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TRAVIS AUDUBON SOCIETY

BE A BETTER BIRDER (B3)

2025

MEADOWLARKS

WESTERN MEADOWLARK

EASTERN MEADOWLARK

HABIT o WHO?

TAXONOMY (THE TREE OF LIFE)

- ▶ **Domain:** 3 (archaea, bacteria, and **eukarya**)
- ▶ **Kingdom:** Animalia (animals)
 - ▶ **Phylum:** Chordata (vertebrates)
 - ▶ **Class:** Aves (birds)

▶ **Order:** Passeriformes

▶ **Family:** *Icteridae*

▶ **Genus:** *Sturnella*

▶ **Species:** *magna, neglecta*

▶ **Subspecies:**

Western – 2,

Eastern – 16 “recognized” (10 in Nat Geo),

"Why for instance is this thus, and what is the reason for this thusness?"

(The movie *Lincoln*, 2012)

Magna = great

Audubon felt that the **Western** was “neglected”.

Do Kings Play Chess On Fine Green Silk?

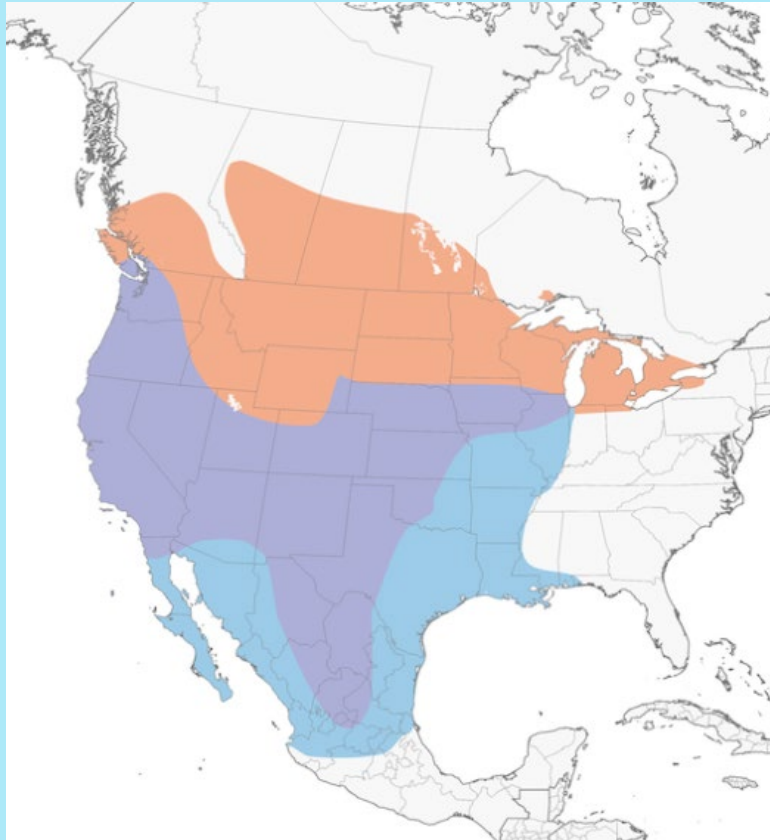
HABIT o WHO?

- ▶ Audubon's report (1844) – triggered **100-year** debate over status of Meadowlarks
- ▶ Interspecific territoriality – Among first cases in NA.
 - ▶ Defend territory from another species.
- ▶ Interbreeding?
 - ▶ Little evidence of interbreeding in the wild
 - ▶ Morphology, ecology, behavior
 - ▶ Captive birds – high incidence of hybrid sterility.
- ▶ Designated as a “pest” in early 1900s (crops)

HABIT o WHO?

- ▶ Breeding plumage acquired by wear
 - ▶ Brownish feather tips veil blacks, yellows, whites.
- ▶ **Eastern Meadowlark**
 - ▶ *Sturnella magna*
 - ▶ One of NA most wide spread songbirds
- ▶ **Western Meadowlark**
 - ▶ *Sturnella neglecta*
 - ▶ State bird of 6 states
 - ▶ Known to Lewis & Clark

HABIT 1,2 WHERE/WHEN? RANGE



Western

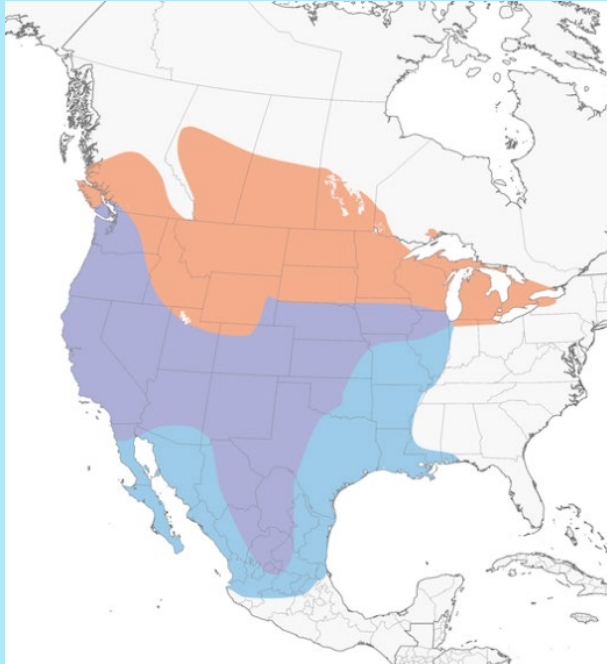


What do you
make of this?

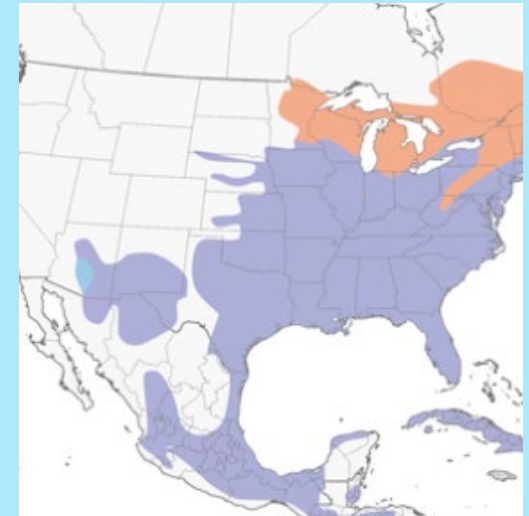
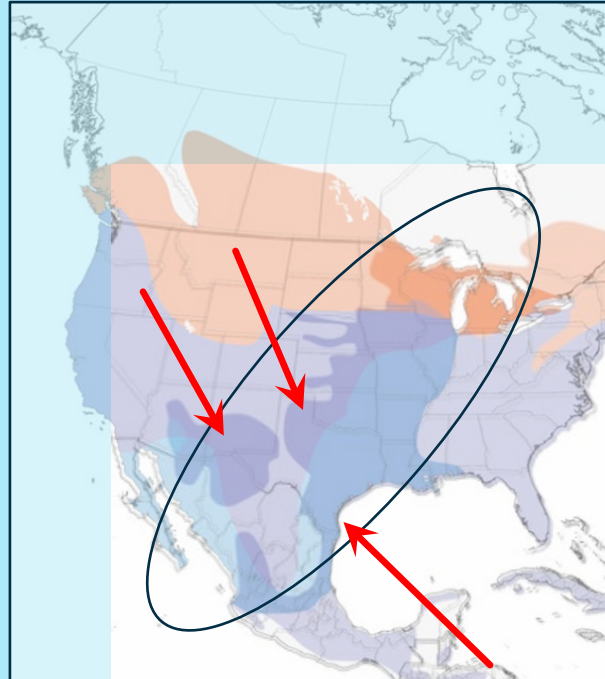
Eastern

