

Educational Specimen Development Project:

Prairie Ridge State Natural Area

Wildlife Preservation Fund

Small Grant - 1998

Jeffery W. Walk & Eric L. Kershner

Department of Natural Resources & Environmental Sciences

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Summary. Several salvage specimens of various grassland and wetland species were present in frozen storage at Prairie Ridge SNA, Jasper County, Illinois. The specimens were of varying condition and many had been in storage for >5 years. This project preserved some of the most valuable of these specimens, and augmented with other salvage specimens, was developed into a educational display collection for IDNR-Division of Natural Heritage staff at the site. Fourteen (14) skins of 13 species were prepared from January to June of 1998. To accompany each species on display, placards were created denoting status in Illinois and at Prairie Ridge and general life history notes.

Results. We prepared 14 skins for the collection at Prairie Ridge SNA. Each specimen is tagged with collection (where available) and preparation information. This information, along with general comment on specimen condition is given in List 1. Photocopies of the display placards are found in Appendix 1.

An adult male Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) was salvaged in June 1998. A placard has already been created for this species and we intend to prepare this as a skin and add it to the collection as soon as possible.

Recommendations. This collection will be an invaluable educational tool for the many visitors to Prairie Ridge SNA. The majority of visitors come to the site from March-May, therefore a seasonal display may be most appropriate to protect the specimens from sunlight, handling, accidents, insects, etc. during the 'off

season.' Storage in a display cases or sealed containers with moth balls or other pest-deterrent is strongly advised. While the skins should be tolerant of careful handling for many years, over-handling (especially by inexperienced persons) will surely result in severely damaged specimens in a short period of time. This collection represents the avifauna of Prairie Ridge very well. Future additions might include a Loggerhead Shrike, Henslow's Sparrow and other marsh birds if they should become available as salvage specimens.

Special Note. A copy of this report was forwarded to H. David Bohlen of the Illinois State Museum as a record of specimens deposited at Prairie Ridge and available to future researchers needing access to such specimens.

List 1. Collection, condition and preparation information for study skins in the collection at Prairie Ridge State Natural Area, Jasper County, Illinois, 1998.

BOBOLINK (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) - Male, alternate plumage.

Coll. 6 May 1991, Prairie Ridge SNA, McCormick tract, Jasper Co., IL by S. Simpson. Found dead, foot caught on fence. Lots of fat, 33g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by E. Kershner. *Excellent condition.

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*) - Male.

Coll. April 1998, Prairie Ridge SNA, near McCormack tract, Jasper Co., IL by E. Kershner. Apparent roadkill, little fat. Prep'd June 1998 by E. Kershner. *Excellent condition; breast slightly blood-stained.

GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) - Male.

Coll. 24 Dec. 1996, Prairie Ridge SNA, Donnelley Tract, Jasper Co., IL by S. Simpson. Highline kill--massive internal bleeding. Moderate fat, crop empty, 780g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by J. Walk. *Excellent condition.

GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN (*Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus*) - Female.

Coll. 9 April 1995, Chase Co., KS. Died during translocation to IL. Ill. Nat. Hist. Survey band # C3512. Some fat, 820g. Prep'd. Feb. 1998 by J. Walk. *Excellent condition.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW (*Ammodramus savannarum*) - Female.

Coll. 9 May 1997, 4 miles E. of Charleston, Coles Co., IL by J. Walk. Radio tower kill. Little fat, crop empty, 15g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by J. Walk. *Good condition.

HORNED LARK (*Eremophila alpestris*) - Male.

No collection information available; apparent roadkill. Very little fat, 30g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by E. Kershner. *Excellent condition; abdomen slightly blood stained.

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) - Male.

Coll. 11 March 1994, Prairie Ridge SNA, Walter's tract, Jasper Co., IL by R. Jansen. Road kill. Very fat, 91g. Prep'd Feb. 1998 by J. Walk. *Very good condition; note right leg and wing broken with some feather loss.

KING RAIL (*Rallus elegans*) - Female.

Coll. Spring 1992, "Ray Watkins property," Jasper Co., IL. Vehicle kill? Moderate fat, some identifiable stomach contents, 295g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by J. Walk.
*Excellent condition.

LAPLAND LONGSPUR (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - Male, basic plumage.

Coll. 20 Jan. 1998, S of Cooks Mills, Coles Co., IL by D. Olson. Road kill, badly damaged rump and back. Lots of fat, 32g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by E. Kershner.
*Very good condition, but fragile due to injuries.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*) - Adult Male.

No collection information available. Road kill? No fat, no stomach contents, 340g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by J. Walk. *Excellent condition; use care in handling due to long wings and tail.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) - Male.

Coll. 24 March 1989, Prairie Ridge SNA, Donsbach tract, Jasper Co., IL. Appears to have been shot. Minimal fat, no stomach contents, 77g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by E. Kershner. *Very good condition.

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) - Female.

