

SOMERSET FIELD NOTES

Somerset County Soil & Water Conservation District Newsletter

Supporting Grassland Birds & Farmers Statewide

Ag Allies Program Gains National Attention While Supporting Maine Farms

700 million. That's how many grassland birds have been lost in North America over the last 50 years.

Habitat loss is the main reason for these declines. Ag Allies, a grassland bird conservation program at Somerset County SWCD, is working to turn that around in Maine by collaborating with landowners and land managers to make best-fit management practices to integrate farm and wildlife needs. Bobolinks, Savannah sparrows, Eastern meadow-

larks and other ground-nesting grassland birds rely on large expanses of undisturbed fields during nesting season to provide them with food and protection from predators. Here in Maine, hayfields are cut once and sometimes twice during the grassland bird nesting timeframe. This cutting during the nesting period results in total mortality for nestlings.

Through Ag Allies, Somerset County SWCD Technical Director Laura Suomi-Lecker works with farmers and other

landowners to fine-tune their management strategies. The program recognizes the pressure managers face to cut early season hay, so management recommendations are tailored and focused on areas that will have the greatest impact for birds and the least impact for the farm. This involves on-farm assessments to identify fields in use by target species, followed by discussion of options for management changes. Farmer incentive payments are used as needed to encourage *(see AgAllies on page 3)*



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www.somersetswcd.org



Eastern meadowlark in an Ag Allies field, photo Kshanti Greene 2020

2021 Workshops

Forestry for Maine Birds

9 - Noon Saturday, June 5
Robbin's Hill Scenic Overlook,
Route 201, Solon

Woodland management with birds in mind! This is a free program presented together with Maine Audubon, Maine Forest Service and Forest Stewards Guild. CEU credits pending. Free.

Wild Foraging Workshop

10 - 1 Saturday, June 12
Yankee Woodlot, Skowhegan

Maine naturalist, outdoorsman and author Tom Seymour will help us see the Yankee Woodlot through a new lens as we learn the art of wild edible foraging. \$10 fee.

Forest Pollinators Walk

9 - 11 Sunday, June 20
Yankee Woodlot, Skowhegan

During this walk and talk, we will discuss important forest plants for pollinators, nesting sites for native bees, and management strategies to support pollinators in your forest. Our program leader is Hannah Mullally, Xerces Society Pollinator Conservation Planner and Partner Biologist with the USDA NRCS. Free.

Forest Biodiversity

10 - 1 Saturday, July 31
Yankee Woodlot, Skowhegan

Join wildlife biologist Deb Perkins for this half-day session to gain clear action steps you can implement right away to enhance biodiversity on your property and in our community. \$10 fee.

**Participation for all workshops is limited.
Pre-registration is required.**

Visit our web site, somersetwcd.org/events for full workshop descriptions as well as additional, newly scheduled events. Information and pre-registration is also available by phone at 207-474-8323 or email at somersetwcd.outreach@gmail.com.

COVID-19 precautions are required at all events for the safety of our participants, staff and community. Visit our web site for current requirements.



Our mission: *Promote the conservation and stewardship of soil, water, woodlands and wildlife habitat through outreach, education, and technical services for the farmers, woodland owners, residents and municipalities of Somerset County*

Our office is located at the USDA Somerset County Service Center,
70 East Madison Rd., Skowhegan, ME 04976
207-474-8323 info@somersetwcd.org
somersetwcd.org

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Ag Allies Inspires Action Across the Northeast

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the use of the program and help offset the cost of management changes.

In many cases, this means Laura and several trained volunteers help to identify fields or portions of fields where grassland birds are present in greatest density. These areas can then be targeted for a delayed mowing schedule. Careful monitoring allows farmers to get back in and harvest these fields as soon as fledglings are capable of sustained flight.

Since launching in 2016, Ag Allies has enjoyed steady growth and success. Last season, more than 600 grassland acres were enrolled - producing more than 2,000 bobolink, meadowlark and Savannah sparrow fledglings! The most exciting development



for upcoming seasons is a new formal collaboration with Cornell Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative. In 2021 this means the use of Ag Allies as a pilot program model for grassland bird conservation in the Northeast. This is the first step in a multi-year plan to create a northeast region conservation partnership for grassland bird habitat. Ag Allies has also been invited as a participant in a Northeast Grassland Coalition planning group, hosted by the Grassland

Bird Trust of New York, again to work on creating a coalition to help grassland birds across the northeast. Ag Allies has also helped inspire a similar initiative in Maryland.

In 2021, Ag Allies will continue to work with landowners and land trusts, and it will also take on a new challenge: refurbishment of fields to restore quality nesting habitat. Several demonstration sites for this new program component will be established on land trust properties. Public workshops will showcase techniques and results.

