

Sturnella neglecta

English name western meadowlark (Georgia Depression population)

Scientific name *Sturnella neglecta*

Other scientific names *Sturnella neglecta confluenta*

Risk status

BC (Georgia Depression population): presumed extirpated (SXB, SZN); red-listed Canada: unranked (N?)

Global: not assessed (GST?Q)

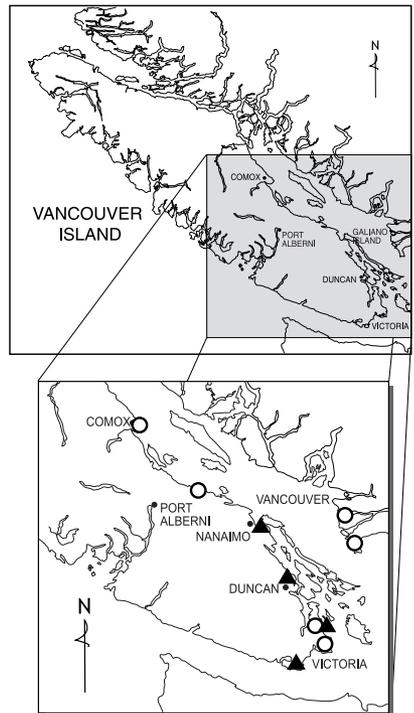
Elsewhere: *S. n. confluenta* is considered common to abundant across much of its North American range, although the subspecies is unranked in the United States due to taxonomic uncertainty. The western meadowlark is a State Sensitive Species in Oregon.

Range/Known distribution

The taxonomy and distribution of the two recognised subspecies of the western meadowlark (*S. n. confluenta* and *S. n. neglecta*) are not well understood. *S. n. confluenta* is thought to be the subspecies occurring in the Georgia Depression, although the Conservation Data Centre only recognises “Interior” and “Georgia Depression” populations of *S. neglecta* for British Columbia. Western meadowlarks are widespread in western North America and are still common through much of their range, but populations have declined in the grassland and oak ecosystems of western Washington and Oregon.

In Canada, western meadowlarks breed from south and central British Columbia eastwards to Ontario and, rarely, in southwestern Quebec. Local populations once bred from Comox south to Victoria, and in the Fraser lowlands.

Although now extirpated as a breeding species in the Georgia Depression, in the early fall to late spring western meadowlarks are still fairly common to uncommon migrants on southeast Vancouver Island and in the lower Fraser River Valley. Wintering birds occur from southern British Columbia to central Mexico.



Distribution of *Sturnella neglecta*

○ former breeding sites

▲ recent (2002) records of non-breeding birds

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Field Description

9". A **starling-shaped** member of the blackbird family (Icteridae) rather than a true lark. Both males and females have a brownish back, black-spotted white sides, and a **bright yellow throat and breast bisected by a black V-shaped patch**. When the bird is in flight, note the fluttering wing beats interspersed with short glides, and the conspicuous white patches on either side of a short, broad tail. The beautiful, **flute-like song** is distinctive.

Western meadowlarks sing from the tops of open perches such as fence posts, scattered shrubs, and farm machinery. They forage on the ground for grain, seeds and insects, and sometimes glean insects from low vegetation. During the breeding season, meadowlarks occasionally eat the eggs and chicks of other grassland songbirds, and may scavenge roadkills during the winter when other foods are scarce.

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

The unique song and breast markings make birds unmistakable once seen or heard, although distinguishing field characteristics of the two subspecies are poorly described. Range does not overlap with that of the similar eastern meadowlark (*S. magna*) in British Columbia.



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Life history

In the Georgia Depression, breeding occurred between the end of March and late July. Female western meadowlarks arrive on their breeding territories up to a month later than the males and pairs are formed at that time. Female birds build domed nests from dry grass or other vegetation, and line them with finer grasses. Nests are situated on the ground and are well-concealed beneath shrubs or similar cover. Parental care of eggs and nestlings is primarily carried out by females, although the polygamous males assist with provisioning of young. Western meadowlarks can rear up to three broods per season.

Habitat

In general, western meadowlarks prefer open, moderately-vegetated areas with scattered trees and a groundcover of tall grasses and shrubs. Nesting habitat in the Georgia Depression historically included open estuarine areas and wetland complexes as well as the grasslands associated with Garry oak ecosystems, but fields, pastures and other suitable agricultural sites were also readily used as natural open habitats were converted by human settlement.

Prior to European settlement, natural and human-induced fires helped to maintain the open habitat required by western meadowlarks and other grassland birds of the region.

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Why the species is at risk

Western meadowlark populations are largely limited by availability of nesting habitat throughout their range. Much of the open grassland in the Georgia Depression has already been lost to urban sprawl and agriculture. Following European settlement, farming practices may have temporarily increased the open areas required by western meadowlarks; however, modern large-scale conversion of agricultural lands to greenhouses and intensively-cultivated monocultures has reduced nesting habitat for the species. Fire suppression has also led to encroachment by trees and shrubs into previously open grassland ecosystems.

Urbanisation of previously viable habitat exposes western meadowlarks to additional threats. These include human disturbance resulting in nest abandonment, destruction of nests by livestock and farm machinery, and depredation of both adults and young by domestic cats. Pesticide use can also cause meadowlark mortality, a result of direct ingestion of poisoned grain or reduction in insect prey.

What you can do to help this species

Management practices should be tailored to the needs of the species and its habitat. Potential management tools will depend on the specific circumstances and may require experimentation prior to implementation. **Before taking any action, expert advice should be obtained, and no action taken without it. Please refer to the introductory section of this manual.**

If suitable nesting habitats are appropriately managed, migratory populations of western meadowlark may again colonise suitable sites in the Georgia Depression. Habitat restoration efforts should focus on large areas of protected grasslands and similar areas that are currently used by meadowlarks during the non-breeding season. Private landowners and managers of utility rights-of-way could also manage their lands as habitat for western meadowlarks and other grassland-nesting birds.

References

Beauchesne, S.M., P. Chytyk and J.M. Cooper. 2002. Western Meadowlark stewardship account for the Garry oak ecosystems of southwestern British Columbia. Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team. Victoria, British Columbia.

For further information, contact the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, or see the web site at: www.goert.ca.

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*Refers to non-native species.