



## *Isn't it a sin to kill a Meadowlark, too!!*

...to paraphrase author Harper Lee in her 1960 novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, through the wise words of her protagonist, Atticus Finch, one of literature's great, ideal father figures:

*"Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a..."* **Meadowlark!** OK, so the novel's title refers to a crime against mockingbirds, but the sentiment holds true for our lovely late-winter visitors, the meadowlarks, surely. Their varied songs are magical and they do us no harm, but only bring us delight. When my father realized that I shared his love of their songs, he taught me to whistle to them-- and get an answer! And once, in my moody teen years, when I was feeling especially blue and unable to shake it, insisting that I just could not think of one dang thing to be happy about (no doubt there was some boy in the story...) he sat in thought for several minutes and then said, "Think of the Meadowlark's song!" We whistled their song together and the healing began...What blues? What broken heart? HA!

So, I got ahold of my bird man of Hungry Hollow, Jim Hiatt, and asked him what he could tell me about this beloved bird..

Text by Jim Hiatt, bird-man of Hungry Hollow:

*Few folks in the Hungry Hollow or Capay Valley area do not at least have a cursory or subconscious familiarity with our beloved Western Meadowlark, *Sturnella neglecta*. They are about as eternally an avian fixture here as we have, and are as ubiquitous and normal a member of our country fauna as jackrabbits and buzzards.*

*In Birds of North America, it is found on page 638. On the other side of the U.S. they are blessed with the Eastern Meadowlark, which are very similar in appearance and song as the Western, but these are distinct species. These lovely things are a bird of the open field, and will perch in deciduous trees during the winter before the leaves reappear, even those around buildings and driveways, and although they don't normally show up in your back yard, their lifestyle and needs are exactly met from farming and ground cultivation, as that's what gives rise to the bugs they eat and the seeds as well. Freshly-mown alfalfa hay gives them a fresh, even though temporary, plate of food with the insects this exposes. Meadowlarks are a walking bird, just like others that frequent these open fields. They, like Brewer's Blackbirds and many others common to us here, are not likely to show up on anyone's "endangered species" listing any time soon, happily.*



*Western Meadowlark*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_Meadowlark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Meadowlark) - mw-head[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_Meadowlark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Meadowlark) - p-search

Not to be confused with the Eastern Meadowlark, a different species, our darling fellow sits out in the middle of fields atop stalks of grain, difficult to photograph well, so I downloaded a nice picture from good ol' Wikipedia, seen above.

When a fence post is not available, they are happy to perch on grain and shrubs to sing--near their food and nesting sites. Common this time of year in western North America, they will partially migrate toward Mexico in the dead of winter. Feeding mostly on insects like beetles and grasshoppers, they are a friend to the farmer--who gets to enjoy their songs of complex bubblings and whistlings in descending pitch, a nice accompaniment to their hard labors! So lovely to hear!

They build nests of domed grass cups, hidden in tall grass, and raise their annual brood between March and August. All the singing they do this time of year is the prelude!

*Betsy Monroe*



Jim Hiatt continues: *Although not normally a bird of upper altitudes, they are found in the hilly areas hereabouts, and I've even seen them as high up as in the cottonwoods on the west side of Fiske Creek Lake, and even in the limited grasslands of the Homestake Lake area. They are pretty strictly a bird of the open country, though they can be found in field areas just outside towns. Not a big city bird. Smart little things.*

*They are gregarious in nature and do pretty much keep to flocks most of the time. They are most notably known for their songs, which are unique among our birds and almost beyond lovely. Consummately musical. Some of my own earliest childhood memories are of enjoying the several specific sequences of notes that these lovelies are known for. The songs are normally a series of very distinct groupings of specific note sequences. I know them all, as do many of us who pay appreciative attention to these. The specific sequences are not usually mixed with others, but are repeated again and again from the same perch for a time before they flit off. The sequences are usually 2-3 seconds long, but a very packed 2-3 seconds, like phrases. You have to hear to appreciate, and if you spend any considerable period in the country, you will gradually get to know them all--usually sung out from a perch on a fence post or even power line or tree top, with their beaks open as wide as wide can be. As well as I know them, I'm sure that they're either territorial, mating calls, or a form of saying, in effect, "I am here; you are there; we are all here!" They are all important to each other. That saying was borrowed from my old Ornithology Professor Nicholas Udvardy, one of the best birders in the world in the 1970s, under whom I was privileged to have studied. That was his homespun explanation of the mutual reassurance that these were all together an extended family. Meadowlarks also have an almost equally melodious single "CHIRP!" They can even make a single note musically worth hearing. They also have periods of time, seasonally, like the winter in which they are silent. If only they could tell those of us with a genuine interest what each sequence means, and why they are just as silent at other times...I would love to know!*

*These lovelies are easily spotted by the brilliant golden yellow breast and face, and a crescent-shaped "bib" on the upper breast. Above they are brown and white in striping and spotting. The male and female are essentially identical in plumage. These are a relatively chunky bird with more short and rounded wings, thus accounting for the rapid wingbeat accompanied with lots of gliding as well. They live an average of 10 years, and have a nesting practice pretty much unique among our valley birds--their nest is literally an "igloo" of grasses mostly; an upside down dome, with an opening on the outside, with one brood a year with 3-7 eggs. In my bird egg collection as a youngster, I had one of their spotted eggs which came out of the first nest I'd seen once while rabbit hunting. The nest looked different from anything around it, and upon checking and keeping one of the eggs, thereafter a visit to my Audubon's Land Bird Guide taught me what I'd just found.*

*And while I know Betsy will not like this story, one of my childhood memories is of my Grandfather telling me of times when much food was shot for the family table, that he would go out after school with his shotgun and shoot 3 or 4 of these for his school lunch the next day. Those were the times in which the guys shot Canadian Geese along the Arbuckle Hills by the buckboard load in season for the family table, when families of 6-8 kids were the average. Sorry, Betsy! But these beauties are, indeed, a joy to get to know--and are safe from my dining table!*