



Evening Sisters
24" x 40" acrylic on canvas
© LUCIE BAUSE

Sprague's Pipit

You can't protect an animal without protecting its habitat. Any Grade 3 student would be able to tell you this. But, this fairly obvious statement does not seem to have been taken on board by those federal departments nominally charged with recovering endangered species. Though recovery strategies for different species at risk are required to

identify, and protect, *critical habitat* for those species, federal agencies have shown a notable reluctance to identify such habitat, even when the information is well known.

Another example of this unfortunate state of affairs was provided recently by a draft of a new revised recovery strategy for the Sprague's pipit. The Sprague's pipit is a rare and declining prairie songbird which in Alberta is now restricted to the southeast corner of the province. It nests mostly in native grasslands, avoiding cultivated grasslands, and nesting at much lower densities in grasslands where native grasses have been replaced by introduced species.

The first version of the Sprague's pipit recovery strategy came out in March 2008. AWA commented then that there was no reason why critical habitat should not be identified quickly. "We believe that the fieldwork required to identify

much of the critical habitat could be carried out this breeding season (April to July, 2008) and that critical habitat could be identified in all large parcels of native grassland on federal crown land across most of the Canadian breeding range of Sprague's pipit, by spring 2009 at the latest."

Three years on, a revised report, the *Amendment to the final Recovery Strategy for the Sprague's Pipit (Anthus spragueii) in Canada* identifies critical habitat only on federal land in the Suffield National Wildlife Area: provincial lands are ignored.

In a May 6 letter to Environment Canada, the Suffield Coalition, (comprising Alberta Wilderness Association, Grasslands Naturalists, Nature Alberta, Nature Saskatchewan, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment, WWF Canada and Nature Canada) wrote: "the Coalition is gravely concerned by the ongoing delays in identifying critical habitat for Sprague's pipit and by the failure, despite available information, to identify critical habitat elsewhere in Alberta and in both federal and non-federal lands." Whether the province of Alberta is refusing to release scientific information to federal scientists, or the federal agencies have never taken the time to ask is not clear, but there is certainly a failure of communication taking place.

The Sprague's pipit recovery strategy is by no means the first to fail to identify critical habitat, despite having ample scientific evidence to do so. In 2009, a federal court judge ruled that the federal Minister of the Environment, Jim Prentice, broke the law by refusing to identify critical habitat in a recovery plan for the endangered greater sage-grouse. The judge agreed with the environmental groups that it was "unreasonable" for the government to claim it couldn't identify breeding grounds when knowledge of their locations was "notorious."

Although the federal *Species at Risk Act* provides the tools to allow the federal government to adopt real measures to recover endangered species, this painful reluctance to use them, and the apparent necessity to drag them through the courts before any progress can be made, does nothing to serve the interests of endangered wildlife.

- Nigel Douglas

