Ornithological Literature

ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION OF GRASSLAND BIRDS OF THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE. Edited by Peter D. Vickery and James R. Herkert. Studies in Avian Biology, No. 19. Cooper Ornithological Society, Camarillo, California. 1999: 299 pp., extensive figures, maps, tables. $25.00 (paper), $39.95 (cloth).—This volume is the proceedings of a conference held in Tulsa, Oklahoma in October 1995. Included are 34 papers by 66 authors, organized into four categories: introduction, ecology, breeding ecology, and Latin America. An abstract in both English and Spanish is provided for each paper.

The introduction alone is worth the price of the book. It clearly identifies the focus of the book, defines the group of birds addressed, and demonstrates the importance of grassland conservation. Complete listings are provided of obligate and facultative grassland species for the Western Hemisphere, including annotations on geographic distributions of North American, Mexican, and Caribbean species. The introduction lays the groundwork for more detailed ecological and conservation assessments found through the book. The thorough nature of this chapter should be a model for future editors of conference proceedings.

Ecology and conservation of grassland birds continues with four large scale papers: Peterjohn et al. use familiar BBS data to document declining population trends for a majority of North American breeding season grassland birds; O’Connor et al. provide a multidimensional assessment of bird distribution patterns, drawing heavily on BBS data; Askins argues that grassland birds were an ancient component of the avian diversity in the eastern U.S.; and Wells and Rosenberg outline conservation priorities for the northeastern U.S. based on the geographic distribution of breeding populations. Together, these summaries present biological, historical, and continent wide landscape perspectives that underlie our understanding of the current status of grassland bird populations.

Subsequent papers run the gamut in terms of geographic scope (from very local to continental), taxonomic focus (from single species to all associated birds), analytical approach (descriptive and statistical), and conservation implication (secure to endangered species). The geographic areas of attention justify the title, with reports on original field research spanning at least 18 U.S. states, Canadian provinces, and Central and South American countries. Similarly, detailed ecological data and management implications are provided in survey papers that address almost every obligate grassland species listed for North America and many from South America. There is, however, a clear emphasis on passerines that breed in the temperate zone, particularly members of the Emberizidae, with only brief or passing references to most of the traditional game species for which a rich literature exists elsewhere. Authors come from many geographic areas and are associated with a range of organizations with interests in this subject, including state, provincial, and federal governments, universities, and non-profit organizations.

There is an applied emphasis throughout much of the book. Many papers address land management issues, including various species’ responses to cultivation, prescribed fire, grazing, and the Conservation Reserve Program. These include both experimental designs and descriptive analyses. Specific habitat needs are identified for many species and management regimes are evaluated and recommended under various scenarios. There are methodological papers, including a robust example of distance sampling and an innovative approach to monitoring migrants (by nocturnal flight calls). The vast majority of papers address breeding season issues, but a few focus on nonbreeding issues, notably for the Dickcissel (Spiza americana). Detailed tables and figures accompany many papers, providing data that will be of great use to future researchers.

The copy is well edited and clean. Figures are almost uniformly clear and well labeled, although formatting of similar types of figures varies considerably among papers. Characteristic of proceedings, it has been somewhat