

The central Illinois corn and soybean desert regularly hosts flocks of 2,000 to 5,000 American Golden-Plovers. Typically, birders find flocks of from 50 to 500 plovers.

The bulk of another species' global population also occurs in Illinois agricultural fields during spring migration. It is the coveted Smith's Longspur. This species favors several types of foxtails for feeding. The foxtails are considered the bane of farmers because their stems get twisted and bound in combines. Perhaps American Golden-Plovers and Smith's Longspurs can be economically important in ridding fields of pests and weeds. Bobolinks and other blackbirds, on the other hand, are considered pests by farmers. Bobolinks are known as "rice birds" in southern United States, because they gorge on rice before departing for their South American wintering grounds.

Agricultural fields also provide incidental breeding as well as roosting and feeding habitat for a number of species during migration and winter. A central Illinois farmer has found Indigo Buntings and other species placing nests in soybean fields close to edge-type habitats with which the species is normally associated. American Robins also use cornfields, but not for food. Large numbers of them use the fields for roosting sites.

European Starlings and species in the blackbird family, and sometimes even orioles, feed in agricultural fields, harvested or unharvested, in winter and during migration. Thousands of American Crows, too, will settle into a harvested field to partake of left-over crops. Flocks of swallows also cruise agricultural fields during migration for insects, and Blue Jays will cache waste grains, especially corn, in fall. American Pipits feed along edges of wet agricultural fields by the hundreds, mostly in spring and late fall/early winter. All five species of geese, all puddle ducks, and all



The American Pipit feeds along edges of wet agricultural fields by the hundreds during migration. Photo by Peter Weber.

gallinaceous species that have occurred in the state and even birds of prey such as Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, Rough-legged Hawk, and Great Horned Owl feed in agricultural fields – some of these year-round, some in winter, and some during migration.

Ring-billed, Herring, Bonaparte's, and Franklin's Gulls also feed in agricultural fields. Gulls often follow farmers' tractors as they plow and till, kicking up larvae for a spring meal. Cattle Egrets and other herons also use wet agricultural fields for feeding.

One family of birds most Illinois birders would not associate with agricultural fields, but which regularly use them, is the rail family. Birders Jim Smith and Jim Funk, two central Illinois farmers, regularly encounter migratory Sora and Virginia Rail, when mowing hayfields in spring and fall. Smith and Funk also occasionally encounter the rare Yellow and Black Rails in spring and fall. The birds flush ahead of their tractors. One of the best places to see Yellow Rail in the United States is the rice fields of Louisiana during harvest time when the birds flush ahead of the combines. In the case of the Black Rail, "agricultural meadows" could

serve as breeding habitat. This species historically bred in wet hayfields in central Illinois.

Common and widespread species including Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees, Northern Cardinal, Tufted Titmouse, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, and occasionally Indigo Bunting, regularly feed in standing corn stubble near woodlands. They are likely feeding on insects, while Red-headed Woodpeckers often feed on left-over corn. Loggerhead Shrikes search for mice and insects in the grassy strips along agricultural fields. In winter, hardy species such as Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting find sustenance eating waste corn and soybeans.

Surprisingly, many species of warblers have been found in the corn and soybean deserts of Illinois. However, some are more regularly encountered than others. These include Orange-crowned, Tennessee, Palm, and Yellow-rumped Warblers. These are four of the most common warblers in the U.S. and have wider food palates than other warblers. Most of their feeding opportunities occur along the edges of agricultural fields, where they meet forest.

This might seem like a long list of species, but in reality you'd be hard-pressed to find more than a half dozen species on any given day in any one agricultural field in Illinois. And on an average day in the Sonoran Desert near Tucson, a birder could easily see two dozen species or more. Illinois can enhance its corn and soybean desert to help birds. Good farming practices could, in fact, enhance the value of agricultural lands not only for the farmer, but also for the birds species that use them.

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