

NATIVE SHRUBS ARE CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF HABITAT

FOR A KALEIDOSCOPE OF SONGBIRDS AND UPLAND GAMEBIRDS IN GRASSLANDS, FARMLANDS AND RURAL LANDSCAPES IN THE GREAT PLAINS.



Native shrubs in the landscape do not get the credit they deserve. Dozens of bird species rely on native shrubs and the unique habitat provided by shrub thickets. For resident species like the Northern Bobwhite and Northern Cardinal, shrubs are vital throughout the year. The list of migratory bird species that rely on shrubs and similar habitat at

various times of the year is incredibly long. Our purpose here is to provide a glimpse of some of the most notable “regulars” that utilize shrubs and other brushy areas.

It is a delight to contemplate the connections—connections made by birds—that a few shrub thickets on one’s farm or ranch may have within the western hemisphere. Neotropical migrants



"When one tugs at a single thing in Nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world."
~ John Muir



Spotted Towhee © Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Blue Grosbeak © David Rintoul

are well represented among the breeding birds that nest within the branches, forage for food within the thickets and surrounding vegetation, and find shelter from storms and searing heat. Other species pass through in seasonal migrations, and some (Neoarctic species) come to the central Great Plains to spend the winter. The Gray Catbirds nesting in a dogwood thicket in our

pasture may winter in Costa Rica; and the Harris's Sparrows that hang out here in the plum thicket along the driveway all winter travel back to the far northern reaches of Canada each summer. If we all mapped the travels of each of the birds that utilize the land we share and the habitats they need, we would likely marvel at how important it is to life far beyond our horizons.



Northern Mockingbird © Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Yellow-billed Cuckoo © Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Painted Bunting © Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Loggerhead Shrike © John Bosnak



Northern Cardinals © John Bosnak



Orchard Oriole © David Rintoul



Bewick's Wren
© David Rintoul

*"Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all."*

~ Emily Dickinson



Eastern Kingbird
© Ron Klataske



American Robins
© Ron Klataske

Tragically these habitats are often regarded as simply brush to be leveled with brushhog mowers, sprayed with herbicides, or bulldozed. Where brushy draws occur in farmed fields, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service requires removal to be replaced by monoculture grassed waterways (usually planted to brome grass) when terraces are installed with governmental cost-share dollars. Many tens of thousands of miles of brushy draws have been removed for this purpose in Kansas and surrounding states, and a similar fate is imposed with herbicides at the hands of county noxious weed departments on native vegetation along tens of thousands of miles of rural roads. Within the rural landscape, tens of millions of federal dollars have been spent via USDA to broadcast spray

grasslands to kill shrubs. It is not that woody plants should not be controlled and managed, it is the total disregard for ecosystem values by agencies of government that is so disappointing.

There is a Need to Include Birds in the Balance. Unless wildlife organizations step to the plate and go to bat for birds and other wildlife that depend on shrub habitat, governmental agencies will ignore the detrimental impacts of their actions. Considering that many entities have only recently begun to recognize the importance of pollinator habitat, there may be *hope* that the diversity of habitats needed by birds will be recognized as well.

Some of the native shrubs and woody vines that are most notable and of significant value for birds in the central prairie states include American plum, sandhill plum, choke cherry, rough-leaved dogwood, elderberry, aromatic sumac, smooth sumac, golden current, buckbrush (coralberry), riverbank grape and bittersweet.

Incredible “Little Brown Birds”

Thirty-five species of American sparrows are our most unimposing and secretive songbirds. But once one gets to know them, they add greatly to our enjoyment of the natural world around us. Their songs are beautiful, but for many displays of their breeding plumage and songs are brief during their spring stay. Many species have distinctive head patterns. Most are migratory; a third nest in the central Great Plains. Others winter in this area or pass through fall and spring. American sparrows are insect and seed-eating birds and most depend on habitats with a mixture of grasses, shrubs and weedy patches. These New World passerine birds share the family Emberizidae with similar buntings, juncos, towhees and longspurs.

Birds of a Different Feather - Although American sparrows are delightful and desirable in every way from a human perspective, they—unfortunately—share the name “sparrow” with the introduced “House Sparrow.” Our native birds are not closely related to House Sparrows. Like European Starlings, House Sparrows are ecologically destructive because they displace native birds from their cavity nesting sites, and they are introduced often a nuisance around farmsteads.



Harris's Sparrow © David Rintoul



Lincoln Sparrow © John Bosnak



Field Sparrow © David Rintoul



White-Crowned Sparrow
© Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



White-Crown Sparrow © Mike Harding



White-Throated Sparrow © John Bosnak



Song Sparrow © Michael Harding



Dark Eyed Junco © David Rintoul

Birds of Southwestern Shrubs

The more arid southwestern part of Kansas hosts a number of birds associated with shrub vegetation unique to that area. Curve-billed Thrashers, Greater Roadrunners and Scaled Quail are among them. They all gravitate to "thorny brush" when it is available. Although rare and routinely eliminated, the shrub-like cholla cactus is one of their favorite protective hangouts. Southwestern Kansas is also the largest remaining occupied range for Lesser Prairie-chickens (LEPC). Sand sagebrush, *Artemisia filifolia*, is a branching woody shrub and it is one of the most valuable components of LEPC habitat. Grassland habitat is vital for both Lesser and Greater Prairie-chickens, but people often overlook the fact that a low canopy of shrubs and forbs is important for brood and year-round protection from the elements and concealment from predators. —Ron Klataske



Curve-billed Thrasher © David Rintoul



Scaled Quail © David Rintoul



Lesser Prairie Chicken © Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com



Sand Sage Prairie © Ron Klataske