



Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*). Left: Photo courtesy Gary Kramer, USFWS Center: Foraging in a restored perennial grassland (primarily *S. pulchra*), in Zamora, Yolo County. Photo courtesy Kristina Wolf Right: Photo courtesy Krista Lundgren, USFWS

### SPECIES SPOTLIGHT:

## The Neglected Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*)

by Diana Jeffery<sup>1</sup>, Administrative Director, CNGA

Western Meadowlarks are perhaps the quintessential grassland bird. Easily recognized by their bright yellow breast crossed by a black V-shaped band, they are most often seen perched on a fencepost or nearby shrub. They forage on the ground in grasslands, prairies, fields and pastures, nesting in small depressions in the soil, sometimes even a hoof print. They often conceal their nest by weaving the surrounding grass stalks into a dome or tunnel-like structure; industrious birds construct an entrance tunnel reaching up to several feet long.

Western Meadowlarks are year-round residents of California grasslands. Once thought to be the same species as the Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), the Western Meadowlark was eventually recognized as a separate species and subsequently given the name *neglecta* by John James Audubon. Both species live, nest, and forage in grasslands. They are almost identical, with the same black V-shaped marking on bright yellow breasts, differing almost imperceptibly in bill and tail shapes, but each species has its own distinctive melodic songs and calls. It is reported that in areas where the species overlap there is some interbreeding and the males learn the songs of both species. Western Meadowlarks feed primarily on seeds and insects (e.g., beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, caterpillars, ants, bees, wasps) using bills with strong muscles that allow them to force open bark and pry into soils to reach grubs, worms, and insects that other birds cannot access.

<sup>1</sup>Diana is a plant and grassland ecologist. She has a current project with *Trifolium amoenum*, an endangered clover, and is co-author of the website, *California's Coastal Prairies*, a project of the Sonoma Marin Coastal Grasslands Working Group.

Worldwide, all grassland birds are at risk because of degraded and mismanaged grasslands. Western Meadowlark populations have declined 42% since 1970 (North American Breeding Bird Survey via Partners in Flight, 2017). Other birds have fared less well: the Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) has lost 68% of its population over the last 40 years (Partners in Flight, 2016). Programs offered by the USDA Farm Service Agency and the Conservation Reserve Program have previously offered incentives

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### Some Recommended Actions for Bird Conservation (Adapted from Partners in Flight, 2017)

- ❖ Implement conservation practices to reverse or sustain grassland bird populations. Reduce the use of pesticides, and improve your knowledge about the role of pesticides in declines of beneficial insect and bird populations.
- ❖ Reduce and prevent collisions with buildings and other structures by making windows less reflective and more visible to birds (e.g. apply decals, bird tape, bird safety film, or install awnings, etc.).
- ❖ Remove feral cats from public lands and keep pet cats from roaming freely — make them an indoor cat or add a bird-protective cover to their collar.
- ❖ Preserve greenspace and use native plants in urban and suburban landscaping.

## Western Meadowlark

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and funding to land owners for using conservation practices and for providing habitat. The future of programs, such as the Upland Bird Habitat Buffer Initiative (CP-33), is unsure.

There are ways, however, in which land managers, ranchers, and farmers can alter their practices to benefit both themselves and grassland birds. The first step towards conservation management is to learn about the plants and animals living there. Western Meadowlarks' nesting season is March through August. Adjusting the timing, extent, and intensity of activities such as haying, grazing, and mowing can make management operations more compatible with Western Meadowlarks and other grassland inhabitants (Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2009).



### References

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# Upcoming CNGA Workshops & Events

## Field Practices: Hands-on Restoration, Implementation, and Maintenance

October 20, 2017, 8:00 am–4:30 pm (October 27 rain date)  
UC Davis Putah Creek Reserve, Davis CA

**\$155/CNGA members | \$180/Non-members | \$95/Students with ID**

Register online at [cnga.org](http://cnga.org) or contact Diana Jeffery at [admin@cnga.org](mailto:admin@cnga.org) or 530.902.6009

## CNGA at the Cal-IPC Symposium: Grassland Invaders

Riviera Palm Springs Resort, October 24–27, 2017

CNGA will host the "Grassland Invaders" session on Wednesday, October 25th from 3–5 pm, featuring speakers from around the state. Other grassland-related talks appear throughout the conference. Join us in Palm Springs for some of the latest news in grassland research. Conference registration fees apply. Register online at <http://cal-ipc.org/symposia>

## CNGA at the California Native Plant Society 2018 Conservation Conference

Los Angeles Airport Marriott— Workshops & Field Trips January 30–31, Conference February 1–3, 2018

CNGA will present its grass identification workshop, "An Introduction to Grass Identification: You Can Totally Do This!" on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1–4:30 pm. Board members Jennifer Buck-Diaz and Michele Hammond will chair the "Grasslands and Prairies" session, and Andrea Williams will chair "Managing Lands for Native Plant Conservation". Find more details at [cnga.org](http://cnga.org) and [conference.cnps.org](http://conference.cnps.org). Get more information on workshop & conference registration fees and register online at [conference.cnps.org](http://conference.cnps.org)

### Coming this Winter:

***Pasture Walk—See How Nature Grows Topsoil and How You Can Too***

***Introduction to Grazing Planning***

***Landscaping with Nature — Designing, Building and Maintaining Beautiful Landscapes that Support Wildlife and Reduce Water Usage***

### Coming this Spring:

***Grassland Monitoring Methods and Techniques***

Register online at [www.cnga.org](http://www.cnga.org) or contact Diana Jeffery at [admin@cnga.org](mailto:admin@cnga.org) or 530.902.6009

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