



**NORTHERN
GREAT PLAINS**
JOINT VENTURE



Lark Bunting by Bob Martinka

NGPJV 5-YEAR ACTION PLAN

2022-2027

This document steps down the NGPJV 2022 Strategic Plan and provides more specific time-bound goals, objectives, and priority actions for communications, outreach, and education; conservation design and delivery; science, research, and monitoring; conservation policy; and human dimensions. Progress will be monitored throughout implementation with final evaluations taking place at the end of this 5-year period to inform future goals and objectives.

COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, AND EDUCATION

Situational Analysis

The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV) added part-time communications and outreach staff in 2021 to enhance effective communications across NGPJV networks, which includes partner staff, agricultural audiences, and elected officials. This investment in communications provides an opportunity for the NGPJV to reach new audiences and deliver priority messages more effectively. The [2019-2021 Communications Framework](#) currently guides communications goals, objectives, and action. It will continue to guide NGPJV communications for the short-term and will be revised and updated within the 2022-2027 time-period. Communications, outreach, and education is an area of anticipated growth for the NGPJV.

CONSERVATION DESIGN AND DELIVERY

The NGPJV Technical Committee has developed habitat and bird population objectives. While these are separate goals and objectives, they are inexorably linked and inform each other, and as such conservation actions to achieve habitat objectives should help achieve goals and objectives for birds. In this section, they are addressed separately. Conservation delivery and design for habitats will focus on slowing the loss of priority habitats, restoring habitat in key areas that expand and connect existing habitats, and maintaining and enhancing the quality of retained habitat. Conservation delivery and design for birds will focus on slowing or stabilizing populations of declining priority species and maintaining populations of stable species.

Situational Analysis—Habitats

Approximately 25% of the Northern Great Plains (NGP) has been converted to cropland, and grassland loss continues at a rate of 0.3%/year, averaging over 285,000 acres/year, in the NGPJV geography (World Wildlife Fund 2021). Some drivers of conversion include advances in technology that make conversion more attractive to landowners, policy incentives to convert grasslands to cropland (e.g., crop insurance), and social and economic pressure to convert to various other uses (e.g., urban sprawl, ranchettes). The amount of land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has also declined substantially in the NGP, and the region on average has seen a 57% decline in acres enrolled since a high in 2007. Between 2007 and 2019, Montana and North Dakota lost 70% and 62% of CRP acreage, respectively, totaling more than 4.2 million acres.

Annual invasive grasses and woody encroachment are degrading existing rangelands. Occasional wetland drainage, lack of management, and some irrigation practices are impacting the quality and quantity of wetlands. Streams and rivers are increasingly characterized by incised channels and invasive woody species, which lead to degraded riparian systems, erosion, and decreases in water quantity and quality. Collectively, some land use patterns lead to less resilient systems that threaten ecosystem functions and local cultures and communities.

Table 1. Habitat Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
<p>Slow the loss of intact grasslands in quality and quantity from the current rate of 0.3%/year to 0.2 – 0.25%/year, especially in priority areas for grassland birds¹</p>	<p>Deliver 0.25 – 1.75 million acres of grasslands retention, enhancement, restoration, and protection in priority areas (acre objectives are estimated from NGPJV Grassland Bird Conservation Objectives and adjusted for acres already conserved 2016-2021).</p>	<p>Acres, location, and conservation activity implemented by NGPJV and partners --- WWF’s Plowprint annual report to assess loss of rangeland and changes in land use --- NRCS’s Rangeland Analysis Platform (RAP) to assess rangeland condition</p>
<p>Maintain no net loss of quality or quantity of wetlands and riparian areas</p>	<p>Identify wetland and riparian priority areas and acre objectives needed to achieve waterfowl and riparian bird population goals --- Continue to retain, enhance, restore, and protect wetlands and riparian areas opportunistically until objectives are established</p>	<p>Acres of wetland and riparian area conservation implemented by NGPJV and partners --- IWJV’s Wetland Evaluation Tool (WET) to assess wetland persistence and resilience</p>

