



CRITTER CONNECTIONS



Sparrows

Side-oats Grama



Side-oats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) is the state grass of Texas. The name of the plant comes from the oat-like spikes which hang on the side of the stem. The stems can grow from 12-40 in tall, making this quite a tall grass in some places. Side-oats grama is found across most of Texas, except far eastern parts of the state.

Grasses are flowering plants, but their flowers are not bright and showy like other types of flowering plants because they are pollinated by wind. The flowers grow in structures called spikes which attach directly to the stem instead of on a separate stalk. The flowers are purplish in color and grow on one side of the stem. Once the flowers have bloomed, they turn a straw-like color in the fall and produce seeds which fall to the ground.



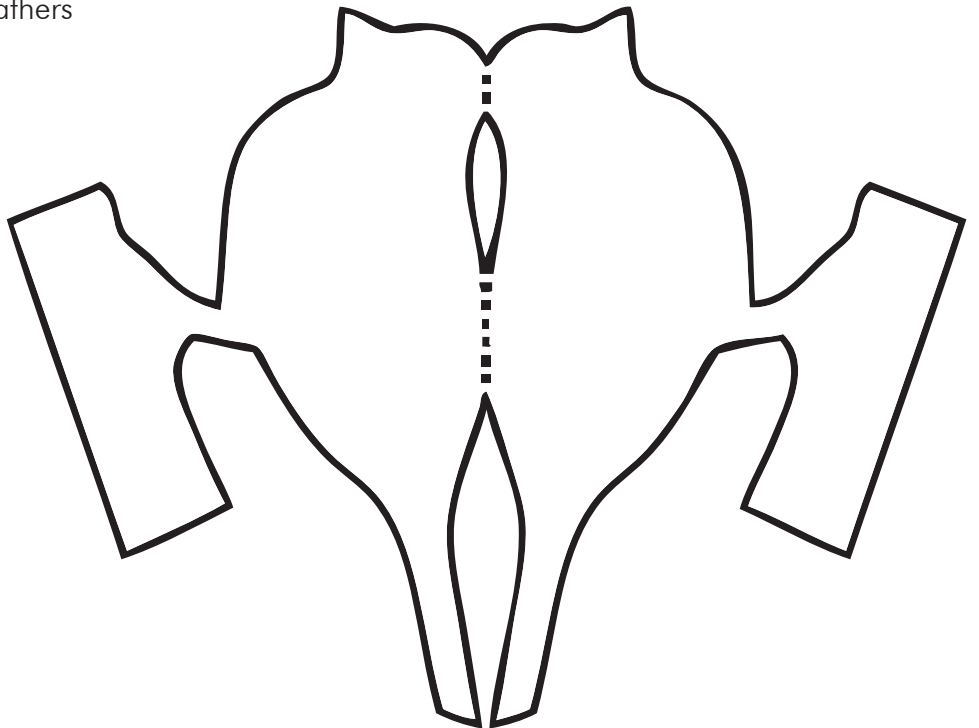
Side-oats grama is beneficial to wildlife in many ways. It provides cover and nesting material for smaller species of wildlife. It is also a food source for wildlife like birds and deer and livestock like cattle. It is also the host plant for several species of butterfly, which means butterflies lay their eggs on the stems and when they hatch, the caterpillars consume the grass. It is also an attractive grass in grassland ecosystems or gardens and it provides erosion control.



Article Source: Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center
Photo Sources: USFWS Mountain-Prairie, Erutun, Matt Lavin

Sparrow Craft

1. Download template here: bit.ly/CC_Sparrow
Or use template to the right
2. Fold template in half along dotted line and cut along black line
3. Gather fall leaves and twigs to decorate your sparrow
4. Glue leaves onto template to mimic feathers



Did you know...

- ... that female sparrows are plain in color and it is difficult to tell apart the species?
- ... that one of the most common sparrows in Texas, the House Sparrow, is not native to America?
- ... that people who watch birds, known as birders, refer to sparrows as LBBs or little brown birds?
- ... that sparrows live in a variety of habitats including grasslands, marshes, deserts and forests?
- ... that young sparrows consume mostly insects which provide protein to help them grow?
- ... that some sparrows can swim underwater to escape from predators?
- ... that House Sparrows have adapted to live near humans?



House Sparrow

Photo source: Bengt Nyman

Color Me

White-crowned Sparrow

(Zonotrichia leucophrys)



White-crowned Sparrow





Sparrows

by Elanor Dean

Texas is home to over 20 species or types of sparrow, and they are common all over the United States. You have probably seen many different types of sparrow, but you may not realize they are different species of birds because they all look quite similar, especially the females.

