

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**CHIHUAHUAN MEADOWLARK**

FEBRUARY 2025

The Chihuahuan Meadowlark (*Sturnella lilianae*) was split from the Eastern Meadowlark (*S. magna*) in 2022 by the American Ornithological Society. It is found in semiarid grasslands of Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, and Mexico. It breeds in the subalpine grasslands of the White Mountains area and to the west, in the Prescott and Chino valleys. It is a year-round resident in southeastern Arizona and to some extent in northern parts of the state. Much of the northern breeding population moves south in the winter, mostly to the southeast but occasionally in grassland habitat in other parts of the state. Unlike the southeastern breeding population, which rarely shares its habitat with Western Meadowlark (*S. neglecta*), the northern breeding populations of Chihuahuan Meadowlarks overlap with those of breeding Western Meadowlarks. The 2 species overlap in the southern part of the state during winter.

Due to their similarity, distinguishing between the 2 species can be challenging. The Chihuahuan Meadowlark differs from Western Meadowlark by having 6 fully white and 2 partially white outer tail feathers, making two-thirds of the tail appear white, more than in any other meadowlark species. However, in the field it is rarely possible to count the white rectrices, and often tails are not fully spread making it difficult to determine the amount of white. Other field marks are more useful. The Chihuahuan Meadowlark's auriculars are clean with little-to-no streaking, which gives the face a greater contrast with the dark eyelines than in the Western Meadowlark. The malar of the Chihuahuan Meadowlark, unlike that of the Western Meadowlark, is white rather than yellow. Flanks are pale white, and the black streaking rarely touches the yellow of the breast. Finally, the breast color of the Chihuahuan Meadowlark often appears more saffron than the purer yellow tones of the Western Meadowlark. Overall, the bird appears paler than the Western Meadowlark.

The call or song may be one of the more reliable ways to tell the species apart. The Chihuahuan call is typically a short buzzy "dzert", whereas that of the Western is a "chup". The Chihuahuan Meadowlark song consists of 3 to 5 descending whistles, and that of the Western is a low, descending warble.



Las Cienegas Conservation Area, Pima County, 5 June 2023. Photo by Carol Hippenmeyer



Willow Lake, Yavapai County, 6 January 2016. Photo by Walt Anderson