



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Eastern Meadowlark
*Sturnella magna***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Eastern Meadowlark is a ground-nesting passerine of grasslands, pastures and hayfields. The species breeds throughout the eastern United States, Canada's Maritime Provinces, the desert Southwest, and nearly continuously south to Panama. Individuals breeding in the northern limits of the range are short-distance migrants, often congregating in small flocks and moving south to areas free of snow. The Eastern Meadowlark, like many other birds associated with grasslands, has seen its population fluctuate widely in response to trends in agricultural practices.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Eastern Meadowlarks can be found as breeding birds in nearly all regions of Massachusetts, though specific breeding sites are somewhat limited. The highest densities are in the rural farming districts of eastern Berkshire County, the Connecticut River Valley, the Sudbury River Valley, and the Middleborough-Bridgewater area of Plymouth County. Scattered pairs also regularly breed at a number of airports throughout the state.

Breeding Bird Survey data shows that the population of Eastern Meadowlark has experienced an overall decline of 2.9 percent annually from 1966 to 2002. Northeastern states have seen the largest declines, with states such as Rhode Island (18.2%), Connecticut (10.5%) and Massachusetts (10.4%) seeing the sharpest declines during that timeframe. No state has recorded a significant population increase.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Eastern Meadowlarks are most common in native grasslands, prairie and savannah. They prefer moderately tall grasslands with abundant litter cover, a high proportion of grass, moderate to high forb density, and low coverage of woody vegetation. Various types of open habitats are utilized, such as tallgrass prairie, xeric grassland, and cultural grasslands

such as hayfields and airports. As with most grassland birds, breeding presence and the relevance of a site for Eastern Meadowlark are directly correlated to unfragmented patch size. Typically, Eastern Meadowlarks will not initiate breeding on grasslands of less than ten acres, and a site will often need greater than 100 acres of contiguously suitable habitat to support a large breeding population.

THREATS: The decline of Eastern Meadowlark populations in Massachusetts is attributed to loss of suitable nesting habitat due to landscape conversion (suburban sprawl, succession, and incompatible agricultural practices). Agriculturally, the main threat to breeding Eastern Meadowlarks in Massachusetts is the mowing of hayfields before the nesting cycle is complete. This results in near complete egg/nestling mortality, some adult mortality, and an overall decrease in species reproductive success. High winter mortality during especially severe winters is also a contributing factor in local declines.

Land-use practices that provide suitable nesting habitat should be encouraged, particularly the development of incentives for ecologically sensitive agricultural practices that promote the increased acreage of hayfields and pastures that are in a delayed harvest (hayfields) or grazed on a rotation (pastures). Mowing should be delayed until August to ensure fledgling survival. On conservation properties with suitable landscapes, large natural grasslands that are mown on a 3-5 year rotation, or when appropriate, managed by controlled burning, should be encouraged. However, it should be noted that Meadowlarks often will not recolonize a burned area within two years of the initial fire. In areas of more "industrialized" habitats, such as airports, efforts should be made to coordinate with site managers to reduce areas of grassland succession and to avoid mowing during the

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nesting season. Where suitable habitat currently exists, efforts should be made to protect the landscape from development.

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Updated 2015

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