HABIT 1,2 WHERE/WHEN? RANGE

Sympatric – overlapping
in distribution



Western



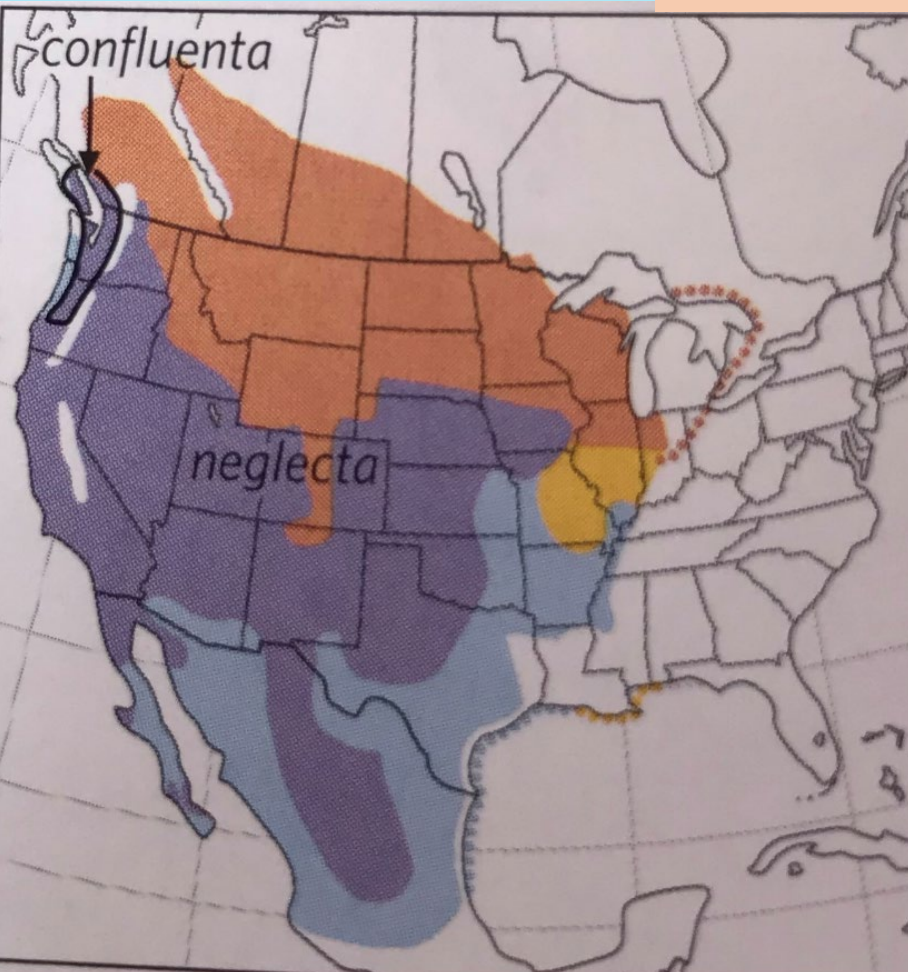
Eastern

SUBSPECIES

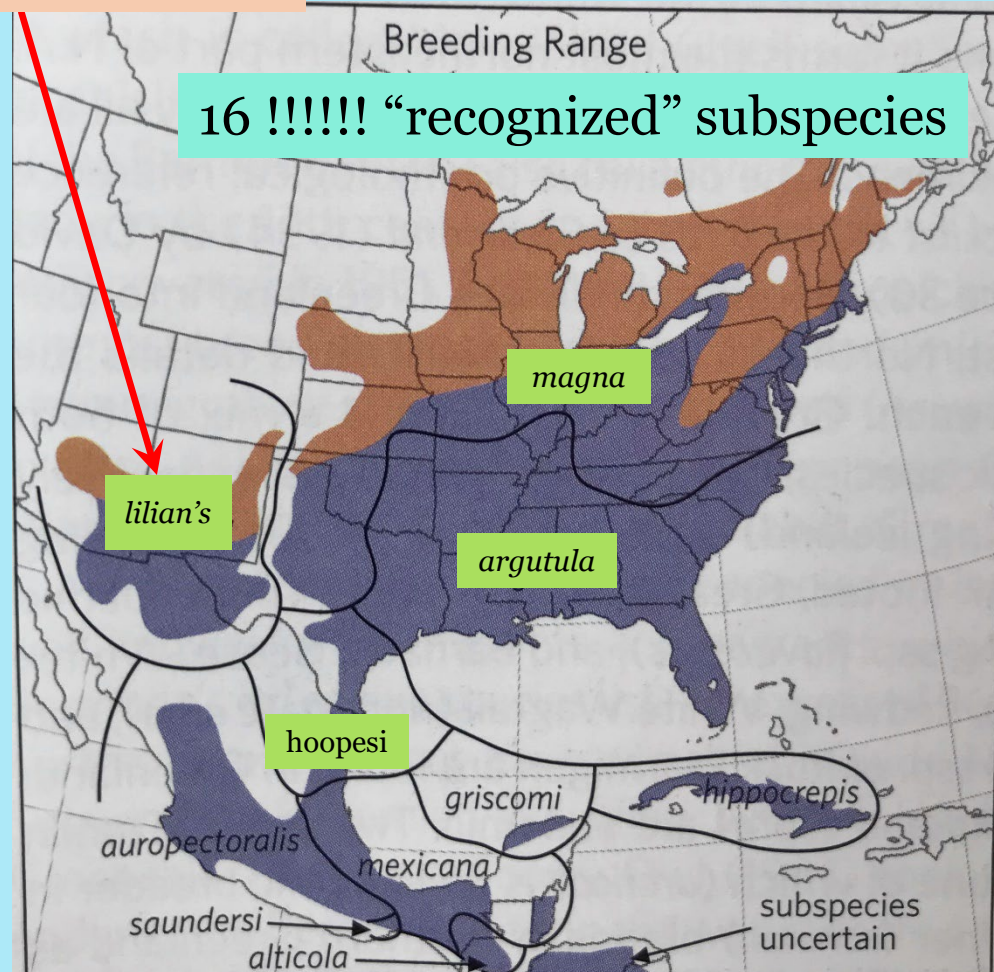
**Chihuahuan
(Lilian's Meadowlark)**
Sturnella liliana,
May be full species

