

Grassland Opera

Rare species nest at Nachusa Grasslands

by Ann Haverstock

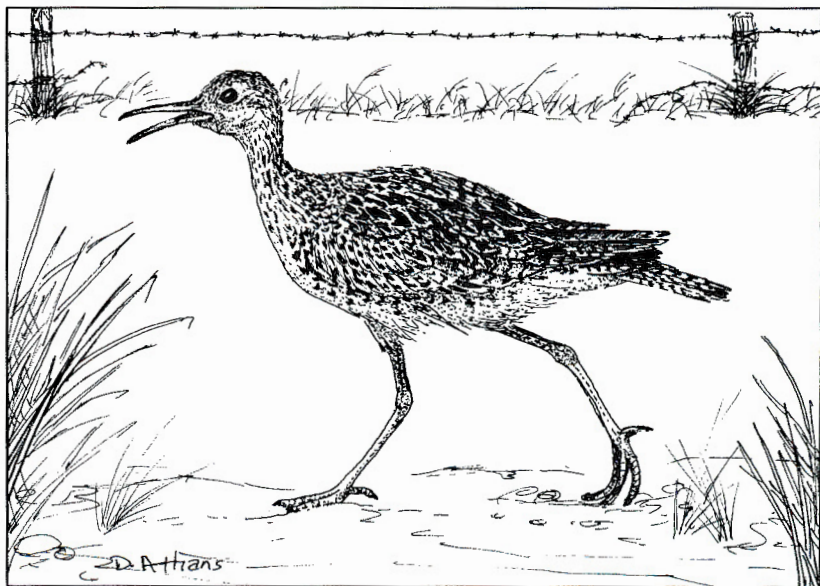
Early one summer morning as I approach the Nachusa Grasslands, I am compelled to roll down the car window to listen to the prairie. Sounds move across this grassland as they would across a quiet lake. In summer when birds are still active, the air is a riot of song - from the tinkling of Bobolinks to the soft buzz of the Grasshopper Sparrow.

Botanists drive the back roads of the grasslands located in Lee and Ogle counties near Dixon, Oregon, Rochelle, and Franklin Grove, to distinguish prairie remnants by the subtle color differences in the landscapes. Birders at Nachusa find what they are looking for by ear.

At least 90 species of summer birds including the Illinois-endangered Upland Sandpiper can be found on nearly 1,000 acres at Nachusa; many are discovered first by their song since grassland species are so secretive. June and July are the best months for birders to view grassland species at Nachusa, although Short-eared Owls can be found in September, Harris' Sparrows in October, and Goshawks in November.

Nachusa, acquired by the Illinois Nature Conservancy beginning in 1986, consists of sandstone outcrops, prairie, fen, marsh, creek, and savanna. A few of the paths are worn, but birders are welcome to wander anywhere on the property as long as they are careful not to disturb nesting species.

Embarking on a series of loops seems to be the best way to bird Nachusa. First-time visitors should take the loop at Coyote Point (No. 4 on Map 2). As you traipse through the



The Upland Sandpiper has been observed nesting at the Nachusa Grasslands. Drawing by David Athans

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prairie here, you will easily find the Grasshopper Sparrow, one of Nachusa's most common summer residents. Listen closely, and one of these little Pavarottis will "pi tup zeeeee" for you. Note, too, the constant cadence of the Dickcissel's call, which can be heard from shrubby

snags and fence posts. His insistence will force you take a closer look.

With some luck, you may also hear the "wolf" whistle of the Upland Sandpiper. I call it a "wolf" whistle because it mimics that rude whistle grandmother told me to ignore. Best not to ignore it now. Only one nesting pair remains at Nachusa.

While monitoring Nachusa's breeding birds for three years, I wondered whether it was the male sandpiper giving the distinct call. I queried the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York and the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in North Dakota. Greg Budney of Cornell told me the male uses this whistle to attract mates and to defend territory. Listen, too, for another utterance of this species which sounds like puttering or a "quip-ip-ip-ip,"