

Missouri Master Naturalist 2021 Certification Pin

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*



Description

A chunky, medium-sized songbird with a short tail and long spear-shaped bill. They are pale brown marked with black, with bright-yellow underparts and a bold black V across the chest. The crown is dark with a light medium stripe; eyebrow and moustachial streak are white; lores (space between eye and bill) yellow; and eye line dark. Though most of the tail is brown and blackish barring, the outer feathers are white and conspicuous during flight and when the bird flicks them while on the ground.

Range

Occurs throughout the eastern United States and statewide in Missouri. A similar species the western meadowlark, is a permanent resident in northwest Missouri but rare and scattered in the rest of the state.

Habitat

Open fields, pastures, meadows, prairies, airports, and crop fields. Winters in many kinds of natural and cultivated fields. In the Midwest, tends to prefer taller and lush grass than western meadowlarks.

Behavior

Walks on the ground, often concealed by grasses or crops. Males sing beautiful, flutelike songs from exposed perches, particularly fence posts. Their flight is a distinctive sequence of rapid fluttering and short glides, usually low to the ground. In winter you may see flocks of meadowlarks hunting insects in the fields.

Diet

The sharp, long bills of meadowlarks enable them to hunt ground-dwelling insects such as grubs, crickets, and grasshoppers. Like many members of the blackbird family, they jab their strong, swordlike bill into the soil, then open their jaws, prying open the grass and soil, uncovering spiders, ants, grubs, and other insects. In fall and winter, they also eat seeds and waste grain.

Life Cycle

Meadowlarks are ground nesters. The female builds a cup-shaped nest of grass stems, plant stalks, and similar materials interwoven with surrounding growth in a depression on the ground. Sometimes the nests are covered with a roof and have a side entrance. There are usually narrow trails or “runways” leading up to the nest through the grass. From 2-7 white eggs, heavily spotted with brown and purple are laid. The young hatch naked and helpless in 13-15 days. Both parents feed the nestlings. Young leave the

nest after 11-12 days, when still unable to fly, and are tended by the parents for at least two more weeks. There are generally two broods a year.

Conservation Status

The species probably increased in numbers during the 1700s and 1800s as forests were cleared and turned into farmland. Populations have been decreasing in recent decades as the amount and quality of grassland habitats decline.

Human Connections

The buoyant, flutelike melody of the eastern meadowlark ringing out across a field can brighten anyone's day. They often sing from fence posts or telephone lines, where we can easily admire them. Meadowlarks devour many insects that humans find troublesome.