

The Audubon Society

The National Audubon Society is among the oldest and largest private conservation organizations in the world. With over 525,000 members and more than 500 local chapters across the country, the Society works in behalf of our natural heritage through environmental education and conservation action. It protects wildlife in more than 70 sanctuaries from coast to coast. It also operates outdoor education centers and ecology workshops, and publishes the prize-winning *Audubon* magazine, *American Birds* magazine, newsletters, films, and other educational materials. For information regarding membership in the Society, write to the National Audubon Society, 950 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022.

Foreword by Les Line

Morning of the Meadowlarks

Editor of Audubon since 1966, Les Line has been the guiding spirit behind this much-acclaimed nature and conservation magazine.

The first western bird to be added to my life list, one memorable June morning a quarter of a century ago, was far east of the 100th meridian that theoretically divides North America and its natural inhabitants into equal halves. It was in far eastern Michigan, to be exact, in the company of Gene Kenaga, then president of the Michigan Audubon Society and my mentor when I became serious about the pleasures of bird watching.

"The coming of the meadowlark in early spring, while the fields are still brown, is a thrilling event," Alfred Gross wrote in an earlier era when it was not considered unseemly for ornithologists to express a sense of wonder. "His arrival is made known by his plaintive but not complaining or melancholy song as he stands mounted atop some tall tree in a grassy meadow, with his bright yellow breast surmounted by a black crescent gleaming in the morning sun."

There are, of course, two meadowlarks, Eastern and Western. And to the eye, even aided by the best binoculars or spotting scope, they may appear identical. An experienced birder can detect subtle differences in plumage, but the easiest way to tell one meadowlark from the other is by their songs, which are as dissimilar as symphonies by Mozart and Mahler. The Eastern Meadowlark sings two clear, descending whistles: "See you, see you." In contrast, the Western Meadowlark, state bird of Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, and Wyoming—quite a tribute to its popularity—is a feathered James Galway, its song an unpredictable, burbling flute solo that accelerates as it descends the scale.

Our destination was an airport in the rural flatlands of Bay County west of Midland. No LaGuardia or O'Hare, its runways were silent in dawn's early light—silent except for meadowlarks singing atop fence posts that separated grassy verge and pasture, where cows demanded to be milked. Eastern Meadowlarks on my left, Westerns on my right! Such antiphonal meadowlark choirs are not uncommon on the Heartland prairies where the ranges of the two species have long overlapped. But in recent decades the Western Meadowlark has expanded its claim to the Great Lakes and beyond. And this airport was its easternmost outpost in Michigan at the time. By song alone we had confirmed its return another spring, and I had checked off a new species without a trip west. But even more, it was a valuable lesson for an inexperienced watcher in how a drawing alone is often inadequate in identifying birds. Easily understood information—pictures and words—on voice, behavior, and habitat, in addition to a bird's size, shape, and color patterns, is essential in sorting out what to a beginner can be a confusing feathered horde.

That morning of the meadowlarks soon led to a birding trip farther west, to all the wondrous grassland and wetland birds with which the Western Meadowlark is associated. And that trek led in time to western mountain and canyon, to high plains and desert, to rain forest and chaparral. My life list is a good deal longer today, but the gathering would have been measurably easier with John Farrand's *Audubon Handbooks* in hand. There are still western birds to be encountered for the first time, however, and the search will continue with this new field guide companion.