Eastern Meadowlark

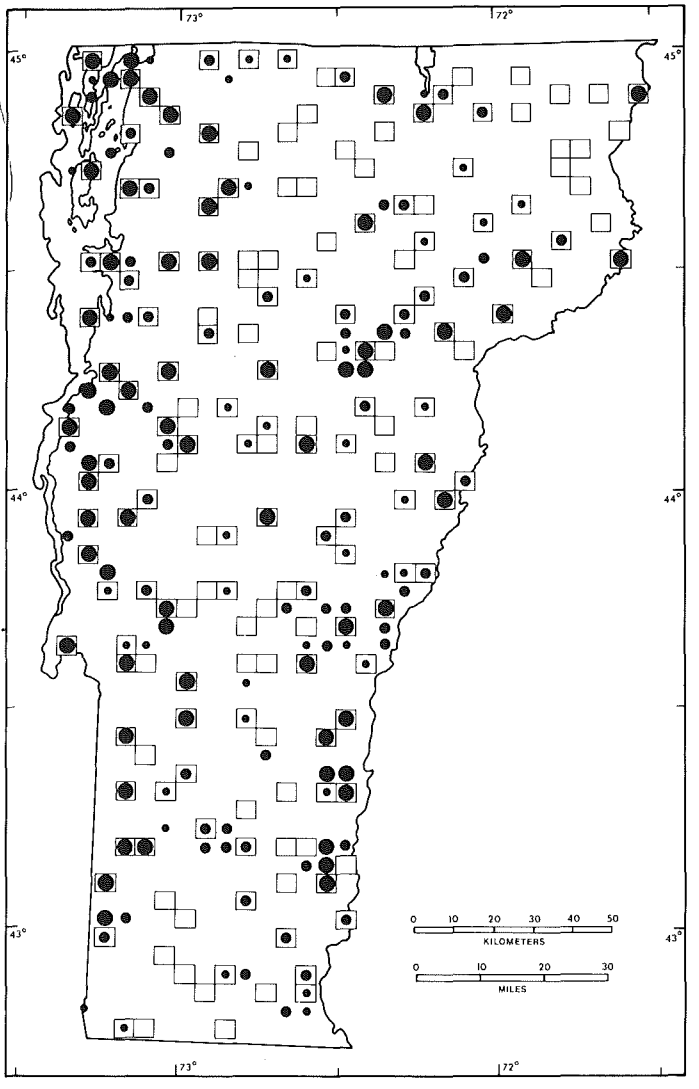
Sturnella magna

The Eastern Meadowlark inhabits extensive tracts of grassland. Wiens (1969) found that territories of Eastern Meadowlarks were characterized by a high proportion of narrow-leaved grasses, relatively low numbers of short, broad-leaved forbs, and the presence of fences or isolated trees for song perches. Territory size is large, 1.2–6 ha (3–15 a) in area (Lanyon 1957); Wisconsin territories were found to average 2.3 ha (5.8 a) (Wiens 1969). For this reason, the species is probably limited to large fields. Meadowlarks avoid very sparse or very dense growth and prefer vegetation of intermediate height and density, and plant-litter of intermediate depth (Wiens 1969). Fields that might be appropriate for another grassland-inhabiting Icterine species—the Bobolink—would be too lush for the meadowlark. A characteristic associated species of the meadowlark would be the Savannah Sparrow, which prefers similar conditions.

Meadowlarks arrive in Vermont very early in the spring, usually in mid March. Some attempt to overwinter, and in mild winters a few probably succeed. During March and April, before the growth of grass, returning males are relatively easy to locate. Song provides the best clue to the presence of nesting pairs. The song, though of a thin quality that is easily lost under noisy conditions, carries far; it consists of four to five clear, whistled notes. Adults are often seen perched on roadside trees, wires, and fences. A walking survey of appropriate grassy fields after the first of June may reveal isolated pairs that have ceased singing. The nest, placed on the ground in dense cover, is difficult to find. An observer may usually obtain evidence of breeding by finding parents carrying food (45% of Atlas Project confirmations were obtained in this way), or by locating the recently fledged young (which accounted for 32% of Atlas Project confirmations).

Meadowlarks establish their territories in mid April; nests are built in early to mid May. The species is double-brooded, and dates for confirmation cover at least a 3-month period. Egg dates for Vermont determined from 6 clutches, extend from May 5 to July 6. Clutch size for 4 Vermont nests ranged from 3 to 5 eggs (1 clutch of 2 eggs was probably collected before completion). Nestling and fledgling data are fragmentary for Vermont; data from New York State range from late May to mid August for nestlings and from early June to late August for fledglings (Bull 1974). Most meadowlarks depart Vermont in late October and November.

Meadowlarks are widely though rather thinly distributed in grasslands over much of the state. The species is most common in the extensively farmed Champlain Lowlands of northwestern Vermont. Most large fields in the region are inhabited by at least one pair, often more. The species is also well represented in the broad river valleys of the Taconic Mountains. In the more heavily forested eastern part of the state, the meadowlark's distribution is patchy. There the largest populations are in the Connecticut River valley and the dairy farmland of Caledonia and Orleans counties. Meadowlarks were found in fewer than half of the priority blocks in the Green Mountains and North-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 115 (64%)

Possible breeding:	26 (22% of total)
Probable breeding:	34 (29% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	55 (49% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	27.0
Green Mountains	22	41	19.0
North Central	13	58	11.3
Northeast Highlands	5	31	4.3
East Central	13	68	11.3
Taconic Mountains	14	87	12.1
Eastern Foothills	17	71	15

east Highlands, apparently because of the high elevations and heavily forested landscapes of these regions. Early references (Howe 1913; Fortner et al. 1933) indicate that meadowlarks first arrived in northeastern Vermont (e.g., St. Johnsbury) as a breeding species around 1910. At this time the Eastern Meadowlark may be declining because of reforestation in the state.

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