

CONSERVATION PLANNING IN THE PRAIRIES: DOES WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT HELP GRASSLAND BIRDS?

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Abstract: Conservation planning and management activities in the northern plains traditionally have strongly emphasized waterfowl. We address issues involving nongame birds, especially grassland and wetland birds, of the northern plains. We argue that most species of prairie waterfowl are in fact grassland birds and, accordingly, protection and management of nesting habitat for waterfowl involves grasslands. Waterfowl differ from other grassland birds in that they have a strong constituency that provides political and financial support for management that benefits them. Many management practices applied for waterfowl also benefit many species of nongame birds; these practices include protection of wetlands and native grassland, conversion of croplands to grasslands, restoration of wetlands, and periodic management interventions using fire, grazing, and haying. A few waterfowl management practices, such as nest baskets, do not benefit nongame species, and few practices are beneficial to all non-target species. The consequences of predator management to nongame birds are much more complex than for waterfowl, because nongame birds are influenced by a broader variety of predators. We examine the array of management practices currently being deployed and how their effects on nongame birds are being evaluated, both in Canada and the United States. Although most waterfowl management practices are beneficial for a number of non-target species, requirements of nongame grassland and wetland birds as a group are more diverse than waterfowl and do not respond to management practices as uniformly as do waterfowl.