

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*



Folk Name: Field Lark, Old-fieldlark

Status: Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common to Common

Habitat: Fields, pastures, all grassland areas

The Eastern Meadowlark, or “Field Lark” as it was long known in this part of the South, is an exceptionally handsome bird of our fields, pastures, and other wide open spaces. When seen from above it is a nondescript, well-camouflaged, and streaked-brown bird. However, when seen perched on a fence post or wire in the sunlight it displays wonderfully bright yellow underparts and a distinctive black “V” marking on its upper breast. It has bold crown stripes of white and black on its flat head and a whitish malar stripe. Its bill is long, slender, and sharply pointed, and its white outer tail feathers are obvious in flight. At 9 ½ inches, the meadowlark is the second largest member of our blackbird family.

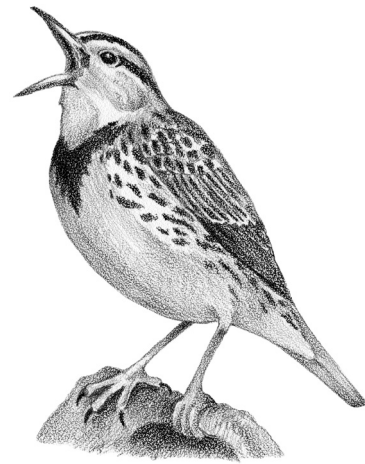
The song of the Eastern Meadowlark is well known to anyone who grew up on a farm in the East. Roger Tory Peterson described it as a clear whistled “tee-yah, tee-yair.” Workers in the cotton fields in this part of the South described this song as an inspiring cry of “Laziness will k-i-l-l you!” However one hears it, this bird’s song remains an iconic melody of country living.

“In the fall and winter months we had a special friend that visited us...the field lark. It was beautifully marked with fine plumage, walked with the precision of a dude, and made the best of bird pies. He was a delightful songster, but was rarely seen alone. His feeding grounds were stubble fields, hence the name, the ‘field lark.’”

—Dr. J.B. Alexander, Charlotte, 1908



Eastern Meadowlark. (Jeff Lemons)



In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the meadowlark was widely persecuted and a regular target of the farmer’s gun. Many people felt it was one of the most destructive birds to farmers’ newly planted crops. It was also considered a very tasty game bird. South Carolina ornithologist Arthur T. Wayne wrote: “As every farmer well knows, this bird is very destructive to grain, as well as to truck.” One Iredell County farmer wrote:

I believe the common lark is our worst enemy. I have heard farmers complaining about fields of wheat being too thin; say their seed was good and they sowed enough to the acre, but it was not there. If they had noticed about the time the wheat commenced coming up they would likely have found a colony larks pulling up the wheat. ...They will return two or three times during the day and



Eastern Meadowlark fledglings. (Jeff Lemons)

unless kept away will stay about until the vitality of the grain is all gone.

However, many people also voiced alternative views over the years. On October 26, 1894, one writer, published in *The Charlotte Democrat*, wrote:

The farmer, the gardener, and the fruit grower, should know more about the birds that nest and sing and flit about their premises for then they would defend and protect them, and in time have them back in something like their old time numbers and variety. ...The meadow lark is another bird that has little peace on any one's land, for there is a mistaken notion abroad that he is a game bird. He is game in the quality of being alert and hard to get a shot at, but is no more entitled to be so classified than the flicker, or highholder is. The meadowlark is a constant feeder on underground larvae, and whenever he is disturbed he is simply being driven away from active work in ridding the ground of the worst kind of farm pests.

In 1919, North Carolina's state ornithologists wrote: "Instead of being persecuted as a game bird, it has always deserved the fullest protection because of its value as a destroyer of insects injurious to the farmer's crops. As a destroyer of spouting corn, the depredations it commits are grossly exaggerated. It is now protected at all times under Federal regulations."

The meadowlark is a fairly common to common permanent resident throughout both Carolinas. Numbers are augmented each fall when northern birds migrate here to spend the winter. These northern birds generally arrive in October and depart by April. Breeding occurs in the Carolina Piedmont from April through July. Nests are built on the ground in heavily grassed fields and they are notoriously difficult to find.

In the nineteenth century, the Eastern Meadowlark was known to be a common breeding bird in the South Carolina Piedmont "in some localities" and common in "restricted fields" in the Coastal Plain. In the early part of the twentieth century, the breeding range of the meadowlark in North Carolina was somewhat unclear—possibly due to long-term depredation. Breeding was known in the mountains and on the coast, but little evidence of breeding in the Piedmont had been gathered. On January 6, 1923, Elmer Brown wrote a letter to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum confirming the breeding of Eastern Meadowlarks in Rowan County:

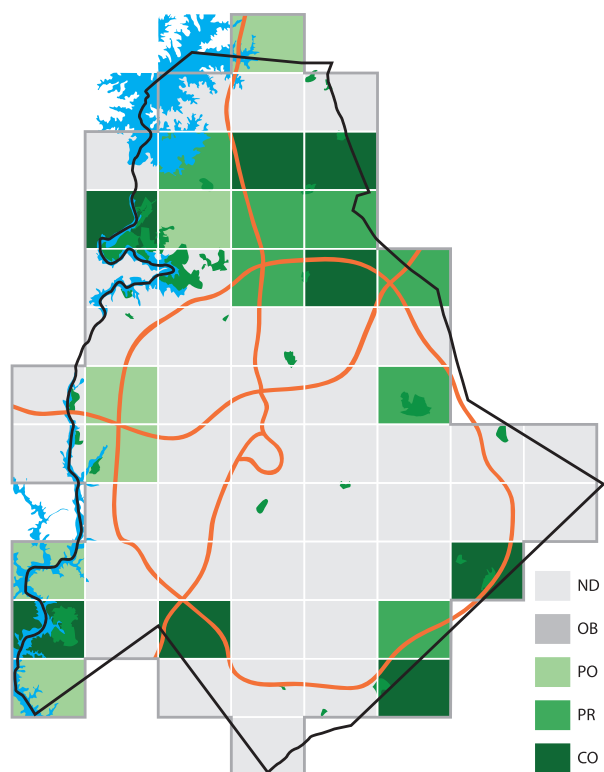
We believe the Meadow Lark to be a rather common breeder here. We often see it during the summer, and many times have had it to act as though we were near its nest. When near meadows or grassy land, we have more than once watched it make regular

trips one after another, securing food and then flying away as if to feed young. I remember once a good many years ago seeing a nest which contained young birds. On May 22, 1922 Frank saw a nest which contained three fresh eggs. On July 15, 1926 I saw a mower cutting hay find a nest. It contained four partly incubated eggs.

William McIlwaine later confirmed this bird was a common breeding bird around Charlotte in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It was also confirmed in Cabarrus County. The Eastern Meadowlark remained a common permanent resident of the Carolina Piedmont throughout the remainder of the 1900s. However, its numbers began to decline in both states and nationally in the 1990s.

Today, much of the meadowlark's breeding habitat across the country—large contiguous patches of grassy fields—has been lost to development, and meadowlark populations have declined. An analysis of 40 years of data collected from Breeding Bird Survey routes in this region shows a steady, long-term, declining population trend from about 35 birds per route to below 20 per route.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Eastern Meadowlark is rapidly declining throughout its range. Scientists estimate a population loss nationally of over 70% in a 40-year period.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/7, CO/8)