

TECHNICAL NOTES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

WYOMING

SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

Biology No. 227

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Subject: WESTERN MEADOWLARK*

General

Western meadowlarks (*Sturnella neglecta*) are characteristic of treeless meadows, pasturelands, and grasslands. They inhabit lowland areas and mountain parks up to an elevation of 7,000 feet (2,134 m) in Colorado. The western meadowlark in New Mexico is common where there is sufficient grass for nesting and is found at elevations of up to 8,000 feet (2,438 m).

Food Requirements

Approximately 63 percent of the diet of the western meadowlark in California consisted of animal matter. Insects were the primary dietary component and included, in order of decreasing importance, ground beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, butterfly and moth larvae, ants, bugs, and flies. Spiders, snails, sowbugs, centipedes, and millipedes were consumed less frequently. Beetles were eaten year-round, while consumption of grasshoppers and crickets was seasonal and accounted for up to 85 percent of the diet in August. Consumption of the larvae of butterflies and moths reached a peak in May and June, and these larvae often constituted 33 percent of the total diet during these months. Vegetable matter accounted for the remaining 37 percent of the overall diet with cultivated grains being of greatest importance. Weed seeds were also consumed and constituted up to 20 percent of the total diet during the late fall. Nestlings were fed primarily on cutworms, grasshoppers, and ground beetles. Weed seeds were occasionally found in nestling stomachs, but cultivated grains were never found.



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*Information taken from Ecoregion M3113 Handbook and Habitat Suitability Index Models, Wildlife Species Narratives (literature searches), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, various dates between 1978-1984.

Water Requirements

Captive western meadowlarks consumed large quantities of water when it was readily available. Availability of water is a major requirement of the western meadowlark in New Mexico.

Cover Requirements

Western meadowlarks in north-central Colorado preferred light to moderately grazed areas characterized by tall, dense grass cover. This species often seeks shelter in grass and pasturelands during the hotter periods of the day. Western meadowlarks in a study area in north-central Colorado were common in mixed grass pastures characterized by buffalograss (Buchloe dactyloides), cheatgrass (Bromus tectorum), red threeawn (Aristida longiseta), western wheatgrass (Agropyron smithii), fringed sage (Artemisia frigida), and broom snakeweed (Gutierrizia sarothrae).

Reproductive Requirements

Nests of the western meadowlark are usually well concealed, are constructed of closely woven dry grasses, and are frequently positioned over a shallow depression in the ground. The nests are usually constructed with a canopy of dry grass arching over the top, and in some cases a runway 2 to 5 feet (0.61-1.5 m) long may lead to the nest. The primary grass utilized in nest construction in a north-central Colorado study was red threeawn. Nests were frequently built beneath clumps of this grass, which provided concealment.

Special Habitat Requirements

No special habitat requirements for the western meadowlark were found in the literature.

Interspersion Requirements

The average territory defended by male western meadowlarks in north-central Colorado was 6.4 acres (2.6 ha) with a range of 4.2 to 11.9 acres (1.7 to 4.8 ha).

Special Considerations

Western meadowlarks occasionally desert their nests and young due to human disturbance in the immediate vicinity of the nest.