
Manitoba's Birds Need Intact Grasslands

Major bird conservation report confirms connection between grassland loss and bird declines

(Winnipeg, Mb) June 9, 2016—A recently-released tri-nation report on the continent's bird populations has confirmed what Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association (MFGA) members, cattle producers, conservation groups and grassland advocates have stated for years: With the continued loss of our province's intact grassland habitats, Manitoba's native bird populations will face decline.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI)'s State of North America's Birds report was released recently by government leads. The report represented the findings of a conservation status assessment of 1,154 native bird species that breed in the continental U.S., Canada, and Mexico, as well as oceanic birds that regularly occur in waters off these three countries. The grasslands of the three nations were included among key habitats for the health of bird species, including the northern Great Plains grasslands in southern Manitoba. The report stated that many species in coastal, grassland, and dry prairie habitats are declining steeply. In particular, NABCI reports that birds which migrate from the Great Plains to Mexico's Chihuahuan grasslands have lost, on average, almost 70 per cent of their continental populations since 1970. Other temperate grassland birds have declined by 33 per cent in that time.

"This report confirms that MFGA's interest in keeping Manitoba's grasslands intact is on the right track, however, it also very much signals a sense of urgency for these threatened ecosystems and the decline of our grassland birds is a definite alarm bell in that regard," says Henry Nelson, MFGA vice-chair and co-chair of the Canadian Forage and Grassland Association (CFGAs) environment committee. "Things are definitely changing for our agricultural lands. We know that from a climate change perspective and now from this NABCI report, on our declining grassland bird populations. We also know that maintaining intact grasslands offer a solution to both situations in the form of carbon sinks and wildlife habitat, as well as the vast benefits to clean air and water, flood and drought mitigation and soil health."

Tim Sopuck is the chief executive officer for Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation, the province's foremost agency for the delivery of conservation agreements with landowners. He says that the relationship between range health and biodiversity conservation is important to so many groups, especially the landowner.

"The big challenge is conserving and enhancing native range. The good news is that many approaches that improve range health also improve the bottom line for cattle producers as well as biodiversity," said Sopuck.

As an agricultural producer group, Nelson says the MFGA is bringing a solution-orientated approach to the issue.

"Our producers work the land every day and are some of the staunchest environmental stewards to be found anywhere," says Nelson. "We inherently know the value of unbroken prairie on numerous levels, the birds are one very big component of that. We also know these lands improve water quality, and offer flood and drought mitigation and the ability to store carbon."

Nelson says dialogues and actions are needed among all the groups. His group is currently in discussions with the International Institute for Sustainable Development and the CFGA about gaining a better understanding of



grassland values and policy action implications. Nelson points to the cooperation with the Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC) and the CFGA as a sterling example of the leadership and international collaboration required for the conservation of these critical habitats going forward. Along with like-minded forage and producer groups from Saskatchewan and Alberta, MFGA was a key partner organization in the CEC effort.

"We need to look hard at immediate stop-gap measures that halt the purge of these intact areas and also longer term solutions that offer security for years ahead," says Nelson. "These include creating policy, examining incentive programs, promoting sustainable grazing practices and identifying ecosystem valuations that keep these valuable tracts of grasses in place for numerous reasons."

Nelson says the NABCI report clearly points out that large intact grasslands exist in only a few places in North America. Fortunately, one key area is in southern Manitoba.

"Cropland expansion is a constant pressure on wildlife habitat and the landowners that maintain grasslands for their livestock," says Nelson. "The link to a healthier society from our agricultural lands clearly includes intact grasslands and the wealth of services they provide. Saving these natural gems cannot be only on the shoulders of the agricultural producer. We need to help the producers on numerous fronts, they know what works for the environment but it has to compete economically for them."

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Link to NABCI report: <http://www.stateofthebirds.org/2016/habitats/grasslands/>

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