Sparrows are characteristically small brownish birds with a streaky pattern. They have short **conical** or cone shaped bills and reasonably long tails. They are found in grassy and brushy habitats with plenty of food and cover. Taller grasses and bushes provide cover against predators, like Sharp-shinned Hawks, which mainly prey upon small birds like sparrows.



White-crowned Sparrow

Grassy habitats also provide great camouflage from predators. Sparrows are brownish in color and have streaky patterns on their bodies, which means they blend in very well in tall grasses. Female sparrows, in particular are very **drab** or plain in color, making it tricky to tell what species you are looking at. Because of their similar appearance, people who observe birds for recreation, known as bird-watchers or

birders, will often refer to sparrows as LBBs or little brown birds.

Male sparrows offer a bit more variation in their colors and facial features. Chipping Sparrows have a rusty colored crown or cap on the top of their heads. Black-throated Sparrows have thick white and black stripes on their heads and black throat feathers. Lark Sparrows have beautiful markings on their heads in a pattern of black, white and a rusty red color. Just look closely at some of the sparrows in this issue and you will see how different they truly are.



Black-throated Sparrow

Grass also provides food for sparrows. They will eat or consume different seeds, such as grass seeds, and they will also eat insects. Some sparrows will switch their diet seasonally, consuming more insects in the spring and summer when they are easily available and swapping to seeds in the winter when insects are dormant. Their short conical beak provides the perfect structure to break the hard shell on seeds and the crunchy exoskeleton of insects. In places with a dense covering of leaves on the ground, sparrows will quickly scratch the ground with both feet to remove **leaf litter** and uncover insects and seeds.

Like all birds, sparrows go through changes in their life cycle, from egg, to chick, to an adult bird. Most sparrows will build a cup-shaped nest out of grass. Sparrows build their nests on the ground or close to the ground on a small tree or bush. This is one reason why it is so important for female sparrows



Vesper nest

to be plain in color. Nesting near the ground makes them more exposed to predators like snakes, house cats and foxes. Male sparrows are generally not involved with parental care. Once the eggs hatch, the chicks are helpless and rely on their mother to provide food. She will catch insects to feed her chicks, which provide a great source of protein for the growing babies.



Vesper chicks

One species of sparrow has adapted so well to living around humans that it was actually named the House Sparrow. Its scientific name *Passer domesticus* is also a reference to its adaptation to humans. The word domestic refers to animals that live near or alongside humans like livestock and our pets. This is one of the most common sparrows in the United States, but it is actually not native to America. This means the House Sparrow has not always lived in the United States. It was introduced from Europe. As such, House Sparrows are not in the same Family that American sparrows are classified. House Sparrows are usually seen in urban places like cities and our neighborhoods and schools.



Savannah Sparrow

Next time you are in an open field, try walking back and forth through the grass. Sparrows are often down on the ground and will **flush**, or briefly fly up, out of the grass and fly further away. This is also how predators like hawks will separate sparrows from their flock. They will drive toward the ground to scatter the birds and try to separate one to catch. If you want to see sparrows in your garden or at school, make sure there are places that provide cover like grasses and bushes. Sparrows will also eat birdseed, but since they usually forage on the ground, be sure to place the birdseed on the ground or on a feeder close to the ground. Sparrows will also take advantage of bird boxes to build their nests.



Lincoln's Sparrow



Fox Sparrow



Lark Sparrow

WORD BANK

Conical – cone-shaped

Drab – dull or plain in color

Birders – people who look at birds for fun or recreation

Leaf litter – a layer of leaves and twigs that have fallen onto the ground

Flush – to cause a bird to fly away from where it was

Source: National Wildlife Federation and Sibley Field Guides

Photos from Wikimedia Commons: Mdf, Michael L. Baird, Kevin Cole, Kati Flemming, Cephas, Andy Morffew, Andy Reago & Chrissy McClarren

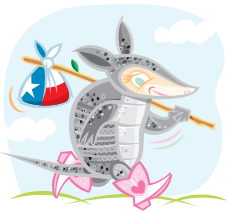
Sparrow Search

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BIRD
BROWN
CAMOUFLAGE
FLOCK
GRASS
HABITAT
INSECTS
SEEDS
SMALL
SPARROW
TEXAS



Photo Source: Andy Reago & Chrissy McClarren
 Created by Puzzlemaker at DiscoveryEducation.com



Nancy's Corner



Tips for attracting sparrows to your backyard or schoolyard:

1. Place bird seed on or near the ground – sparrows like sunflower seeds
2. Provide cover like tall grasses and shrubs
3. Install a bird house where sparrows can build a nest
4. Provide a shallow water source for drinking and bathing

Start a field journal, write down what you observe and hear.



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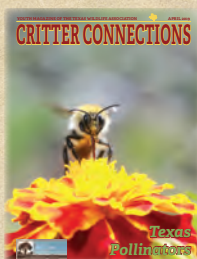


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