

Thick-billed Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*)

Conservation Status Rank Summary

Date Published: April 9, 2026

For details on assessment and ranking methodology, see: [Conservation Status Assessment Definitions, Process, Rank Factors, and Calculation of State Ranks for Montana Species](#)

Rarity and Trends

Rank Factor	Date Assessed	Value Factor Rating	Score	Data Source	Comments
Rarity					
Range Extent	2024-11-27	300493.8 km ² G = 200,000- 2,500,000 km ²	4.710	MTNHP Range Maps	None
Area of Occupancy	2024-11-27	10555 4km ² cells H = 2,501-12,500 4- km ² grid cells	4.810	MTNHP Modeling	None
Number of Occurrences			-		Factor not used in ranking.
Population Size			-		Factor not used in ranking.
# of Occurrences in Good Condition			-		Factor not used in ranking.
% of Area Occupied in Good Condition			-		Factor not used in ranking.
Environmental Specificity	2011-12-20	Narrow B = Narrow; specialist or community with key requirements common	-	MTNHP Species Rank Data Table	Factor not used in ranking. Narrow specialist. Dependent on shortgrass prairie (grass height of 12 inches with 8 inches probably ideal for nesting). Methodology: NS (2003) Original Score: B
Rarity is calculated by averaging weighted factor scores: $((4.71 \times 1) + (4.81 \times 2)) / 3 = 4.78$					
Trends					
Short-term Trend	2023-12-20	-10.9% F = Decline of 10 - 30%	-0.070	IMBCR	IMBCR trend in population estimates for Bird Conservation Region 11. "-Point Estimate"
Long-term Trend	2011-12-20	* E = Decline of 30 - 50%	-0.140	MTNHP Species Rank Data Table	Grassland habitats have been heavily impacted since European arrival and species has probably declined by 25-50% over this time period. Methodology: NS (2003) Original Score: D
Trends score is calculated by summing weighted short and long-term trend scores: $((-0.07 \times 2) + (-0.14 \times 1)) = -0.28$					

*Values may be absent if not precisely estimated; factors may still be assessed for rank if a Factor Rating can be assigned.

Threats

Rank Factor	Date Assessed	Value Factor Rating	Score	Data Source	Comments
Threats					
Overall Threat Impact		Very High A = Very High	0.000		Plowing, use of pesticides, and control of fires probably represent the biggest threats to the species. Species breeding range is drastically reduced and local abundances within current breeding range are probably lower than in historic range probably due to loss of buffalo and natural fire regime and plowing of native prairie. Species is dependent on grazing and fire as natural disturbance regimes that create their preferred short grass habitat.
Intrinsic Vulnerability	2011-12-20	Not intrinsically vulnerable C = Not intrinsically vulnerable	-	MTNHP Species Rank Data Table	Factor not used in ranking. Not Intrinsicly Vulnerable. Species matures quickly, reproduces frequently, and/or has a high fecundity such that populations recover quickly (5 years or 2 generations) from decreases in abundance. Species has good dispersal capabilities such that extirpated populations generally become reestablished through natural recolonization. Methodology: NS (2003) Original Score: C
Threat score is calculated from Overall Threat Impact when available or Intrinsic Vulnerability if not: (0.00) = 0.00					

Individual Threats Data

Threat Category	Date Assessed	Impact Score	Scope	Severity	Immediacy	Comments
Agriculture & Aquaculture	None	High	Large	Serious	High	Multiple Level 2 threats - see Additional Threat Details below.
Energy Production & Mining	2026-04-09	Low	Restricted	Moderate	High	Degradation, conversion, and fragmentation of grassland habitat due to oil and gas structures and activity associated with drilling can decrease breeding habitat.
Natural System Modifications	2026-04-09	Medium	Large	Moderate	High	Altered fire regimes and fire suppression in grassland landscapes can alter the vegetation structure and composition of native prairies which can degrade habitat for grassland birds.
Climate Change & Severe Weather	2024-12-02	High	Pervasive	Serious	Moderate	Audubon analysis shows a significant loss of habitat in Montana with a 3c rise in temperature
Threat Tally: 0 - Very High, 2 - High, 0 - Medium, 0 - Low Overall Threat Impact* = Very High						

*See [Conservation Status Assessment Definitions, Process, Rank Factors, and Calculation of State Ranks for Montana Species](#) for calculation of Overall Threat Impact based on the number and impact of individual threats.

Conservation Status Rank Calculation

Raw score

Rarity: $(4.78 \times 70\%)$ + Threats: $(0.00 \times 30\%)$ + Trends: (-0.28) = 3.06

Calculated Rank: S3

Accepted Rank	S3B
Author(s)	Dan Bachen
Rank Approved By	Montana Species of Concern Committee
State Rank Reason	Species is relatively common in steppe ecosystems across northern and central Montana. It has likely suffered historic declines due to habitat loss, and declines have continued. It faces high threats from further habitat loss due to agriculture and climate change.

Supplementary Information

Montana Natural Heritage Program. 2021. Conservation Status Assessment Definitions, Process, Rank Factors, and Calculation of State Ranks for Montana Species. 18 p.

https://mtnhp.mt.gov/docs/Montana_State_Rank_Criteria_20211201.pdf

Montana Field Guide Species Account:

<https://fieldguide.mt.gov/speciesDetail.aspx?elcode=ABPBXA6010>

Predicted Suitable Habitat Model:

<https://mtnhp.mt.gov/resources/models/?elcode=ABPBXA6010>

Information Needs

Information needs are assessed by considering the availability of factors used to assess species status as well as the quality of these assessments. Current information availability and quality to inform Conservation Status Rank for this species are highlighted.

