

**GRASSLAND BIRD RESPONSE TO WOODY VEGETATION REMOVAL ON GRASSLANDS IN THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE REGION OF MINNESOTA**

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*Abstract:* Grassland bird populations are rapidly declining in the Great Plains where conversion to agriculture has destroyed or altered much of their habitat. An additional threat in the prairie region of western Minnesota is the encroachment of woody vegetation. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has been removing trees on Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) to 1) reduce the acreage of unsuitable habitat, 2) increase the effective field size of adjacent grasslands, and 3) reduce the amount of habitat attractive to avian and mammalian predators. We initiated point counts on 12 WPAs in June 2005. Trees and shrubs were removed after the 2005 nesting season on 6 sites and 6 were left as controls. After 4 years of annual monitoring we have seen no indication of a positive response by grassland birds to treatment. Many grassland obligates expected in this region were rare on study sites prior to woody vegetation removal, and were still infrequently detected after treatment. Grassland species that were relatively common prior to treatment remained stable, despite indications of a negative relationship with woody vegetation. Vegetation surveys indicate that although trees have been effectively removed, shrub densities are back to pre-treatment levels despite prescribed burning. Other likely influences on the lack of grassland bird response are declining populations throughout the region and a need for continued habitat improvement within treated sites. Our results suggest that grassland bird response to decades of habitat degradation cannot be repaired in a short amount of time.