

CONSERVATION

Hoping for the Things with Feathers

BY JODI STEMLER



Our hunts focus on the prairies, our quarry largely the wild birds that still call these grasslands home. While we mostly seek out grouse or quail, an early-season hunt is not the same without the song of the meadowlark gripping tightly to the swaying stems of a plains sunflower or hearing a bobolink or longspur's trilling notes. To me, the soundtrack of the prairies is the sound of the birds.

But many of our birds are at a tipping point, and grassland species face some of the steepest declines. A landmark study published in the journal *Science* in 2019 documented the loss of three billion birds in North America over the last 50 years—that's one in every four birds since 1970. The bird conservation community rallied around the public awareness of the report but didn't gather the necessary political support. Five years later, a new report shows continued widespread declines.

In March, the partners of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative released the *2025 US State of the Birds*. The report reveals continued widespread declines in various "guilds" of American birds that depend on specific habitat types across all mainland and marine habitats, with 229 species requiring urgent conservation action.

According to the report, more than one-third of US bird species are of high or moderate conservation concern, with 112 species at the "tipping point." These birds have the steepest declines, having lost more than 50 percent of their populations in the last 50 years, and are classified at different levels of urgency (Red, Orange, and Yellow) based on the trajectory of declines, severity of threats, and security of core breeding populations.

Perhaps more concerning for bird hunters is that four grouse species are on the urgent Red list due to already perilously low populations and steep declining trends. Neither the Gunnison sage grouse nor the lesser prairie chickens have huntable populations anymore. The greater sage grouse has been a political ping-pong ball for several years, but greater prairie chickens have seemed more stable. Both species have limited hunting opportunities where there are still strongholds. And yet they are all teetering on the edge of a precipice.

These grouse species—and others of our native upland gamebirds—depend on the country's rapidly shrinking grasslands and rangelands. As hunters, we love those wide-open spaces and the miles spent walking the plains in hopes of raising a covey of sharp-tailed grouse, northern bobwhite, or prairie chickens.

When you are in eastern Montana or the Sandhills of Nebraska, prairies can seem to stretch on forever. But we've already lost 62 percent of our country's grasslands and two million acres more every year. Development, conversion to row crop agriculture, invasive nonnative plants, encroachment by cedars and junipers—it's death by a thousand cuts and not just for our hunted species. The songbirds we love to hear and the shorebirds that breed in prairie wetlands are also at risk—grassland bird numbers are down 43 percent since the 1970s.

I've long been a doomsday doubter. I have heard enough Chicken Little stories about the environment's sky falling, but I think we're facing our generational gut check time. Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, and other visionaries faced it in the early 1900s when overexploitation spurred the conservation movement. Rachel Carson sounded the alarm in the 1960s with fears of a Silent Spring.

However, what Roosevelt knew and has continued to be the case to this day is that hunters must lead the way. "In a civilized and cultivated country, wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen," he wrote in his 1905 biography. It is the paradox that is hunting. The act of

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choosing to take an animal's life creates a deeper connection and commitment to ensure its perpetuity.

This has proven true before with waterfowl, which are generally stable or increasing because the hunting community has championed them for nearly a century. Dedicated funding, strategic legislative initiatives, collaborations with private landowners and corporations, and scientifically targeted actions have all shown how focused conservation attention can make a difference.

Riffing on James Carville, "It's the habitat, stupid." Our grasslands need our help, and those of us who walk the miles across these plains must lead the way. We are the ones who glory in the song of a meadowlark, the clacking of a sharp-tail, the booming of a prairie chicken. We value them for the entirety of the experience, for motivating us to rise early and hear the prairie come alive. We cannot let them go.

I, for one, can't imagine a time when we can no longer hear the symphony of the grasslands. 🦋

With a degree in wildlife, Jodi Stemler brings a foundation in ecology to her freelance writing and her work as a communications and policy consultant for national hunting conservation organizations.