

Songbirds of Missouri

Field Sparrow

Field sparrows are members of the bird family Emberizidae, a group of species commonly referred to as the New World sparrows. This family of 49 species is made up primarily of small, brownish birds that have short, conical bills ideally suited for feeding on insects and seeds.

Most people think of sparrows as those small, brownish-flecked birds that cluster around houses, garages, parking lots, or barns. And, people typically call these birds everything from English sparrows to house sparrows, common sparrows, or just sparrows.

But you might be surprised to know that this little bird isn't a sparrow at all! It's actually a weaver finch, which is an exotic species that was introduced into North America in the 1800s. Now let's compare the weaver finch with a "true" sparrow – the field sparrow.

While weaver finches flock to areas of heavy human occupation, field sparrows shy away from people. Weaver finches thrive in urban areas and around farm buildings. But field sparrows inhabit open grasslands with no buildings or other type of human development. Weaver finches commonly nest in crevices and ledges on buildings, but field sparrows nest in grassy areas on or near the ground.

Because of its shy nature, the field sparrow is always a bit difficult to spot. In late winter/early spring, before spring comes alive with color, the bird's brownish-coloring blends in with grasses and unleafed shrubs in overgrown fields and prairies. Therefore, it's always something of a treat to see this little creature – even for those who are experienced birders! The field sparrow's main identifying traits are its bright pink bill, a reddish-brown colored cap, a white eye-ring and a plain buff-colored breast.

Field sparrows begin their courtship and nesting rituals during mid-spring and continue until well into summer. During this time, it's common practice for the male to hop atop a fence post or other perch to deliver his clear call -- a series of notes that become a trill. The males repeat this behavior until they find a mate.

The female builds a cup-shaped nest of thick grasses interwoven with finer grasses. She lays three to five eggs and incubates them for 12 days. The young usually fledge in seven to eight days. More than one brood is often raised in a season.

Unlike the weaver finches that are thriving, North America's field sparrow population is declining due to the steady disappearance of native grassland habitat. Field sparrows aren't an endangered species, but birding surveys indicate their numbers are falling here and in many other areas of their range.

As is the case with many other birds, improving habitat for field sparrows can have multiple wildlife benefits. By improving the habitat for one creature, you help a multitude of birds, reptiles, mammals and amphibians that make up a grassland ecosystem.

Information about the wildlife and agricultural benefits of managing land for grassland species can be found at your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4, S.8)

What's all the fuss about feathers?



Field sparrows are one of many types of birds that preen -- and it's not because they're concerned about their appearance! Preening is an important behavior that helps these birds keep their feathers clean and functional. Preening is accom-

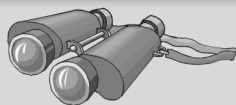
plished through the use of the preen gland -- also called the oil gland or the uropygial -- an oil-secreting gland located at the base of the bird's tail. Most birds preen by rubbing their bill and head over the preen gland pore, then rubbing the oil over their feathers and the skin of the legs and feet.

Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Field sparrows are year-round residents of most parts of Missouri. They are strictly a rural bird and are most commonly found in old, overgrown fields, prairies, woodland openings and along forest edges.

Many Department of Conservation areas have some component of old field habitat, which makes these locations good sites to see field sparrows.



...and Listen

The field sparrow has a simple, yet distinctive song that is heard most frequently in spring when the bird is courting a mate during breeding season.

This song is a series of clear whistled notes which increase in rate until they become a trill. The call is similar in its pattern to a bouncing ball.