“species is over split”
(Jaramillo and Burke 1999)

Graphics by National Geographic Field Guide
to the Birds of North America, 8th Edition



Western



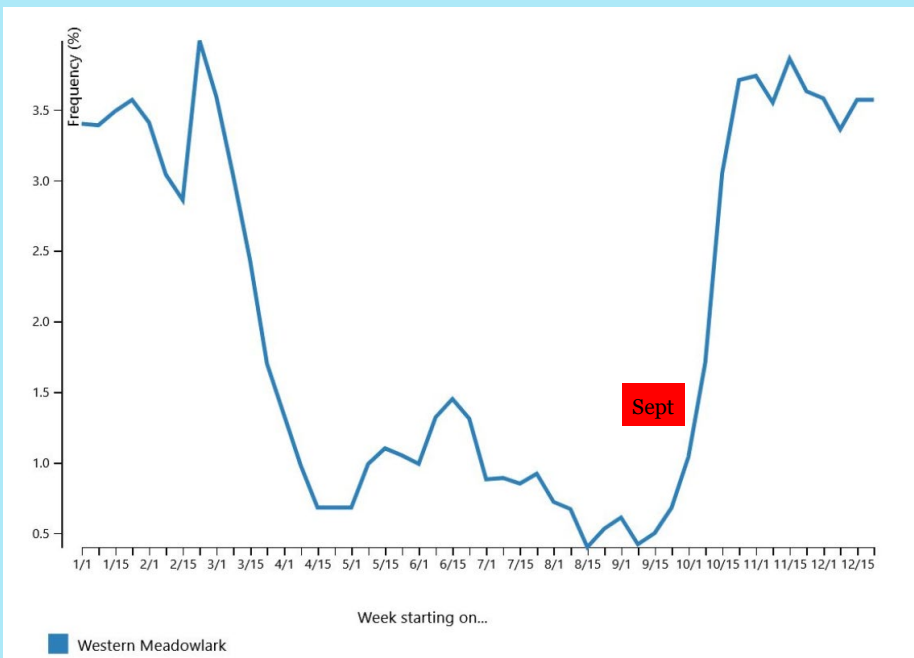
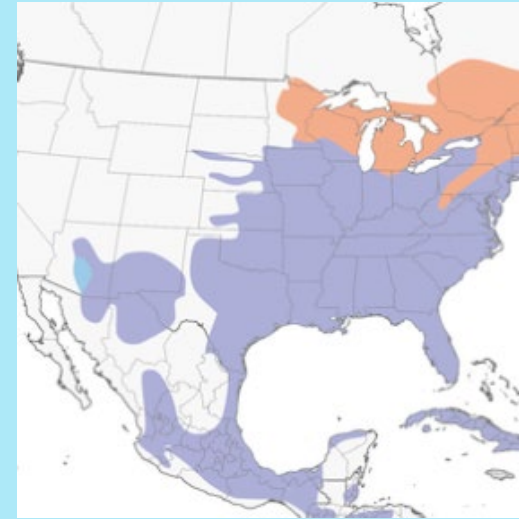
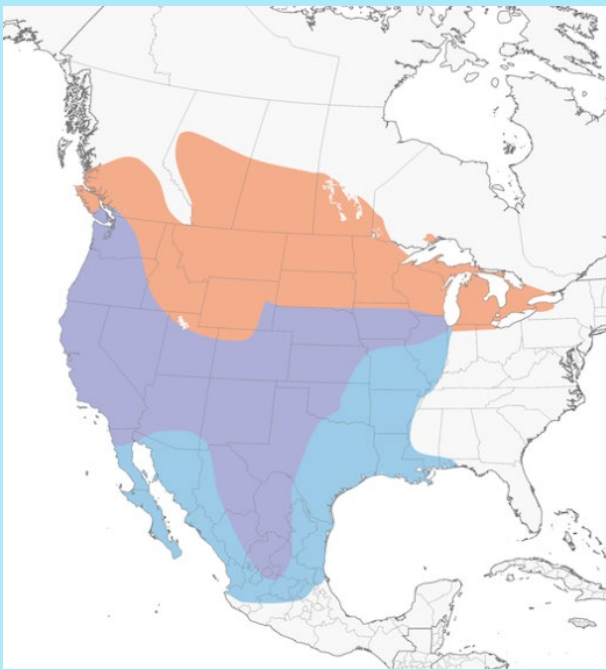
Eastern

CHIHUAHUAN

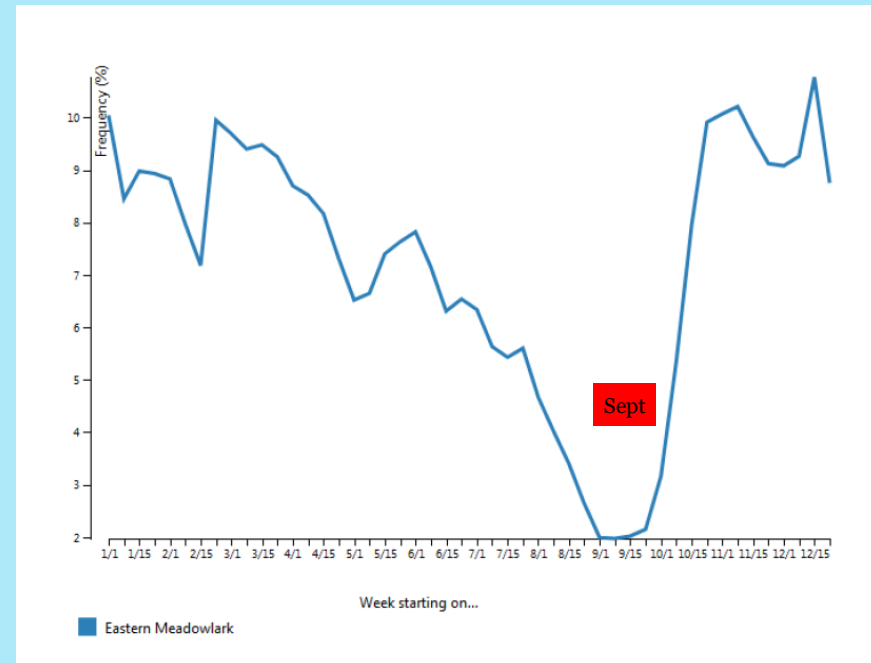
- ▶ 4 white outer rectrices
- ▶ Pale off-white sides where the streaking rarely touches the saffron yellow of the breast
- ▶ Pale, almost sun-bleached look to the mantle.
- ▶ Auriculars clean with little-to-no streaking, adding to the overall pale appearance of the bird.
- ▶ More polka dots than streaking - dark brown, short, thin, interrupted lines or dots mark the sides of the breast
- ▶ Thicker, bolder lines on Eastern

HABIT 2 WHEN? FREQUENCY IN TEXAS

What happens in
September in Texas?



