



Species Survey Strategies

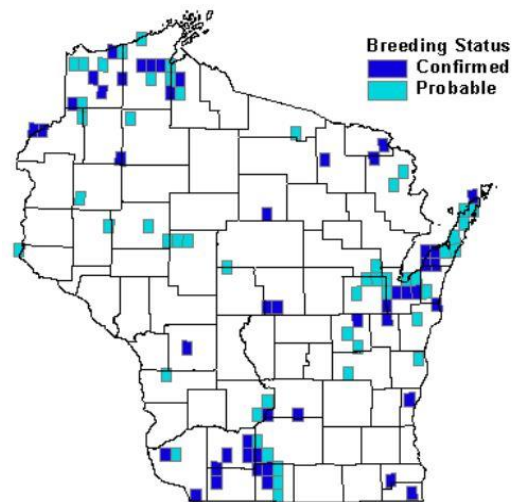
Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas II

State-threatened Grassland Species

Over the past 40 years grassland bird populations have been steadily declining in Wisconsin resulting in many being listed as state Species of Greatest Conservation Need (see “Other Species” section below for some examples). The Atlas will play a key role in understanding the current status of these priority species. This document outlines tips and strategies to improve your chances of finding two of our state-threatened grassland species: Upland Sandpiper and Henslow’s Sparrow.



Ryan Brady



Upland Sandpiper

WBBA I Breeding Range

The Upland Sandpiper’s rolling drawn-out “wolf whistle” is unmistakable and, when given high overhead, can often be heard for miles. Hearing that whistle, technically referred to as the “Long Mellow Whistle” is usually the first and no doubt most conspicuous indicator that this species is in the area, and suitable grassland habitats should be checked. This species prefers large open grassland habitats and has a penchant for perching on exposed fence posts and telephone poles. It has declined sharply due to habitat loss and also hunting, we need your help to document how the current range compares to the first atlas.

Region: Throughout the state in suitable large open grassland habitats. [eBird Range Map](#)

Time of Year: This species is one of our longer distance migrants and thus spends a relatively short period of time in Wisconsin. Birds begin to arrive between in late April and mid-May, and

once on the breeding grounds with form pairs and begin nesting within about 14 days. Aerial displays and vocalizations (including the “Long Mellow Whistle”) during this brief courtship period make is a good time to initially locate the breeding grounds. Once nesting begins, there is a noticeable decrease in both activity and vocalization, especially in the first week or two of the incubation period, which averages about 23 days. Young begin hatching in June through early-July, during which time the adults are again more conspicuous as they guard the precocious chicks, often sounding alarms and contact calls.

Breeding Guideline Bar Chart: (Full chart is on [atlas handbook webpage](#))

January				February				March				April				May				June				July				August				September				October				November				December																							
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4																

N = Nonbreeding Season, **M** = Migration, **B** = Breeding Season, **E** = Either (a transition period)

Time of Day: No special instructions. As with many birds, early morning hours are usually best.

Focal Habitat: As their name implies, the Upland Sandpiper is a shorebird that favors open upland habitats. The best breeding areas are large open grasslands with few trees or shrubs, and low to moderate forb cover. Examples include: lightly grazed pastures; idle grasslands; old fields; barrens; hayfields; and native or restored prairies (especially when burned). They generally avoid extremely dense vegetation, particularly once young have hatched, often moving into relatively sparse cover including row crops, mowed fields, and heavily grazed pastures later in the season.

Special Methods: Spring roadside surveys in or near suitable habitat to listen for the "[Long Mellow Whistle](#)". Stop every half mile or so and listen for several minutes, avoid busy roads if possible (be safe); quiet mornings with light winds are best. Whistles can carry some distance and birds may not be visible, in which case note the direction and follow or plot on map to locate breeding grounds. When in suitable habitat during breeding season, scan telephone poles, fence posts, dead snags, even rock piles, for perching birds also listen for the staccato [warning calls](#), which are often given near nests or young.

Code Guidance: Use S for the Long Mellow Whistle from birds in the air assuming you have located suitable habitat (birds may fly some distance from their primary area when calling). Use A for persistent warning calls. Due to secretive nature of incubating adult and the fact that young leave nest immediately after hatching, the most likely confirmed code will be DD or FL.

Other Species: In addition to the species listed in this document, these grasslands can have uncommon breeders like Eastern and Western Meadowlark, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrow, Sedge Wren, Northern Harrier, and Short-eared Owl.

