

## From the Editor

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## *From the Editor*

Those who read these comments regularly know that I was born and raised in Iowa—Greene County, to be exact. Most of central Iowa was greatly affected by the most recent glaciation, which scoured a giant segment of land extending as far south as Des Moines just a few thousand years ago. The drift plain from this glaciation is incredibly flat, while those areas not as recently affected by glaciers have a bit of a roll to them (although my wife says its still pretty damned flat). The combination of mostly flat ground and perhaps the best soil on earth resulted in essentially all of Iowa being converted to agriculture. By chance, my home county was unusually diverse, and only now do I realize that in many ways I was blessed with the location my parents chose for their grocery store. Only six miles from home was a glacial wetland that was too large and too low to keep drained, so I had access to 400 acres of wonderful prairie marsh. The Raccoon River flowed just outside of town, and the bluffs surrounding the river supported some robust stands of oak and hickory trees, enough that springtime warbler lists often approached 30 species. About 20 miles to the southwest of home was the region where the glacier stopped and the land was much more rolling. Here, a few hills were steep enough that they were maintained in pasture, something that just didn't happen where the land was flat. In a world where everything was perfectly square, with every mile having a road, I was lucky that there were maybe 2 or 3 square miles of nontilled habitat remaining within the 576 square miles that constituted Greene County. Birders from other counties in Iowa were not so fortunate.

Of course, none of this remaining habitat was anything approaching natural. All of the wetlands had been drained and farmed at least once, and the few pastures and all of the roadside ditches were planted with non-native grasses. Although I could find a site with a few Bobolinks or Savannah Sparrows every year, for most pure grassland species, these "populations" numbered just a handful of birds, and for something like the Upland Sandpiper, it was a pair here or a pair there. Obviously, for states like Iowa that were covered in tallgrass prairie, incredible declines in breeding grassland birds must have occurred well over a century ago, when the plow turned virtually all the tallgrass prairie into farmland. In his "Preliminary notes on the birds of Missouri," Widman (1907) suggested that only about one-tenth the number of Upland Sandpipers went through Missouri compared with 20 years earlier, which would have been 1887. Given that these tallgrass prairies existed on the best soils on Earth and undoubtedly supported large densities of birds, we cannot even fathom how many birds we lost as the plow converted the most productive parts of this habitat into cropland well before my Danish ancestors came to this country in the 1890s. While the handful of prairie reserves that exist are spectacular refuges for prairie plant diversity, none in Iowa are large enough to support the total diversity and abundance of prairie birds found before European settlers so totally changed this part of the world.

Fortunately, most of the tallgrass-prairie bird species found refuge in areas supporting tallgrass prairie on poor soils (such as the Flint Hills of Kansas) or occurred in mixed-grass sites such as the Sandhills of Nebraska or the Coteau of the Dakotas. These often large areas are better suited for grazing than for row crops, and this has undoubtedly saved many grassland bird populations.

Unfortunately, during the past two decades, we have seen increased conversion of these remaining grasslands to rowcrop agriculture, with the resulting decline of grassland bird populations. Although concern for forest birds of the eastern United States led to the development of Partners in Flight around 1990, the reality is that grassland birds have shown the most consistent declines since the inception of the Breeding Bird Survey in 1966. This makes sense, for it is clear that they have less and less habitat each year. Add some drought years on the breeding grounds and loss of wintering habitat, and it is clear that we need to be very concerned about grassland bird populations.

*Ornithological Monograph No. 64* presents the current state of North American grassland bird conservation and management. I have commented here on the large grasslands of the Middle West and Great Plains, but this monograph also addresses problems faced by other grasslands, such as those that used to occur in the southeastern United States in association with southern pine forests and those of the arid West. Grasslands can usually be saved only at the expense of agricultural

development. With recent talk of replacing imported gasoline with ethanol produced from crops, pressures to convert current grasslands to some form of agriculture will likely increase. We must consider the needs of grassland birds as this development occurs, so that the fate of Greene County, Iowa, does not befall the grasslands that still exist. Grassland birds need grasslands—it's as simple as that. And we must provide them.

*John Faaborg*