Western



Eastern





HABIT 3 WHERE?

HABITAT & MICRO-HABITAT

Breeding

- Tend to settle in agricultural lowlands

Western

Winter

- More common in mesic (moderate water) farmlands and xeric creosote deserts.
- Prefers sparser, drier, more disturbed areas

Breeding

- Grasslands
- Prairie
- Pine savanna
- Orchards
- Roadsides
- Airports
- Overgrown fields
- Drier portions of tidal wetlands.

Eastern

Winter

- Selects the wetter, denser habitat

Breeding

Lillian's

- High, western grasslands

HABIT 3 WHERE? HABITAT & MICRO-HABITAT



HABIT 4 GISS & STRUCTURE

HABIT 4 GISS & STRUCTURE



- Slow, preoccupied waddling gait.
- Usually flies when approached.
- Sings from elevated perch.
- Very territorial in summer.
- Gregarious in non-breeding.
- Forage in the same direction.

HABIT 4 GISS & STRUCTURE

FLIGHT GISS



Photo by Kitty O'Neal



Photo by Alex Laumoreaux



Photo by Bill Niemczyk

- Stocky
- Pot-bellied
- Triangular wings
- Short-tail
- Distinctive stiff-winged flight style, with glides interspersed

HABIT 5: HEAD & BILL



- Long, flat head.
- Viciously sharp bill.

Photo by Ted Floyd

ID OVERVIEW

- ▶ ID as “**meadowlark sp**” is easy
 - ▶ Yellow breast
 - ▶ Black “V”
 - ▶ GISS
 - ▶ Flight GISS
- ▶ Diagnostic songs & Calls
 - ▶ Rarely learn each other’s songs & calls
 - ▶ Rarely give intermediate songs
- ▶ **Plumage ID is quite subtle**
- ▶ Breeding vs non-breeding plumage

ID OVERVIEW

▶ **Diagnostic**

- ▶ Songs & calls

▶ **Strongly supporting**

- ▶ Malar (breeding plumage)
- ▶ Auriculars, eye-stripe
- ▶ Flanks
- ▶ Extent of white in tail
- ▶ Extent of black on back & flight feathers

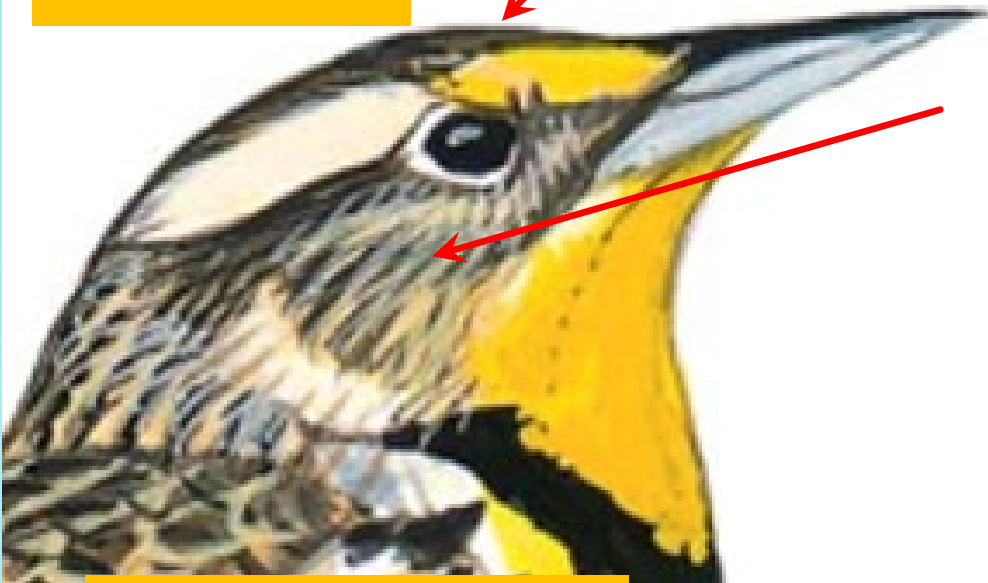
▶ **Supporting**

- ▶ Brightness
- ▶ Contrast
- ▶ Hue

HABIT 5: HEAD & BILL

Eye & head stripes
more diffuse brown

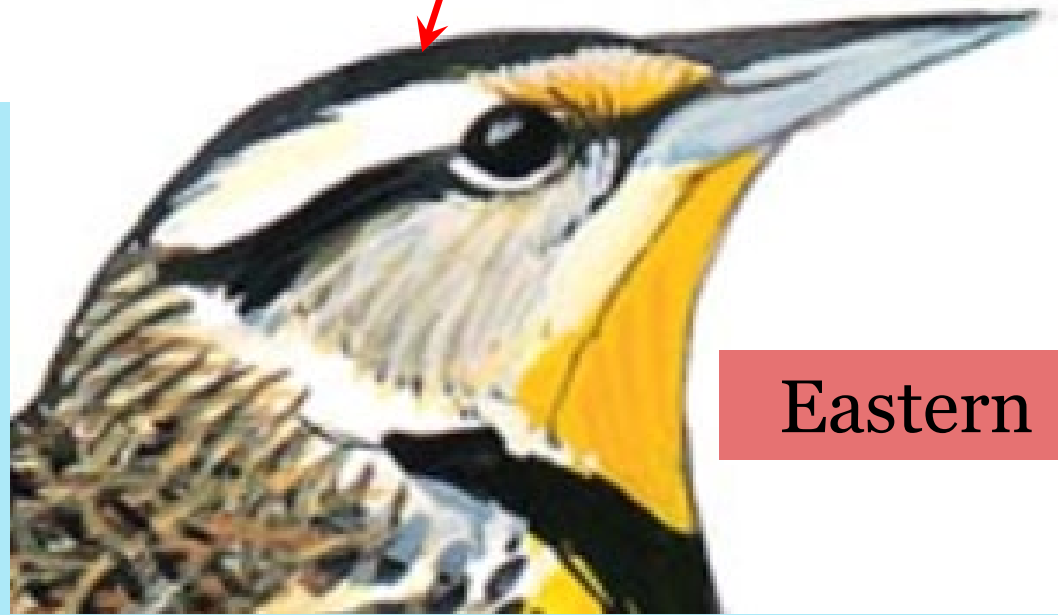
Western



Darker cheek (auriculars)

