

## A Mixed Season for Grassland Birds

by Pamela Hunt

The summer of 2021 was a busy season in New Hampshire's grasslands. Part of the impetus for this extra attention was a focus on the state-threatened Eastern Meadowlark, which hasn't been subject to a comprehensive survey since it was listed in 2017. In conjunction with this effort, we partnered with colleagues at the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and University of Vermont to initiate a two-state "meadowlark blitz." Volunteers in both states selected known or potential sites for meadowlarks and visited each site multiple times between mid-May and late July in search of meadowlarks and other grassland birds.

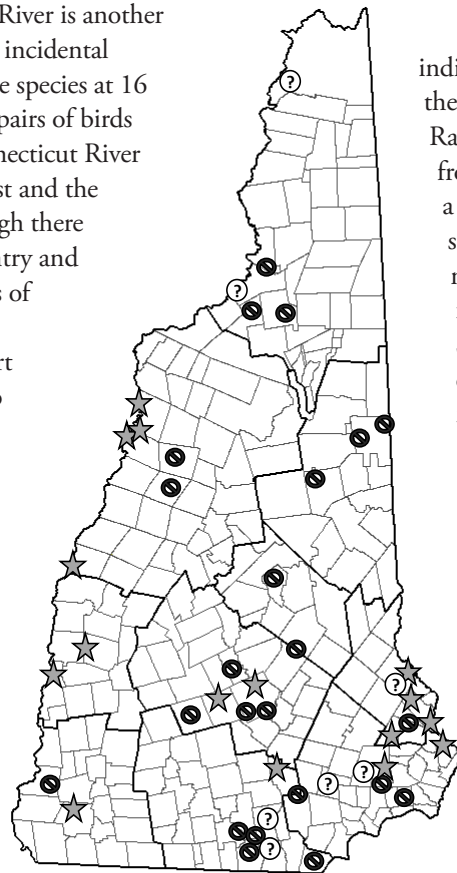
While meadowlarks remain fairly common (but still declining) in Vermont, the east side of the Connecticut River is another story entirely. Between dedicated surveys and incidental records submitted to eBird, we only found the species at 16 sites (see map), which supported only 20-25 pairs of birds in total. Close to half of these are in the Connecticut River Valley, with fair numbers still near the seacoast and the fewest in the Merrimack River Valley. Although there are still occasional records in the North Country and Lakes Region, none were found in these parts of the state despite some careful searching.

At the same time, I made a concerted effort to visit most sites for Grasshopper Sparrow so as to update this threatened species' status. And here's the good news: I estimate at least 40 singing males, higher by a third than any previous statewide estimate. Much of this is thanks to a huge increase at the Concord Airport, which supported 18-20 territories in 2021 (usually it's been around 10!). Grasshopper Sparrows are still only known from a handful of locations though, with most at airports. A highlight this year was finding one at the Lebanon Airport, well away from their core range in the southern third of the state.

Two more species deserve a quick mention. Vesper Sparrow is rarer than either of the preceding two species. It is only common in two areas, Ossipee and Concord, both of which are associated with pine barrens. There are scattered



*Horned Lark nest with three fuzzy young just outside the Concord Airport, May 9. Photo by Rebecca Suomala.*



*The state of our knowledge of Eastern Meadowlarks in 2021. Stars indicate where meadowlarks were detected, slashed circles where searches came up empty, and question marks for historical sites that were not surveyed in 2021.*

individuals elsewhere in the state, but I estimate the total population to be under a dozen pairs. Rarest of all is the Horned Lark, now only known from the Concord and Pease airports, although a tantalizing sighting from Keene in mid-May suggests they might still persist there (however none were detected in June or July). A highlight for the season for this species was when Becky Suomala found a nest in mid-April just north of the Concord Airport (see photo, above). This nest fledged two young, and the pair renested in May.

Counting grassland birds is one thing – long term conservation is another. Maintaining grasslands is often in opposition to economic interests (e.g., haying, airport safety) at the sites where these species occur. New Hampshire is lucky that two of our airports are amenable to bird-friendly management: Pease for Upland Sandpipers and Concord for Karner Blue Butterflies. In fact, the latter management may be behind the growth of Concord's Grasshopper Sparrow population. Moving forward, NH Audubon is hoping to work more closely with other statewide partners to implement practices that benefit grassland birds at some of the other key sites where they occur.