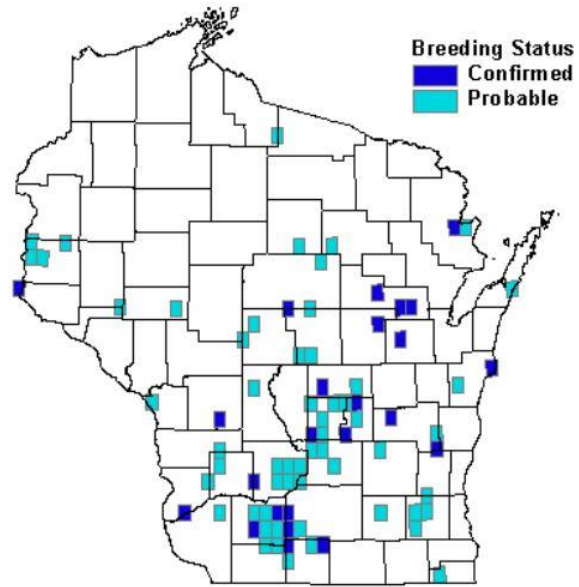
Confusing Species: The only other “shorebird” likely to be found in upland habitats is the Killdeer which has bold black banding on its neck and a solid brown back. Pectoral Sandpiper can use fields in migration, but is a shorter bird, with a well-defined “bib”.

More information about Upland Sandpiper:

[All About Birds](#) [Birds of North America Account](#) (subscription required)



Ryan Brady



Henslow's Sparrow

WBBA I Breeding Range

This sparrow breeds almost exclusively in idle grass fields where it often goes unnoticed due to its feeble song and propensity for staying hidden in the dense grass. Loss of habitat has led to steep declines in this species. Being difficult to detect using standard roadside surveys, WBBA II is a valuable tool to help us assess its current status.

Region: Mostly the southern two-third of the state, but all suitable idle grass habitats should be investigated. [eBird Range Map](#)

Time of Year: Males begin singing as soon as they arrive on breeding grounds and for several weeks are more easily detected as they attempt to attract females and establish territories. About the last week in May things quiet down as nesting begins and the birds become much more secretive. Activity picks up again about a month later in June after the first brood hatches and a second is started.

Breeding Guideline Bar Chart: (Full chart is on [atlas handbook webpage](#))

January				February				March				April				May				June				July				August				September				October				November				December																							
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4																

N = Nonbreeding Season, **M** = Migration, **B** = Breeding Season, **E** = Either (a transition period)

Time of Day: No special instructions. As with many birds, early morning hours are usually best. Also this species will sometimes sing throughout the night.

Focal Habitat: Almost exclusively in upland idle grass fields with moderate to heavy residual grass litter layer from the previous year's growth. Look in set-aside fields, old fields, native and restored prairies, that have not been mowed, grazed, or burned in the previous 6 months, and little to no shrub or tree growth.

Special Methods: Slowly walk transects, spaced about 100 yards apart, through suitable grass fields (check for litter layer) and listen for the short, but distinctive, "[tse-slik song](#)". Unless actively defending territory, these birds are very secretive; you may hear one and not see it, or have one silently pop out of the grass, fly 10 feet and dive back in. If you think you have a Henslow's but aren't sure, mark the location and try returning at different times of day. These birds are somewhat colonial and tend to stay fairly close to their territory, so for the atlaser patience and persistence are key.

Code Guidance: Because of the secretive nature, most breeding behavior will revolve around singing males (Code S and S7). The most common confirmed code will likely be CF.

Other Species: In addition to the species listed in this document, these grasslands can have uncommon breeders like Eastern and Western Meadowlark, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, Sedge Wren, Northern Harrier, and Short-eared Owl.

Confusing Species: The Henslow's song is distinctive, and although unobtrusive, the best tool for detecting and identifying this bird. Visually, unless good views of the bold head and facial markings with olive coloring are obtained, it can easily be confused with the host of little brown birds with which it shares the grasslands; the two closest species in terms of size, shape, and behavior are the Grasshopper Sparrow which is overall paler, and has a clear face and breast; and Le Conte's Sparrow which has buffy facial coloring with pinkish brown nape.

More information about Henslow's Sparrow:

[All About Birds](#)

[Birds of North America Account](#) (subscription required)