Graphics by David A. Sibley

Eye & head stripes
black



Eastern

MALAR REGION

Auriculars

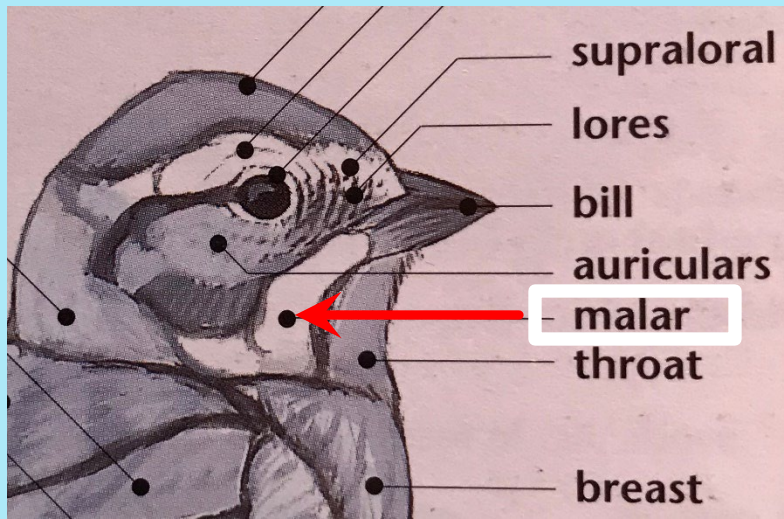


Photo by Brenton Reyner

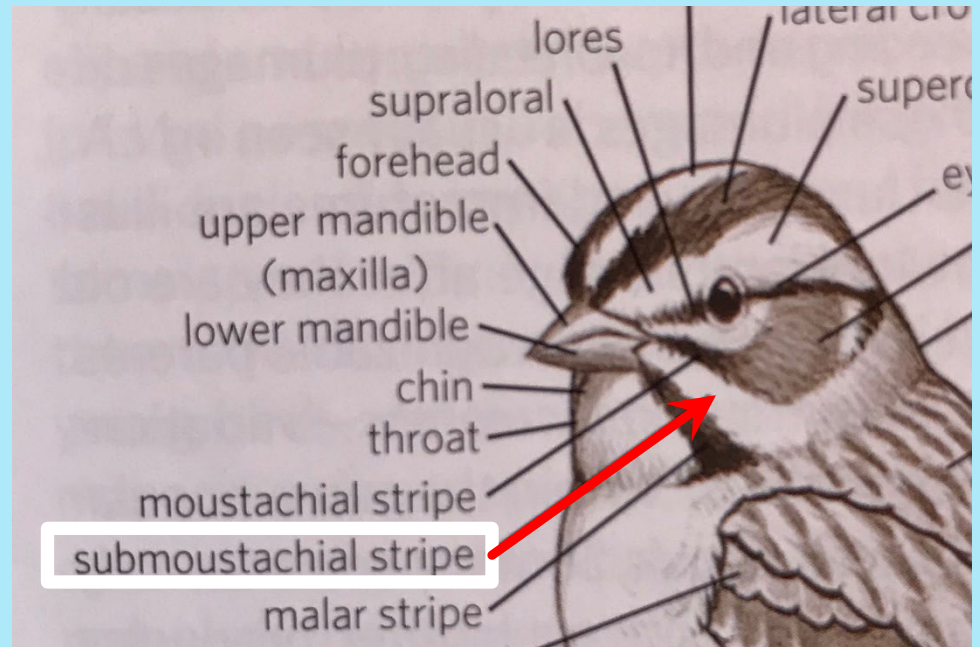
Malar

Chin & throat

“MALAR” OR “SUBMOUSTACHIAL”



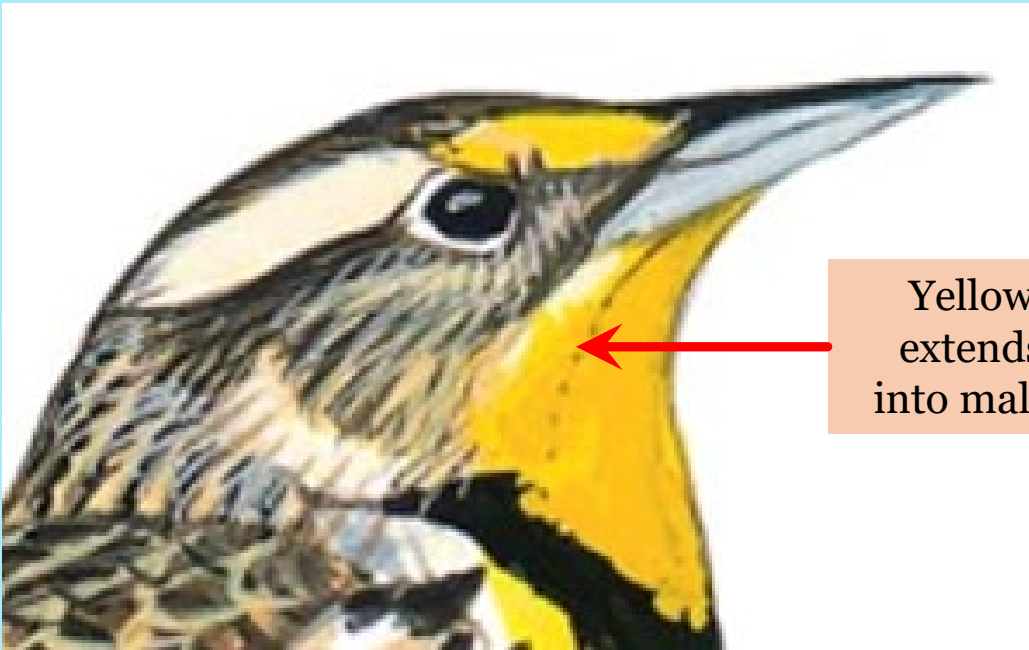
Sibley



National Geographic

MALAR (BREEDING)

