

Featured Plant

Common Name: Fourwing saltbush
Scientific Name: *Atriplex canescens*



Coronado RC&D, *Shrubs of Southeastern Arizona*

Mature plants are mostly 2 to 4 feet tall, but may be as tall as 8 feet in specific ecotypes. Leaves are alternate, narrow (about 1/8 to 1/2 inch) and 1 to 2 inches long, grayish in color. The tiny male and female flowers are found on separate plants (dioecious). The female flowers develop into a dry achene fruit that is prominently 4-winged.

This species occurs on many diverse sites throughout most of the western U.S. and northern Mexico at elevations of 2,500 – 8,000 feet. In southeastern Arizona, it may be found on sandy, loamy, and saline bottomlands or loamy and limy uplands. It is highly tolerant of drought, salinity and alkalinity.

The leaves and young stems provide palatable and nutritious browse for livestock, elk, deer and antelope. The fruits provide abundant food for birds, rodents, other wildlife, and livestock. Native Americans used the young shoots as food and a source for a yellow dye. Seeds were ground to use as meal and as a leavening agent for bread.

Featured Bird

Common Name: Eastern Meadowlark (pictured) and Western Meadowlark
Scientific Name: *Sturnella magna* and *Sturnella neglecta*



Dan L. Fischer

Dan L. Fischer – Author of *Early Southwest Ornithologists, 1728-1900*, University of Arizona Press

At first glance the distinction or separation of the two meadowlark species occurring in Arizona presents real and difficult challenges. Perched on the top of a bush, post or on the ground in open country, the subtle plumage differences are ever so slight. When fully exposed in this manner, especially during the breeding season, the males display a beautiful splash of yellow on their breast with a very pronounced black V. Chunky bodied with a short tail and a rather long bill, their head is marked with a black eye line and crown separated by white. Buffs, browns and black on their back present a cryptic pattern making them very difficult to see, especially in dry grass. Their feet, if visible, appear quite large.

To this point the two species may appear as one, especially to the casual observer. Dr. H.C. Oberholser, a student of these species for many years, expressed that in their case of "...similarity of plumage and size...they may breed in the same field and sing from neighboring fence posts, yet their songs are totally different, which is their most obvious indicator." The song of the male Western Meadowlark is very melodic and flute-like with several whistles followed by complex bubbling and gurgling. Their call is a low chuck. The characteristic song of the Eastern Meadowlark is strikingly different with a series of high pitched buzzy, almost rattle like sounds that often include a short series or variations of whistles. When flying or feeding in the grass they are in constant contact through their vocalizations.

The Eastern Meadowlark reaches its western frontier in Arizona and, within the state, it is most common in the southeast with some occurring in central and northern areas. The Western Meadowlark is more widespread in Arizona, but is sparse in the southern portion and almost totally absent in the southeast. In general the Eastern favors the drier conditions while the Western prefers wetter conditions. Because of yearly precipitation variations the two species sometimes overlap or interchange their breeding distribution from previous years. When the two species occasionally interbreed, their hybrids are sterile.

The history and recognition that two species exist is quite interesting in that it involved the efforts of many individuals. Some will hereby be briefly noted. Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) first described and applied the Latin species name *magna* to the Eastern Meadowlark in 1758, based on "The Large Lark" from the work and travels in the southeastern coastal region of America by Mark Catesby (1682-1773).

While on his trip up the Missouri River in 1844, John James Audubon (1785-1851), the famous artist-naturalist, stated "...the existence of this species was known to...Lewis and Clark...across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific [1804-06]; no one has since taken the least notice of it." Continuing, he wrote "...its curious notes were first noticed by Mr. J.G. Bell [expedition taxidermist], without which in all probability it would have been mistaken for our common species..." From that encounter Audubon recognized the distinction and described it as the Western Meadowlark, appropriately applying the Latin species name *neglecta*, meaning "neglected" or perhaps, in this case, overlooked.

An additional note, the race of the Eastern Meadowlark occurring in Arizona is sometimes referred to as Lillian's (*lillianae*) Meadowlark, named for Mrs. Lillian Hanna Baldwin by Dr. Oberholser in 1930. She presented this type to the Cleveland Museum.