Coll. 6 Jan. 1994, 2.5 miles SE of Kinmundy, Prairie Ridge SNA, Copple tract, Marion Co., IL by T. Esker and S. Simpson. Road kill. Lots of fat, no stomach contents, 390g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by J. Walk. *Very good condition; fragile due to injuries (head was nearly completely severed) and long wings.

SMITH'S LONGSPUR (*Calcarius pictus*) - Male, alternate plumage.

Coll. April 1998, Prairie Ridge SNA, near Winters tract, Jasper Co., IL. Road kill. Some fat, 32g. Prep'd June 1998 by J. Walk. *Excellent condition.

UPLAND SANDPIPER (*Bartramia longicauda*) - Male.

Coll. 23 May 1988, Prairie Ridge SNA, Field tract, Jasper Co., IL by R. Westemeier. Tattered and blood-soaked. Moderate fat, crop empty, 132g. Prep'd Jan. 1998 by J. Walk. *Fair condition due to poor storage conditions.

BOBOLINK - *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*

The bobolink is a fairly common migrant at Prairie Ridge, and may rarely breed here. Most bobolinks nest on prairies farther north. Due to population declines and habitat loss, the bobolink is a Watch List species in Illinois. This specimen is a male in breeding plumage.

GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN

Tympanuchus cupido pinnatus

Prairie Ridge is the only place to find the Endangered greater prairie-chicken in Illinois. Males are easy to see in spring when they display on "booming grounds." Both sexes are similar in size and plumage, but females do not boom or have as long *pinnae*, or black neck feathers.

EASTERN MEADOWLARK - *Sturnella magna*

The eastern meadowlark is common at all seasons at Prairie Ridge. The males even sing on sunny winter days. Meadowlarks nest on the ground in most grassy habitats, but as pastures and hayfields have been converted to row crops, their population has declined.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW

Ammodramus savannarum

The grasshopper sparrow is fairly common from May to August at Prairie Ridge. Grasshopper sparrows build domed nests on the ground in short grasses. Their drab coloration and the males' insect-like buzzing song often make grasshopper sparrows difficult to observe.

HORNED LARK - *Eremophila alpestris*

The horned lark is abundant around Prairie Ridge at all seasons. The males' sing as they fly far overhead and sound like the tinkling of small bells. Horned larks nest in very short grasses and on bare soil, often raising their young before crop fields are planted in the spring.

KILLDEER - *Charadrius vociferus*

The killdeer is common at Prairie Ridge from late winter to late fall. This species nests in very short grasses, on gravel roadsides, and on bare soil, and begins breeding in March. Killdeer are often able to hatch their young in crop fields before they are planted in the spring.

KING RAIL - *Rallus elegans*

King rails are rare summer residents at Prairie Ridge. Since king rails and the marshes they breed in are rare throughout Illinois, they are listed as a Threatened species. King rails are occasionally seen when they feed on the open mud flats of drying wetlands.

LAPLAND LONGSPUR - *Calcarius lapponicus*

Lapland longspurs are common winter residents in the crop fields around Prairie Ridge, but leave in the spring to breed on the Arctic tundra. Lapland longspurs are best seen in snowy weather when they come to roadsides to search for exposed seeds and grit.

NORTHERN HARRIER - *Circus cyaneus*

Northern harriers are common at Prairie Ridge from October to April, feeding on the abundant rodents. Two to ten pairs typically remain to breed. Requiring large grasslands and breeding at few other places in Illinois, it is an Endangered species. This bird is an adult male.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD - *Agelaius phoeniceus*

Red-winged blackbirds are abundant at Prairie Ridge from late winter to late fall. Males are easy to identify, but females are dull brown. "Red wings" nest in wheat fields, marshes, hayfields, roadsides and grasslands. They gather into huge flocks before migrating in fall.

SHORT-EARED OWL - *Asio flammeus*

Short-eared owls are fairly common during the winter months at Prairie Ridge, and sometimes remain to nest during the summer. These birds are best seen in late afternoon on cloudy winter days as they start to hunt for rodents. Short-eared owls are Endangered in Illinois.

SMITH'S LONGSPUR - *Calcarius pictus*

The Smith's longspur is an uncommon fall migrant and a common spring migrant at Prairie Ridge. They stop here to feed in weedy crop fields and short grasses before moving to wintering areas on the Great Plains and nesting grounds on the Arctic. This is a breeding male.

UPLAND SANDPIPER - *Bartramia longicauda*

Upland sandpipers are an uncommon breeding species at Prairie Ridge. The male's song is a "wolf whistle," given as he flies high overhead. Upland Sandpipers are Endangered in Illinois since the large grasslands and pastures they prefer for nesting are nearly gone.

DICKCISSEL - *Spiza americana*

Dickcissels are a very common nesting species at Prairie Ridge from mid-May to August, but they winter in South America. Females lay blue eggs in nests they build in hayfields and grasslands. Males (like this bird) sing nearly non-stop, even on hot afternoons and at night.