



A Home on the Range



Cut from the vast deciduous forests that once cloaked the Tennessee River Valley, northern Alabama's fertile farmlands have become home to a variety of birds and other wildlife. However, as more and more fields become residential or commercial developments, many familiar grassland bird species are beginning to decline.

Many grassland bird species such as the Northern Bobwhite have distinct far-carrying calls and intricate plumage with brown, yellow, and black patterns. These patterns allow them to hide amongst the grass and wildflowers and elude detection from predators. Other species to look for along the Tennessee River Valley include Eastern Meadowlark, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Dickcissel.

In addition to distinctive avian species, another great attraction to grasslands are the numerous wildflowers whose vibrant blooms are constantly changing the color of the landscape. A wonderful variety can be found, with colors ranging from the vivid yellows of Coneflowers and Black-eyed Susans to the deep reds and oranges of Indian Blanket and Butterfly Weed.

How to Make Grassland?

Most grasslands originated from grazing cattle or as regeneration from unused agricultural fields. Recent management practices, such as the planting of warm season native grasses, including switch grass, Indian grass, and little blue stem have enhanced these grasslands. These native grasses grow during the warm

months of the year providing food and cover for nesting and newly hatched birds. These grasses primarily grow in bunches with adequate space between groups for birds to forage for seeds. In contrast, many non-native grasses, such as bermuda and fescue, can grow so dense that birds cannot move to find food or to escape their predators.



Dickcissel singing/USFWS, Steve Maslowski

Grassland Birds are Declining

Across North America, grassland bird species are declining. Although not fully understood, in many cases, these declines are due to loss of breeding habitat. As more open fields are paved or as invasive species choke out native ones, these birds are losing their homes. In an attempt to reverse this trend, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources is working with numerous partners to manage the remaining grasslands primarily for native birds.



Prescribed fire/Steve Seibert

Fire: A Natural Management Tool

Fire is a natural occurrence in the life of a grassland. Periodic prescribed burning of grasslands is necessary to stimulate growth of native grasses and inhibit the growth of alien species. Grassland managers conduct prescribed fires every few years to simulate processes that once occurred naturally by lightning. Other management practices for maintaining grasslands include livestock grazing as well as mowing for hay.



Grasshopper Sparrow/Walt Burch