

PRAIRIE AND OREGON WHITE OAK PROTECTIONS

Updated 2/9/2011

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The prairie ecosystem in western Washington has been vanishing for more than 150 years for a number of reasons, including development pressures and fire suppression policies. Prairies are being lost everywhere they are found throughout North America. Using prairie soils as an indicator, U.S. Fish & Wildlife estimates that in 1850 over 300,000 acres in Thurston, Pierce, Lewis, and Mason Counties likely supported prairies or other grassland environments. Today, less than 30,000 acres, or under 10% of historic prairies remain, with about 3% remaining as high quality prairies. Prairies support a wide variety of plants and animals that are not found in other environments. Without active management the amount of acreage will continue to decline.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

Good examples of prairies in Thurston County include Glacial Heritage, Mima Mounds, and Scatter Creek Preserves. A few of the larger prairies can be seen easily, while others are scattered among forests, farms and houses. These lands are home to several rare and endangered species and help define the landscape of Thurston County.

As prairies disappear, the native plants and wildlife they support also disappear and are replaced by invasive, non-native plants and wildlife, and human development. If Thurston County fails to protect rare and endangered species, the state and federal governments may step in and enact stricter requirements.



Courtesy of Rod Gilbert

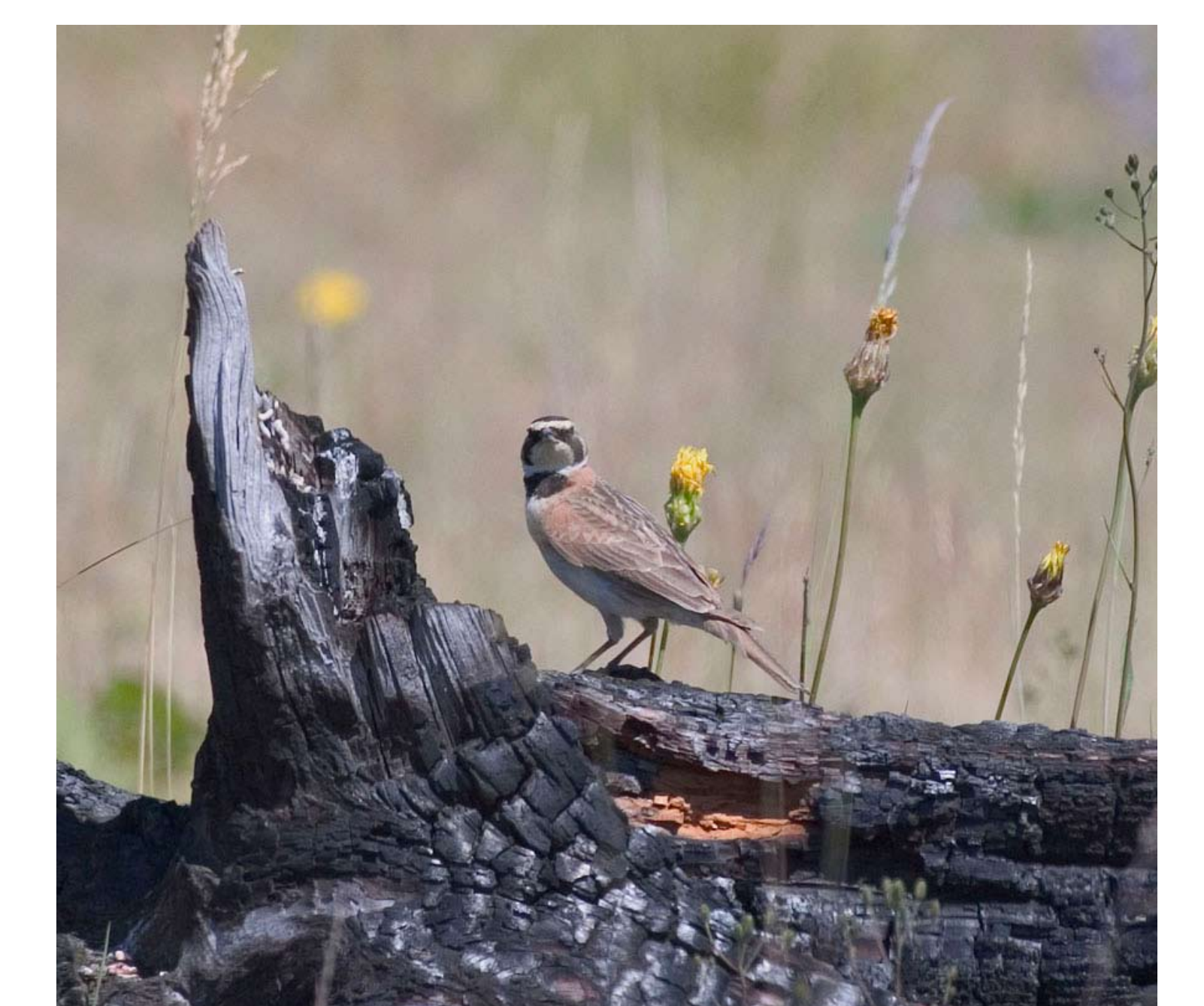
CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE CRITICAL AREAS ORDINANCE

- A prairie or Oregon white oak habitat area as small as one acre could be considered important for species that depend on prairies for survival.
- Developed areas that have prairie soils (i.e. may have contained prairie habitat in the past) are unlikely to contain important prairie habitat.
- Some areas dominated by invasive species, such as Scot's Broom, may be considered prairie if they have native prairie species present and have the potential to be restored.
- Prairie lands tend to have very porous soils, so they often contain critical aquifer recharge areas – places where water infiltrates into the ground and replenishes drinking water aquifers. The challenge is that the very soils that make it easy for water to infiltrate into the aquifer also make it easy for pollutants to enter the aquifer.
- Under the existing Critical Areas Ordinance, a property owner who wishes to develop land that contains an important habitat must provide a habitat management plan during the land-use review/permitting process.* The same requirement is made for those who wish to develop land within 600 feet from the point location of an important species, even if that location is on another property.
- Under the potential amendments, a habitat management plan or a critical area report would be required if the property contained important habitat or an important species, or if the proposed development would occur within 600 feet of the point location of an important species. Buffers would then be established on a case-by-case basis according to the habitat management plan or critical area report, the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) management recommendations for Washington's priority habitats and species, and in consultation with WDFW or others with expertise.

*Note: A habitat management plan is a plan that identifies the location of the important habitat area, incursions or impacts into the habitat by the development, and ways to mitigate any impacts to the habitat. The primary goal of any plan is to avoid or minimize impacts or alterations to important habitat.



Courtesy of Rod Gilbert



Courtesy of Rod Gilbert