

Western Meadowlark



Sturnella neglecta

Identification

Western meadowlarks are a medium-sized bird, 7.5-9.5 in/19-24 cm, about the size of a robin, with a long slender bill and short tail. They are black and brown on the back and wings, have a yellow throat, breast and belly with a black “V” on the breast. In the winter, meadowlark colors are duller. They are an abundant grassland bird occurring from the Great Plains to the Pacific Coast.



Photo credit: Lauryn Wachs, The Nature Conservancy

Observation Tips

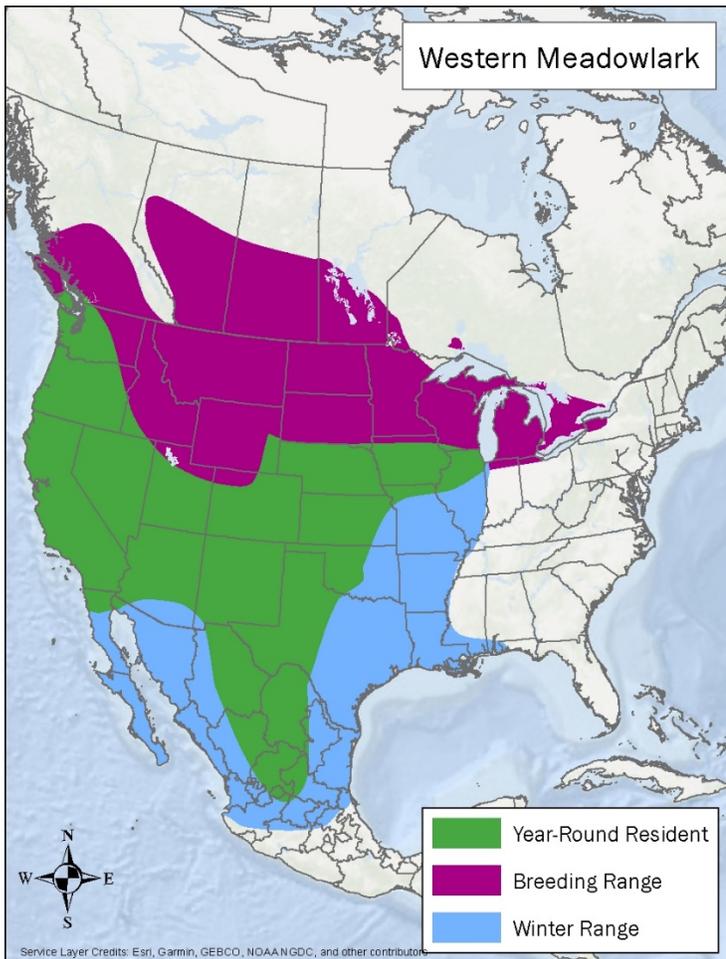
In the spring and summer, males can often be seen singing atop fence posts, shrubs, powerlines and other high points. In winter, western meadowlarks are often seen in small, loose flocks foraging on the ground in stubble fields and other farmlands. Birds arrive at their breeding sites in March and April and stay until October or November before fall migration. In the southern part of their range, some will overwinter. Looks almost identical to the eastern meadowlark and their ranges do overlap in portions of the Great Plains.

Interesting Fact

In 1914, California grain growers initiated a study on the western meadowlark’s diet to determine if the bird could be designated a pest species. Although they do eat some grain, western meadowlarks also help limit crop-damaging insects.

Ideal Habitat

Western meadowlarks live in open grasslands, prairies, meadows, and some agricultural fields ranging from sea level to 10,000 ft/3,048 m. They avoid wooded edges and areas with heavy shrubs. Their optimal breeding habitat is lightly grazed pastures or fallow fields with grass heights of 1-2 ft/0.3-0.6 m and shrub or tree cover <10%. Western meadowlarks nest in late April through early July, and nests are typically placed in a depression on the ground. In winter they forage for seeds on nearly bare ground, in contrast to the eastern meadowlark, which tends to feed in more vegetated areas. Western meadowlarks show a distinctly seasonal dietary pattern, foraging for grain during winter and early spring, and for forb seeds in the fall.



Range map provided by BirdLife International

Management Activities that Benefit Species – Best Management Practices (BMPs)

Maintain large, native grassland areas and provide a mosaic of conditions from tall to short grasses by grazing or mowing. Mow hayfields after mid-July to avoid nesting birds. Undercut wheat stubble in spring instead of using surface tillage to avoid destroying nests. Minimize pest management; use rapidly degrading chemicals of low toxicity only when necessary.

Management Activities to Avoid

Western meadowlarks are extremely sensitive to human disturbance during the breeding season and will often abort nesting attempts if they are flushed while incubating eggs. Other factors affecting Western Meadowlark populations may include extensive pesticide use, and invasive plant species introduction and expansion.

Other Species that Benefit from Similar Habitat Management

Upland sandpipers, Sprague’s pipits, savannah sparrows, grasshopper sparrows, and chestnut-collared longspurs may benefit from habitat management for western meadowlark.

Other Resources

BirdLife International and Handbook of the Birds of the World. 2019. Bird species distribution maps of the world. Version 2019.1. [Western meadowlark](#)

The Cornell Lab, [All About Birds \(Western meadowlark\)](#)

eBird. [Western meadowlark](#)