

# Pocket Guide to Northern Prairie Birds



Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

## Key to the Range Maps

Maps in this guide are color-coded to indicate where each bird species may be found during different times of the year:



*Cover photo of male Chestnut-collared Longspur  
courtesy of Rick Bohn at USFWS Mountain  
Prairie.*

*Back cover photo of Greater Prairie-Chicken  
© Dreamstime.com/Twildlife*

# Pocket Guide to Northern Prairie Birds

Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

The mission of *Bird Conservancy of the Rockies* is to conserve birds and their habitats through science, education and land stewardship.

Please consider supporting our bird conservation efforts by becoming a member. Visit us online at [www.birdconservancy.org](http://www.birdconservancy.org)

If you are interested in learning more about the birds using your land or habitat conservation opportunities, please visit our website and click on the links for Stewardship.



## Acknowledgments

Production of this second edition of the pocket guide was funded by Montana Grazing Lands Coalition, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, and US Forest Service.

Some text in this guide is derived from *Pocket Guide to Prairie Birds* by Scott Gillihan and Tammy VerCauteren, with additional material by Nancy Drilling. The design and layout were by Scott Gillihan. We are grateful for the valuable input received from reviewers. Thank you to the photographers who donated their photos: Doug Backlund, Tom Grey, Lana Hays, David Kinneer, Tony Leukering, Ross Lock, Bill Schmoker, Robert Shantz, Dan Streifel, Glen Tepke, Brian Wheeler, Becky Matsubara, Bob Gress, David Seibel, Judd Patterson, Allan Clayborn, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Andy Reago and Chrissy McClarren.

Most of the diet icons were created by Chris Jordison of Coventry Design Studio and originally appeared in the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation publication, *A Land Manager's Guide to Grassland Birds of Saskatchewan*. Many thanks to Sharon Metz for allowing us to use them.

First edition printed 2010  
Second edition printed 2017

Print: Copyright © 2017 by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies Brighton,  
CO

Online: Copyright © 2018 by Montana Natural Heritage Program  
(MTNHP), Helena, MT

## **Purpose of this Pocket Guide**

This guide provides an introduction to the common and unique bird species found in the prairies of the northern Great Plains. The geographical area covered by this guide includes western Minnesota, the Dakotas, eastern Montana and Wyoming, and southern Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. Prairie grassland is the predominant habitat type but the region also has rivers, shallow wetlands, shrublands, homesteads, and shelterbelts. All of these areas are important for migrating, wintering, and nesting birds. Thus this guide includes more than 80 species which occur in the northern Great Plains at some point during the year. More extensive information, including descriptions of these birds in different seasons and information about other prairie species, can be found in bird field guides available at most bookstores.

## **Northern Great Plains Prairie Birds**

Together, shortgrass, mixed-grass, and tallgrass prairies cover about one-fifth of North America. Vegetation in the Great Plains, the westernmost region of North America's grassland, is affected by pronounced wet-dry climate cycles, grazing, and

fire. These forces create a patchwork of vegetation in a variety of growth stages and conditions that have supported a diverse and highly specialized group of birds.

Eleven bird species are restricted to the Great Plains, and 35 others are closely linked with it. These 46 species are a small fraction of the approximately 650 bird species that breed in North America north of Mexico. Such a small group of birds is easily overlooked, especially in comparison with the more numerous and colorful forest species. As a result, population declines among prairie bird species have been largely overlooked until recently. Grassland birds are now arguably the highest conservation priority—they have shown the steepest population declines of any group of North American birds. These declines can be attributed to the loss of high-quality habitat resulting from the conversion and fragmentation of native prairie by agriculture, urban development, and suppression of naturally occurring fire.

Many grassland birds are still around because of a long tradition of careful and effective land

management. With so much grassland habitat in private ownership, landowners play a pivotal role in prairie bird conservation. Different grassland birds require management for different vegetation structure. Careful stewardship includes maintaining healthy, diverse ecosystems upon which livestock, wildlife, and humans depend.

### **Species Accounts**

Not all bird species found in the northern Great Plains are included in this guide. Instead, the guide focuses on commonly seen birds or iconic prairie species, especially those found in grasslands and wetlands. Species are organized according to their relationships to each other; e.g., hawks are grouped together, shorebirds are together, etc. Each species account has the following sections:

**Identification**: Description of adult birds in breeding or wintering season plumage. Differences between the sexes are also noted. Measurement is length of the bird from bill tip to tail tip, unless otherwise noted.

