

Songbirds of Missouri

Dickcissel

A small brown bird with striking yellow facial stripes has long been one of Missouri's favorite songbirds, but like some other species, this little bird's population is declining.

Named after the song it sings, the dickcissel's population is slightly more than 20 million, according to the estimates of bird experts. And although this may sound abundant, there are far fewer of these birds than before.

Once common as far east as the Atlantic, the dickcissel today is primarily a bird of the central United States. The reduction of its population is directly linked to the disappearance of native grassland habitat in North America. This habitat is gradually being lost to human development and exotic grasses that are choking out native grasses.

In the case of the dickcissel, however, there's another aspect to the story that's not always apparent. This same creature North American birders enjoy is actually despised as an agricultural pest by South American farmers. During the winter, they kill these birds to protect their crops, further reducing its population.

The central U.S. – including Missouri – comprises much of what remains of the dickcissel's summer breeding and nesting range. Because breeding, nesting and brood-rearing requires lots of energy, dickcissels eat a high-protein diet rich in insects when they are here in the summer.

But in winter, when they migrate to the northern part of South America – primarily Venezuela – they instinctively switch to eating grains and seeds because they don't need as much energy. Gathering in winter flocks of sometimes more than one million birds, they feed heavily on fields of rice, sorghum and other crops throughout Venezuela. Each year, hundreds of dickcissels are poisoned or shot by Venezuelan farmers trying to protect their

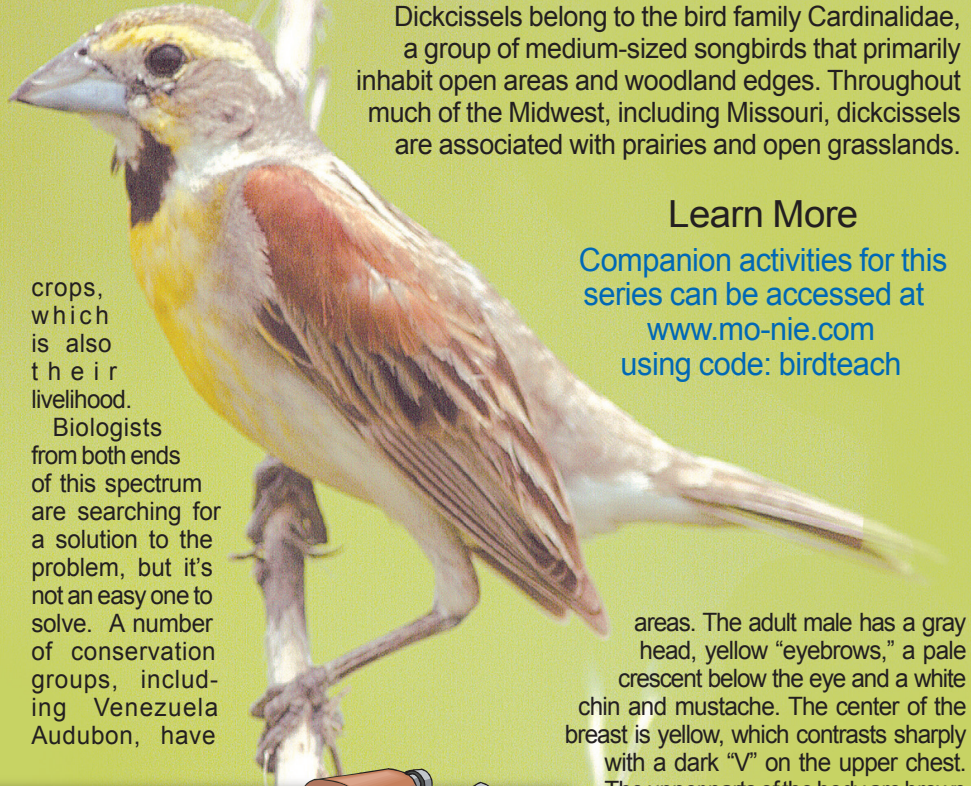
crops, which is also their livelihood.

Biologists from both ends of this spectrum are searching for a solution to the problem, but it's not an easy one to solve. A number of conservation groups, including Venezuela Audubon, have

Dickcissels belong to the bird family Cardinalidae, a group of medium-sized songbirds that primarily inhabit open areas and woodland edges. Throughout much of the Midwest, including Missouri, dickcissels are associated with prairies and open grasslands.

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areas. The adult male has a gray head, yellow "eyebrows," a pale crescent below the eye and a white chin and mustache. The center of the breast is yellow, which contrasts sharply with a dark "V" on the upper chest. The upper parts of the body are brown with blackish stripes on the back. This ensemble is completed by a rusty-colored shoulder patch. As in most other species, the females are less striking in appearance; the female dickcissels do not have the yellow and black that the males do.

Females build cup-like nests made of leaves and grass. These nests are located on or near the ground. The female lays four pale blue eggs that hatch in 12-13 days. The young fledge in nine days.

Here in the U.S., the best way to help dickcissels and other wildlife that depend on grassland is to improve

and conserve their grassland habitat. Information about the wildlife and agricultural benefits of managing land for grassland species can be found at your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office or other land-management agencies.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4, S.8)

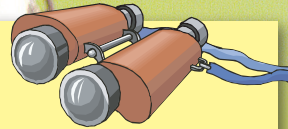
Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Dickcissels can be seen in Missouri during the spring and summer. In winter, they migrate to the northern parts of South America, especially Venezuela. Dickcissels can be seen in native prairies, meadows, hayfields and other types of open grassland habitat.

...and Listen

The most familiar call of the dickcissel is the one that gave the bird its name – a multi-syllable song that sounds something like "dic-dic-ciss-ciss-ciss." It also can utter a dry-sounding "chek" and, in flight, a buzzy "fpppt" that sounds like a Bronx cheer.



established an agreement with Venezuelan farmer's associations to develop a management plan for the species. This is a step towards better bird conservation, but progress still needs to be made.

As spring unfolds in Missouri, dickcissels will soon appear on prairies and other grassland