbeaks were found in Emmons, ND; a rare breeder in the state, 2 were noted 7 Jun (JM).

Contributors (state editors in boldface): MONTANA: Elsa Anderson, Charles Carlson, Stephen J. Dinsmore, Paula Gouse, Elizabeth Madden, Jeff Marks, Bob Martinka, John Nordrum, Larry Persacole, Dwain Prellwitz, Mike Schwitters, Shannon Swanson, Mike Weber. NORTH DAKOTA: Keith R. Corliss, Corey D. Ellingson, Eve E. Freeberg, Bob Freeberg, Val Gabbert, Gregg Knutsen, Lynda Knutsen, Rebecca Kreag, David O. Lambeth, Jean Legge, Ron E. Martin, Janelle Masters, H. Clark Talkington. SOUTH DAKOTA: Doug Backlund, Jocelyn Baker, Brad Bolduan, Jay Carlisle, Eddie Childers, Rosemary Draeger, Jennifer Fowler, Todd Jensen, Kenny Miller, Ricky D. Olson, Jeffrey S. Palmer, D. George Prisbe, Dave Swanson. 🐦



This Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, in Stutsman County, North Dakota 21 July 2004 furnished only the eighth report of this species for the state and the first since 1998. Photograph by Keith Corliss.

State of the Region

Ron Martin • 16900 125th Street SE • Sawyer, North Dakota 58781-9284
(jmartin@ndak.net)

The Northern Great Plains may be divided into two ecoregions: the Prairie Potholes (BCR 11) of the eastern and southern portion of the Region, and the Badlands and Prairies (BCR 17) of the western and northern portions. Common to both ecoregions are grasslands—probably the least understood and least appreciated ecosystem in North America. While perhaps not as glamorous as rainforests, native grasslands contain a great diversity of plant and animal life. Most people have little firsthand experience with grasslands and their unique species and therefore lack understanding of the complex relationships that characterize this dynamic ecosystem.

In recent decades, grassland birds have declined more precipitously than any other group of North American birds. These declines are due to degradation, fragmentation, and outright loss of prairie by conversion to agricultural cropland. Large tracts of quality native grassland are rare in the eastern Dakotas, and these tracts are becoming increasingly uncommon in western areas due to conversion. Much of the native grassland that remains is highly degraded by overgrazing, excessive rest, fire exclusion, and tree expansion. Statistically, many acres of grassland exist in these areas, but much of this grassland is a product of reseeding efforts via the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). These grasslands are not, however, the same as native prairie.

It could be argued that the Conservation Reserve Program, begun in 1988, was the worst thing that could have happened to native grasslands. Until 2002, farmers could plow native grasslands, crop them for a few years, and then enroll them in the Program. The loss of native grasslands in this era is truly lamentable. These lands have, however, benefited wildlife and certain grassland passerines. Widespread breeders such as Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, and Bobolink have shown signs of recovery in the Northern Great Plains since the advent of this program. At the southern edge of the Region, Dickcissels have also benefited. However, the lack of defoliation of these areas makes them undesirable to key endemic mixed-grass prairie species such as Ferruginous Hawk, Burrowing Owl, Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow, and Chestnut-collared Longspur. And now, in a twist of fate, even this habitat created by the CRP is threatened because Congress and the USDA may no longer fund the program at previous levels of support through the Farm Bill, which will be revisited in 2007.

An emerging threat to native grasslands is the recent arrival of genetically modified plants for use in the Northern Great Plains. Genetically modified dryland soybeans are now seeded directly into native sod in some areas and treated with herbicide. In addition, increases in the acreage of row crops like corn and soybeans in conventional farmland is also trending upward. While some grassland birds do use fields of small grains, these species seem to be absent in row-cropped areas. Changes in agricultural programs that encourage overproduction are needed to stem the tide of conversion that continues today.

The diversity of extant native grassland areas has also been reduced due to the con-

tinued decline of small colonial mammal populations. Burrowing Owls are now nearly extirpated east of the Missouri River, due (in part) to the extermination of Richardson's Ground Squirrels, on which they depend for breeding burrows. Similar declines have been noted west of the Missouri River due to the continued loss of Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies.

An often under-appreciated threat to grassland birds is excessive rest of prairies. The northern prairies evolved with frequent disturbance by herds of large herbivores, as well as fire. Many of the sites managed for "wildlife" in the Northern Great Plains are misguidedly protected from both large grazers and fire. As a result, these sites are often characterized by expanses of matted, exotic grasses invaded by exotic trees and forbs. As such, these areas support few grassland birds. Even the wetlands in such areas support relatively little wildlife due to the choking influence of unchecked cattail growth.

Despite their small percentage in terms of land area in the plains, woodlands are also a critical topic when considering prairie ecosystems. Many plains people have a strange relationship with trees, including a perverse desire to plant them in habitats where they do not belong and to destroy them in riparian areas where they are critical to migrant and nesting passerines. Many riparian areas in the Region are severely degraded, and the looming specter of tamarisk (salt cedar) only adds to the problem. As woody vegetation has expanded over prairie lands, we have created massive landscape-level changes. This landscape favors habitat generalists like Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owls to the detriment of the mixed-grass species previously mentioned. These generalists were surely only a minor part of the original prairies but are now the dominant raptors in these communities. The trees not only fragment the prairie but also encourage the proliferation of mammalian predators that were not part of the original prairie landscape. This in turn leads to higher nest predation of grassland birds. To illustrate the threat of increased forestation on the prairie, consider that the number one habitat recommendation of Greater Prairie-Chicken researchers is to maintain large, treeless expanses of native prairie. Sadly, state and federal agencies encourage these tree expansion practices, paving the way for the creation of a poor copy of Ohio in the Great Plains.

There are, however, bright spots in this otherwise dismal picture. The model for grassland restoration and preservation pioneered by Karen Smith and the staff at Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern North Dakota over the last 25 years offers hope for the acres that remain. The model they have created attempts to mimic the defoliation patterns of pre-European settlement. Using adaptive management, this model is now being modified regionally for application in other areas. The use of fire and cattle in this model has detractors in various environmental

and ranching groups, but attitudes are changing.

Another Regional bright spot is a conservation program entitled *Grasslands for Tomorrow*, supported by Ducks Unlimited member donations. The funds from this program are used by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service for grassland easements on private lands. The program pays ranchers to keep their land in native prairie and to refrain from converting it to cropland. This prairie not only supports the pothole-breeding species that hunters value but also the grassland species of concern to conservationists and birders. If funded sufficiently, this program has an excellent chance of preserving a way of life and a functioning grassland ecosystem for future generations. The ambitious goal of this program is to enroll 2.4 millions acres. Here is an opportunity for the birding community to step up and match the efforts of hunters by directly contributing to habitat conservation.

Perhaps the connotations of the word "conservation" are too passive. We must step forward and use the science and experience available to us. We cannot go on just documenting the declines and doing nothing because the available science does not give us the entire picture. *Action is the key.*



The Northern Great Plains is truly a realm of grasses, both native and exotic species. In recent decades, due to degradation, fragmentation, and conversion of prairie to farmland, grassland birds as a group have declined more precipitously than any other group of North American birds. Burrowing Owls (here in Valley County, northeastern Montana) are now nearly extirpated east of the Missouri River, due in part to the extermination of Richardson's Ground Squirrels, on which they depend for breeding burrows. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore.