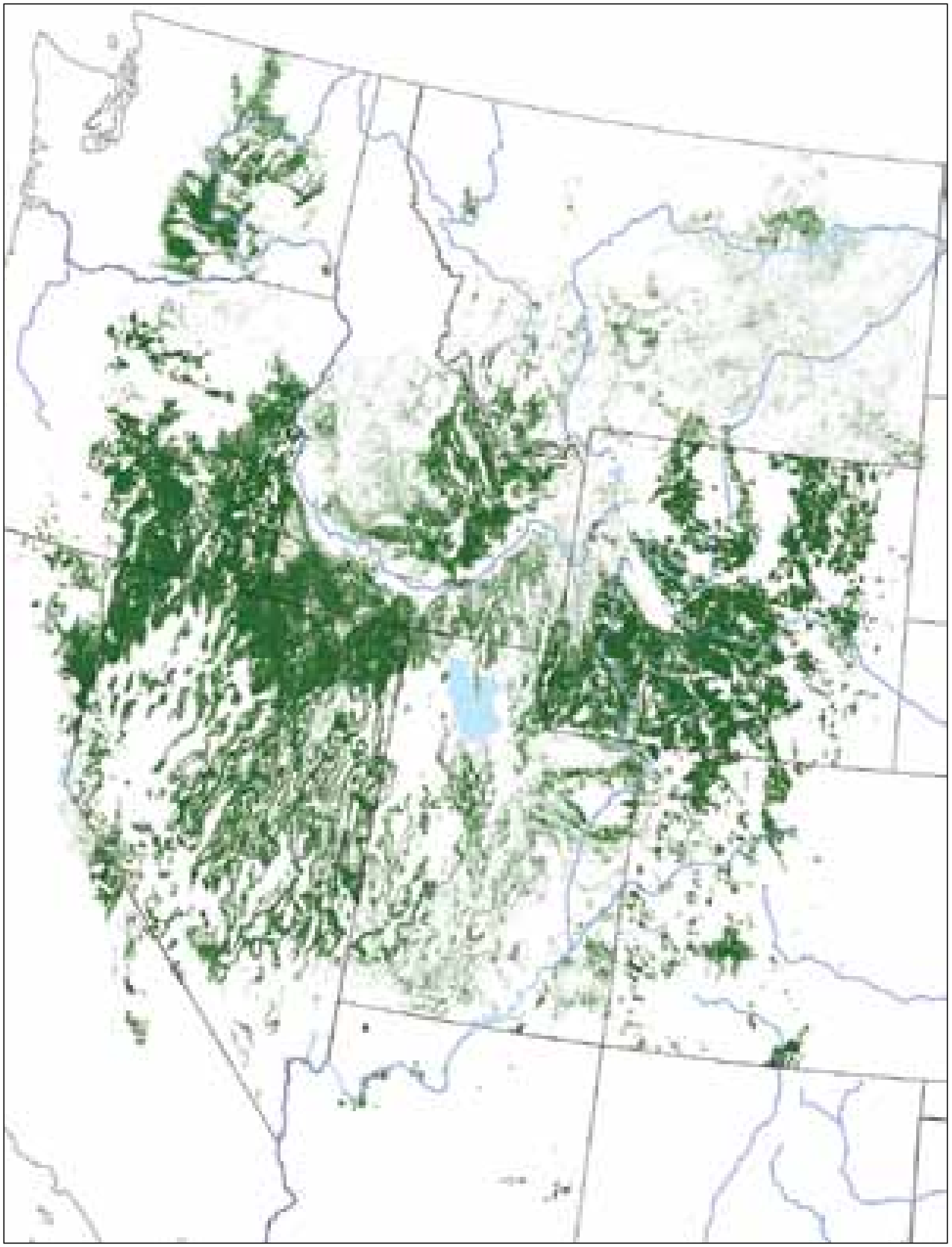
Pocket Guide to Sagebrush Birds

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory
and PRBO Conservation Science



The sagebrush region of the Intermountain West.

Pocket Guide to Sagebrush Birds

Melissa Pitkin and Laura Quattrini

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) works to conserve birds and their habitats through a full-circle approach using science, education and stewardship.

PRBO Conservation Science (PRBO) is dedicated to conserving birds, other wildlife and ecosystems through innovative scientific research and outreach.

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USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service—**www.nrcs.usda.gov/**

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How to Use this Guide

This guide was written for anyone interested in learning about the most common bird species in sagebrush habitats, and it contains some general information about what people can do to help them survive. We focus on 40 of the most common species and organize them according to their relationships to each other. For example, hawks are grouped together, sparrows are grouped together, et cetera.

In the first few pages of the guide we present descriptions of some of the main types of plant communities found within the sagebrush region of the Intermountain West (the area of North America stretching from the Rocky Mountains westward to the Cascades and Sierra Nevada). Along with these descriptions are some overarching concepts to aid in the conservation, restoration, and management of this valuable and fragile ecosystem. After the habitat descriptions, you will find profiles of some of the most common species of birds that nest in sagebrush.

Aaron Holmes

There are more than 120 million acres of sagebrush landscape in the Intermountain West. Of that, 45% is public land, managed by agencies such as the USDI Bureau of Land Management and the USDA Forest Service. The rest is in private land ownership, so the people who live and work in the region have great opportunities to be part of conservation.

This vast "sagebrush sea" is not just one continuous expanse of sagebrush. Instead, it is comprised of a mosaic of different habitats that support numerous and varied wildlife species and provide valuable ecosystem services to people (such as water filtration, flood control, and nutrient cycling). Some of the habitats within the sagebrush region include sagebrush steppe, desert shrublands, grasslands, riparian areas, and woodlands. These habitats are all integral parts of the landscape and support approximately 90 bird species and more than 85 mammal species.

Also within the sagebrush sea are the headwaters of the Columbia, Colorado, and Missouri rivers and the watersheds within the Great Basin, which retain nutrients and sediments and capture the snow and rainfall that supply water to agriculture and cities. The wide-open scenery of the Intermountain West attracts tourism and backcountry hunting and packing trips. Sagebrush land is important to the ranching industry, as nearly all sagebrush habitats, public or private, are grazed by livestock. Good stewardship of these important habitats is necessary to ensure that the needs of wildlife and people can be met.

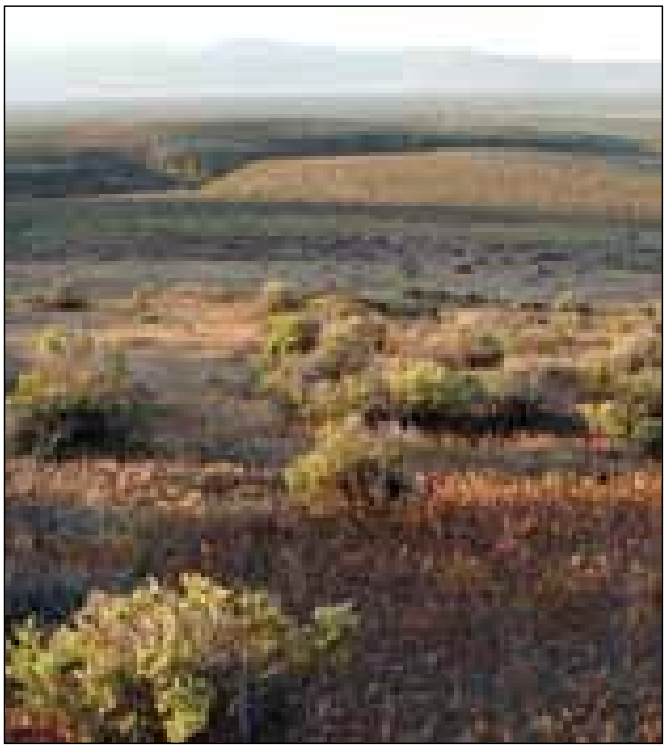
Aaron Holmes

Healthy sagebrush steppe habitat.

Sagebrush Steppe

The sagebrush steppe is a habitat type where grasses and shrubs are co-dominant. The dominant shrub is sagebrush, of which there are many types growing throughout the West. Other important shrub species include antelope bitterbrush, horsebrush, and rabbitbrush. Rabbitbrush is particularly important, providing forage for insects and herbivores, and as a primary successor in restoring degraded sagebrush sites.

For most birds it is the structure of the habitat that matters most. In other words, different birds need different heights and configurations of vegetation. Throughout the region, sagebrush birds need a mix of plant communities—some patches of dense shrubs, some open patches, and a healthy understory.



Aaron Holmes

A cheatgrass understory invading sagebrush steppe.

The understory consists of perennial bunch grasses, flowering forbs and legumes, and biological soil crust. This crust is very fragile and made up of algae, lichen, fungi, mosses, and bacteria. It is critical to protecting and enhancing the soil, enabling the native plant community to flourish.

Among the bird species found in the sagebrush steppe are Greater Sage-Grouse, Common Nighthawk, and Sage Sparrow.

Aaron Holmes

Desert Shrublands

"Desert shrublands" is a term used to describe shrub communities that generally lack a co-dominant grass layer. Dominant shrubs, often occurring in mixed stands, include big sagebrush, black greasewood, spiny hop-sage, and saltbush, among others. The

Tom Grey

Loggerhead Shrike

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Black-throated Sparrow

understory is often dominated by bare ground and rock, with relatively less cover of flowering forbs and grass.

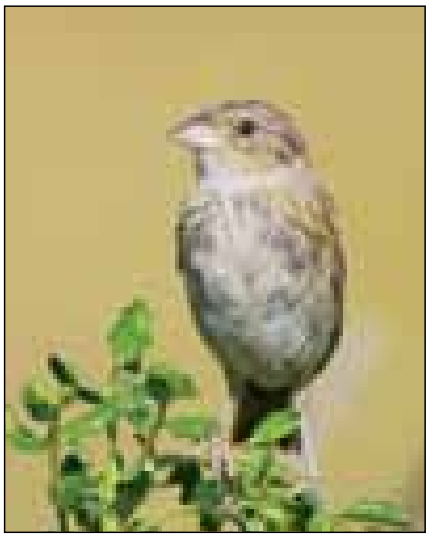
Plants and animals in this habitat are adapted to low moisture conditions. For example, animals are sometimes nocturnal or only active very early in the morning to avoid moisture loss. Others, like some raptors, Turkey Vultures, and nighthawks, keep their mouths open wide to cool their bodies by evaporating water from their mouths.

Bird species that prefer shrubland habitats include Loggerhead Shrike and Black-throated Sparrow.

Aaron Holmes

Grasslands

Within the sagebrush steppe there are patches of habitat dominated by grasses, both perennial and annual types. After burns, the habitat may be dominated by grasses for years, which means that there can also be successional grasslands. Grasses tend to be more plentiful at higher elevations and around wetlands in the gradient between sage and water.



Tom Grey

Grasshopper Sparrow

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Western Meadowlark

Some areas, such as the Palouse Prairie region of eastern Washington, are primarily made up of bunch-grasses and include expanses where sagebrush is fairly limited. The eastern edge of the sagebrush biome grades into shortgrass prairie communities. Perennial grasslands with a healthy flowering forb and legume component provide important habitat for species such as Grasshopper Sparrow and Western Meadowlark. Perennial grasslands are important; their extensive root systems help prevent soil erosion, and the above-ground growth returns minerals and provides humus to the soil as it decomposes. They are also a food base for insects, a critical food source for many birds.

Aaron Holmes

Riparian Areas

The term riparian area refers to the interface between a river or stream and the upland landscape. Due to a higher water table this area has a dramatically different vegetative component than the drier upland area, including more trees, shrubs and forbs. Riparian habitat provides riverbank protection, erosion control, and improves water quality. It provides food, cover, and nesting habitat and is extremely important to many birds for migratory and stopover habitat. Birds such as Willow Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, MacGillivray's Warbler, Song Sparrow,

Black-headed Grosbeak, and Bullock's Oriole are found in these thin strips of moist habitat surrounded by an arid sagebrush landscape. In the western states, riparian habitat provides for the majority of the diversity found across the landscape; however they are one of the most impacted habitat types.

Seth Gallagher

Wetlands are typically associated with riparian areas due to their proximity to each other, both shaped by a higher water table. Wetland soils are inundated or saturated for the entire or part of a year. The shallow and sedentary water is ideal habitat for many plants (e.g., algae, rushes, cattails) and animals (e.g., insects, shellfish, frogs), providing a food source for many birds.

Willow Flycatcher and Black-headed Grosbeak are among the species found in riparian areas.

Photos: David Seibel and Bob Gress, BirdsinFocus.com

Terry Rich

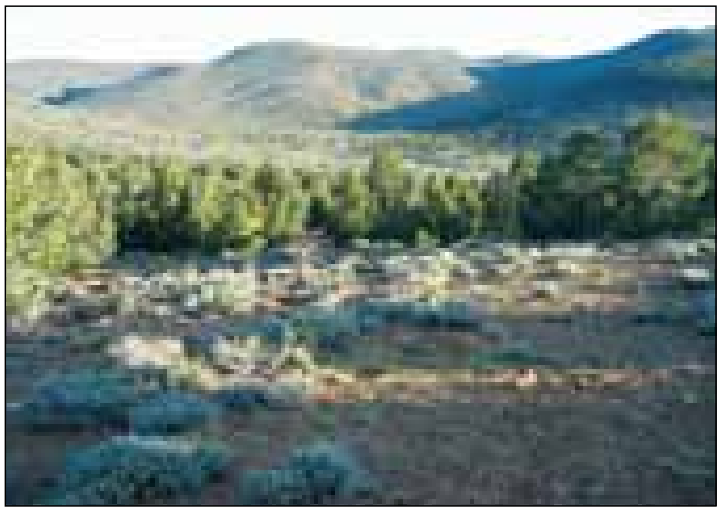
Woodlands

In the Intermountain West the extent of woodlands has increased over the last 150 years, especially woodlands that include aspen, pinyon, and juniper. This increase in tree species has caused some plant communities to shift from shrubs, grasses and forbs with scattered trees to communities dominated by trees.

Woodland plants such as mountain mahogany may provide structure for nest sites of Red-tailed and Ferruginous Hawks and may attract bird species

Facing page: Mountain mahogany woodland.

Right: Juniper woodland spreading in sagebrush.



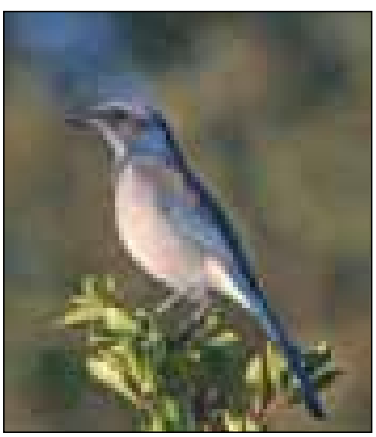
Stella Moss

such as Western Scrub-Jay, Black-billed Magpie, and Virginia's Warbler.

Lack of fire, unsustainable livestock grazing, and changes in climate are likely the cause of the transition from sagebrush to woodland habitats.

For more information on pinyon-juniper woodlands visit http://oregonstate.edu/dept/EOARC/pinon-juniper/index.html

Black-billed Magpie (left) and Western Scrub-Jay.



Photos by Tom Grey

Aaron Holmes

Conservation Challenges

The sagebrush sea and the bird species it supports are among the highest conservation priorities of North America. While there is much work to be done to restore or enhance this landscape, many sagebrush birds are still here due to a long tradition of careful and effective management of the land, a necessity in a dry region where so little vegetation grows. Landowners and land managers have been responsible

for providing for human needs as well as providing wildlife habitat on the sagebrush landscape.

Raising awareness about birds and their habitat needs among landowners and natural resource professionals will be critical for sagebrush bird conservation. Different birds require different habitats; this requires habitat management for a variety of vegetation structures. Careful stewardship includes maintaining healthy, diverse ecosystems upon which livestock, wildlife, and humans depend. The management recommendations offered in this guide reflect this.

Human development and fragmentation of the landscape has resulted in the loss and alteration of millions of acres of sagebrush habitats. Threats, including unsustainable livestock grazing, exotic plant invasion, and an altered fire cycle often cause the habitat to transition, irreversibly, from one type to another. For example, mismanaged livestock grazing can remove grasses and flowering forbs and herbs, create soil compaction, and break up the biological soil crust. This allows for exotic cheatgrass invasion in an area which increases the likelihood that a fire will carry, resulting in more intense and more frequent burns.

The habitat then usually switches from a mixture of shrubs and perennial grasses to invasive annual grasses, displacing native wildlife. Where fires have become very frequent, they prevent the shrubs from returning, making this conversion to non-native grassland permanent.

In other areas, suppression of wildfires allows juniper and pinyon trees to invade. When woodland habitat is established, understory vegetation is significantly reduced and fire will not carry. This eventually results in the permanent loss of sagebrush habitats and transition to permanent woodlands.

