

While the state-endangered Upland Sandpiper and state-threatened Sandhill Crane do not find agricultural fields to be suitable for breeding, these species often use agricultural fields adjacent to grasslands and wetlands in which to feed during the breeding season.

Depending on what particular agricultural practices a farmer uses, additional species may breed in the "corn and soybean desert." Grassy waterways, terracing, and other erosion-preventative practices can be attractive to some grassland species including Eastern and Western Meadowlarks and Grasshopper, Savannah, and Vesper Sparrows, though their ability to raise young there is tenuous. First, they are more susceptible to predation and parasitism in such fragmented habitats. Secondly, farmers in the Midwest, especially in southern Illinois, tend to delay planting for various reasons, causing their fields to act as ecological traps for grassland sparrows, meadowlarks, and Horned Larks. When the birds arrive in spring, they begin setting up territories in fields that have not yet been prepared for planting. Often farmers will plow or plant fields in the middle of these birds' nesting cycles. Farm practices then not only disrupt the bird's breed-

ing cycle, but also leave the birds with no other place to start another brood. So where do these birds go?

Some birders have noticed species such as Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Sedge Wren, and others appear in the middle of the breeding season in areas they hadn't been found earlier. These birds may be those that got ousted out of habitat such as previously mentioned, or due to other agricultural practices such as early repeated mowing for hay. Farmers used to mow for hay once or twice per season; they now try to get three, four, or more each summer, making things even more difficult for birds that attempt to breed in croplands.

Late-arriving Illinois breeders such as the Sedge Wren raise some interesting questions. Are these birds wandering to find suitable breeding habitat after being kicked out of hay and wheat fields farther north? Or is late breeding natural for this species? And if so, where did they spend the first part of the breeding season?

Grassland birds may be opportunistic in their habitat and timing choices during the breeding season. Their choices may be due to historical patterns of how fire and bison-grazing drastically altered habitats in any given year or in any given area.

## Migration and Winter

The picture does appear to be a little brighter in the corn and soybean desert during migration and winter. Some are more common in spring, especially wet springs, while others are more common in fall and winter. Although not what it once was when this part of the country was filled with prairie potholes, fallow corn and soybean fields that still contain wet spots (e.g., have not been tilled or otherwise drained) still attract a wide variety of waterfowl and shorebirds. Virtually any migratory shorebird can and has appeared in wet fields. For example, in May 1986, I observed the sixth state record of a Curlew Sandpiper in a soybean field that was once a prairie pothole.

More common shorebirds using the fields in spring include both yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, and American Golden-Plover. This species seems to prefer soybean stubble fields for feeding and roosting. Illinois may very well fall within the nation's major staging area for migrating golden-plovers. It remains unclear what the plovers are eating, although it could be the larval stage of some insect. By eating these pests, the plovers could be helping farmers.



*Sandhill Cranes often feed in cornfields during migration.*