Rank Factor	Assessment Category	Value	Criteria
General Status	Status Quality	Adequate	Calculated rank has low uncertainty and is represented by a single rank (e.g. S3); accepted rank may be adjusted to a range rank (e.g. S2S3)
		Poor	Rank assessed as SU or calculated rank has notable uncertainty and corresponds to a range rank with 2 or more values (e.g. S2?, S1S3, or S4S5)
Rarity	Range Quality	Adequate	Range polygon adequately represents area of probable occupancy and does not include substantial unoccupied areas; range may be adequately defined and still include areas of unsuitable habitat (e.g. mountain ranges for plains species)
		Marginal	Range polygon defined, but may include or exclude notable areas where the species may or may not occur on the landscape
		Poor	Range polygon not defined
	Habitat Quality	Adequate	Species-habitat relationship is well-defined (e.g. relevant literature or robust habitat model available)
		Marginal	Understanding of species-habitat relationship is adequate among some but not all habitats (e.g. literature covers similar habitats outside of Montana or habitat model performance is only somewhat adequate)
		Poor	Species-habitat relationship is not well understood
Threats	Threat Quality	Adequate	Threat Impact is a single value (including "Unthreatened")
		Marginal	Threat Impact assessed at more than one value (e.g. "High - Medium")
		Poor	Threat Impact is Unknown but Intrinsic Vulnerability is assessed
		Unknown	Threat Impact is Unknown and Intrinsic Vulnerability is not assessed
Trends	Recency	Current	Short-term Trend assessment date less than 10 years old
		Out of Date but Adequate	Short-term Trend assessment date is more than 10 years old or Unknown, but species is Unthreatened
		Out of Date	Short-term Trend assessment date more than 10 years old
		Not Available	Short-term Trend data are not available
	Trend Quality	Sufficient	Short-term Trend assessed at a single value or multiple values with a minimum trend greater than -10% (stable or increasing)
		Unknown but Sufficient	Short-term Trend is Unknown, but species is Unthreatened
		Poor	Short-term Trend is less than -10% (in decline) with two or more values selected
		Unknown	Short-term Trend is Unknown

Summary of Information Availability

No additional data are needed to calculate a robust status rank.

Summary of Information Needs

As the population of this species is declining and it faces high threats, continued monitoring of populations is necessary. More detailed analysis of climate and habitat based threats should be conducted to generate more state specific assessments.

Additional Threat Details

The table below contains the complete threats assessment for this species. While the Conservation Status Rank Calculation is based on cumulative, broadly categorized (Level 1) threats data, threats are assessed and tracked for more specifically categorized (Level 2) threats when available.

Threat Category	Date Assessed	Assessed By	Data Source	Scope	Severity	Immediacy	Comments
Agriculture & Aquaculture - 2.1 - Annual & Perennial Non-Timber Crops	2024-12-02	Dan Bachen	MTNHP Data, WWF Plowprint Tool	Large	Serious	High	A significant portion of the species range overlaps with areas at risk of conversion to row crop production.
Agriculture & Aquaculture - 2.3 - Livestock Farming & Ranching	2026-04-09	Dan Bachen	SWAP Assessment	Large	Moderate	High	Effect of livestock grazing (or lack thereof) depending on timing, intensity, and duration can create unsuitable habitat. Thick-billed longspurs depend on disturbance from ungulate grazing. Grazing exclusion usually creates unfavorable vegetation structures and habitat compositions, except when poor soils limit vegetation productivity. Species prefers sparsely vegetated short grass prairies that contain bare ground with little woody vegetation.
Energy Production & Mining - 3.1 - Oil & Gas Drilling	2026-04-09	Dan Bachen	SWAP Assessment	Restricted	Moderate	High	Degradation, conversion, and fragmentation of grassland habitat due to oil and gas structures and activity associated with drilling can decrease breeding habitat.
Natural System Modifications - 7.1 - Fire & Fire Suppression	2026-04-09	Dan Bachen	SWAP Assessment	Large	Moderate	High	Altered fire regimes and fire suppression in grassland landscapes can alter the vegetation structure and composition of native prairies which can degrade habitat for grassland birds.
Pollution - 9.3 - Agricultural & Forestry Effluents	2026-04-09	Dan Bachen	SWAP Assessment	Large	Unknown	High	Herbicide/ pesticide spraying, use, and runoff may impact invertebrate abundance and species health. Thick-billed longspurs may nest in cultivated fields early in the season and are susceptible to direct ingestion of prey or indirectly from runoff. Individuals that occupy/nest in cultivated lands are at a higher risk of pesticide exposure than those nesting in grasslands (Environment Canada 2014). Abundance of insect prey is likely reduced from widespread use of insecticides, including neonicotinoids seed treatments.
Climate Change & Severe Weather - 11.1 - Habitat Shifting & Alteration	2024-12-02	Dan bachen	Audubon Survival by Degrees Project data	Pervasive	Serious	Moderate	Audubon analysis shows a significant loss of habitat in Montana with a 3c rise in temperature