These transitions from one habitat type to another can be extremely difficult to reverse and are responsible for making the sagebrush steppe less valuable to wildlife and people.

Conservation Practices

• Use management strategies that include part or all of the following:

– Maintain or create a patchwork of native perennial bunchgrasses, forbs, and legumes, mature and young sagebrush, and open ground.

– Control non-native, fall-germinating annual grasses.

– Avoid disturbing (includes mowing and spraying) nesting birds during the nesting season, April–July.

– Maintain ground squirrel and prairie dog colonies to provide burrows for Burrowing Owls, prey for raptors and other predators, and nesting habitat for the Mountain Plover; avoid poisoning near these colonies, especially during the nesting season. If colonies need to be controlled, trap and/or shoot using non-lead bullets. Lead bullets can lead to secondary poisoning of birds and mammals that may scavenge on prairie dog carcasses.

– Remove unnecessary fences and avoid building fences within a ¼ mile of active sage-grouse leks; mark existing fences near leks to make them more visible to sage-grouse and help prevent fatal fence collisions. (see www.suttoncenter.org/pages/fence_marking_instructions).

– Add wildlife escape ladders to stock water tanks (see Stock Tank Ladder design at www.rmbo.org/v2/web/Publications/manuals.aspx).

- Contact your local NRCS office, private lands wildlife biologist, or wildlife conservation manager (see page 19) to discuss management strategies that use techniques such as prescribed grazing, deferment (resting the grass from grazing), and interseeding.
- It is illegal to pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect most species of birds. Contact your state or federal wildlife conservation officer if you need assistance or want more information.
- Retrofit existing power poles using techniques to minimize electrocuting birds of prey. Call your local electric company for poles that may be a problem.
- Keep vehicles on established roads to protect soil crust and nesting areas.
- Keep house cats indoors.

Resources and Funding Programs for Sagebrush Conservation

The following is a partial list of resources. There are other agencies and organizations that can provide technical and monetary assistance.

USDA

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)—www.nrcs.usda.gov

- Conservation Reserve Program—www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/CRP
- Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)—www.nrcs.usda.gov/PROGRAMS/EQIP
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)—www.nrcs.usda.gov/new_csp
- Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)—www.nrcs.usda.gov/Programs/whip
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program—(FRPP) www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/frpp/19
- Grasslands Reserve Program—www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/GRP
- Conservation of Private Grazing Lands—www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cpgl
- Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative—www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/glci

USDI

U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS)—**www.fws.gov**

- Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program—www.fws.gov/partners
- North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA)—www.fws.gov/birdhabitat/Grants/NAWCA/index.shtm

U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)—www.usgs.gov

- SageMAP—sagemap.wr.usgs.gov
- Sage Grouse Local Working Group Locator—greatbasin.wr.usgs.gov/LWG
- National Biological Information Infrastructure—www.nbii.gov/portal/server.pt/community/nbii_home/236
    - Great Basin Information Project—greatbasin.nbii.gov

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

- Great Basin Restoration Initiative—www.blm.gov/id/st/en/prog/gbri.html

State Agencies/Organizations

California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG)
Landowner Incentive Program—
www.dfg.ca.gov/lands/lip

Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW)—
wildlife.state.co.us/LandWater/PrivateLandProgram

Idaho Fish and Game

Programs/Grants for Private landowners—
fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/landowners

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Landowner Programs—
fwp.mt.gov/habitat/landownersGuide.html

Nevada Department of Agriculture Noxious Weed Program—www.agri.nv.gov

Nevada Department of Wildlife Landowner Incentive Program—ndow.org/wild/conservation/lip

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife—
www.dfw.state.or.us/conservationstrategy

Utah Department of Agriculture and Food—
ag.utah.gov/index.html

Utah Division of Natural Resources
Wildlife Resources—naturalresources.utah.gov/divisions/wildlife.html

Utah State University Cooperative Extension
Natural Resources—extension.usu.edu/htm/natural

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
Grants and Incentives—wdfw.wa.gov/grants

Wyoming Game and Fish Department Landowner
Incentive Program—gf.state.wy.us/wildlife/nongame/LIP/index.asp

Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust—wwwnrt.state.wy.us/index.htm

Other Resources

SageSTEP—www.sagestep.org

Great Basin Bird Observatory—www.gbbo.org

Intermountain West Joint Venture—www.iwjv.org

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory—www.rmbo.org

PRBO Conservation Science —www.prbo.org

Cooperative Sagebrush Initiative—www.sandcounty.net/programs/cbcn/sagewise/

Species Profiles

This is not a comprehensive guide to birds of the sagebrush sea, but an introduction to common species and how to conserve their habitat.

Some birds have different plumages – or feather patterns – depending on the time of year and on their age and sex. Not all the species we include here are present in the region year-round. To illustrate these species, we have chosen images of the birds as they usually look when in the sagebrush sea.

Each species profile includes:

1) **Identification:** Average length, in inches (measured from bill tip to tail tip). Features or behaviors that help identify a species. When males and females, or adults and juveniles, look different from one another, this is noted.

2) **Feeding:** How the bird obtains its food, also useful in identification. **Diet icons** indicate primary kinds of food; a key is found on the inside back cover.

3) **Habitat:** The main habitat features the bird requires.

4) **Conservation:** Population status (from various sources, including the Breeding Bird Survey and Partners in Flight Species Assessment Database). Specific ways to conserve the species and its habitats.

David Seibel, BirdsInFocus.com

Turkey Vulture *(Cathartes aura)*

Identification: 26″ – Large soaring bird with small, unfeathered red head; juvenile has dark head. Dark brown overall, with two-toned underwing visible from below. Soars with wings held above head in shallow ∨.

Feeding: Searches for carrion (from small mammals to deer and cattle) by soaring. Uses its excellent sense of smell to locate food.