Specific Actions to Achieve Habitat Goals and Objectives:

- Provide technical and financial assistance for beneficial range management practices through the Northern Grasslands Restoration Incentive Program (N-GRIP). Leverage N-GRIP to help deliver other conservation programs, such as Partners for Fish and Wildlife and NDGF’s Meadowlark Initiative. N-GRIP cost-share incentives include, but are not limited to:
 - Assistance for working lands (e.g., native grass seedings, fencing and infrastructure, etc.)
 - Management of annual invasive grasses (e.g., cheatgrass, ventenata) and conifer encroachment (e.g., Rocky Mountain juniper, Eastern red cedar) on rangelands
 - Implementation of low-tech, process-based mesic and riparian restoration to enhance water retention and quality and vegetative response
 - “Stacking” conservation to connect local projects to larger landscapes (e.g., implementing upland projects in conjunction with wetland projects to impact an entire watershed)

¹ NGPJV recognizes there is a need to understand the collective impact of conservation activities on the landscape while accounting for ongoing loss and will work with partners to quantify how meeting the 0.25 – 1.75 million acre grassland objectives affects the 5-year goal of slowing grassland loss.

- Provide technical assistance to local partners and land managers for:
 - Delivering NRCS programs, including RCPP, and writing Targeted Implementation Plans (TIP; Montana) and Conservation Implementation Strategies (CIS; South Dakota)
 - Regenerative agricultural practices on croplands and removing barriers to enroll in programs that increase grass cover (e.g., General CRP)
 - Planting of cover crops to reduce runoff and control saline seeps in adjacent wetlands
 - Using flood irrigation practices and infrastructure where those practices benefit wildlife and are not detrimental to other ecological processes (e.g., fish passage)
 - Supporting water and irrigation infrastructure updates to improve water efficiency
 - Targeting voluntary conservation of intact grasslands and wetlands in areas most at risk of conversion or development and reducing conversion of agricultural lands to subdivision
- Employ a Science Integration Specialist to help local decision makers use grasslands and wetland science to inform management and conserve these important habitats, and inform co-produced new science
- Continue to apply for grants to support N-GRIP in cooperation with partners
- Leverage ecosystem services payments and carbon markets to support working lands
- Recommend best practices for habitat projects such as:
 - Limit pesticide applications to the least toxic alternative and applied at the lowest concentrations and rates required to address pest concerns to minimize impacts on pollinators and birds
 - Encourage invasive species management in riparian areas (e.g., Russian olive and salt cedar treatments)
 - Discourage bank stabilization practices (e.g., rip-rap); encourage Channel Migration Easements
 - Encourage fencing after riparian restoration activities to exclude browsing/grazing pressure
 - Encourage planting of more water efficient crops (e.g., winter wheat, barley, canola vs. corn, alfalfa, etc.) and sustainable water use practices to support crops
- Help partners secure existing intact grasslands and wetlands through long-term leases and perpetual easements with willing landowners.

Situational Analysis—Bird Populations

Grassland birds have experienced significant population losses since 1970 - approximately a 53% decline in grassland birds as a group and up to 84% loss of chestnut-collared longspur populations in the NGP (Rosenberg et al. 2019). Habitat loss is considered one of the most significant factors influencing grassland bird populations (Greer et al. 2016). Waterfowl in the region are generally maintaining stable to increasing populations, except for Northern Pintails, which are showing a ~40% decline in populations (USFWS data). Riparian-associated species are experiencing localized decreases in abundance and persistence, primarily in areas experiencing riparian degradation.

The NGPJV Technical Committee has identified 26 [NGPJV Priority Species](#). Their current population estimates, trends, and conservation statuses have been summarized and will be used to guide science needs. In addition, the Technical Committee has completed a [Grassland Bird Conservation Objectives](#) document to quantify population and habitat targets for slowing or stabilizing declining trends.

