

Manitoba's Species At Risk

Endangered

Baird's sparrow

Ammodramus bairdii



Any native Manitoba species threatened to disappear through all or most of its Manitoba range. Endangered species are declared as such by regulation under the *Endangered Species Act*.

The Baird's sparrow (*Ammodramus bairdii*) is an Endangered grassland bird that breeds in the Canadian prairies and in the northern Great Plains. It is a shy and inconspicuous bird that usually remains on or near the ground. It is rarely seen unless observers are familiar with its distinctive high-pitched call.

Baird's sparrows are slightly smaller than most of the common sparrow species. The best identification features are the fine black streaks on its breast which resemble a necklace. In addition, look for ochre (yellow-brown) markings on its face and an ochre stripe through its crown.

Habitat

In Manitoba, Baird's sparrows are found primarily in mixed grass prairies or in lightly grazed pastures. Occasionally they can be found in hayfields, fallow fields, or even cropland. Baird's sparrows regularly occur in idle areas where conditions are dry or the vegetation is sparse. In Manitoba, however, idle or ungrazed grasslands are generally too matted or too dense to be suitable.

Life History

Generally arriving in mid to late May, Baird's sparrows are among the last of the prairie birds to return to summer nesting territories. Soon after it returns, the male establishes a territory from which it sings for a mate. The female selects a small depression at the base of a grass clump and builds an open cup nest of fine grasses, forbs and animal hair. Egg-laying in Manitoba continues until early August due to re-nesting (second nests begun if the first nest fails) or double-brooding (producing a second nest after raising their first brood). Four to six eggs are laid in early nests, but late nests often have only three.

Incubation of the eggs lasts 11 to 12 days. The female does most of the incubating, but both parents tend to the young birds. Young Baird's sparrows often leave the nest within ten days

of hatching and start flying at two weeks of age. Adults feed on grass seeds and insects, but young are often fed only insects. Baird's sparrows begin migrating south in August and there are virtually no records of the species in Manitoba in September.

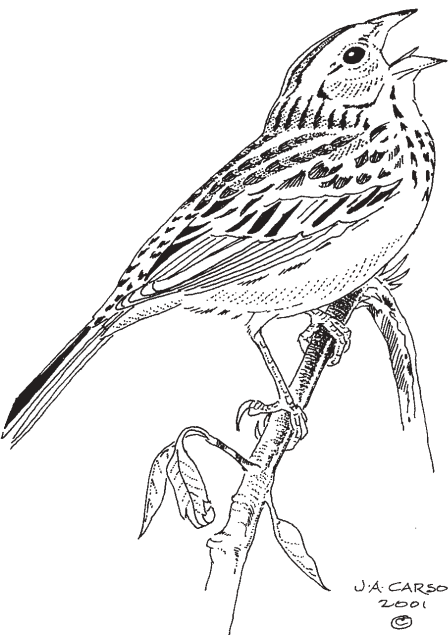
Distribution

Baird's sparrows nest only in the northern Great Plains, from the southern prairie provinces, to Montana, South Dakota and rarely into Minnesota. Most winter in northern Mexico, though some remain in southern portions of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.

Historically, this bird was common throughout southwestern Manitoba, east to Winnipeg and north to Swan River. With the conversion of prairie to agricultural lands throughout much of southern Manitoba, however, Baird's sparrows are now rarely seen outside the extreme southwestern corner of Manitoba.

Status

The Baird's sparrow is considered rare to uncommon (S2S3) by the Manitoba Conservation Data Centre. Large-scale declines have occurred in Manitoba, due largely to the loss of native grasslands. They may also be affected by insecticide use, as both adults and young depend on insects for food. Other factors such as predation and cowbird nest parasitism may be more prevalent than they were in the past due to habitat changes. Limiting factors are difficult to assess because nests are hard to find and there have been few directed studies. For these reasons, and because the prairie landscape continues to be altered, Manitoba Conservation continues to monitor the status of the Baird's sparrow and remaining prairie habitat in southwestern Manitoba. Although Baird's sparrow populations have shown rangewide declines, and their nesting range is small and contracted, the species is still abundant enough to be considered globally secure (G4) by NatureServe.