Habitat: Found in all habitat types. Nests on the ground and on cliffs.

Conservation: Increasing. Avoid disturbing this beneficial scavenger. On highways, watch for vultures foraging on road-kills.

Photos by Tom Grey

Red-tailed Hawk *(Buteo jamaicensis)*

Identification: 19″ – *Adult* (shown): Tail broad and rust-colored. Commonly has pale chest and dark band across belly and white spotted V on back; dark area on leading edge of wing when in flight. *Juvenile:* Brown tail, finely barred black.

Feeding: Hunts by watching from a perch or while soaring, preying on mammals, birds, reptiles.

Habitat: Open woodlands. Nests in trees and on cliffs.

Conservation: Stable or increasing. Maintain open sagebrush; retain existing trees for nesting. Minimize pesticide use.

Photos by Tom Grey

Ferruginous Hawk *(Buteo regalis)*

Identification: 22–27″ – Largest "buteo." Light form most common. Has rust-colored back and shoulders. Head pale and chest clean white. Tail is light. Very pale when seen from underneath. Adults have reddish-brown feathers all the way down its legs.

Feeding: Hunts while soaring or from a perch. Preys on ground squirrels, prairie dogs, rabbits.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on cliffs or rocky ledges or large trees.

Conservation: Increasing. Maintain large tracts of open sagebrush and small mammal populations, including prairie dogs. Avoid activity near nests. Minimize pesticide use.

Jeff Birek

P. Gaines, Flickr Creative Commons

Golden Eagle *(Aquila chrysaetos)*

Identification: 30″ – Very large and dark. *Juvenile:* Base of tail white, outer wings often with white patches. *Adult:* Dark overall.

Feeding: Hunts primarily while soaring. Preys on small mammals, including jackrabbits.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on cliffs or rocky outcrops. Thrives where there are healthy rodent and rabbit populations.

Conservation: Declining nesting populations make this species vulnerable to habitat loss and degradation (especially loss of shrubs and jackrabbit habitat due to widespread fires). Do not disturb known breeding sites.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Bill Schmoker

Prairie Falcon *(Falco mexicanus)*

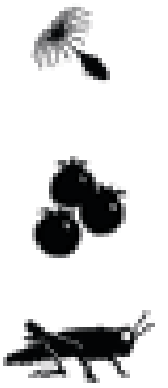
Identification: 16″ – Upperparts uniformly brown. Chest and belly white with dark streaking or spotting. Brown cheek patch, or "mustache," against pale face. Dark "armpits" seen from underneath while in flight.

Feeding: Hunts while flying, catching birds in mid-air and small mammals on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on cliff ledges.

Conservation: Uncertain. Maintain open sagebrush and small mammal populations. Minimize pesticide use.

David Bell



Sharp-tailed Grouse

(Tympanuchus phasianellus)

Identification: 16–18″ – Chicken-like bird. Upperparts spotted brown, black, and white; paler below. Pale, sharply pointed tail.

Feeding: Collects plant foods from ground or low in shrubs. Also eat fruits, berries, and insects.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe with open grassland areas. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain a large mosaic of tall sagebrush mixed with native grasslands (including perennial bunchgrass), forbs, and legumes. Trees are not compatible with grouse management.

L.Beeney / VIREO

Gunnison Sage-Grouse

(Centrocercus minimus)

Identification: 18–22″ – Very similar to Greater Sage-Grouse but found only in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.

Feeding: In summer, eats insects and sagebrush shoots, buds, and flowers. In fall and winter, eats sagebrush leaves almost exclusively.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, grasslands, riparian/meadows. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Declining, with potential for extinction. Maintain a large mosaic of tall sagebrush mixed with native grasslands (including perennial bunchgrass), forbs, and legumes. Trees are not compatible with grouse management.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Greater Sage-Grouse *(Centrocercus urophasianus)*

Identification: 22–29″ – Large, heavy, pheasant-like bird, with long pointed tail. *Male:* larger; black throat, white chest, and black belly. *Female:* smaller; gray overall with black belly.

Feeding: In summer, eats insects and sagebrush shoots, buds and flowers. In fall and winter, eats sagebrush leaves almost exclusively.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, grasslands, riparian/meadows. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain a large mosaic of tall sagebrush mixed with native grasslands (including perennial bunchgrass), forbs, and legumes. Trees are not compatible with grouse management.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Mountain Plover *(Charadrius montanus)*

Identification: 9″ – Pale tan back and wings, white breast and belly, a black patch above the white forehead, and a black stripe between the black beak and eye.

Feeding: Collects insects on the ground.

Habitat: Open sagebrush steppe; flat, disturbed grassland with short vegetation and areas of bare ground where it will nest. Also nests in bare agricultural fields.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands with extensive bare ground. Maintain prairie dog towns. Avoid nests when working in cultivated fields.

Tom Grey

Long-billed Curlew *(Numenius americanus)*

Identification: 20–26″ – Large shorebird with long legs and distinctive long, down-curved bill. Buffy body. Cinnamon hue to wings seen when in flight.

Feeding: Feeds by walking slowly, watching for grasshoppers and other large insects, toads, bird eggs, and nesting songbirds.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe and grasslands. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain a patchwork of short and taller grasses mixed with shrubs and wetlands. Avoid activity near known nesting sites. Minimize pesticide use.

Jacob Cooper

Wilson's Snipe *(Gallinago delicata)*

Identification: 10.5″ – Stocky shorebird with long, straight bill and boldly striped head. Overall dark brown with buffy-white lines. Often crouches low to the ground. Difficult to see, but often heard flying overhead.

Feeding: Collects its insect food on or in ground.

Habitat: Riparian areas, primarily wet meadows. Nest on the ground.