Table 2. Bird Population Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Slow or stabilize declining trends in grassland bird populations by 2026	<p>Achieve grassland bird population objectives for 5 priority grassland bird species:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trend objective for Sprague’s pipit, thick-billed longspur, and Baird’s sparrow = stabilize • Trend objective for chestnut-collared longspur = slow decline by 60% • Trend objective for lark bunting = slow decline by 45% <p>(see NGPJV Grassland Bird Conservation Objectives for more details).</p>	BBS and IMBCR population trend estimates in the region compared with earlier trends
Maintain or improve recent waterfowl population increases	Maintain 80% of the long-term average for waterfowl populations, per NAWMP, in the NGP region.	USFWS waterfowl breeding population survey (B-POP) trend estimates
Prevent, slow, or reverse declining trends in riparian bird populations	Establish population objectives for priority riparian bird species	Metrics will be developed once objectives are established

Specific Actions to Achieve Bird Population Goals and Objectives:

- Implement habitat conservation projects, as described in the habitat section above
- Identify priority grassland and wetland areas and what type of conservation efforts should be targeted to achieve bird population objectives
- Develop baselines to determine if we are maintaining or expanding current distributions, enhancing abundance, or influencing nest success and survival
- Continue to develop science on priority species and use outputs to inform and modify our conservation approach for achieving population goals and objectives

Situational Analysis—Partnerships

The NGPJV Management Board is made up of 17 partner entities, including agencies, organizations, industry, and landowners, that represent a diversity of priorities and interests across the region. The larger NGPJV partnership engages hundreds of individuals and organizations regionally, nationally, and internationally. The NGPJV maintains a Technical Committee, Conservation Delivery Network, and state-based Local Leadership Teams to serve, inform, and catalyze our partnerships. Tribal/Indigenous partners are notably absent from the NGPJV Management Board and many NGPJV-associated coalitions. Better serving Indigenous partners is an area for development over the next 5 years.

Table 3. Partnership Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Catalyze, energize, and convene partnerships to amplify the scale and scope of on-the-ground conservation	Be value-added to ongoing conservation partnerships and activities --- Activate the full spectrum of people and resources in the region --- Identify and fill information and capacity gaps in communications, conservation design & delivery, science & research, monitoring, policy, and human dimensions	Subjective assessment based on partner feedback --- Accounting of new and reinvigorated partnerships and engagement across the region --- See relevant sections in this document for metrics in each of these categories
Engage and support diverse voices and perspectives to incorporate all peoples who live, work, and recreate in the NGP	Develop relationships with and incorporate perspectives of Tribal members, landowner collaboratives, industry, and other partners new to the NGPJV	Accounting of new, more diverse partnerships in the NGP

Specific Actions to Achieve Partnership Goals and Objectives:

- Convene a Strategic Think Tank populated by NGPJV Management Board members (or designees) and staff to leverage existing expertise to inform conservation innovation.
- Host conservation delivery workshops to better collaborate delivery programs, partners, and opportunities

- Continue to collaborate with partners to address training needs
- Incorporate Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge in conservation planning and land use decisions
- Attend webinars and trainings on emerging ranching practices (e.g., virtual fence), CRP, wetland and riparian practices, ecosystem services, Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and rancher and Native American perspectives on range management and conservation
- Provide leadership and support to state-based Local Leadership Teams to enhance collaborative conservation actions
- Maintain and support the NGPJV Conservation Delivery Network through information exchange, trainings, and annual meetings
- Identify new industry partners and work to establish relationships
- Establish relationships with applicable agricultural organizations (e.g., stockgrowers) and increase the understanding and value of the Joint Venture to their organizations
- Participate in Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion trainings and webinars and incorporate lessons learned into JV operations and communications

