



# WESTERN CUYAHOGA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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## Grassland Birds in Ohio

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While many North American bird species are in decline, few groups are in as steep a drop as the grassland species. Further reading on the topic can help provide focus on the scary details and the steps being taken to help.

There are plenty of states throughout our great nation that historically included hundreds of thousands of acres of natural, prairie grasslands. Ohio was not one of them. Heavily forested when expansion of European settlers began, much of those woodlands were felled over time to make way for farming to feed families and communities. That “opening” of farmlands created prairie-like habitats that helped to attract and increase grassland birds. But, over time, farming practices increased their efficiency (including heavy use of pesticides and equipment that left little edge cover along borders and fence rows) that led to reductions in nesting and wintering capability.

Ohio has many places a birder may go to observe the species that winter, migrate through or breed in the state. Today, there are several counties in the state with good grassland habitat. But one of the biggest assists to grassland birds has been the conversion of former coal company strip mine land to grassland habitat, primarily in central Ohio. These reclamations have been very popular with birds and birders alike and provide large swaths of land that harbor nesting species in numbers much greater than smaller pockets of habitat elsewhere.

A great example is The Wilds property in Muskingum County. For the intrepid birder willing to travel from destinations near the state borders, The Wilds can provide an exciting day (or more) of grassland birding in late May, June and even into July and August. Several species can be reliably found (though sometimes heard rather than seen) along several roads adjacent to The

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Wilds including Henslow's Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink. They all breed in the area allowing birders to find them well past migration. In winter, this area can also produce observations of both Northern Harriers and Short-eared Owls.

Several good grassland spaces exist elsewhere in the state – here is a selected list of just a few:

- Tri-Valley Wildlife area (also in Muskingum County) holds breeding Grasshopper and Henslow's Sparrows. And, historically, both Ring-necked Pheasant and Bobwhite have been found at Tri-Valley.
- Fernald Preserve in Southwest Ohio (Hamilton County) is a multi-habitat property that includes grasslands and their associated species. Like The Wilds, both Harriers and Short-eared's may be sighted in winter. But the true joy of grassland birding is in the spring and summer as Grasshopper, Savannah and Henslow's Sparrows may all be found along with Meadowlark and Dickcissel.
- Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area in Wyandot County is the breeding home to Ring-necked Pheasant, Horned Lark, Sedge Wren, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Bobolink, and Eastern Meadowlark. While their populations have declined since the early 70's, Bobwhite can sometimes be seen at Killdeer. And in winter, Northern Harriers and Short-eared Owls share the same habitat at different times of a 24-hour day.
- Oak Openings Preserve Metropark near Toledo (Lucas County) is located within an oak savannah ecosystem and it's grasslands represent a small percentage of the park. But, Grasshopper, Savannah and Henslow's Sparrows may all be found here along with Eastern Meadowlark. Most interesting, however, may be the fact that the park may be the most reliable spot in the state to find nesting Lark Sparrow. These large, showy sparrows find the dry, sandy, and weedy grassland patches at Oak Openings perfect for nesting and many an Ohioan birder has picked up their lifer Lark Sparrow at the corners of Girdham and Reed Roads in the park.

- OSU Livestock Facility (Franklin County) – in addition to all the expected grassland sparrows (Grasshopper, Henslow's, and Savannah) as well as Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark and Dickcissel, the Livestock Facility has been very reliable for Upland Sandpiper, a grassland shorebird (pardon the oxymoron) that has been in significant decline in Ohio.

Closer to northeast Ohio, there are several places where grassland birds may be found, generally in smaller numbers but fairly reliably. Here are a handful:

- Bath Nature Preserve (Summit County) – Henslow's Sparrows, Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlark are all annual breeders here.
- Wecht Road (Wayne County) – grassland species often found here include Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrows plus Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks. Bonus: very reliable for Dickcissel in late spring into early summer!
- Coliseum Grasslands at Cuyahoga Valley National Park (Summit County) – good numbers of breeding Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks every year and, in some years, grassland sparrows including both Henslow's and Grasshopper.
- Margaret Peak Nature Preserve (Lorain County) – this park continues to improve. As it transitioned from a hybrid that housed many acres of agricultural space (soybean) to a full-fledged wildlife area, the birdlife has improved as well. It is recently the closest reliable location near Cleveland to find Dickcissel. In addition, look for Grasshopper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark. In some years, Vesper Sparrow can also be found here.