Conservation: Stable. Protect wetland and wet meadow habitats within the sagebrush steppe.

Jeff Birek

Mourning Dove *(Zenaida macroura)*

Identification: 9-13″ – Gray-brown overall. Long tapered tail with white tips; short legs, small bill, and a head that looks small in comparison to the body.

Feeding: Picks seeds from the ground; eats some insects.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, riparian, woodland. Nests in trees, on the ground, or in shrubs.

Conservation: Stable. Minimize pesticide use.

© iStockPhoto.com/John Pitcher

Barn Owl *(Tyto alba)*

Identification: 16″ – Pale, tawny upperparts, whiter underparts. *Female:* Golden-buff below. Heart-shaped face and contrasting dark eyes are distinctive. Rarely seen during the day time, except inside buildings.

Feeding: Hunts at night, primarily for small rodents but also large insects, bats, and reptiles.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe and open desert. Often found nesting near people, in barns and other structures. Will nest in man-made nest boxes.

Conservation: Appears to be declining. Maintain small mammal populations. Minimize pesticide use.

Tom Grey

Long-eared Owl

(Asio otus)

Identification: 15″ – Long, slender profile. Tawny-orange face with dark vertical stripe through eyes. Long ear tufts visible when raised. Dark streaking and barring overall.

Feeding: Hunts at night, soaring low to the ground searching primarily for mammals.

Habitat: Woodlands. Nests in trees; often uses old nests of magpies or other birds.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain woodlands and grasslands. Minimize pesticide use.

Photos by David Seibel, BirdsInFocus.com

Short-eared Owl *(Asio flammeus)*

Identification: 13-17″ – Mottled buffy-brown upperparts and streaked buffy underparts. Short ear tufts and dark patches around eyes.

Feeding: Small mammals; sometimes birds.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe with open grassland areas. Nests on the ground, either under a shrub or up against/under a bunchgrass.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open sagebrush and grasslands and small mammal populations. Minimize pesticide use. Remove unused fences.

Judd Patterson, BirdsInFocus.com

Burrowing Owl *(Athene cunicularia)*

Identification: 9.5″ – Small owl. No ear tufts. Long legs, short tail, white spots on brown back. Large yellow eyes. Bill yellowish, eyebrows and throat white, wings and tail barred brown and buffy.

Feeding: Captures grasshoppers and other insects during the day, birds and small mammals at night.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe and grasslands. Nests in burrows in ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain prairie dog, ground squirrel, and badger digs to provide burrows for nesting. Minimize pesticide use.

Ross Lock

Common Nighthawk *(Chordeiles minor)*

Identification: 9″ – Slender features; brown, black and/or gray coloring overall. In flight, a white bar near the base of feathers at the tip of the wing can be seen. Often seen flying over woods, fields, or towns at dusk. Erratic, bounding flight distinctive.

Feeding: Captures insects in flight.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open sagebrush and grasslands. Minimize pesticide use.

Ken-ichi Ueda, Flickr Creative Commons

Common Poorwill *(Phalaenoptilus nuttallii)*

Identification: 7-8″ – Very well camouflaged, speckled brown, gray, and black; short wings and tail with relatively large head. More typically heard, giving its forlorn, two-note whistle— “poor-will”.

Feeding: Leaps from the ground or a perch to catch night-flying insects.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Status unknown, but birds go unseen. Minimize pesticide use.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Gray Flycatcher *(Empidonax wrightii)*

Identification: 6″ – Grayish overall, with olive-gray upperparts. Small, rounded head. Most readily identified by distinctive tail-dipping action when perched.

Feeding: Hunts from a perch and catches insects in mid-air

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, woodlands. Nests in tall sagebrush, bitterbrush, and smaller trees.

Conservation: Stable. Maintain older, denser patches of sagebrush with a layered canopy.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Say's Phoebe *(Sayornis saya)*

Identification: 7.5″ – Apricot-colored belly. Gray head, back, and wings. Tail black.

Feeding: Flies out from a perch to capture flying or terrestrial insects.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on cliffs or on buildings, near people.

Conservation: Stable. Has benefited from humans as it often nests on man-made structures.

Tom Grey

Western Kingbird *(Tyrannus verticalis)*

Identification: 8.75″ – Belly yellow; chest, crown of head, and neck pale gray, with darker gray through the face. White throat. Tail black with white outer edges.

Feeding: Captures flying insects in the air.

Habitat: Sagebrush, open woodlands. Nests in tree canopies and often on human structures. Commonly perches on utility lines and nests on poles.

Conservation: Stable. Maintain snags (dead trees) for perching.

Tom Grey

Loggerhead Shrike *(Lanius ludovicianus)*

Identification: 9″ – Broad black mask and white throat. Crown of head and back dark gray, underparts paler. Wings and tail flash black and white in flight.

Feeding: Watches from a fencepost or other perch, then swoops down to capture insects, lizards, small mammals. Skewers prey on thorns or barbed wire.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, open woodlands. Nests in tall shrubs and small trees.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain large, mature sagebrush and open grassland with scattered shrubs for nesting sites for shrikes. Minimize pesticide use.

