

## Nature Notes, April 2023

### The Western Meadowlark: Prairie Icon and Harbinger of Spring

By Blair McCann

Growing up on a southern Saskatchewan farm, we knew spring was on the way when the sweet song of the Western Meadowlark serenaded us on our walk home from school. These prairie icons sang out from fence posts, telephone poles and even tall weeds in the ditches. Their song for me is synonymous with the prairie landscape. I enjoyed these birds as a boy but developed true appreciation for them only after my wife and I purchased a country property with six acres of grassland outside the three acre yard - ideal habitat for Western Meadowlarks.

At our country property (AKA Lark's Crossing), the male meadowlarks arrive in early April, about a month before the females make an appearance. Each male typically claims a territory of six or seven acres of grassland. Our grassland is only enough territory for one male so the competition is intense. They compete for territory by singing from fence posts, power lines and trees in the shelterbelt. Each may have as many as 10 songs and switch them when another male is present. Lynn and I have enjoyed many morning coffees listening to a pair of males vocally sparring from opposite ends of our yard. The complex melodies are typically comprised of a rich flute-like jumble of gurgling notes, usually descending in scale. Each male has its distinct style and with time we've been able to identify individuals by this. The vocal sparring can go on for minutes, usually ending when one male pursues the other off its territory. Things really get ramped up when the females arrive around the end of April. Although they sing much less than the males, they initiate courtship with a series of short aerial chases that often end in landing in open spaces. On the ground the male struts around the female, puffing his chest feathers with bill pointed up to display his black "V". He does this as he spreads his tail and flicks his wings. The female stands with her bill and tail elevated and her wings slightly lowered. The courtship often takes place inside the yard where it's easy for us to observe, and it's absolutely fascinating.



The male meadowlark sings to establish and defend his territory.

Photo by Blair McCann

The courtship usually culminates with the pair mating. Fidelity is not one of the male meadowlark's strong suits as they are non-monogamous, often mating with two females. Nests are built by females on the ground in dense grass. They hollow out a shallow depression and create a dome structure that is interwoven with adjacent grass; a side entrance with a narrow trail leads to the nest. Three to seven eggs are incubated for around 14 days. Nesting females have a low tolerance for disturbance and often abandon their nest if disrupted. After the young hatch, the female does most of the feeding. The young leave the nest after about 10 days but aren't able to fly yet. The adults tend to them for at least another two weeks. When the fledglings are about a month old they begin to learn how to vocalize the adult's songs. From random warbling and churting sounds they progress by late summer to notes within the adult's primary song. It's amusing how they'll abruptly stop partway through the song - as if they've lost their place or can't remember the rest of it. By migration time they've usually got the basics down but are still distinct from the adults. Listening to them learn these songs is fascinating, one of the most enjoyable aspects of spending time at Lark's Crossing. It's all truly marvelous.

*Blair McCann is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society.*