Want to learn more about Ag Allies and how to participate as a farmer, landowner or land trust? Visit the Somerset County SWCD web site, or contact director **Laura Suomi-Lecker** at 474-8323 or laura.lecker@me.nacdnet.net.

2020 BY THE NUMBERS

Acres Enrolled: >600

Participating Landowners: 29

Fledglings Produced:

1600 Bobolinks

475 Savannah sparrows

10 Eastern meadowlarks



Male bobolink, photo L. Suomi-Lecker 2020

Woodland Owner of the Year: Jason Hilton, Mercer

The Somerset County SWCD is proud to announce that Jason Hilton of Mercer has been selected as the Woodland Owner of the Year.

Jason owns and manages a 68-acre woodland property in Mercer that has been in his family for 3 generations. His grand-father, Ralph True, managed the property with the focus on increasing the quality of the trees grown and the wood products that could be harvested from it.

Over the last 14 years, Jason has focused his management of the property on the northern red oak and eastern white pine that are present. Annually he harvests several loads of high-quality oak and pine sawlogs which he selects, cuts and skids to the landing himself. Throughout the harvest Jason is thinking ahead to future tree growth and harvests as he knows his present actions if well thought out can provide meaningful future results to the property's woods.

A few years back Jason hosted a Maine Woodland Owners workshop at his property that focused on northern red oak management, tree selection for harvest, and log scaling. The event was very well attended and provided a tremendous amount of insight and useful information. To those present it was obvious how much thought and care Jason took in his management of the woodland



and how he conducted any harvesting.

Obviously, his work in managing the forest on the property has become a significant component of his life, so much so that he enrolled in the Forestry Program at the University of Maine - Orono. Jason finished his B.S. degree in Forestry in May 2020 and now works for Wadsworth Woodlands as a consulting forester all across Maine. Jason works on management plans, facilitates timber harvests, and

conducts timber cruises.

As for his own woodlot the plan is to continue to thin around the oak and pine crop trees, selecting the lesser quality trees and fostering the best to grow into the future. He has also purchased a brush saw to help with spacing the regeneration and removing inferior quality saplings.

We will present Jason with his award sign later this spring. Congratulations!

Farm of the Year: Sites Farm, Athens

The Somerset County SWCD is proud to announce that Sites Farm of Athens has been named Farm of the Year. Luke and Allyson Sites own and manage this 250-acre farm that is well known for its strawberries, but also offers raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. They also raise Black Angus beef cattle and in recent years have become a rustic wedding venue.

The Sites Farm began in 1969 when Luke's parents, John and Kitty, purchased a 60-acre farm. Over time they renovated the old farmhouse and improved the farmland, producing milk, butter, eggs, vegetables and, of course, strawberries. In the 1990s Luke took over managing the farm with a focus on pick-your-own strawberries and adding other berry crops. Over time the acreage of the farm grew.

When you visit the farm there is an overall sense of pastoral tranquility: the acres of strawberries and other berries are well tended, the pasture fencing is tight, and the buildings are well maintained. This is not due to coincidence. The sound management strategies demonstrated at the Sites Farm are due to thoughtful and planful management. The current setting is made possible by the trials and learning experiences Luke has been part of throughout his time at the farm.



Along the way the Sites Farm has worked with the Somerset County SWCD to develop a nutrient management plan and completed a host of projects with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Sites have participated in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to address waste management and water diversions, among other resource protection measures.

An NRCS Conservation Plan has guided forest stand improvement, thinning, pruning, stand access and water crossings. They set up irrigation through the Agricultural Management Assistance program and worked to improve soil health and pollinator populations with cover crops, conservation cover and hedge rows.

Additionally at the end of 2019 Luke completed his third term (9 consecutive years total) on the USDA-Farm Service Agency's County Advisory Committee, which provides local oversight of the FSA's activities in Somerset County.

Congratulations Sites Farm!

District Staff are Available to Assist

The Somerset County SWCD office at the USDA Service Center in Skowhegan remains closed to the public. Staff continue to work remotely. E-mail is the most efficient way to reach us. Voicemail messages will be returned as promptly as possible. We are also available for in-person visits at your property. Please contact us and let us assist you with your resource concerns.

Take the First Step in Managing Invasive Plants

Would you like to gain a better understanding of the invasive plants in your woodlands? Want to know what actions you can take to effectively remove or control honeysuckle, Japanese barberry or other nonnative invasive plants? The Somerset County SWCD, in partnership with the Maine Natural Areas Program, is ready to assist.

The District is looking for volunteer landowners in Somerset County that would like to have their woodlands surveyed for invasive terrestrial plants and a management plan developed to provide a course of action in addressing any identified concerns. There is no cost to the landowner to participate, nor any obligation to undertake the management recommendations provided in the plan.

