

**Grassland birds are declining faster than any other group of birds in the region.** In the last 50 years, over 75% of grassland species have seen population losses in Vermont and New Hampshire. Bobolink populations have dropped by 59%-71%, and more than 95% of our Eastern Meadowlarks have disappeared. Most grassland bird species are of conservation concern in each state, if not threatened or endangered.

**Agriculture and grassland birds can coexist.** With its legacy of agriculture and remaining open lands, the Upper Valley can play an important role in providing havens for grassland birds. Following some simple management guidelines will help ensure that grassland birds remain a unique part of the Upper Valley's rich heritage.

*Eastern Meadowlark*



*Bobolink*



*Bobolink nest*



## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

On lands used for forage production, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers incentives for grassland habitat conservation. In New Hampshire, Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) can provide financial assistance for landowners with grasslands, pastures, and rangelands.

To learn more, visit the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) website [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov). Click on the upper right "state websites" link to locate your nearest NRCS office.

Or call your local USDA Service Center in the phone book under "U.S. Government, Agriculture Department."

Produced in partnership between the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and New Hampshire Audubon.

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 **VERMONT CENTER  
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*Uniting People and Science for Conservation*



# Grassland Bird Conservation



IN THE UPPER VALLEY



**MOWING FIELDS IN JUNE AND JULY DESTROYS ACTIVE NESTS AND REDUCES AVAILABLE HABITAT FOR RENESTING.**

**G**rassland birds thrive in large, open landscapes with few trees and shrubs. During the breeding season from May to August, most species build their nests on the ground, concealed in clumps of grass, and feed insects to their young. Grassland birds in the Upper Valley include the Bobolink, Savannah Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark.

**Grassland birds have always been a part of our natural heritage in the northeastern U.S.,** although the bulk of their population inhabits the Midwest and Great Plains. Here in New England, their populations expanded after land was cleared for agriculture during European settlement. With the decline of agriculture in recent decades, however, grassland birds have been disappearing. Moreover, modern machinery and earlier maturing grasses allow landowners to mow their hayfields 2 to 3 weeks earlier in the season, and more frequently compared to 50 years ago. These practices are less compatible with the nesting needs of grassland birds.

Cover photo: Doug Gimler ; Top: Jamie Sydorak

Photos from left: Denis Fornier, Mike Allen, Steven Kersting





## GRASSLAND BIRD-FRIENDLY MANAGEMENT ON OPEN MEADOWS, HAYFIELDS, AND PASTURES

**G**ood grassland bird habitat is at least 10 acres in size, approximately square (as opposed to long and narrow), and dominated by grasses with some legumes and flowering plants. The larger the grassland area and the more open the surrounding landscape, the more grassland bird species it can potentially support. These management guidelines can be applied to any fields that can support grassland birds:

**In hayfields, waiting as late as possible to cut will greatly increase nest survival.** Hay or brush hog after July 15, or ideally August 1 to reduce nest destruction.

**Pick up the grass at least every 1 to 3 years to promote regrowth,** and remove hay bales immediately following mowing.

**Reduce grazing in areas where birds are nesting** to provide adequate nesting cover and to prevent nest trampling. Fewer grassland birds species use pasture, but Savannah Sparrows and Eastern Meadowlarks will use these shorter grasses. Alternatively, where grassland birds appear to be most active, select one or more paddocks to leave ungrazed from Memorial Day weekend through mid-July or August 1.

**Prevent establishment of invasive plants and woody shrubs.** Invasive plants and shrubs overtake fields from the edges. Grassland birds avoid nesting near field edges so it is safe to mow around the edges of fields as frequently as needed to prevent encroachment. For help identifying unwanted plants that invade grasslands, contact your local NRCS office.

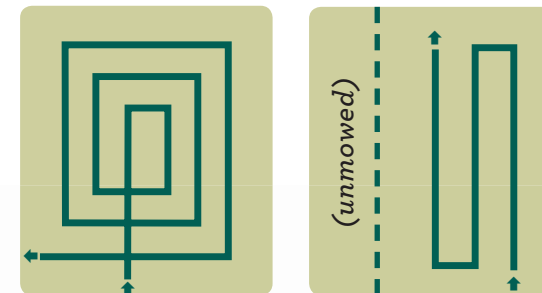
**Plan invasive plant removal and reseeding with a long-term view.** Adult grassland birds generally return to the same fields each year, unless land use has changed. Tilling and reseeding the field may be needed to control invasive plants, rendering the field useless for birds 3 to 5 years in the short-term, but leaving it better for birds and forage quality over the long-term. Restore fallow fields into grasses by brush hogging and reseeding with a mix of native warm season grass species if possible. For help selecting and applying seed mixes, contact your local NRCS or conservation district office.

**Implement the 65-day Haying Program.** The VT and NH NRCS offers compensation for this practice for qualifying farms (see back panel). Complete the first harvest of

hay and apply manure by June 1. Mow the second harvest of hay at least 65 days later. This practice allows for at least two cuts per season, and provides enough time for birds to reproduce between harvests.

**If mowing multiple fields, consider mowing last the most beneficial sections for grassland birds:** after July 15, ideally after August 1. To increase nutrient content of later-cut hay, incorporate late-maturing grasses, preferably a mix of warm species like Big Bluestem.

**Mow fields from the center outwards, or towards unmowed areas (see below).** This will provide cover for escaping birds, especially young grassland birds who cannot fly for up to 10 days after leaving the nest.



**Your late-hayed fields and open meadows may serve as a critical refuge for birds** which have been displaced from nearby fields that were hayed early in the summer. These late-hayed fields may also serve as important staging areas for grassland birds prior to and during their migration.

**Coordinate your management.** Encourage your neighbors to follow the management practices in this brochure. Avoid fragmenting habitat in your parcels, and maintain openness with adjacent meadows.

**Implementing the 65-day Haying Program allows for at least two cuts per season and provides enough time for birds to reproduce between harvests.**



Photos from top left: Jamie Sydoriak (3)  
Pam Hunt (bottom right)

**Savannah Sparrow**