

# SPRAGUE'S PIPIT IN ALBERTA



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## IDENTIFICATION

Have you ever heard a series of clear, descending notes, coming from high above your head, while out on the prairie in summer? This is the ethereal song of the male Sprague's Pipit, a small, sparrow-sized ground-nesting songbird, defending his territory.

During the breeding season, the male performs a prolonged vocal flight display, circling hundreds of feet above the prairie, singing a series of descending tinkling notes ("Cheeer, Cheeer, Cheeer, Cheeer" repeatedly). After the male finishes his impressive performance, he drops rapidly to the ground and quietly hides in the grass (probably exhausted!). The song is the only reliable way to find this bird in the vast prairie landscape. When on the ground, the Sprague's Pipit is a highly secretive bird that relies on its dull plumage to blend into its preferred natural grassland habitat.

If you are lucky enough to spot a pipit on land, you will notice a "necklace" of brown striping on the upper breast, a relatively thin bill, large brown eyes and white edges on its tail feathers.



## HABITAT

Sprague's Pipits depend on large blocks (>160 acres) of healthy native pasture in good or excellent range condition. They prefer native grasses of moderate height with little or no woody vegetation.

Although Sprague's Pipits will nest in planted grassland in some parts of their range, chick survival is lower in planted areas.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Sprague's Pipits have earned the nickname Goldilocks of the grassland birds because they require vegetation that is not too tall/dense or short/sparse, but "just right"!

## NESTING

Just like the bird, the Sprague's Pipit nest is often hard to find. They nest on the ground in a cup of woven grasses well-hidden by a dome or canopy of longer grass above.

## FAST FACTS: SPRAGUE'S PIPIT

Species name:	<i>Anthus spragueii</i>
Average weight:	22–26 g
Length:	10–15 cm
Food:	Beetles, grasshoppers (a favorite!), spiders, ants, moth larvae
Nest:	Cup nest on the ground
Number of eggs:	4–5





## COOL FACT

The Sprague's Pipit has the longest known flight display of any bird. Males will sing and display up to 100m (330 ft) in the air, and will remain in the air for up to three hours straight!

## WHEN ACTIVE

In Alberta, Sprague's Pipits are found from late April to mid-September. They migrate to the southern US and northern Mexico for the winter.

## REASON FOR CONCERN

Formerly more widespread and numerous, the Sprague's Pipit has declined dramatically in numbers, as suitable native prairie has disappeared due to overgrazing, conversion to farmland, and invasion of exotic species.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Consider incorporating the following land management options:

- Maintain light to moderate grazing
- Reduce or remove woody vegetation
- Delay harvesting until breeding season is complete (3rd week of July)
- Consider planting native grasses and control exotic vegetation species
- Avoid using pesticide on or adjacent to native prairie – pipits rely on grasshoppers as a main food source!
- Retain all native prairie
- Report all observations of Sprague's Pipits to Operation Grassland Community.

## HELPING SPRAGUE'S PIPITS HELPS YOU!

Fortunately, actions that benefit Sprague's Pipits are compatible with sustainable range management and may even benefit your own operation.





**OPERATION GRASSLAND COMMUNITY** is committed to promoting sustainable agricultural activities that benefit species at risk like the Sprague's Pipit and can cost-share with qualified participants to install wildlife-friendly fencing and/or alternative water development. For more information on Sprague's Pipits or to find out how you can help, please contact us at:

**Operation Grassland Community**

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