Judd Patterson, BirdsInFocus.com

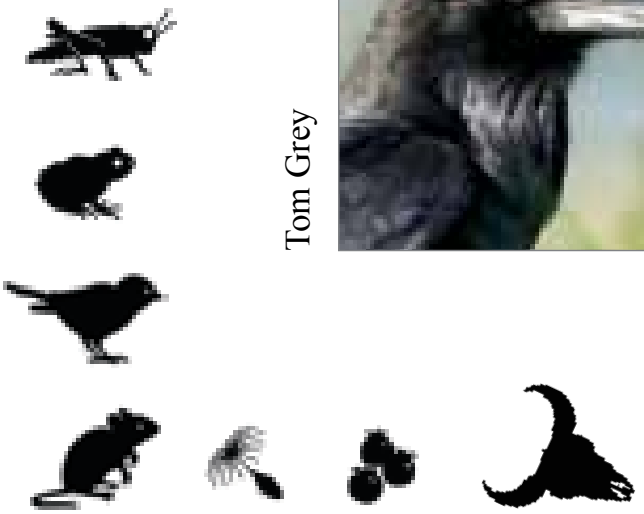
Black-billed Magpie *(Pica hudsonia)*

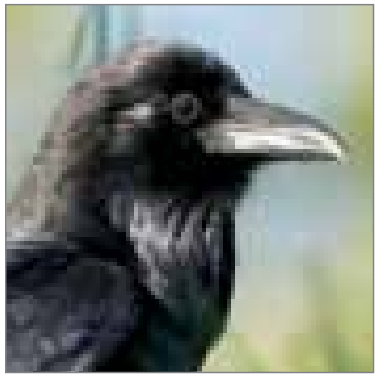
Identification: 18-24″ – Large bird with long black tail and broad wings; black head, chest, and bill; and white shoulders and belly.

Feeding: Scavenges mostly on ground for insects, lizards, small mammals; will collect food from trees. Sometimes caches food in piles on ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, woodlands, riparian. Nests in larger shrubs, trees, and willows—near wet areas because it uses mud to line its nest.

Conservation: Maintain mature, large sagebrush and also woody riparian areas, for nest building and nest sites.





Tom Grey

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Common Raven *(Corvus corax)*

Identification: 24″ – Larger than American Crow. All-black; wedge-shaped tail, long neck and thick, long, black bill; and long, narrow wings.

Feeding: Scavenges mostly on ground, but will collect a wide range of food from other areas. Sometimes caches food in piles on ground.

Habitat: Widespread. Nests in tree canopies, on cliffs, and on power-line poles.

Conservation: Stable. Raven populations can have negative effects on other nesting birds. Do not supplement their diet, and keep food sources (e.g., grain) covered to prevent offering them a feeding station.

Tom Grey

American Crow *(Corvus brachyrhynchos)*

Identification: 18″ – All black with short, squared tail and broad wings. Bill stout and black. Often seen in groups.

Feeding: Often forages in groups. Feeds mostly on ground, on a wide range of foods, but will collect food from other areas. Sometimes caches food in piles on ground.

Habitat: Crows are widespread and thrive near people. Nests in trees.

Conservation: Stable. Do not supplement the diet of crows and ravens. Keep outdoor sources of pet and livestock food covered.

Tom Grey

Horned Lark *(Eremophila alpestris)*

Identification: 6–8″ – Upperparts uniformly sand-colored; belly white. Black breastband and mask and yellowish or white throat distinctive. Small black "horns" are often difficult to see.

Feeding: Eats seeds and insects collected on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, grasslands, areas with bare ground.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands with few shrubs. Minimize pesticide use.

Dennis Garrison / USDA Forest Service

Rock Wren *(Salpinctes obsoletus)*

Identification: 5-6 ″ – Upperparts gray and finely speckled; throat and chest pale and finely streaked. Belly pale. Frequently bobs body up and down.

Feeding: Eats insects captured on the ground.

Habitat: Rocky hillsides and talus within sagebrush steppe. Nests in cavities in rocks.

Conservation: Generally declining, in part due to nest parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird. Minimize pesticide use.

Tom Grey

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *(Polioptila caerulea)*

Identification: 5″ – Small and delicate with long tail. Bluish-gray overall. White eye ring. Black tail with contrasting white outer tail feathers.

Feeding: Gleans insects from twigs and leaves.

Habitat: Woodlands. Nests in shrub or tree canopy.

Conservation: Stable. Confine woodland tree-thinning projects to fall and winter, to avoid disturbing nesting gnatcatchers.

Dennis Garrison / USDA Forest Service

Sage Thrasher *(Oreoscoptes montanus)*

Identification: 8-9″ – Gray-brown above; paler white below with heavy black streaking and often a salmon wash to the flanks. Tail is long, with white corners.

Feeding: Collects food items, mostly insects from the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests in shrubs.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain older, dense stands of sagebrush. Control invasive plants and encroaching trees.

Tom Grey

Green-tailed Towhee *(Pipilo chlorurus)*

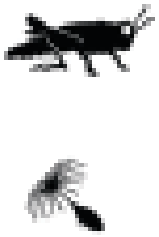
Identification: 7.5″ – Rust-colored crown, white throat, dark gray undersides, and greenish-yellow upperparts.

Feeding: "Rakes" leaves and soil to expose seeds, insects.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, woodland, riparian. Nests on the ground or in shrubs in thick sagebrush or wooded stream edges.

Conservation: Stable. Maintain older, dense stands of sagebrush.

Brian E. Small



Sage Sparrow *(Amphispiza belli)*

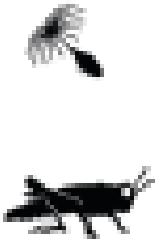
Identification: 6″ – Dark gray head with bold white "mustache" stripe and complete white eye-ring. White breast with dark central spot. Often walks on ground with tail raised.

Feeding: Collects insects, spiders, and seeds on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests in or under shrubs, especially sagebrush.

Conservation: Declining. Requires large tracts of mainly low-elevation sagebrush. Maintain old, dense sagebrush stands; control invasive grasses and encroaching trees.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Black-throated Sparrow

(Amphispiza bilineata)

Identification: 5-6″ – Striking black throat. Bold white stripes through black face. Gray unmarked body. White tips to outer tail feathers.

