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Sing It Loud
Scott Bean

YEAR-ROUND AND MIGRATORY BIRDS OF THE FLINT HILLS

THE ULTIMATE 'FREQUENT FLYERS'

The Flint Hills support a wealth of birds, some 250 species. They range in size from the tiny Ruby-throated Hummingbird (3 grams, or a little more than 0.10 ounce) to the substantial Wild Turkey (10 kilograms, or 21 pounds).

But not all these birds can be found in the Flint Hills at the same time. Being highly mobile creatures, birds come and go with the seasons. Most birds that summer in the Flint Hills transport themselves to sites south of the region in the fall. Birds that winter in the Flint Hills mostly breed far north of the Sunflower State, flying to destinations such as the Canadian prairies or the Arctic. For the majority of its 250 species of birds, the Flint Hills are simply a place to rest and refuel while “on the road” to other destinations. Birds get around.

Based on their seasonal movement patterns, bird species can be broken down into four general groups: year-round residents, summer residents, spring and fall migrants (transients), and winter visitors.

YEAR-ROUND RESIDENTS

Year-round residents constitute a modest subset of the birds found in the Flint Hills. Most of the birds that breed in the Flint Hills fly south in the fall, avoiding what can be a harsh environment in winter. Many non-bird wildlife residents, such as small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects, take shelter

below ground, but wintering birds are exposed to the elements.

Meadowlarks are familiar all-season residents of the Flint Hills. The Eastern Meadowlark is one of the most common prairie-nesting species in the region. The Western Meadowlark, the state bird of Kansas, breeds locally in the northern Flint Hills. Both meadowlark species are present year-round in the Flint Hills, but in winter, crowds of Western Meadowlarks that breed elsewhere join the resident birds.

The Greater Prairie-Chicken was formerly abundant in the tallgrass region of the central U.S. With the tremendous loss of prairie in the Great Plains over the past 150 years, prairie-chicken populations have crashed. With its expansive prairies, the Flint Hills are a stronghold for the Greater Prairie-Chicken.

Other permanent residents include the Red-tailed Hawk, Brown-headed Cowbird and Bobwhite Quail, which frequent grassland-shrubland habitats. The cowbird, which is easily confused with blackbirds, is so named because it feeds on insects and other food associated with grazing animal activity. The cowbird evolved in North America with roaming herds of grazing animals, especially bison. Female cowbirds do not tend their own nest but instead are “nest parasites,” meaning that the female

lays her eggs in the nests of other bird species, then leaves them to be raised by the host parents. With the expansion of livestock and open, agricultural habitats, cowbird populations expanded greatly in North America. With this expansion, the Brown-headed Cowbird began parasitizing new host species that had little or no experience with nest parasitism; this has led to the decline of many bird species.

SUMMER RESIDENTS

Birds that migrate to an area for the breeding season are referred to as summer residents. After spending the summer tending young, they fly south in the fall. Summer residents are a diverse group that includes characteristic grassland breeders such as Upland Sandpiper, Dickcissel and Grasshopper Sparrow.

Upland Sandpipers are long-distance migrants that arrive in mid-spring and promptly begin courtship, nesting and raising young. They are one of the earliest bird species to migrate south, departing in July and August for the pampas grasslands of Argentina and Uruguay.

The Dickcissel breeds in great abundance in the tallgrass prairies. The male, sporting a bright yellow and black breast, sings incessantly to advertise its territory and can attract up to several females. After breeding, Dickcissels form large flocks that migrate to northern



Prairie-Chicken Dispute
Scott Bean

South America, where they often roost in the millions and are considered a pest in some agricultural areas.

The Grasshopper Sparrow is one of some eight species of sparrow found in the region. The most common grassland-breeding sparrow in the Flint Hills, the Grasshopper Sparrow arrives in March and April from wintering areas in the southern United States and Mexico. Nests are well hidden in open, grassy

vegetation, and the young are fed grasshoppers (hence the species' name) and other high-protein invertebrates.

SPRING AND FALL MIGRANTS

Transients that pass through the region during migration constitute nearly one-half of the species recorded in the Flint Hills. These birds stop to rest and refuel during their journeys, but most do not linger.



Striding By
Scott Bean

Some are long-distance migrants such as those that winter in South America and breed in the Arctic. Each year they traverse much of the Western Hemisphere twice, flying north in the spring and south in the fall, covering thousands of miles in each direction. This includes shorebirds such as the American Golden-Plover and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Flocks of both shorebirds can be seen for a brief period

in the spring as they fly low over the prairie or forage in recently burned pastures. Also in this group was the now extinct Eskimo Curlew, last seen in the 1960s. Market hunters in the late 1800s called them “dough birds” because of the large amount of fat they accumulated prior to long open-water flights.

Other long-distance migrants breed in North America and winter in the tropics. Most of the warblers, buntings,

orioles and tanagers that pass through the Flint Hills during spring and fall migration winter in southern Mexico, Central America or tropical regions of South America.

Other migrants winter in the southern U.S. and pass through the Flint Hills en route to nearby breeding grounds. Many kinds of sparrows — including Song, Savannah, Lincoln’s and Vesper sparrows — are short- to medium-distance migrants.

WINTER VISITORS

The final and much smaller group of birds in the Flint Hills arrive in the fall and spend the winter months in the Flint Hills. Winter visitors consist mostly of northern breeders that can cope with Kansas winters. The prairie’s open, grassy expanses offer little shelter from harsh weather, and many birds seek out protected areas such as wooded valleys during winter storms.

Flocks of Harris’ Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco can be seen feeding in open areas bordering woody

vegetation. Horned Larks feed on the ground in open, unvegetated areas such as roads and cropland. Horned Larks do breed in the Flint Hills, but many more come to the Flint Hills in winter. Birds of prey, conspicuous in winter landscape, include the Northern Harrier, a medium-sized hawk that courses slowly over open fields hunting for mice; the Rough-legged Hawk, a large, Arctic-breeding species; and the Short-eared Owl, a medium-sized owl that can be spotted flying low over open grasslands at dawn and dusk. In winter, resident Red-tailed Hawks are joined by visiting red-tails that breed in the northern plains.

The changing of the seasons is marked by a dynamic pattern of birds coming and going in the skies over the Flint Hills. Given that migrating birds often fly at night or at heights where they are not easily detected, the scale of bird movement is under-appreciated by people. Seen or unseen, birds are busy chalking up frequent-flyer miles at rates we would find impressive.

William Busby is retired from the Kansas Biological Survey at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. He has over 30 years of experience in vertebrate conservation in the Great Plains and has written more than 50 scientific publications, including the Kansas Breeding Bird Atlas. A previous version of this article appeared in the 2011 Field Journal; Busby revised and updated it for this year’s Field Journal.