SCIENCE, RESEARCH, AND MONITORING

Situational Analysis—Science and Research

Science helps ensure that the right conservation tools are used in the most effective way and at the right time and place to positively affect resilient grasslands and priority grassland birds. It also informs new and innovative approaches to conservation planning, tools, and decisions. The NGPJV hosts a Technical Committee comprised of technical experts from within the partnership to advise on science and research needs in the region. In 2021, the NGPJV awarded small grants to cooperators to develop new science products that address needs identified by the NGPJV Technical Committee. Additional grant opportunities will be made available in subsequent years, as funding allows. The NGPJV also added new science and delivery capacity in 2022 with the hiring of a full-time Science Integration Specialist in South Dakota. This position will work across science, conservation delivery, and communications elements to ensure local practitioners have the most relevant and useful science when making conservation decisions.

Table 4. Science and Research Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Develop and grow our understanding of ecological processes, biology, and change agents in the region and how they work in concert with land management decisions to achieve conservation goals	Quantify the effectiveness of on-the-ground habitat conservation	Assessments of changes in bird abundance and demographics, vegetation condition, and/or wetland persistence and condition that result from conservation actions or inform future actions
	Develop science products in cooperation with land managers to ensure products are useful and interpretable to land managers	Assessment of efforts to co-produce science to inform management and conservation of resilient grasslands
	Improve information for targeting actions to the places most beneficial for birds and habitats	Spatial and predictive models to prioritize conservation actions and assess change
	Advance ecological research on birds to inform conservation decisions	Baseline ecological studies filling information needs

Specific Actions to Achieve Science and Research Goals and Objectives:

- Host conservation effectiveness workshops to collaborate on how to quantify bird and habitat outcomes to include consistent methods, data sharing, use of emerging technologies, and expanded partnerships (e.g., universities, landowners, etc.)
- Conduct effectiveness monitoring studies to assess assumptions of the influence of conservation actions on priority species
- Support additional research to improve spatial targeting and knowledge of species ecology (e.g., limiting factors, demographic data etc.) that can be used to further refine targeting and conservation decisions
- Support social science and human dimensions research to inform conservation delivery
- Develop a better understanding of predicted impacts of climate change on resilient grasslands in the NGP region and use that to help focus conservation actions

Situational Analysis—Monitoring

Measuring and tracking trends and patterns in each of the NGPJV’s Strategic Plan priorities is fundamental to understanding the impacts of conservation work and communicating those impacts to a variety of audiences. There are different types and amounts of monitoring projects within the region—from soils to vegetation surveys to photo plots to bird point counts and acoustic recorders—that occur at different scales, from local to regional to national and international. The NGPJV and many other partners are currently helping to support bird monitoring efforts in the NGP. Partners have identified a need for more coordination on project level monitoring, which is a service the NGPJV will work to provide over the next few years.

Table 5. Monitoring Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Quantify conservation, biological, and social trends to document successes and highlight urgent needs	Maintain a robust accounting of information needed to measure habitat, bird population, policy, human dimensions, and communications goals	Database that houses metrics identified in this document or tracks where that information can be obtained --- Graphics and summaries of monitoring metrics from across partners and disciplines for use by partners

Specific Actions to Achieve Monitoring Goals and Objectives:

- Establish baselines against which to measure success towards habitat and bird population goals and objectives
- Track progress toward habitat objectives that are needed to meet bird population objectives
- Support ongoing bird monitoring across Bird Conservation Region 17 to provide baseline data on density, occupancy, and trends
- Develop and host a spatial database for N-GRIP projects and other projects as desired by NGPJV partners
- Track changes in human demographics, land succession, and economics to better identify factors influencing conservation decisions
- Engage local communities through Citizen Science

CONSERVATION POLICY

Situational Analysis

Federal and state policies have a powerful effect on habitat conservation, setting sideboards on grant programs, direct payments to landowners, rental rate programs, and cost-share assistance. Antiquated water rights laws vary across states and impact conservation options. Federal and state environmental and cultural protection laws can affect conservation implementation. Policies also inform species and population management, including implementation of the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Endangered Species Act, and state-based hunting regulations. Conservation policy is dynamic and requires a dedicated effort to track and help inform good policy.

