



McCown's Longspur



Photo: © Gordon Court

Scientific name

Rhynchophanes mccownii

Taxon

Birds

COSEWIC Status

Threatened

Canadian range

Alberta, Saskatchewan

Reason for Designation

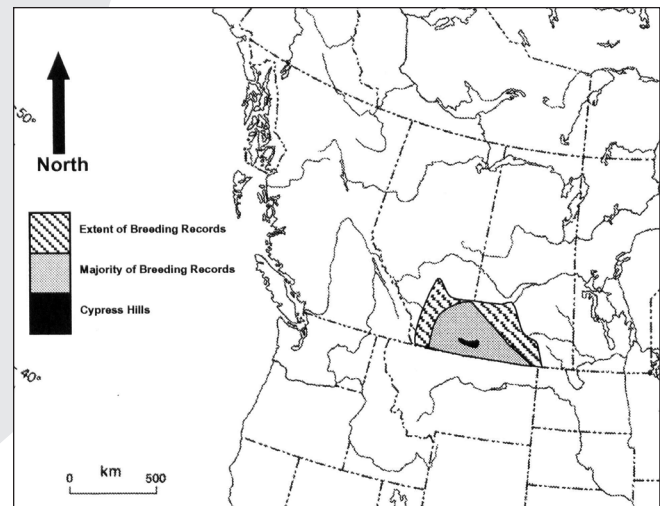
This grassland bird has experienced a severe population decline since at least the late 1960s, and there is evidence of a substantial, continuing decline. The species is primarily threatened by continuing loss and degradation of grassland habitats within both its breeding and wintering grounds.

Wildlife Species Description and Significance

The McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) is a grey or greyish brown sparrow-like songbird with an inverted black "T" pattern on its white tail. Males have a mostly white head with a black crown, moustache stripe, and bib patch. As an endemic species of the northern prairies, the species is a useful indicator of that habitat's condition.

Distribution

The breeding range extends from southern Alberta and eastern Montana east to southern Saskatchewan and the western edge of the Dakotas. It has a slightly disjunct range in eastern Wyoming that extends slightly into neighbouring states. Historically, the range extended eastward to Minnesota and southward to Oklahoma. The wintering range is in the southwestern US (mainly Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona) and northern Mexico (mainly Chihuahua and Sonora).



Distribution of McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) in Canada, showing a portion of species breeding range (from COSEWIC 2006). Longspurs are uncommon on the edge of their breeding range (diagonal stripes) and are absent from the high elevations of Cypress Hills (black).

Map Source: COSEWIC. 2006. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the McCown's Longspur *Calcarius mccownii* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. vi + 28 pp.

Habitat

The species breeds in dry, sparse, short-cropped grassland with bare patches and few shrubs or forbs. Such habitat includes short-grass prairie, non-native pastures, closely grazed mixed-grass prairie, and some cultivated fields. Breeding habitat declined historically through the last century, and habitat loss and degradation continue, mainly because native grasslands are being converted for agriculture.

Biology

Birds probably breed in their first year. They are monogamous and territorial, and raise one, or, more rarely, two broods per year. Hatching success is high and starvation is rare, but predators take 30-75% of nests. Otherwise, demographic variables, particularly return and survival rates, are poorly known. Invertebrates, especially grasshoppers, are the main food provided to nestlings, but otherwise the species feeds mainly on seeds. Birds leave Canada for the wintering grounds starting in August, and return to Canada starting in April.

Population Sizes and Trends

The Canadian population is estimated from Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) results as 138,000 adults, which is about 23% of the global population. The best available information on trends, from the BBS, suggests the species declined by 98% in Canada between 1970 and 2012 and by at least 30% in the 10-year period between 2002 and 2012.

Threats and Limiting Factors

Threats include natural system modifications, agricultural effluents, oil and gas drilling, annual and perennial non-timber crops, renewable energy, and transportation and service corridors. Overall, threats were scored as having high to moderate impacts.

Protection, Status and Ranks

The species is protected under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* of 1994 and listed as Special Concern under Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act*. It is ranked as Apparently Secure globally, but as imperiled or vulnerable in most of the states in its US range. In Alberta and Saskatchewan it is ranked as vulnerable or apparently secure.

Source: COSEWIC. 2016. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the McCown's Longspur *Rhynchophanes mccownii* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. ix + 35 pp.

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Cat. No.: CW69-14/488-2016-1E-PDF
ISBN: 978-0-660-07320-0

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