

Songbirds of Missouri

Eastern Meadowlark

Sturnella Magna



Eastern meadowlarks are colorful members of the bird family Icteridae, a group that includes black birds, cowbirds and grackles. There are 88 species in this group worldwide, and most have conical, sharp-pointed bills and flat profiles.

For generations of Missouri farmers, the tell-tale sign of spring becoming summer was the crisp call of a meadowlark perched on a nearby fencepost. But due to changes in the rural environment, that sound is slowly, steadily disappearing.

Eastern meadowlarks are not an endangered species in Missouri, and these yellow-breasted birds can still be spotted in the open areas of pastures, meadows and hayfields. But bird population surveys show a distinct downward trend that biologists believe is caused by the disappearance and alteration of grassland habitat.

Some experts have estimated that, during the 20th century, the eastern meadowlark population declined by more than 60 percent. The drop hasn't been as severe in Missouri, but it's dwindled enough to indicate that improvement in the state's grassland habitat is necessary. Bobwhite quail, dickcissels, field sparrows and other grassland birds have been affected by the loss of grasslands, too.

The eastern meadowlark is a close relative of the western meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*), which is also found in parts of Missouri. Meadowlarks aren't true larks in the scientific sense. The meadowlark belongs to the Icteridae family, while true larks belong to the Alaudidae family. But biologists believe meadowlarks may have received their names because they occasionally sing while flying, much like England's skylarks.

Eastern meadowlarks have brown-streaked wings and backs and white-edged tails. They are best-known, however, for their bright yellow throats and breasts. As is the case with most birds, these colors are more pronounced in the males. Eastern meadowlarks assist farmers by feeding on grasshoppers, caterpillars, grubs and other insects that can destroy crops.

In Missouri, their breeding season lasts from late April until well into August. Meadowlarks are polygynous, which means males have more than one mate. The female lays four to five eggs in a

grassy, cup-shaped nest and incubates them for 13 to 14 days. After hatching, the young leave the nest in 11-12 days.

The eastern meadowlark is just one of the creatures in a rich mosaic of birds, reptiles, mammals and amphibians that make up a grassland ecosystem. By helping one of these animals, you help them all. In many cases, improving life for these grassland animals helps domestic animals, too.

The native warm-season grasses that the meadowlark benefits from, for instance, are good livestock forage that is higher in nutrition during the summer months than cool-season grasses such as fescue. If it's cut and baled at the proper time, these native grasses provide high-quality hay without doing much damage to the habitat needs of the grassland wildlife.

For more information about the benefits of managing land for grassland species, contact your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office or other land-management agencies.

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

Be a Bird Watcher!

Look.....

Eastern meadowlarks are year-round residents of Missouri. With the exception of New England and the Great Lakes regions, they inhabit most areas of the eastern and central United States in winter and summer.

Eastern meadowlarks are seen in rural environments and around open, grassy areas in urban locations. At these sites, singing meadowlarks can be observed perched on fences, fence posts, or other above-grass sites.

.....and Listen

The most common call of the eastern meadowlark sounds something like "see-you-see-yeer." In rural areas, these birds can be seen on posts or fences, tilting their heads back and calling. This is usually their way of letting intruders know that they are getting too close to the bird's territory.