Graphics by David A. Sibley



Yellow extends into malar

Eastern

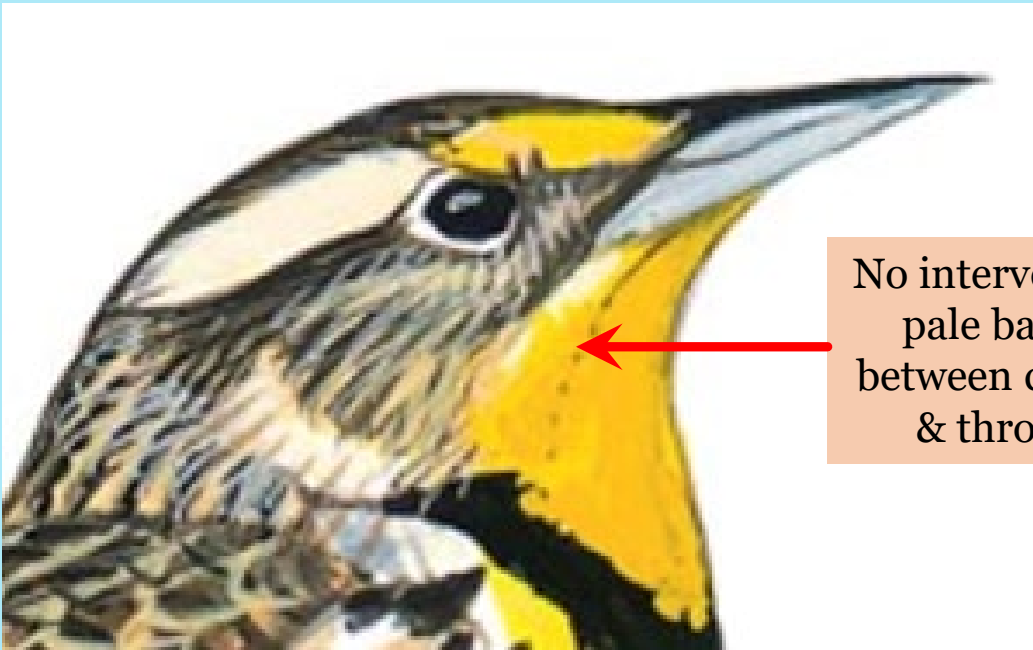
Western

Mnemonic:
More sun
out West



White-ish malar

MALAR (BREEDING)



No intervening
pale band
between cheek
& throat

Eastern

Western



Gray cheeks &
yellow throat are
knit by a pale
band

MALAR (BREEDING)

Eastern



Graphics by David A. Sibley

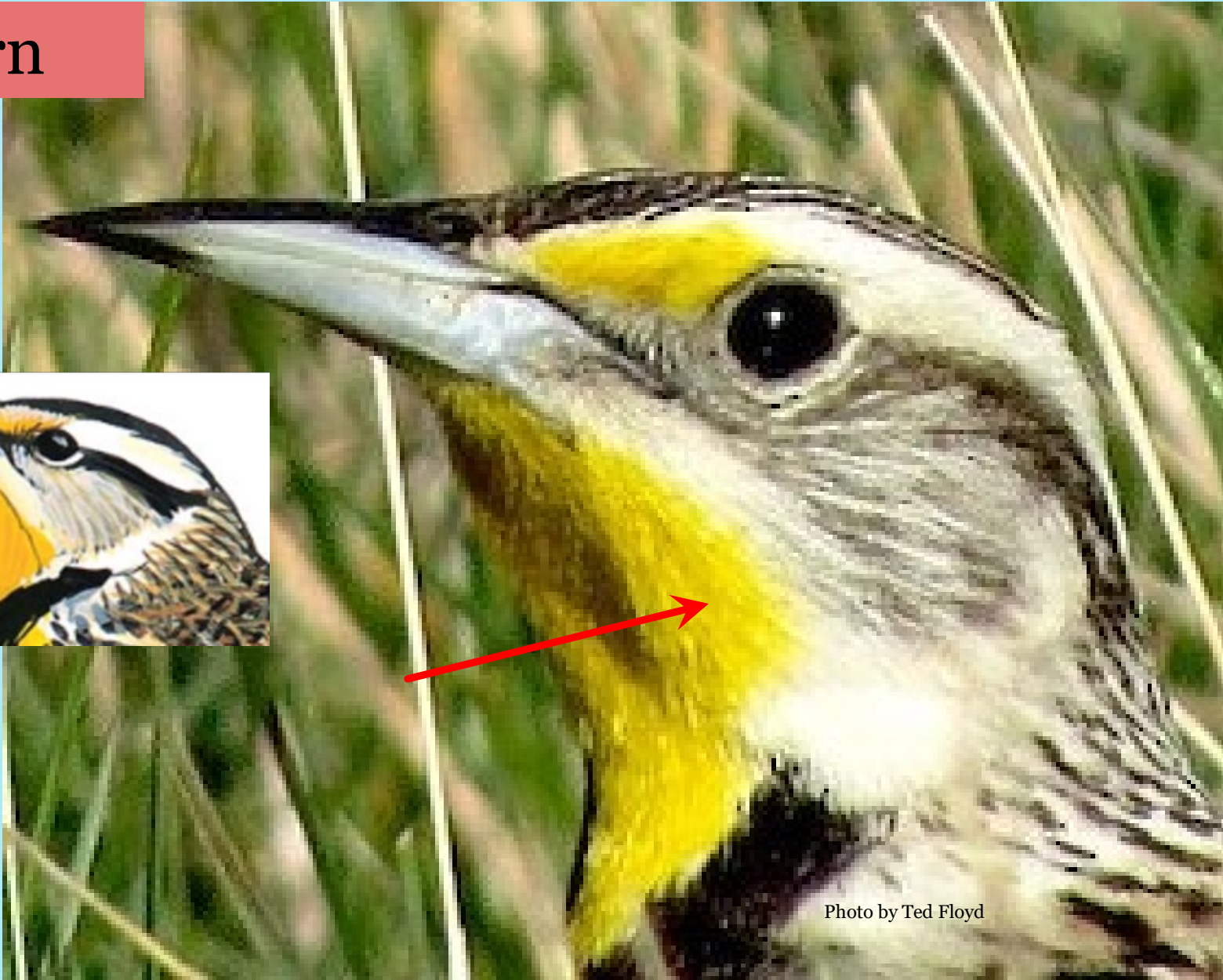


Photo by Ted Floyd

MALAR (BREEDING)

Eastern



Photo by Jack Parlapiano

Western



Photo by Deborah Kainauskas

MALAR IN WINTER
(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)

MALAR IN WINTER (AMBIGUOUS)

(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)

*“Some individuals (probably males)
having breeding appearance year-round,*

*While others (probably females) have pale
brownish feather tips completely veiling
the yellow and black underparts”*

David A. Sibley

Western

Photo by Sam Hugh



MALAR IN WINTER (AMBIGUOUS)

(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)



Photo by Xavier Castillo

Western

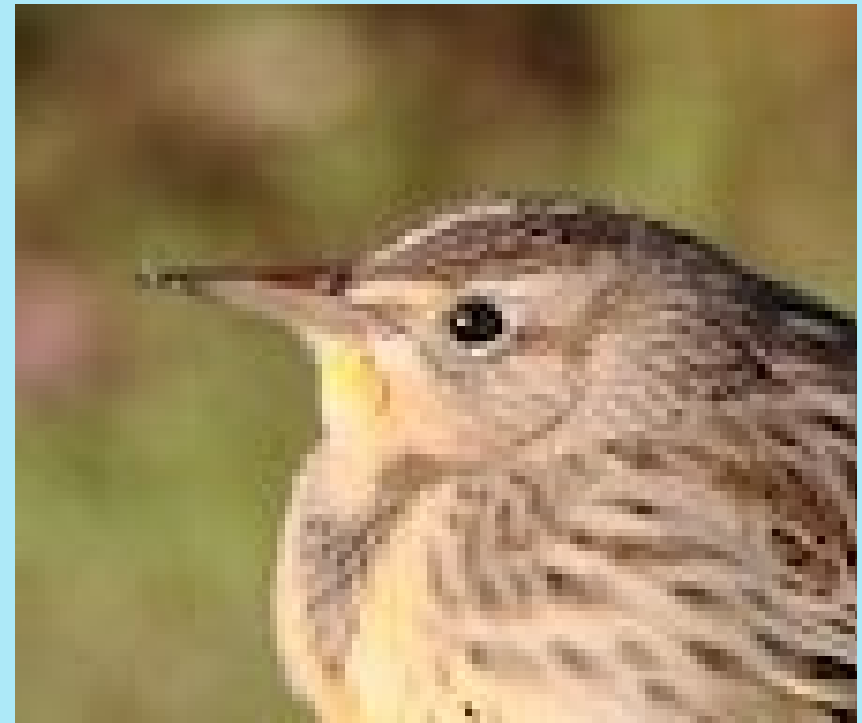


Photo by Don Brode

Western

MALAR IN WINTER (AMBIGUOUS)

