Audubon TEXAS

COMMON BIRDS IN DECLINE

A State of the Birds Report
Summer 2007

Many of our most common and beloved birds are experiencing precipitous population declines throughout North America. Analyzing forty years of bird population data collected by citizen scientists for Audubon's Christmas Bird Count combined, for the first time, with Breeding Bird Survey data from the U.S. Geological Survey, Audubon has identified our nation's most vulnerable common birds. Additional analyses focused on state level trends. Some mirror the national picture, while others reveal local and regional differences. The birds below are suffering the most serious population declines in Texas. Along with their national *Common Birds in Decline* list mates, they showcase the need for vigilance in protecting local habitats and the health of our environment. Working together, we can make a difference. To see the national findings, visit http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/CBID.

TEXAS' VULNERABLE COMMON BIRDS

Percent Decline Since 1967

NORTHERN BOBWHITE (*Colinus virginianus*)

Habitat: Grasslands mixed with widely spaced shrubs or trees. Threats: The disappearance of suitable habitat due to large-scale agriculture such as conversion of native grasslands to high yield monoculture, fire suppression, intensive plantation-style forestry, and development are the most immediate threats to the long-term survival of these common grassland birds.

83%

LARK SPARROW (*Chondestes grammacus*)

Habitat: Prefers grassy habitats with scattered trees or shrubs including sagebrush, park-like settings, hedgerows, and edges associated with woodlands and shrublands. Threats: Development of mid-successional prairie margin habitats, fire suppression, agricultural development that removes all woody species, and suburbanization.

90%

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

Habitat: Typically found in grassland habitats with isolated shrubs and trees. Does well in pasture habitats. Threats: Fire suppression and overgrazing that allow woody shrubs and trees to become too dense, and large-scale agricultural practices that remove all woody cover. Shrikes can be considered an "indicator species" for the habitats in which they and other grassland birds occur because they are relatively easy to detect.

88%

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Ashok Khosla, Glen Tepke, Glen Tepke

BLACK-THROATED SPARROW (*Amphispiza bilineata*)

Habitat: Breeds and winters in short-grass areas with scattered shrubs and trees, especially deserts and semi-desert grasslands, creosote bush pastures. Threats: Altered fire regimes in desert grasslands and overgrazing are primary threats. Global warming and associated changes in desert rainfall patterns may affect this species as well.

89%

AMERICAN BITTERN (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

Habitat: Dense, tall emergent freshwater marsh. Also uses brackish marsh of similar structure in winter in Texas and other Gulf Coast states. Threats: Its global population is declining significantly due to degradation and loss of wetland habitats. A significant portion of the population of this secretive species is thought to occur in Texas and Louisiana marshes in winter where habitat is diminishing due to subsidence, saltwater intrusion, and development.

67%

TEXAS HABITATS AT RISK

Texas boasts the second highest number of bird species recorded in a state at 630, second only to California. Texas' Coastal Prairie and Blackland Prairie host a high diversity of breeding and wintering quail, grassland, and early-successional birds, as do the short- and mid-grass prairies of the Southern High Plains, where species such as Lesser Prairie Chicken and Northern Bobwhite occur. The oak-juniper savannahs and shrubby grasslands of the Edwards Plateau are home to Golden-cheeked Warblers and Black-capped Vireos that breed in no other place in the world. East Texas longleaf pine forests are home to endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and other declining birds, and riparian habitats have their own list of bird species. However, habitats face a number of threats. Forest and grassland habitats are being degraded from fragmentation and parcelization. Development associated with urban sprawl is taking a toll on multiple habitat types around growing cities. Another symptom of this urbanization is the abandonment of the family farm or ranch and loss of habitat associated with a well-managed property. Agricultural practices continue to use exotic, warm-season grasses that create a monoculture and lack the diversity needed by grassland specialists such as Northern Bobwhite, Lark Sparrow, and Eastern Meadowlark. Also, grasslands are being invaded by woody plants due to fire suppression or native grasses replaced with exotic fast-growing species for grazing.

Additional Species of Concern

Eastern Meadowlark is one of the most recognizable and familiar grassland species. Populations are facing serious declines (68% decline in Texas and 72% decline nationally). This species will benefit directly from efforts made to protect a suite of grassland species such as those listed above.

Northern Pintail face similar issues to American Bittern since it winters in Texas coastal wetlands. In addition, it's prairie pothole nesting and stopover habitat is disappearing due to a number of reasons related to agriculture and the potential changes in rainfall and pothole occurrence due to global warming.

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WHAT AUDUBON TEXAS IS DOING

Audubon Texas is working directly with private landowners through our Quail and Grassland Birds Initiative with advice and assistance on how to manage their property for the benefit of quail and grassland bird populations. Through cooperative agreements with landowners and other conservation partners, technical assistance is provided on over two million acres of grasslands, shrublands, and other habitat in the state. Our Texas Coastal Stewardship Program works to protect and improve habitat for nesting populations of wading birds on over 80 islands all along the Texas coast.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Everyone can help keep common birds common in a variety of ways. Landowners can work with Audubon Texas through our Quail and Grassland Birds initiative to provide effective management on their lands, such as conversion of monoculture pastures into meadows of native grasses. Where possible, landowners should maintain some old fields and forest edges in early-successional habitat. Join a local Audubon chapter and get involved with the adoption of Important Bird Areas near you. Volunteers can become involved by taking part in bird monitoring efforts such as the Christmas Bird Count, Great Backyard Bird Count and other targeted monitoring efforts such as the quail count. Even practicing energy conservation, water conservation and planting bird-friendly plants can make a difference.

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"Audubon's mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on bird, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity."

For More Information:
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