Dickcissel

Spiza americana

Mike Lentz Photo

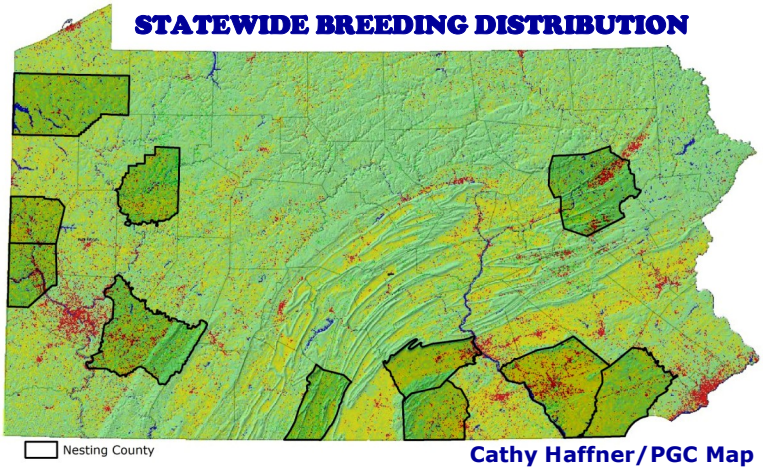
CURRENT STATUS: In Pennsylvania, the dickcissel is endangered and protected under the Game and Wildlife Code. Although not list as endangered or threatened at the federal level, the dicksissel is a Partners in Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan priority grassland species. All migratory birds are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.

POPULATION TREND: Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*) were considered locally common to abundant in nineteenth-century accounts of southeastern and southwestern Pennsylvania. Famous ornithologists such as Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon wrote about their local abundance in the Philadelphia area in the early 1800s. Now they are rare visitors in all seasons in Pennsylvania. In certain years, when weather and food availability are challenging in their core Midwestern breeding range, they appear in widely scattered locations in Pennsylvania, especially in recently-reclaimed strip mines. Other years, they are mysteriously absent. At times, they have been reported widely across western and southern Pennsylvania. Summer records have come from more than 23 counties since 1960. Most locations are occupied for only one year, however. The bird was considered extirpated as a nesting species until 1983, when a pair was found nesting in a Clarion County reclaimed strip mine. In the early 1990s, it was reported nesting regularly in Franklin and Adams counties. In 1999, the dickcissel was added to the state threatened species list, because a regular population was documented. In 2005, it was downgraded to *endangered* because of its rarity in the state as a breeding species. The 2nd Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas (2004-2008) confirmed only four breeding sites, half as many as the 1st Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas (1983-1989). It is difficult to detect population trends of a sporadic nesting species such as dickcissel.

Ivan Petrov Photo

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS: Dickcissels are six to seven inches tall, slightly smaller than northern cardinals; their wing span is nine to 11 inches. Dickcissels have a grayish-brown back with dark streaks, yellow breast (very light on females), white throat with a large black bib, and a wide yellowish line over the eye. Mature males are larger and more distinctively marked than females; they

resemble a little meadowlark. They are difficult to confuse with any other grassland bird species. Female or immature dickcissels, however, closely resemble house sparrows, but are larger and stockier and usually have a trace of yellow in their eyestripe and on their chest. The male dickcissel has a loud and distinctive song that gave this species its name: *see-see-dick-dick-siss-siss-siss.* They often perch at a high point to project their song, so they can be easily detected by observers.



Cathy Haffner/PGC Map

BIOLOGY-NATURAL HISTORY: This is a characteristic bird of old fields and prairie – an obligate grassland specialist. Dickcissels breed primarily in Canada from Saskatchewan south to Texas and east to Georgia and the Appalachian region. They winter from Mexico to South America, with Central Venezuela a core wintering area. Dickcissels also will overwinter in the eastern United States, locally in small numbers to New England. They are nocturnal (night) migrants and migrate and winter in flocks, which makes the species particularly vulnerable.

Dickcissels return to their Pennsylvania breeding grounds in late April to early May. Males arrive about a week before females that seek out the males with the best territory upon arrival. One male may breed with several females (polygynous). Although Dickcissels will nest in small grassland patches, studies suggest large grasslands support more nesting birds and enable those birds to fledge more young successfully. Nests are a bulky cup of grass concealed on the ground, or in trees and shrubs. Eggs are light blue and typically in clutches of four. Eggs hatch in 12 days; young leave the nest in about a week. Females alone construct the nest, incubate the eggs, and care for the young. Nests are often parasitized by brown-headed cowbirds.