Table 6. Conservation Policy Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Influence state, national, and international policy that affects conservation decisions at local scales	Realize improved conservation opportunities in the 2023 Farm Bill, NAWCA, America the Beautiful Challenge, and other legislation such as Recovering America’s Wildlife Act, North American Grasslands Conservation Act, etc. --- Direct involvement in helping to shape new legislation, provisions, and funding for conservation related legislation	Subjective assessment of JV efforts to engage on state, national, and international policy
Generate and support greater institutional commitments to grasslands conservation	Agencies, industry, and organizations raise the profile of grasslands conservation by dedicating staff, resources, and funding	Amount and types of resources dedicated to grasslands conservation
Help agency staff understand and implement new conservation policies, especially if they help meet conservation goals and objectives	Ongoing communication with agency staff on conservation policies and opportunities to ensure agencies are more informed and can take advantage of emerging and changing conservation policy	Subjective assessment based on conversations with partners about conservation policies

Specific Actions to Achieve Conservation Policy Goals and Objectives:

- Provide technical information and science to policy makers to help inform policy direction and decisions relevant to NGPJV partners
- Participate in Hill Visits, meetings with Congressional staff, Association of Joint Venture Management Boards, and other venues to advocate for conservation in the NGP
- Engage and influence Farm Bill policy through state-based NRCS/FSA State Technical Advisory Committees, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agricultural Conservation and Bird Conservation Committees, and non-profit partners
- Enhance communications with policy decision makers using tools identified by the NGPJV Communications Committee
- Engage on policies related to payments for ecosystem services and carbon markets to help inform programs that will work for landowners

HUMAN DIMENSIONS

Situational Analysis

Agriculture, including cattle and crop production, is the dominant land use throughout much of the NGP. There is also some nonrenewable energy development in the form of oil and gas extraction and coal and bentonite mining as well as increasing interest in renewable energy, such as wind and solar. Most of the land in the region is under private ownership.

The NGP is dominated by a rural social demographic with an average of less than 2 people per square mile. The average age of residents is older than the national average, except on tribal reservations where it is younger than the national average. There are 15 sovereign Native Nations within the NGP region.

Table 7. Human Dimensions Goals and Objectives

5-Year Goals	Objectives	Metrics
Increase understanding of people’s knowledge, values, and behaviors that influence conservation decisions	Seek to understand producer, local community, and Native American perspectives on rangeland and wetland/riparian conservation	Subjective assessment of enhanced understanding
	Seek to understand and address barriers to participation in conservation programs	Social science surveys and reports
Empower new community-based collaboratives to form around conservation priorities	Identify priority resource areas where community-based collaboratives might form and what is needed to support them	Community readiness assessment

Specific Actions to Achieve Human Dimensions Goals and Objectives:

- Participate in tribal workshops and coalitions (e.g., Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance)
- Identify and foster partnerships with university faculty and students working on social science
- Survey conservation practitioners (e.g., private lands biologists) to assess perceptions on what influences the conservation decisions of landowners and practitioners
- Survey landowners to develop a better understanding of what currently motivates them to participate in conservation and what would motivate them to participate in future conservation programs
- Gain a better understanding of how best to effectively communicate with landowners about grassland conservation and programs.
- Use the existing NGPJV Technical Bulletin series as a forum for reporting on surveys and other human dimensions work, as appropriate
- Implement a community readiness assessment in areas of high priority for conservation to determine if locally led conservation actions would likely be sustainable in those communities and what resources are necessary to ensure success
- Facilitate interviews of tribal members/councils to identify tribal specific conservation needs, barriers, and opportunities for JV engagement
- Leverage N-GRIP to facilitate discussions about barriers and opportunities for conservation and to support community-based collaboratives focusing on working lands



Baird's Sparrow by Bob Martinka