**Habitat**: Primary habitat(s) the species uses for nesting, feeding, or roosting.

**Feeding**: How the bird searches for food, as well as diet. Explanations of Diet icons are inside the back cover.

**Conservation**: Population trend over the past 20 years. Suggested actions you can take to conserve the species.

**Map**: *General* guide to a species' distribution throughout the year. Because birds are mobile, the species may occur outside the depicted range. A key to map colors is inside the front cover.





---

## **SPECIES ACCOUNTS**

---



## Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)

**Identification:** 25-43". Black head and neck, white chin strap, white rump, black tail, and brown body. Extremely variable in size. Local breeding birds belong to the 'Giant' race, the largest of all Canada Geese.

**Habitat:** Marshes, ponds, lakes, rivers, and creeks in rural and urban areas. Usually nests on the ground, near water.

**Feeding:** Grazes both aquatic and terrestrial vegetation and seeds; also will take larger insects, mollusks, and crustaceans.

**Conservation:** Increasing. Reintroduced in the late 20th century, the 'Giant' Canada Goose has become so abundant that it is considered a pest in some areas. Avoid disturbing nests.





male



female

## Gadwall (*Mareca strepera*)

**Identification:** 21". Male has grayish body, brown-tan head, dark bill, black rump, and white wing patch. Female is mottled brown with yellow legs and bill, and a white wing patch.

**Habitat:** Freshwater wetlands. Nests on the ground in upland areas near water.

**Feeding:** Aquatic feeder; dabbles for food on or near water surface or tip-up their body to reach deeper food items.

**Conservation:** Increasing. Maintain grasslands with tall cover near water. Preserve wetlands. Delay haying of grasslands near water until mid-August. Use non-lead shot when hunting and non-lead sinkers and lures when fishing.





## Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

**Identification:** 24". Male has glossy green head, white ring around the neck, chestnut chest, brown back, whitish sides and belly, orange feet, yellowish bill, and blue wing patch bordered by white. Female is mottled brown with whitish tail, orange feet, and blue wing patch bordered top and bottom with white.

**Habitat:** All types of wetlands in both rural and urban areas. Nests on the ground near water.

**Feeding:** On the ground or dabbles on the water's surface. Will tip-up their body to reach food items in deeper water. Eat grain and seeds in cropland during migration and winter.

**Conservation:** Stable. Maintain grasslands with tall cover near water. Avoid disturbing nests. Use non-lead shot when hunting and non-lead sinkers and lures when fishing.





## Blue-winged Teal (*Spatula discors*)

**Identification:** 16". Both sexes have large pale-blue wing patches. Male has distinctive white crescents on his face. Female is mottled brown.

**Habitat:** Ponds, marshes, and shallow edges of lakes. Nests on the ground in upland areas near water.

**Feeding:** Dabbles for food on or near water surface. During migration, forages grain from corn and rice fields.

**Conservation:** Decreasing. Maintain grasslands with tall cover near water. Preserve shallow wetlands. Delay haying of grasslands near water until mid-August. Use non-lead shot when hunting and non-lead sinkers and lures when fishing.





## Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*)

**Identification:** 19". Both sexes have spoon-shaped bill, large pale-blue wing patch, and orange feet. Male has glossy green head, white chest, and rufous belly and sides. Female is mottled brown.

**Habitat:** Ponds, marshes, and shallow edges of lakes. Nests on the ground near water.

**Feeding:** Aquatic surface feeder; strains plant and animal items through comb-like edge of bill.

**Conservation:** Increasing. Maintain grasslands with tall cover near water. Preserve potholes and ponds. Use non-lead shot when hunting and non-lead sinkers and lures when fishing.





## Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*)

**Identification:** 28" (male), 21" (female). Male has slender neck, long pointed tail, white chest, and white line extending onto dark brown face. Female is mottled brown with slender neck, rather pointed tail, and gray bill.

**Habitat:** Wetlands, especially shallow wetlands. Nests on ground in upland areas near water.

**Feeding:** Aquatic feeder; dabbles for food on or near water surface.

**Conservation:** Stable. Maintain grasslands near water. Preserve shallow wetlands. Delay haying of grasslands near water until mid-August. Use non-lead shot when hunting and non-lead sinkers and lures when fishing.





## Gray Partridge (*Perdix perdix*)

**Identification:** 12". Introduced species from Asia. Gray-brown bird with rufous bars on the sides, dark belly patch (male), rusty face, and short rufous tail. Also called Hungarian Partridge.

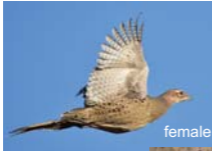
**Habitat:** Cultivated areas with surrounding grassland or other cover. Nests on ground concealed by vegetation.

