

The Prairie Partners' Approach to Landowner Outreach¹

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Abstract

With 70 percent of Great Plains habitat in private ownership, private landowners are the key to conservation of the prairie. Prairie Partners, developed by Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, is a cooperative and voluntary effort to work with landowners, leaseholders, and land managers to conserve shortgrass prairie birds and their habitats. The ultimate goal of Prairie Partners is to build a coalition of landowners and land managers across the Great Plains who are actively involved in the conservation of lands important to prairie birds. Outreach is imperative to raise the awareness of prairie birds with private landowners. Landowner awareness is the first step toward conservation because it creates an appreciation for, and pride in, the birds and their habitats supported by the private landowners. We thank landowners for their stewardship, and we encourage their continued efforts. Prairie Partners also strives to work with landowners and managers to incorporate birds into management practices through incentive programs. Most landowners are already good stewards of the land, and they can serve as mentors for their peers. The success of our program largely is contingent on our partnerships with state, federal, and private organizations. State agencies, including Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and Colorado Division of Wildlife, help make our monitoring and outreach efforts possible. Other partnerships with entities like Natural Resources Conservation Service and Soil Conservation Districts, who work with private landowners on a daily basis, are critical also.

Key words: shortgrass prairie, private landowners, outreach, partnerships, birds, habitat.

Introduction

Prairie Partners, a program developed by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO), was designed to

¹A version of this paper was presented at the **Third International Partners in Flight Conference, March 20-24, 2002, Asilomar Conference Grounds, California.**

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address shortgrass prairie conservation issues and declining avian species by seeking cooperative and voluntary working partnerships with landowners and managers. The mission of Prairie Partners is to build a coalition of landowners and managers across the Great Plains who are actively involved in the conservation of lands important to prairie birds. The majority of shortgrass prairie (*fig. 1*) is privately owned, so the foundation of Prairie Partners is working with private landowners. We thank landowners for the habitat they provide and raise awareness of birds on their land. Awareness is the first step toward conservation because one cannot conserve where awareness and/or familiarity are absent.

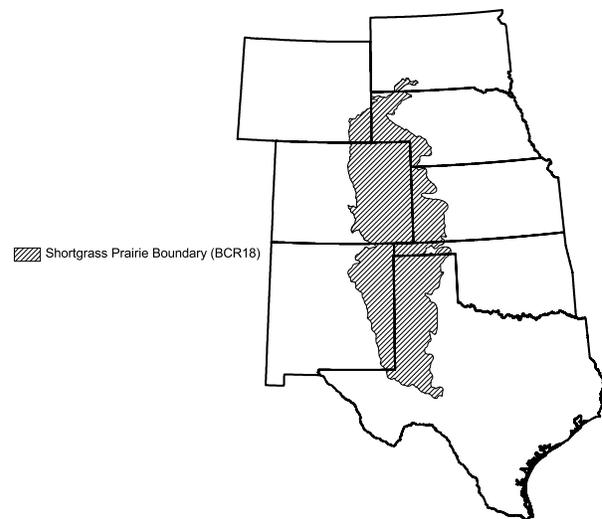


Figure 1— Shortgrass Prairie Conservation Region Boundary as delineated by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative.

Grassland birds rank high in conservation priorities among North American birds because they have shown the steepest population declines of any group (Knopf 1996). Sixty percent of the shortgrass region remains in grassland habitats (Weaver et al. 1996) with the majority of it managed by grazing (Beidleman 2000). According to the Partners in Flight Assessment and Prioritization database (Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory 2002), 11 percent of shortgrass prairie bird species are declining in the Great Plains, including Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) and Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*). Data are insufficient to determine trends for 66 percent of Great Plains breeding bird species (including Burrowing Owl [*Athene*

cunicularia] and Chestnut-collared Longspur [*Calcarius ornatus*]). Twenty species have been identified as conservation priorities in one or more Bird Conservation Plans (BCP) within the shortgrass region (*table 1*). Prairie Partners is needed because the remaining shortgrass prairies are of conservation concern and are privately owned.

Outreach

Prairie Partners is at work in Bird Conservation Regions (U.S. NABCI Committee 2000) 17 (Badlands and Prairies) and 18 (Shortgrass Prairie). On-the-ground efforts by Prairie Partners began in 1999 when we initiated a four-state Burrowing Owl survey in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. Along with Burrowing Owl surveys, we had personal conversations with private landowners and had them respond to an attitudinal survey that was developed by a consulting firm. A sample of results for Wyoming and Colorado (*table 2*) represents over 60 private landowners. The survey results aided our efforts to work with private landowners because it gave us a better understanding of their opinion on issues important to Prairie Partners and helped us establish working relationships.

