Lark Bunting - Calamospiza melanocorys

Abundance: Abundant

Status: NSS4 (Bc) NatureServe: G5 S4B

Population Status: Distribution is restricted but extirpation is not imminent; 6 years of Monitoring Wyoming Birds density data (2002-2007) have shown the need to continue monitoring trends in grassland and shrub-steppe habitats

Limiting Factor: Habitat (and Human Activity): limiting factors are moderate, but on-going habitat loss and degradation due to human activity are likely to increase and negatively affect population status and trends

Comment:

Introduction

The Lark Bunting breeds from southern Alberta and Manitoba south to New Mexico and Texas. It winters from central California, east to Kansas, and south to central Mexico. During summer, it occurs throughout Wyoming. The Lark Bunting is considered an abundant summer resident in Wyoming. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department classifies it as a Species of Special Concern with a Native Species Status of 4 (NSS4) because populations are restricted in distribution, and because its habitat is vulnerable, although there is no ongoing significant loss of habitat.

Habitat

The Lark Bunting primarily inhabits shortgrass and mixed-grass prairies, as well as disturbed grasslands, sagebrush-grassland and shrub-steppe habitats, mountain-foothill shrublands, and agricultural areas. It prefers grasslands of low to moderate height (60 cm [24 in] or less) with high (45%) vegetative cover and 10% to 15% bare ground, often with a shrub component in the overstory.

Problems

- Conversion of native grasslands to croplands and habitat loss to urbanization and industrialization have caused a contraction in this species' breeding range and rangewide population declines.
- Heavy livestock grazing can be detrimental to nests, young, and the availability of prey.
- Human activities have caused the loss of suitable nesting habitat in some areas.
- Impacted by the loss of habitat to urbanization, conversion of grasslands to woodlands and cultivated croplands, and loss of vegetation cover during the nesting season.
- Local breeding populations are impacted by loss of nests and nestlings when fields are mowed during the nesting season.
- Nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds can be locally significant.
- Species is susceptible to impacts from energy development and other large-scale projects that destroy or impair suitable habitats.
- Species may be susceptible to impacts caused by climate change.
- This species is impacted by the loss or degradation of both breeding and wintering habitats, including urbanization, industrialization, intensive agriculture, overgrazing, and human disturbance.

Conservation Actions

- Conserve grassland habitats by minimizing the conversion of native prairie to croplands, fragmentation, roads, urban development, exotic plants, and a shift in community ecology characteristics.
- Avoid or minimize pesticide use in habitats where this species nests to ensure a food source is maintained. If possible, all pesticide use should be postponed until this species has completed its breeding cycle.
- Continue inventory and monitoring efforts and implement the Monitoring Wyoming's Birds grid-based monitoring program to determine density and population trends.
- Delay haying in locations where this species nests until after July 15.
- Develop and maintain a positive relationship with landowners on whose property this species nests. Educate and cultivate a feeling of participation in landowners to promote beneficial land use practices and management for this species on private land.
- Encourage landowners to avoid potentially negative impacts to nesting areas through the use of financial incentives.
- In areas where this species nests, conduct prescribed burns in the fall to avoid loss of nesting cover. Burns should be relatively small so a portion of the area contains nesting cover at all times and adequate residual cover for nesting is retained for the following spring.
- Manage nesting areas to minimize conflicts with natural resources extraction, wind power development, and recreational activities during the breeding season.
- Manage nesting areas to minimize disturbance (including haying, burning, and moderate to heavy grazing) during the breeding season.
- Manage nesting areas to minimize disturbances such as haying, burning, grazing, and tilling during the breeding season.
- Use rotational burning, mowing, and grazing as tools to create and maintain vegetation diversity and a mosaic of early and late successional stages and open ground within grasslands, meadows, and prairies.
- Work with private landowners to conserve habitat for this species by seeking financial incentives from various sources and providing assistance and expertise with management activities.
- In areas where this species nests, manage for open grasslands with a mix of shorter and taller grasses, scattered shrubs, and a limited amount of bare ground.

Monitoring/Research

In addition to the Monitoring Wyoming's Birds program, ensure that Breeding Bird Survey routes in grassland habitats are conducted to determine population density and trends. State Wildlife Grants project to develop essential datasets and a plan for minimizing wildlife and community conflicts with wind development in southeastern Wyoming.

Recent Developments

Populations of grassland birds have declined rangewide more than any other group of birds due to habitat degradation, fragmentation, and loss from industrial developments, urbanization, and conversion to croplands. Wind power development in nesting areas can be problematic due to the courtship displays this species exhibits during the breeding season.

References

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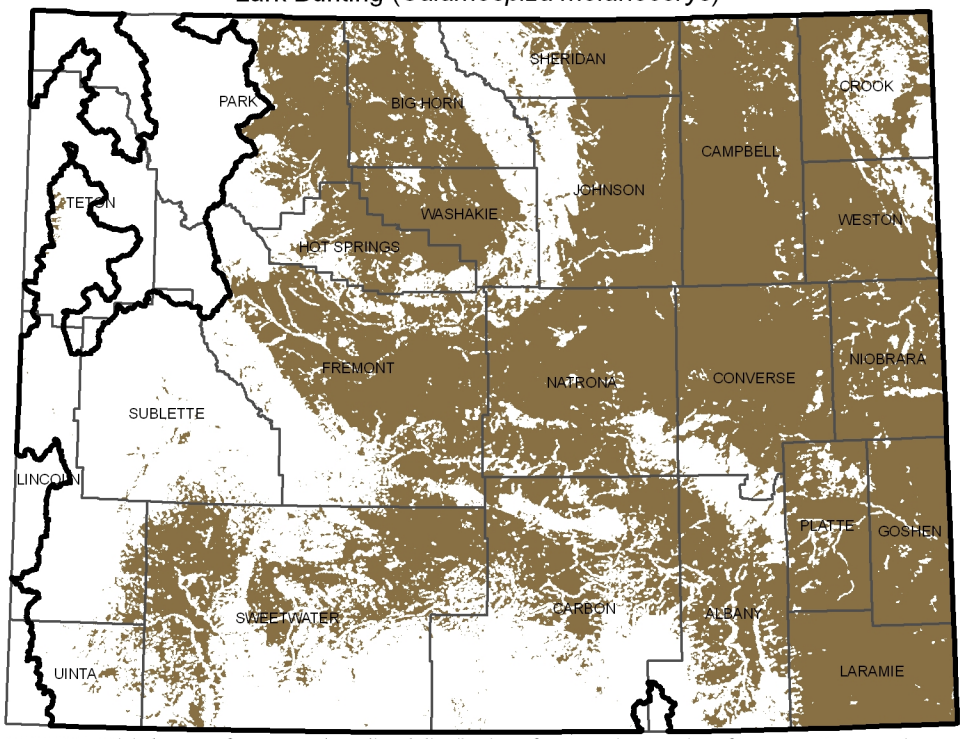
Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*)



SOURCE: Digital maps of ranges and predicted distributions for Wyoming Species of Greatest Conservation Need: April 2010. Wyoming Natural Diversity Database. University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming. Note that brown indicates the predicted distribution of the species; heavy black lines indicate outermost boundaries of possible occurrence.