Feeding: Forages on ground for seeds and small insects; will glean low on shrubs.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, desert shrublands. Nests in shrubs or on ground underneath.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain mixed shrub communities, especially in drier regions.

Dave Herr / USDA Forest Service

Brewer's Sparrow *(Spizella breweri)*

Identification: 5.5″ – Small. Overall drab grey-brown and non-descript; indistinct streaking above paler, plain underside. Slender, long, very thin tail.

Feeding: Collects seeds and small insects on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests in shrubs.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain sagebrush stands; control invasive grasses and encroaching trees.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Grasshopper Sparrow

(Ammodramus savannarum)

Identification: 5″ – Small, compact sparrow. Short-tailed and flat-headed. Back intricately patterned with brown and rufous. Underparts unmarked, with a buffy wash.

Feeding: Collects insects and seeds on the ground.

Habitat: Grasslands. Nests on the ground, typically under bunchgrass.

Conservation: Declining. Manage for healthy stands of native bunchgrasses.

Jerry Oldenettel, Flicker Creative Commons

Savannah Sparrow *(Passerculus sandwichensis)*

Identification: 5.5 ″ – Brown or grayish-brown overall. Back dark and streaked. Underparts whiter, with crisp, heavy streaking. Pale "eyebrow" and fairly dark eye-line and "mustache" stripe. Often has a yellow tinge between eye and top of bill.

Feeding: Collects insects and seeds on the ground.

Habitat: Grasslands and open areas. Common in pastures and wet meadows. Nests on the ground.

Conservation: Declining. Manage for healthy stands of native bunchgrasses

David Seibel, BirdsInFocus.com

Vesper Sparrow *(Pooecetes gramineus)*

Identification: 5-6″ – Back brown and uniformly streaked. Underparts white or cream-colored, with brown streaking on the chest. White outer tail feathers are conspicuous when the bird flies.

Feeding: Collects seeds and insects on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, desert shrublands, grasslands. Nests on the ground, typically under bunchgrass.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain stands of sagebrush with bunchgrass understory.

Tom Grey

Lark Sparrow *(Chondestes grammacus)*

Identification: 7″ – Bold white, black, and chestnut head pattern. Long, rounded tail with white outer tail feathers. Whitish breast with dark central spot.

Feeding: Collects seeds, some insects on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe. Nests on the ground under a shrub or bunchgrass.

Conservation: Declining. Maintain open grasslands with scattered trees and shrubs, especially in mountain foothills areas.

Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Western Meadowlark *(Sturnella neglecta)*

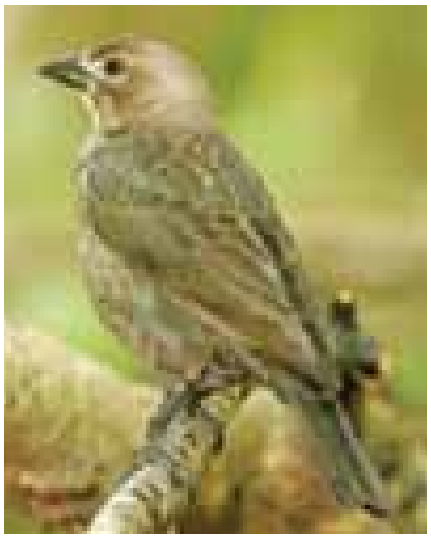
Identification: 9.5″ – Upperparts pale brown. Throat, chest, and belly bright yellow with broad dark breastband. White outer tail feathers.

Feeding: Collects seeds and insects on the ground.

Habitat: Sagebrush steppe, grasslands. Nests on the ground in a dome-shaped nest made out of grass.

Conservation: Declining. Support projects that promote grassland restoration or increased grass cover within shrublands. Avoid disturbing nests.

Tom Grey



Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

Brown-headed Cowbird *(Molothrus ater)*

Identification: 7-9″ – Small stout bill and short tail. Male: Black body and dark brown head; often appears entirely black. Female: Dull brown coloring overall; often finely streaked and with a pale throat.

Diet: Collects seeds and insects on the ground.

Habitat: All. Lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, often reducing the ability of "host" birds to raise any young of their own.

Conservation: Abundant. A threat to other songbirds due to its habit of parasitism. Reduce access to waste grains, spilled feed, etc., which serves as a major attraction for this species.

Tom Grey

Brewer's Blackbird *(Euphagus cyanocephalus)*

Identification: 8–10″ – *Male:* Iridescent black all over with yellow or yellow-white eyes. *Female:* Dark eyes and wings, dull gray-brown body.

Feeding: Collects its food on the ground.

Habitat: Open woodlands and shrubby areas. Nests low in shrubs or on the ground, in dry washes, along wet meadows, or along riparian areas, and on human structures. Often associated with wet areas.

Conservation: Abundant but declining. Can be a nuisance to agriculture. Keep food sources (e.g., grain) covered to prevent offering them a feeding station.

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Bird Identification Websites

Partners in Flight: **www.partnersinflight.org**

Cornell Lab of Ornithology – All About Birds:
www.allaboutbirds.org/NetCommunity/Page

National Audubon Society:
www.audubon.org/educate/expert

USGS Nature Instruct–Dendroica:
www.natureinstruct.org/dendroica/

WhatBird.com: **www.whatbird.com/**

WildBirds.com:
www.wildbirds.com/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx

Key to Diet Icons

Grain, grass seeds, forb seeds

Fruits and berries

Aquatic insects, crayfish, snails

Grasshoppers and other insects, spiders, worms

Frogs, toads, snakes, lizards

Adult birds, nestlings, eggs

Mice, voles, prairie dogs, ground squirrels, rabbits

Carrion

Audubon
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IN NEVADA

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NRCS

prbo

ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIRD OBSERVATORY

Sagebrush Steppe
SageSTEP
Treatment Evaluation Project

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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