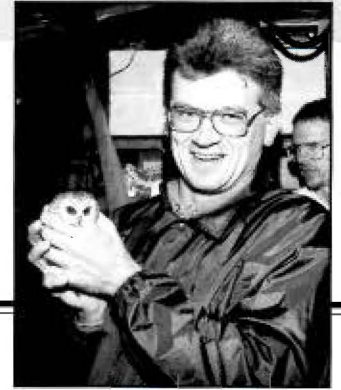


Birds of the Corn and Soybean Desert

by Steven D. Bailey



Steven D. Bailey
Photo by Peter Weber

This issue, we begin a feature in which you can participate. What do you want to know about rare or even common birds in Illinois? Interested in a particular breeding habit of a species, or the best place in the state to find one? Send your questions to Steven D. Bailey, Ornithologist, Illinois Natural History Survey, 608 E. Peabody, Champaign, IL 61820, or Email to: sdbailey@mail.inhs.uiuc.edu. In each issue we'll print the answers to some of those questions. Here's our first question, followed by Steve's answer.



A Sandhill Crane stops in a field in central Illinois in March during migration. Photo by Dennis Oehmke.

Question:

Birders often refer to central Illinois as the corn and soybean desert, giving the impression the area is depauperate of birds. Is this really true?

Answer:

When it comes to breeding birds, monocultural crop fields such as corn and soybeans are even more depauperate than the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts, especially if you remove Horned Lark from the equation. However, there's a surprisingly long list of Illinois species that use agricultural fields at one time or another for feeding, roosting, or breeding. For example, wheat fields may sometimes attract some species due to the structural characteristics of the crop, which simulates some grassland types. Birds that breed in wheat fields include such diverse species as Northern Harrier, Sedge Wren, Red-winged Blackbird, and Dickcissel.

Large agricultural fields placed in the Conservation Reserve Program can be especially attractive for nesting grassland species. These areas are usually fairly large (40 - 100+ acres) and have attracted such rare nesting grassland birds as Northern Harrier, Short-eared Owl, Bobolink, Sedge Wren, and even Henslow's Sparrow.