(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)



Photo by Matt Davis



Photo by Laura Ellis

Western

MALAR IN WINTER (AMBIGUOUS)

(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)

Photo by Derek Hudgins



Eastern

Photo by Bradley Hacker



MALAR IN WINTER (AMBIGUOUS)

(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)



Photo by Paul Heuber

Eastern



Photo by Shelly Rutkin

FLANKS

FLANKS

Broken, thinner streaks
Under-lain by white-ish



Eastern

Western

Graphics by David A. Sibley



Thicker streaks
Under-lain by
buff

FLANKS

Broken, thinner streaks
Under-lain by white-ish



Photo by Jim Gain

Western

Eastern



Photo by Kade Lockhart

Thicker streaks
Under-lain by
buff

**CROSS-BARS ON
FEATHERS OF UPPERPARTS**

CROSS-BARS ON FEATHERS OF UPPERPARTS

Eastern

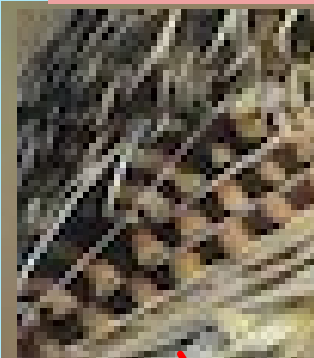


Photo by Valentina Roumi

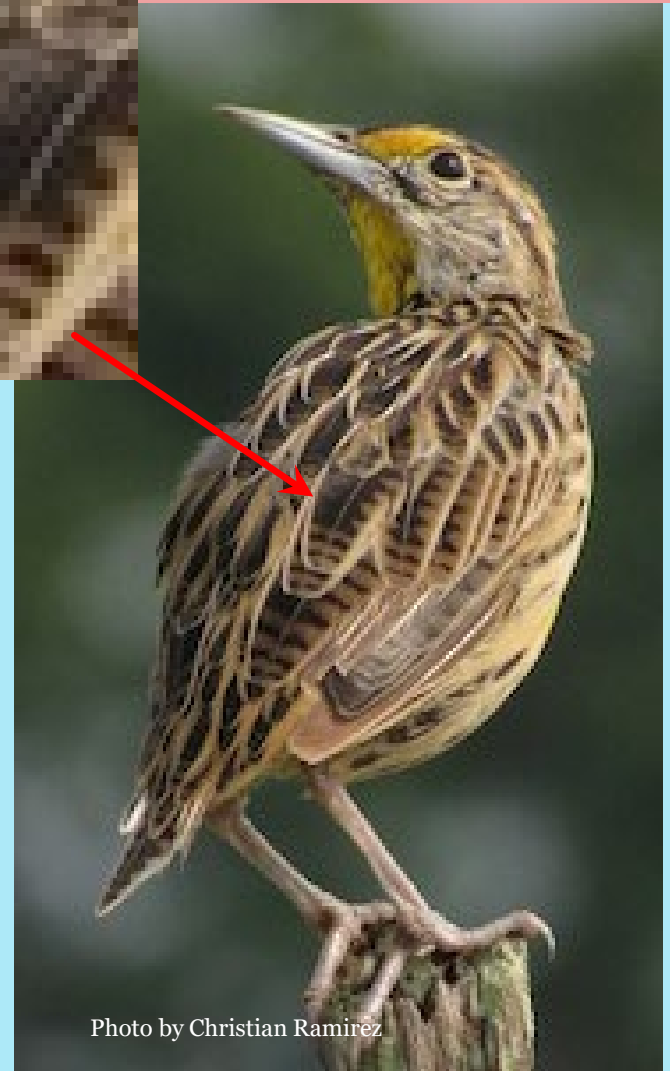
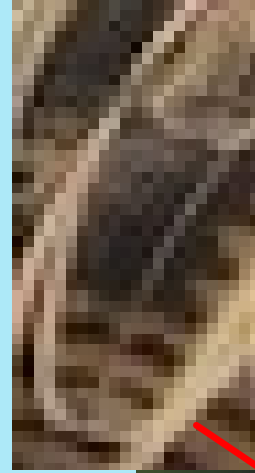
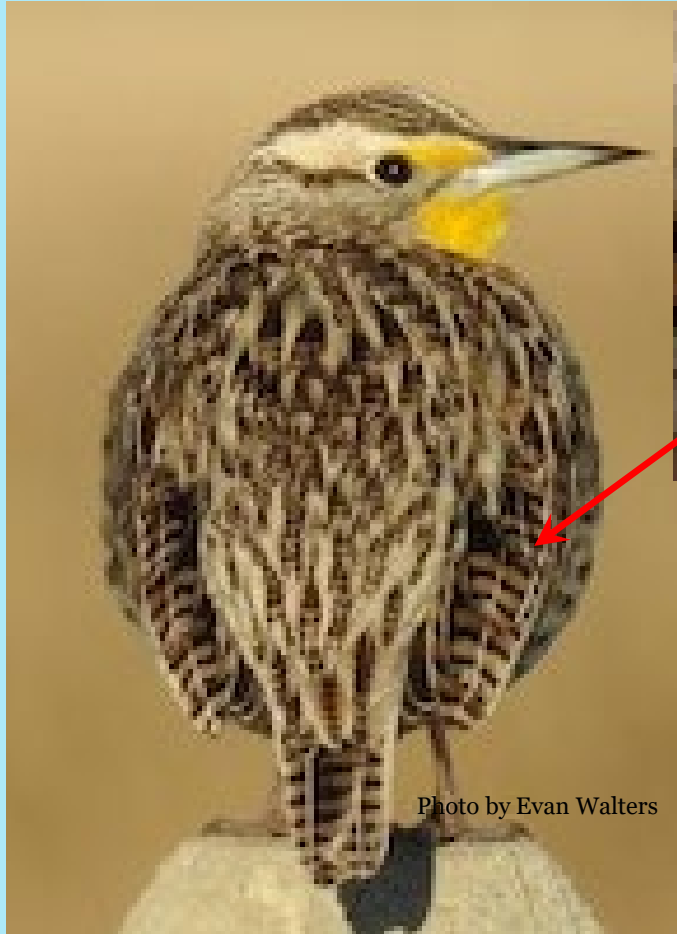


Photo by Brian Sullican

Western

CROSS-BARS ON FEATHERS OF UPPERPARTS

Eastern



Western

CONTRAST & HUE

CONTRAST & HUE

Overall slightly paler and colder-toned.



