

# Grassland Habitat Conservation

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It is spring and the Bobolinks have arrived once again in the fields and meadows of Maine. These birds are most conspicuous from their bubbling song, punctuated with sharp metallic notes. But in addition to his



beautiful song, the male Bobolink is a handsome and distinguished bird (black and white with a yellow nape), easily identified from quite a distance. Bobolinks are remarkable migrants, arriving here to breed each spring all the way from their winter homes in Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. They travel about 12,500 miles round-trip every year, in one of the longest migrations of any songbird. In fact, throughout its lifetime, a single Bobolink may travel the equivalent of 4 or 5 times around the circumference of the earth. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, migrating Bobolinks orient themselves with the earth's magnetic field, using iron oxide in bristles in their nasal cavity. Bobolinks also use the starry night sky to guide their travels. They arrive in central Maine around May 10-15<sup>th</sup> and numbers increase through late May. Nests are built beginning the end of May through early June. Bobolink nests consist of a well concealed cup of grass placed on the ground in a field. Nestlings are tended by both the male and female, and are fed exclusively insects, while adults also consume a variety of weed seeds.

Unfortunately, this remarkable bird species is in trouble. In recent decades, grassland birds, including Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Grasshopper Sparrows, have shown the steepest population decline of any group of birds in the Northeast and all of North America, making them a continental conservation priority. Bobolinks appear on the State of the Birds 2014 **Watch List** ([www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org)), as one of the species most in need of conservation help. Habitat loss, as grassland has been developed or overgrown, is thought to be one of the major contributing factors to their decline.

Because they need open hayfields for nesting, Bobolinks are natural beneficiaries of dairy and other grassland farms. In fact, it is due to the open fields maintained by farmers that grassland birds have significant habitat here at all. Unfortunately, however, managing fields for hay production often inadvertently causes nest failure and mortality of nestling Bobolinks. Bobolink babies mature through June and fledge through the end of July. This time frame often comes into conflict with optimizing hay quality, as leaving hay standing until August greatly reduces the protein content of the forage. Farmers managing their fields for livestock feed generally mow their hay at least once and often twice during the nesting timeframe. This results in complete nestling mortality.

So what can be done to help these beautiful birds? First and foremost, **any field that isn't needed as livestock feed should be left un-mowed until August first**. If you are lucky enough to have Bobolinks on your land and can allow them to have standing hayfields through August 1<sup>st</sup>, you will give them and other grassland birds their best chance for a successful nesting season.

For areas that are mowed regularly throughout the summer, consider letting them 'go natural'. Shrinking your managed lawn and letting the rest grow wild will save you labor, time and fuel costs while helping the birds at the same time. Bigger areas are better, so the more natural grassland area we can create and maintain, the

better off the bobolinks will be. In addition to helping nesting grassland birds, this type of habitat provides food and cover for many birds as well as other wildlife.

For farmers that need to produce high quality feed on fields with nesting bobolinks, leaving un-mowed blocks within the field can help reduce nestling fatalities. The best first step is to go out to fields at the end of May and observe. Bobolinks are conspicuous by sight and song; let them be your guide. Observe where they concentrate in the field to help determine the best spot to locate un-mowed blocks. Dr. Peter Vickery, ornithologist and president for the Center for Ecological Research in Richmond, Maine, indicates that the bigger and the more compact the blocks are, the better. For instance, a few long strips left in a field are not nearly as good as that same area in a single block or circle. Compact blocks reduce the likelihood of nest predation. Consistency is also important, and the same area should be left standing throughout the season, and if possible, year after year. Jeff Norment, State Biologist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) suggests that since most grassland birds generally gravitate to field centers, it is best to leave un-mowed nesting areas in the interior of a field. This will also help reduce predation and increase the chance of the blocks being used by nesting birds.

In addition, monitoring hayfields at the beginning of July can also be of great benefit. **Bobolinks may well fledge much earlier than the August 1<sup>st</sup> date, so if you are starting your haying the first week or two of July, it may be that waiting just a few more days could make all the difference, allowing bobolink babies to fledge.**

Polly Shyka and Prentice Grassi of the Village Farm in Freedom have been experimenting with creating bird blocks in their fields for several years now. This year, Prentice says that an area along their vegetable gardens was left un-mowed and many bobolinks were observed using that area. He states that building ecological diversity benefits not only the birds but the farm as well.

Encouraging beneficial birds and insects provides a natural tool for weed and pest control on the farm.

So take some time this summer to enjoy the sights and sounds of these beautiful grassland birds. Help provide and protect bobolink habitat as much as possible and you will likely be rewarded by their return year after year. Contact your local NRCS or Soil and Water Conservation District office to find out more information on conservation practices and

programs for this purpose. Finally, you can get more information on all of the grassland birds from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. See more photos and hear the beautiful bobolink song at <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>.



*This bobolink nestling was found in Somerset County after its nest was destroyed by haying. It was taken to Avian Haven Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center where it was raised until ready for release at the Village Farm property in Freedom. Photo by Glori Berry, courtesy of Avian Haven.*