

Baird's Sparrow (*Centronyx bairdii*)



Scott Somershoe

Baird's Sparrow

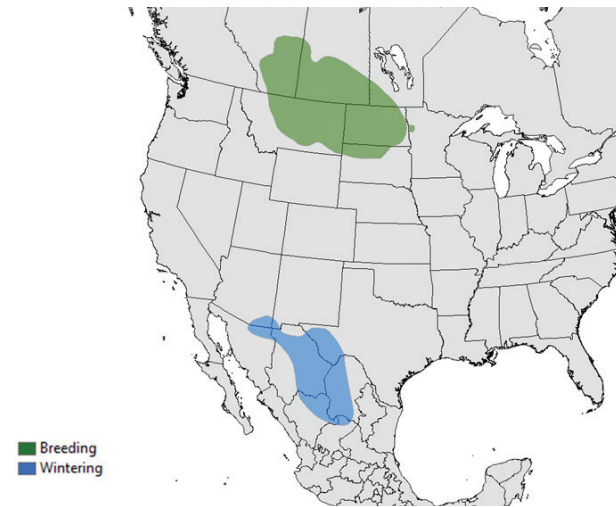


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Introduction

The Baird's Sparrow is a grassland specialist that lives in prairies and grasslands throughout its full annual cycle, breeding in the northern Great Plains and migrating up to 2000 miles to overwinter in the Chihuahuan Desert. Over the last century, North America's grasslands have contracted due to agricultural and urban development, leaving less than 50% of the Baird's Sparrows historical habitat. This species is in decline throughout its range; however exact drivers of this decline are unknown. Baird's Sparrows show a preference for native grasses. They show a slight preference for shorter grassy areas within healthy mixed-grass prairie, perhaps to afford individual birds a clear view of the landscape for increased vigilance for predators.



Baird's Sparrow Distribution Map (BirdLife International and NatureServe 2012).

Identification

The Baird's Sparrow is a small brown songbird with dark brown streaks (length: 5.5 inches [12 cm], wing span: 8.7 inches [22 cm], weight: 0.6 oz [17.5 g]). The Baird's Sparrow is camouflaged well by its appearance in the surrounding grassland landscape; however males are often easily observable on territories during spring and



Kevin Barnes

Baird's Sparrow.

summer due to frequent singing. Adults have a deep yellow-ochre color prominent on head and brow, especially noticeable during the winter. Their head is characterized by a dark yellow stripe running down the center of the head and thin brown “whiskers” running down the sides of the neck. Their tail is notched at the end and has cream-white edges noticeable during flight. Their underbellies are whitish with sparse but dark streaking across breast.

Adult plumage: Adult males and females have similar plumage during the breeding and winter seasons.

Immature birds: Young are similar to adult, but underbelly has heavier streaking.

Breeding Biology

Reproduction: Baird's Sparrows arrive on the breeding grounds in late April through mid-May. Pair formation begins shortly after arrival. Eggs are laid from late May through late July.

Nest: Nests are constructed on the ground in a cup-like shape out of dead grasses. Nests are usually covered and accessed by the bird through an opening on the side.

Clutch Size and Incubation: Average clutch size is normally 4-5 eggs with one egg laid per day. Only females incubate the nest. Eggs are light brown with dark brown speckling.

Nestlings: Nestlings are similar in appearance to many songbird young; chicks hatch from eggs, featherless,



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Baird's Sparrow nest (entry hole is in center of the image at the base of the tall tuft of grass).

with eyes closed. Nestlings develop “pin” feathers 2 or 3 days after hatching. Eyes open on day 3-4, and nestlings fledge from the nest 8-11 days after hatching, before they are able to fly well.

Diet: Mainly insectivorous during the summer (small beetles, mosquitoes, and caterpillars) and granivorous (mainly grass seeds) during the winter.

Fun Fact: Early in the breeding season, Baird's Sparrows often scuttle along the ground instead of flying, slightly hunched over, and can often be mistaken for small rodents!

Habitat

Breeding: The Baird's Sparrow prefers mixed grass prairies in the

northern Great Plains in Canada and the U.S. scattered with few, low shrubs and dead matter grass from previous years. Habitat during the breeding season includes rough fescue (*Festuca scabrella*), sedge (*Carex obtusata*), porcupine grass (*Stipa spartea*), club moss (*Selaginella densa*), spike oat (*Helictotrichon hookeri*), pasture sage (*Artemisia frigida*), June grass (*Koeleria pyramidata*), needle grass (*Stipa comata*), Canby's bluegrass (*Poa canbyi*), graceful sedge (*Carex praegracilis*), foxtail barley (*Hordeum jubatum*), northern wheatgrass (*Agropyron dasystachyum*), western wheatgrass (*A. smithii*), and blue grama grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*).



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Typical breeding habitat for Baird's Sparrow.

Migration: Little is known about habitat requirements for this species during migration.

Winter habitat: The Baird's Sparrow prefers mixed-height grasslands with extensive grass cover (>40%) and avg. height of 15 inches, with low shrub cover (<5%) within grassland landscapes of the Chihuahuan desert in the southwestern U.S. and Mexico.

Management Recommendations

Rangeland management involving seasonal grazing can encourage growth of healthy grasslands that will benefit cattle as well as provide habitat for the Baird's Sparrow and other grassland specialist songbirds.

However, because of their requirement for tall dense grass, both for nesting in summer and for foraging and predator avoidance in winter, Baird's Sparrows are vulnerable to overgrazing, especially during droughts. Baird's Sparrows are also highly sensitive to shrub cover, thus efforts to reduce or reverse shrub encroachment should benefit the species, both on the breeding and wintering grounds. Programs protecting native prairie as well as agricultural incentive programs offer habitat protection for Baird's Sparrows.