

## meadowlark *Sturnella* sp.

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Family: Icteridae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

### FEATURES

Two species of meadowlark are present in Illinois: the eastern meadowlark and the western meadowlark. They are very difficult to tell apart by sight, but their song can help identify them. Both birds have yellow breast feathers with a large, black “v” marking. The white, outer, tail feathers may be seen when the bird flies. The back feathers are brown. The western meadowlark is paler than the eastern meadowlark, and the yellow on its throat touches its cheek. The meadowlark averages nine inches in length (tail tip to bill tip in preserved specimen).

### BEHAVIORS

Two species of meadowlark are present in Illinois: the eastern meadowlark and the western meadowlark. Both are birds of the open country. The eastern meadowlark is a common migrant and summer resident statewide and a common winter resident in the southern one-third of the state. Its whistled song is “tee-yah, tee-yair.” This meadowlark may be seen sitting on fences or wires or flying with short, choppy flaps and a glide. It lives in pastures, hay fields, fallow fields and near row crops. Spring migrants generally arrive in Illinois in March. Migration occurs during the day. Eggs are produced from April through July. The nest is built on the ground. The female constructs the nest of dried grasses in a depression in the ground in a period of about three to eight days. The nest is covered with a domelike, grass canopy, leaving an opening on the side. Two to six, white eggs with red-brown speckles are deposited by the female, and she alone incubates them for the 14-day incubation period. The nest is often parasitized by the brown-headed cowbird that deposits an egg that the meadowlark will hatch and raise, taking food and care away from its own young. Predation and mowing are the main reasons for loss of nests. This bird eats insects when available, switching to seeds and grains when the insects are gone. Fall migrants begin arriving in Illinois during October. The western meadowlark is an uncommon migrant and local summer resident and an uncommon winter resident in the state. It lives in sand prairies in Mason and Henderson counties, dry pastures, airports and other treeless, grassy areas. This bird is most numerous in the northern and western parts of the state and is found in southern Illinois only in winter. Its song consists of seven to 10, flutelike notes. Spring migrants begin arriving in Illinois in February. Eggs are produced from May through June. The nest is built of dried grasses in a depression in the ground and is covered with a domelike, grass canopy, leaving an opening on the side. The female builds the nest in three to eight days. Two to six, white eggs with red-brown speckles are deposited by the female, and she alone incubates them over the 14-day incubation period. Predation and mowing are the main reasons for loss of nests. Fall migration begins in October. This bird eats insects when available, switching to seeds and grains when the insects are gone.

## HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

**none**

Woodland Habitats

**none**

Prairie and Edge Habitats

**black soil prairie; dolomite prairie; edge; gravel prairie; hill prairie; sand prairie; shrub prairie**

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