Outreach efforts include personal one-on-one conversations with private landowners, presentations, and information booths at meetings. Knocking on individual doors is time consuming; booths and presentations at

meetings are efficient ways to meet multiple landowners. Attending agricultural meetings provides a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere for landowners and our presence at these meetings helps create credibility and trust. A relationship starts to build when landowners see us year after year at the meetings. Landowners feel comfortable and begin talking with us about their wildlife and ways we can work together. It is also a great atmosphere to introduce upcoming events and get feedback from landowners regarding programs or projects.

Through personal conversations with landowners, we get to know each other and landowners start introducing us to friends and neighbors. This provides us with an introduction by someone they know, trust, and respect. We also meet with representatives of different landowner-based organizations to learn more about landowner issues and to receive feedback on materials we provide. We make presentations to Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil Conservation District, and Cooperative Extension personnel. These entities are great resources to reach people and to spread the word about our program and upcoming activities. Some of these governmental entities provide cost-share and assistance programs to help with habitat enhancement projects on private land.

We keep relationships positive when talking with landowners and, first and foremost, we thank them for the habitats they provide. As trust and mutual respect develops, we stay in touch through mailings, phone calls,

Table 1-- Priority Grassland Bird Species by Bird Conservation Plan (BCP), within the Shortgrass Prairie BCR, for Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico (www.partnersinflight.org/pifbcps.htm).

| Species | Wyoming BCP | Colorado BCP | New Mexico BCP |
|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------|
| Swainson's Hawk | | X | |
| Ferruginous Hawk | X | X | X |
| Prairie Falcon | | X | |
| Plains Sharp-tailed Grouse | | X | |
| Greater Prairie-Chicken | | X | |
| Lesser Prairie-Chicken | | X | X |
| Scaled Quail | | | X |
| Mountain Plover | X | X | X |
| Upland Sandpiper | X | X | |
| Long-billed Curlew | X | X | X |
| Burrowing Owl | X | X | X |
| Short-eared Owl | X | | |
| Cassin's Sparrow | | X | X |
| Lark Bunting | X | X | |
| Baird's Sparrow | X | | |
| Grasshopper Sparrow | X | X | |
| McCown's Longspur | X | X | |
| Chestnut-collared Longspur | X | | |
| Bobolink | X | | |
| Dickcissel | X | | |

Table 2— Selected results from the landowner attitudinal survey for Colorado and Wyoming, 1999.

| Question | Percent Wyoming | Percent Colorado |
|--|-----------------|------------------|
| Are very or somewhat familiar with Burrowing Owls | 50 | 57 |
| Dislike having prairie dogs on their land | 78 | 77 |
| Prairie dog management should take the well being of Burrowing Owls into account | 25 | 38 |
| Federal protection of endangered species is a threat to your way of life | 47 | 50 |
| Would consider receiving assistance to maintain a prairie dog colony | 25 | 38 |

and visits. We proceed slowly, at a relaxed pace that is comfortable so landowners do not feel pressured or that they are being forced into programs. A key element in our interactions is to understand their way of life and includes offering to help with feeding, branding, fence mending, and calving. Our interest and respect enhances relationships and stirs interest in talking about the birds on their land.

We provide a manual (Gillihan et al. 2001) to landowners during our visits. The manual provides information about the prairie, basic bird biology, and specifics about different prairie birds that include identification, range maps, and management practices that benefit each species. Information in the back of the manual includes assistance programs that are available to landowners.

While visiting with landowners, we ask for permission to inventory their land for birds. Landowners are invited along, and we talk with them about the species we observe including what habitats they frequent and why. We talk about visiting next year and get a feel for what, if any, programs may be suitable for the ranch.

Habitat incentives have become an integral part of Prairie Partners. We offer a list of alternatives that fits the diverse needs of private landowners. For example, our Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*) conservation program provides information on Ferruginous Hawk nesting sites and raises awareness of these birds with private landowners. We identify nest sites that may be impacted by cattle concentrating around nest trees, causing debarking and soil compaction. We provide landowners with information about economic diversification and specific references on a variety of programs and opportunities. We help develop management plans with the landowners that enhance habitat for prairie bird species, and we help get these projects funded through state, federal, and other sources.

We plan to develop and implement workshops during the summer of 2002. Workshops will have two objectives. The first is to get urban residents on a working ranch and have them learn about and talk with agricultural producers. We want them to see the benefits of keeping producers on the land and to learn first hand of their societal value in providing food, fiber, open space,

and wildlife habitat. The second objective is for private landowners to establish the link between wildlife habitat, good range management, and opportunities for economic diversification. We will visit with landowners about the different habitats within the prairie ecosystem, explain how birds can be used as indicators of land health, and introduce programs that are available to conserve or enhance habitats through state and federal agencies and other organizations. The workshop will end with a discussion of economics that tie together range health, wildlife habitat, and opportunities through nature tourism. To provide a comfortable atmosphere, landowners will host all workshops, with support from Prairie Partners.

