

## The eastern meadowlark

By Jim Reichel

**The eastern meadowlark** (*Sturnella magna*) is also called a field lark.

**Interesting facts:** The eastern meadowlark is not actually a member of the lark family, but is a member of the blackbird family. It gets its name meadowlark because it sings prettily like a lark. It also inhabits open areas as a lark does.

**Description:** Eastern meadowlarks are 9 to 11 inches long and have a stocky build. Their yellow breast with a large black "V" on it distinguishes them from any other bird. They have a large pointed bill. Their back and wings are brown streaked with black. The brown tail has white outer feathers, which is easily seen when in flight. The bird spends the majority of its life on the ground in pastures, grassy fields, and drier marshes, where the subtly patterned brown back makes it inconspicuous.

**Habitat and behavior:** Migrating adults arrive in northern Illinois, and Orland Grassland, in late March and stay until October, flying by day short distances at low altitudes. Eastern meadowlarks live in grasslands, prairies, hay fields and fallow farm fields, and in row crops. They prefer native grasslands and open savannas (like Orland Grassland will be), but are also found in many human-altered grassy habitats. In tall grass they build a cup-like nest of dry grass, horsehair, pine needles, and plant stems, and are well hidden in thick vegetation. The opening is on one side. The female always walks some distance to and from the nest, well-concealed, before flying. The female may lay several clutches of 2-6 white eggs spotted with reddish-brown. It is rare to have more than two successful broods. The eggs hatch in about 12 days. The female will feed the young while building a second nest and laying eggs. The male assumes full care of the young after she again begins incubation. Eastern meadowlarks are sometimes the victim of parasitic behavior from brown-headed cowbirds, who lay their eggs in other species' nests, such as the meadowlarks. Nesting occurs throughout the summer months. There may be more than one nesting female in a male's territory.

**Food:** Eastern meadowlarks eat crickets, grasshoppers, caterpillars, cutworms, and grubs during the spring, and weeds and waste grains during the winter. They usually forage on the top of the ground, but will sometimes prod under clumps of soil and manure to find food. During heavy snowstorms, the eastern meadowlark will sometimes eat bird and small mammal road kill. In winter, they often feed in flocks.

**Vocalization:** The song of the meadowlark sounds like "See-you-see-er."

**Status:** The Eastern Meadowlark is a protected short-distance migrant.

**Outlook:** The short-term outlook is not good because of the current push to grow more monocultures for bio-fuels, and the continuing need for row crops for food production. Improving this outlook will depend on the development of strong conservation provisions for grassland birds. This push for conserving grassland habitat has been, and will be, the major focus of the work efforts at Orland Grassland. The number of eastern meadowlarks, as well with other grassland birds, have increased in the past five or so years. Walking along old 175<sup>th</sup> Street in the early spring morning has rewarded many birders with the beautiful song and sight of eastern meadowlarks.

**Global Population:** 6.9 million

**Continental Population:** 6.9 million now, 24 million 40 years ago - a 71% drop.



## OGV's at Taste of Orland

The event attracted tens of thousands from the Orland Southland region. We spoke and distributed literature to about 400 people and added about 40 to our volunteer list.

The kids enjoyed "populating" our prairie mural with birds, butterflies and insects, and then stepped back to see their favorite species through binoculars. Future monitors?

Many thanks to Dave Holke, Bill and Marybeth Fath, Pat Hayes, Bonnie Frainier, Nancy Fournier, Dave Dibble, Dave Carson, Norm Solliday, Karen Glasgow, John Zawacki and his daughter for manning the Orland Grassland booth this year. Others volunteered, but last minute changes prevented them from coming. Thanks to them, too, and there's always next year.



The prairie mural

## Autumn On the Grassland Photos



Canopies welcome visitors to the "Autumn On the Grassland"



The Species Identification display was colorful and eye-catching



Girl Scout Troop 60152 from Cardinal Bernadin School, lead by Lisa Paciga, clears an area of invasive brush



Brooke Herman, (2nd from left, partially blocked and trying to hide from camera) explains the role of the Army Corps in the Grassland restoration