**Feeding:** Forages on ground for seeds, grains, and grass shoots.

**Conservation:** Decreasing. Maintain grasslands in the landscape. Delay haying until August. Provide winter cover.







## Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*)

**Identification:** 33" (male); 23" (female). Introduced species from Asia. Characterized by its long pointed tail. Females are brownish with dark spots and bars over much of the body. Colorful male has red face, iridescent green neck, and white or black spots on orange or rust feathers.

**Habitat:** Open fields with nearby brushy areas or tall thick grass. Nests on ground.

**Feeding:** Searches for seeds and insects on ground.

**Conservation:** Stable. Maintain grasslands with tall thick cover. Delay haying until August. Provide winter cover.





male



female

## Greater Sage-Grouse

(*Centrocercus urophasianus*)

**Identification:** Much larger than other grouse—as large as a small turkey. Mostly brown, mottled on the back and wings, with a black belly, white breast, and pointed tail. Male (28") has black throat and white breast, female (22") has mottled brown head and breast.

**Habitat:** Sagebrush shrublands.

**Feeding:** In summer, eats insects. In winter, eats sagebrush leaves, shoots, flowers, and buds.

**Conservation:** Declining. Maintain extensive areas of sagebrush with understory of native grasses and forbs. Control invasive plants (such as cheatgrass) and encroaching trees. Minimize roads, habitat fragmentation, and other disturbance.





Bob Gress, BirdsnFocus.com

## Sharp-tailed Grouse

(*Tympanuchus phasianellus*)

**Identification:** 17". Mottled, mostly dark brown back and wings, dark brown spots on white breast and belly. Most distinctive feature is the pointed tail, a result of the central tail feathers being longer than the rest. During courtship displays, male inflates purplish air sacs on sides of his neck.

**Habitat:** Grasslands, shrublands.

**Feeding:** Collects food from the ground or low shrubs.

**Conservation:** Declining. Maintain large tracts of native grasslands mixed with shrublands.





## Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*)

**Identification:** 18". Chicken-like bird with dark brown barring, yellow patches of bare skin above the eyes. During courtship displays, male expands yellowish air sacs on sides of his neck.

**Habitat:** Inhabits tallgrass and midgrass prairie.

**Feeding:** Collected on the ground.

**Conservation:** Declining. Maintain medium and tall grasslands. Control invasive grasses such as cheatgrass and encroaching trees and shrubs. Minimize roads, habitat fragmentation, and other disturbance.





## Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

**Identification:** 13". Much larger and heavier than Mourning Dove. Pale grayish tan body with a black line on back of the neck. When it flies, shows a broad square tail with white corners.

**Habitat:** Usually associated with human habitations. Nests in trees, especially in conifers.

**Feeding:** Feeds on seeds on the ground.

**Conservation:** Increasing. Originally from Eurasia and first released in Barbados, this bird has very recently spread into the northern Great Plains.





Tom Grey

## Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

**Identification:** 12". Grayish-brown overall, with black spots on the wings. Long, pointed tail. The familiar cooing song gives the bird its name—it sounds as though it is mourning.

**Habitat:** Widespread, from open grasslands and croplands to open woodlands. The flimsy stick nest is built in a tree or shrub, occasionally on the ground.

**Feeding:** Picks seeds from the ground, eats some insects.

**Conservation:** Stable and abundant. Minimize pesticide use. Avoid using lead shot when hunting.





Ross Lock

## Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*)

**Identification:** 10". Grayish overall, usually seen flying at dusk or dawn but occasionally in midday; sometimes seen perched on fence posts. Wings are tapered and bent back at an angle; in flight, a white bar near the end of each wing is obvious. The wing beat is stiff and the flight erratic, like a bat.

**Habitat:** Open areas, woodlands, towns. Does not build a nest but lays its eggs directly on the ground, especially among gravel on hills, ridges, and even on rooftops.

**Feeding:** Captures insects in flight.

**Conservation:** Declining. Maintain open grasslands. Minimize pesticide use. When driving at night, try to avoid hitting nighthawks roosting on gravel roads.





Doug Backlund

## American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*)

**Identification:** 18". Reddish or cinnamon head and neck, white body, black back and on part of the wings, grayish legs. Long, thin, upturned bill.

**Habitat:** Shorelines, shallow water. Nest is a shallow depression in dried mud or sand.

**Feeding:** Sweeps bill back and forth through the water, capturing small aquatic insects.

**Conservation:** Stable overall, but declining in parts of the Great Plains. Maintain wetlands and shallow open-water areas.