Prairie Partners has a positive image with conservation organizations, agencies, and private landowners. We encourage proactive, voluntary relationships, and we work to get landowners to step forward and show their existing contributions to prairie bird conservation. When we plan with landowners, we must recognize the importance of ranch economics. We are striving to enhance the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the landowner. We want to keep landowners on the land and the heritage of the West intact. Human and wildlife communities will be healthier with the incorporation of birds into management practices. Birds are good indicators of land health. If the system is healthy for wildlife, it is also healthy and sustainable for people and cattle.

Program success can be measured by the annual ratio of privately owned acres to the number of acres owned by landowners enrolled in conservation easements, among others. Another measure of success is by the number of landowners more familiar with bird ecology on their land following our involvement. To date, we have had personal conversations with over 300 private landowners and have permission to inventory birds on over 160,000 ha. Landowners are inviting us to cattle brandings and to local meetings, and they are calling us about the different birds they see. Landowners have commented on how the birds used to be “background noise,” but now they are aware of birds and have identified the different species. Some have altered their management practices to enhance bird populations. Once

key members of the community are involved, neighbors become more willing to get involved.

Monitoring is a critical element of the Prairie Partners program. Over time, trends obtained by the monitoring of shortgrass prairie bird species will help guide and evaluate the effectiveness of our conservation efforts. We are collecting monitoring data on sites where we have established relationships with landowners as well as random sites across the prairie. With time, we can compare trends across the region to trends on our Prairie Partners' lands. Furthermore, monitoring locates hot spots of species richness and identifies key landowners important to our outreach efforts.

Discussion

The next steps involve better coordination of efforts among existing entities because we share the common goal of native prairie conservation. The way to truly affect species conservation is to conserve habitat throughout the breeding, wintering, and stopover range of our migratory prairie birds. The best way to accomplish that is by improving coordination with agencies and non-governmental entities in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, supporting and contributing to conservation work in these areas.

In the short term, we need to expand partnerships with Natural Resources Conservation Service to incorporate birds into their monitoring and management efforts on private lands through our United States Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program grant. We have developed a pocket guide to prairie birds, to be distributed to resource managers and landowners throughout the Great Plains. This spring, we will implement on-the-ground conservation efforts for Mountain Plover through an informational video and field-clearing project in cooperation with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Colorado Farm Bureau, United States Geological Survey-Biological Resources Division, Colorado Natural Heritage Program, Colorado State University, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy Playa Lakes Joint Venture, and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. The video will focus on Mountain Plover identification, behavior, habitat and conservation needs. The field-clearing project involves establishing a toll-free number that landowners can call in advance of cultivation activities so RMBO technicians can mark nests. Mountain Plovers are attracted to bare ground and are using cultivated land as nesting sites; marking nests will help reduce loss of nests due to cultivation activities and possibly assist with population recruitment.

In the long term, we need to build on the success of the Nebraska Prairie Partners Project, which is a part-

nership between RMBO and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Building on this project will involve getting more staff working with the states and within the local communities to achieve the objectives of Prairie Partners, including monitoring, outreach, and habitat conservation throughout BCR's 17 and 18. We also need to build on the success of Colorado workshops and expand these outreach efforts to states within the Great Plains. Also, current monitoring efforts in BCR 18 need to be expanded to BCR 17.

Finally, we and our partners need to take a more proactive approach regarding spreading the word with landowners about economic diversification opportunities through nature tourism. Nature tourism provides the opportunity to keep our stewards on the land and helps them see their land as more than just grass for cattle or grain for feed. When landowners receive economic returns for the natural resources on their land, they are more likely to incorporate them into their ranch management plans, which positively benefit the habitat and associated species.

Acknowledgments

I thank S. Gillihan, T. Rich, T. Toombs, and G. Wallace for the critical review of this paper. I thank W. Gilgert for material reviews and the opportunity to be a part of the conference. Prairie Partners is made possible through our funders and partners: Colorado Division of Wildlife, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Natural Resources Conservation Service including the Wildlife Habitat Management Institute, Shortgrass Bird Conservation Region, Turner Foundation, American Birding Association, LaSalle Adams Fund, Intermountain West Joint Venture, Adams County Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, Texas Prairie Rivers Association, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Colorado Farm Bureau, The Nature Conservancy, Soil Conservation Districts, Resource Conservation and Development Program, Wyoming Game and Fish, University Extension, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, RMBO members, and private landowners.

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Prairie Partners' Landowner Outreach - VerCauteren

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