Dickcissel (Spiza americana)

Pennsylvania Endangered Species

State Rank: S2B (imperiled, breeding)  Global Rank: G5 (secure)

Identification
Dickcissels are part of the family that includes Sparrows, Finches, and Grosbeaks. The male is almost unmistakable, being 5.75 inches long, a large, pale bill, rusty shoulder patch, gray crown, cheek and nape, a yellow and white supercilium and malar streak. Males also have a white chin, black throat, yellow breast, grayish-white belly and undertail coverts, gray-brown back with black streaks, and black wings with gray-brown edges. The female is more sparrow-like in color with a gray-brown crown, cheek and nape, a yellow and white supercilium and malar streak, and grayish-white underparts. The female also has buffy streaked flanks, a gray-brown back with black streaks, and black wings with gray-brown edges. Immature individuals are similar to female, but with a duller plumage.

The male Dickcissel is similar in pattern to the meadowlark but is much smaller with a thicker bill. The female Dickcissel is similar to the female House Sparrow, but has larger, pale bill. Often, the female or immature Dickcissel has yellow in the face, rusty shoulders, or streaked flanks that the House Sparrow lacks.

Range
This species main breeding range stretches from northern North Dakota south through western South Dakota, eastern Colorado, and northeastern New Mexico to southern Texas and Louisiana, and east to northern Alabama, western Tennessee and Kentucky, western Ohio, and southern Michigan and Wisconsin. However, some populations of Dickcissels have historically and currently occur along the mid-Atlantic coastal plain, including Pennsylvania. Currently, this species in Pennsylvania is erratic at best.

Habitat
Dickcissels prefer habitat with dense, moderate to tall vegetation particularly with some forbs and moderately deep litter. Some suitable habitats that Dickcissels will nest in include old fields, hayfields, fencerows, hedgerows, road-rights-of-way, planted cover (Conservation Reserve Program fields and nesting cover), and moderately grazed and idle prairie. In Pennsylvania, many of the nesting areas are in older reclaimed surface-mine sites planted with various grasses and legumes and grown up with scattered, taller, woody plants. They are also found in mixed hayfields containing grasses, alfalfa, and other forbs.

Conservation Status
Since this species is at the edge of its breeding range in Pennsylvania. It is well-known for its unpredictable presence or abundance as a nesting bird from year to year. Consequently, the erratic breeding of the Dickcissel has made difficult conditions on assessing the population in the state. In the Midwest and the Great Plains States, this species is apparently secure in the core of its breeding range. It is reported that Franklin County may harbor the only viable population of this species in the state. Therefore, it may be beneficial to give landowners with potential Dickcissel habitat management information concerning the species habitat needs. This species seems to be an erratic breeder in this state, but with more management practices that favor Dickcissels, perhaps a viable population could occur in the state and Franklin County.

References