Early detection is key to protecting your woodlands. Engaged, informed landowners are critical in both prevention and early detection efforts. Landowners with the ability to identify the most common, non-native invasive plants (such as shrubby honeysuckle, autumn olive, Japanese barberry, multiflora rose and garlic mustard) and stay alert to changes in their woodlands have the greatest likelihood of detecting problems early and responding swiftly. Through this program we aim to provide participating landowners with as much educational and technical assistance as required.



The District's Joe Dembeck takes a closer look at Japanese barberry found in a 2020 property survey. jbrockway photo

To learn more about the program and how to participate, visit [Somerset County SWCD web site somersetswcd.org/ invasive-plants](http://SomersetSWCD.org/invasive-plants), email info@somersetswcd.org or call Joe at 207-474-8323. Participation is limited - contact us today to be sure your property makes it onto the survey schedule!

Gain a better understanding of the
invasive plants on your property

Learn actions you can take to
effectively remove or control
invasive plants

No cost to participate

No obligation to pursue
management actions

Assistance Available for Farmers, Landowners

If you are a farmer or landowner interested in learning about programs and financial assistance, our partners with the USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service provide a broad range of possibilities. USDA-NRCS offers voluntary conservation programs that benefit agricultural producers and the environment.

To learn more about USDA-NRCS you can visit:
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/me/programs/>

For Somerset County landowners and farmers we strongly suggest contacting NRCS staff members Nick Pairitz (District Conservationist) or Alexis Clune (Soil Conservationist) at the Skowhegan Field Office, 207-474-8323 to learn more about programs that can assist you.

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2021 Trout Sales: Rainbow & Brook Trout Order Deadlines Draw Near



Photo by Patrick Hendry on Unsplash

In 2021 the District again hosts two separate trout sales. The Brook Trout are sourced from MicMac Farms in Caribou. Rainbow Trout are sourced from Spectrum Trout of Paris. Order forms are available for download from our [Web site](#).

Stocking permits from Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife in Augusta must be obtained before trout can be ordered. The permit application is available on our [Web site](#).

NOTE: The person picking up the trout order MUST be named on the stocking permit.

"We are happy to assist with your permit application and sales order - please call us! 207-474-8323 x4."

BROOK TROUT

\$3.50 each

Orders Due:

May 14

Pick Up:

May 19

RAINBOW TROUT

\$2.75 each

Orders Due:

June 3

Pick Up:

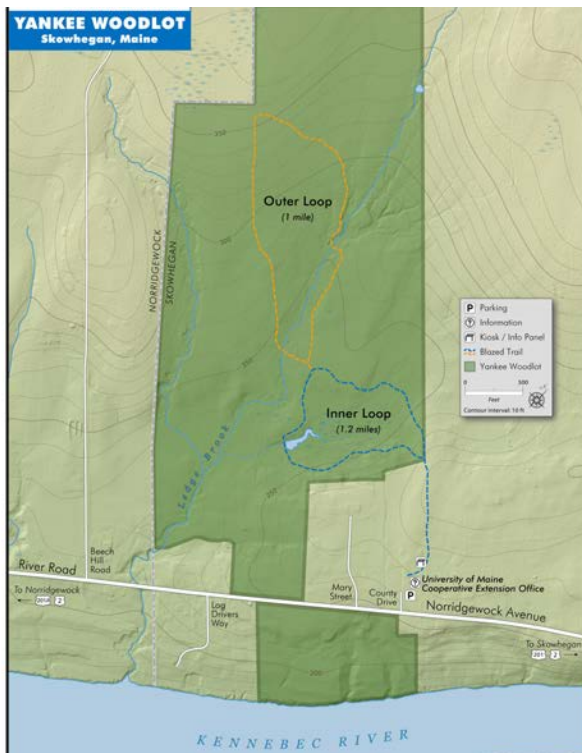
June 5

INFO, ORDER FORMS & PERMIT APPLICATION:
<https://www.somersetswcd.org/trout-sales>



70 East Madison Rd
Skowhegan, ME 04976

Learn & Explore at Yankee Woodlot



Hidden away behind the Cooperative Extension building in Skowhegan, the Yankee Woodlot Demonstration Forest offers walking trails and educational opportunities year-round. Two primitive trail loops offer approx. 2 miles of hiking through mixed woods and along Ledge Brook. A trail map and more information and blogs can be found online at our web site, somersetswcd.org/yankee-woodlot or on Maine Trail Finder.

A collaborative effort of the Maine Forest Service and the Somerset County SWCD, the Yankee Woodlot is designed to demonstrate woodlands management for multiple objectives, including production of high-quality forest products, creation and maintenance of diverse wildlife habitat and non-motorized recreational users.

This spring, a series of beautiful interpretive panels by Maine Audubon and the Forestry for Maine Birds program will be installed along the inner loop trail. Additional panels will provide information about the management choices made during the most recent timber harvest. Tree identification tags are also on this loop. Check it out! For summer workshops at the YWL, see page 2.