PREFERRED HABITAT: During migration, dickcissels may be found in grassy fields, but most often at bird feeding stations. During the breeding season, they inhabit large grassy fields, such as hayfields or strip-mines recently reclaimed with grass. In winter, dickcissels are found at bird feeding stations near shrubs, thickets or hedgerows. They are fond of alfalfa fields.

REASONS FOR BEING ENDANGERED: Like other grassland nesters, the dickcissel has been impacted by development, intensified agricultural practices and other changes in land use. However, the bird's history of extremely erratic nesting behavior – invading areas one year and disappearing from them the next – complicates attempts to ascertain its status. Some locations, however, are occupied in consecutive years.

Ivan Petrov Photo

MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS: It is difficult to develop management programs for nomadic nesters. Nonetheless, efforts to identify and monitor annual nesting sites should be intensified. Fallow fields may be encouraged, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program or other grassland programs, around known or active nesting sites, such as fields in Adams and Cumberland counties, to ensure habitat for this species. Delaying mowing certainly helps this and other grassland birds of thick cover, such as the northern bobwhite and ring-necked pheasant. Fortunately, this species does not appear to be sensitive to habitat size and will nest in fairly small patches of appropriate grassland. Some locations where this species nests are designated as Pennsylvania Important Bird Areas. Managing reclaimed strip-mines for this and other grassland and old field

species would be a great boon to Pennsylvania bird conservation.

Sources:

McWilliams, G. M. and D. W. Brauning. 2000. The Birds of Pennsylvania. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Mulvihill, R. S. 1992. Dickcissel. Pp. 370-371 in Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania (D.W. Brauning, ed.). University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA.

Rich, T. D., C. J. Beardmore, H. Berlanga, P. J. Blancher, M. S. W. Bradstreet, G. S. Butcher, D. W. Demarest, E. H. Dunn, W. C. Hunter, E. E. Inogo-Elias, J. A. Kennedy, A.M. Martell, A. O. Panjabi, D.N. Pashley, K. V. Rosenberg, C. M. Rustay, J. S. Wendt, T. C. Will. 2004. Partners in Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY.

Temple, S. A. 2002. Dickcissel (Spiza americana). In The Birds of North America, No. 703 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

Suggested further reading:

Crossley, G. J. 1999. Important Bird Areas in Pennsylvania: A Guide to Identifying and Conserving Critical Bird Habitat. Pennsylvania Audubon Society, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Gross, A. O. 1968. Dickcissel. Pp. 158-191 in Life histories of North American cardinals, grosbeaks towhees, finches, sparrows and ther allies (O. L. Austin, ed.). U.S. National Museum Bulletin No. 237, Part 1.

Hughes, J. P., R. J. Robel, K. E. Kemp, and J. L. Zimmerman. 1999. Effects of habitat on Dickcissel abundance and nest success in Conservation Reserve Program fields in Kansas. Journal of Wildlife Management 63:523-529.

Johnson, Douglas H., Lawrence D. Igl, and Jill A. Dechant Shaffer (Series Coordinators). 2004. Effects of management practices on grassland birds: Dickcissel. Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Jamestown, ND. Jamestown, ND: Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center Online.

Larkin, R. P., W. R. Evans, and R. H. Diehl. 2002. Nocturnal flight calls of Dickcissels and Doppler radar echoes over south Texas in spring. Journal of Field Ornithology 73: 28.

Mulvihill, R. S. 1988. The occurrence of Dickcissels in western Pennsylvania – its possible bearing on the species unusual history in eastern North America. Pennsylvania Birds 2: 83-87.

Pashley, D. N., C. J. Beardmore, J. A. Fitzpatrick, R. P. Ford, W. C. Hunter, M. S. Morrison, and K. V. Rosenberg. 2000. Partners in Flight Conservation of the Land Birds of the United States. American Bird Conservancy, The Plans, VA.

Pennsylvania Audubon. 2005. Important Bird Area Conservation Plans. Pennsylvania Audubon Society, Harrisburg, PA.

Zimmerman, J. L. 1993. The Birds of Konza: the Avian Ecology of the Tallgrass Prairie. University of Kansas Press, Lawrence, KA.

By Cathy Haffner and Doug Gross
Pennsylvania Game Commission
Connecting you with wildlife!
11/1/09