Photo by Paul Fenwick

Western

Overall color more rufous-tinged, especially on secondaries, greater coverts and scapulars

Eastern



Photo by Denny Swaby

Chihuahuan



Photo by Douglas "BB" Waton

CONTRAST & HUE

(APRIL)

Overall color more rufous-tinged, especially on secondaries, greater coverts and scapulars



Photo by Geoff Malosh

Western

Eastern



Photo by Oscar Joshson

“Lillian’s”



Photo by Jim Hoover

WINTER SUMMARY

(PHOTOS DEC-FEB)

Yellow malar

Bars on upper parts

Western

Photo by Sam Hugh

White-ish
flanks, with
broken barring



VOCALIZATIONS



Western ??

Eastern ??

Plumbeous V
STILL
listening

“LILIAN’S MEADOWLARK”

CHIHUAHUAN MEADOWLARK

More contrast in head pattern.
Cream colored auriculars
contrasts with
bold, dark eyeline.



More white than
brown



Brown, streaked auriculars.
Less contrast with eye-line.

CHIHUAHUAN MEADOWLARK (APRIL)

More contrast in head pattern.
Cream colored auriculars
contrasts with
bold, dark eyeline.

Chihuahuan



Photo by Greg Lavety

Western



Photo by Douglas "BB" Watson

TAIL FEATHERS

About equal brown
& white

Eastern



More brown
than white



Western

“Lillian’s”



More white than
brown

TAIL FEATHERS

Eastern



Photo by Bill Niemczyk



Photo by Shane Sater

Western



Photo by Alix de'Entremont

“Lillian’s”



Photo by Daniel Irons

MEADOWLARK QUIZ

(11 BIRDS)

QUIZ

#1



Photo by Ann Carter

QUIZ

#2



Photo by Jack Parlapiano

QUIZ



#3

Photo by Rex Bartlett

QUIZ

#4



Photo by Myron Gerhard

QUIZ

#5



Photo by Frank Lehman

QUIZ

#6



Photo by Tom Murray

QUIZ

#7

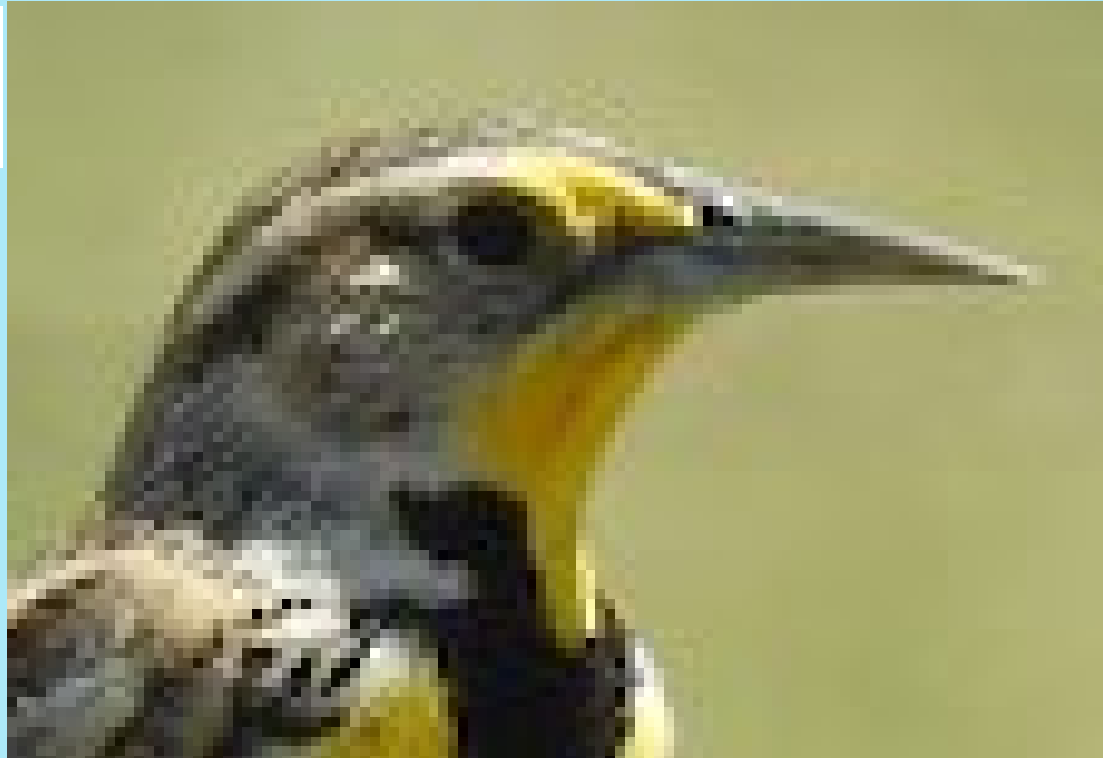


Photo by Glen Pearson

QUIZ

#8



Photo by Ann Carter

QUIZ

#9



Photo by James Bolte



#10

Plumbeous V
STILL
listening

QUIZ

#11



Photo by Bradley Hacker

#12

QUIZ



#13



Plumbeous V
STILL
listening

MEADOWLARK QUIZ ANSWERS

- 1) Western
- 2) Lillian's
- 3) Eastern
- 4) Eastern
- 5) Western
- 6) Eastern
- 7) Western
- 8) Western
- 9) Eastern
- 10) Western
- 11) Lillian's
- 12) Western
- 13) Eastern

MEADOWLARK SUMMARY

- ▶ “Meadowlark sp” is ok
- ▶ Often need scope views
- ▶ Learn songs – easy peasy
 - ▶ Sometime sing in winter
 - ▶ **Eastern** – melodious, slightly mournful
 - ▶ **Western** – culminates in complex splutters
 - ▶ Calls too
- ▶ White in tail
 - ▶ (least to most) **West, East, Chihuahuan**
 - ▶ Helpful, but may be hard to catch
- ▶ Malar
 - ▶ Works in breeding season
 - ▶ More yellow = **Western** – “**It’s bright out west**”
- ▶ Flanks
 - ▶ Thinner streaks over white = **Western**
 - ▶ Thicker streaks over buff = **Eastern** – “**it’s more smoggy in the east**”
- ▶ Be prepared for **Chihuahuan Meadowlark**
 - ▶ Pale overall
 - ▶ Pale auriculars vs dark streaks (**Western**)
 - ▶ South Texas in winter
 - ▶ Trans Pecos in summer