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Cool Facts

The Baird's sparrow's song is a unique series of introductory notes and a longer trill, which it sings from the ground or a low perch during breeding season.

The Baird's sparrow is a living legacy of the prairie that once teemed with wildlife and stretched for as far as the eye could see. In those days, Baird's sparrow habitat waxed and waned in response to the intensity of grazing by bison and the ravages of prairie wildfires.

Influxes of Baird's sparrows into parts of their former range occasionally occur during drought years across the northern Great Plains. The last such influx occurred in 1988 when birds were seen as far east as Winnipeg.

To confuse predators, Baird's sparrows often avoid flying directly to and from the nest, approaching and leaving the nest along runways that radiate out from it.



The Baird's sparrow was listed as Endangered in 1996 by regulation under Manitoba's *Endangered Species Act*. It is also protected in Canada under the federal *Migratory Birds Convention Act*.

The Baird's sparrow was assigned a status of Threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in 1989. It was delisted in 1996 when it was found to be more common than originally thought in portions of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Precise population estimates and trends are difficult to arrive at, however, because populations shift from year to year depending on how moisture cycles affect nesting habitat.

Stewardship and recovery

Little is known about the nature of this bird and its current population size, making it difficult to assess how rapidly the species is declining or to prescribe ways to slow the decrease in numbers. One obvious step is to preserve remaining patches of prairie breeding habitat. Programs that discourage the cultivation of "wastelands", or the conversion of native pastures and prairie to cropland or haylands, will benefit many

wildlife species. This includes species like the Baird's sparrow that rely on native grassland areas for survival.

Grazed grasslands generally support fewer Baird's sparrows than non-grazed areas. In Manitoba, however, it appears that periodic grazing, mowing or fires are necessary to prevent idle grasslands from becoming too lush and overgrown with shrubs and trees. Programs which keep cattle producers on the land also benefit the Baird's sparrow, since in many parts of its range the continued existence of grasslands is due to the presence of livestock. Use of insecticides is also much less prevalent in the livestock industry than in grain farming.

Get involved in recovery

Any steps that help to maintain Baird's sparrow habitat will assist in its recovery. Landowners and range managers should be encouraged to maintain or manage pristine prairie and other suitable grassland habitat. Excessive use of hazardous insecticides should be avoided, particularly near native prairies and other critical nesting sites.

For more information on the Baird's sparrow, please contact Manitoba Conservation at one of the numbers below.

**Manitoba Conservation
Wildlife and Ecosystem Protection Branch**
Box 24, 200 Saulteaux Crescent
Winnipeg MB R3J 3W3
(204) 945-7775
www.gov.mb.ca/natres/wildlife/index.htm

Manitoba Conservation Regional Office
Western Region
Brandon
(204) 726-6450

Partners in production of this fact sheet:
Manitoba Conservation,
Wildlife and Ecosystem Protection Branch
Environment Canada, Canadian Wildlife Service
Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation

Extirpated Species

Any species once native to Manitoba that has disappeared through all of its Manitoba range. Extirpated species are declared as such by regulation under the *Endangered Species Act*.

Endangered Species

Any native Manitoba species threatened to disappear through all or most of its Manitoba range. Endangered species are declared as such by regulation under the *Endangered Species Act*.

Threatened Species

Any native Manitoba species likely to become endangered or at risk due to low or declining numbers in Manitoba if the factors affecting it don't improve. Threatened species are declared as such by regulation under the *Endangered Species Act*.

Vulnerable Species

Species not regulated under the *Endangered Species Act* but which could eventually be considered Endangered or Threatened if the factors affecting them do not improve.