



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 New England. Bobolink populations have dropped by 60%–75%, and more than 95% of our Eastern Meadowlarks have disappeared. Most grassland bird species are of conservation concern in New England states, and often even threatened or endangered.

Agriculture and grassland birds can coexist. With its legacy of agriculture and valued pastoral landscapes, New England can play an important role in providing havens for grassland birds. Following some simple management guidelines will help ensure that grassland birds remain an integral part of New England’s rich heritage.



Bobolink

Bobolink nest

Eastern Meadowlark

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

On lands used for forage production, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers incentives for grassland habitat conservation.

To learn more about incentives and resources available, visit the *Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) website* www.nrcs.usda.gov. Click on the upper right “state websites” link to locate your nearest NRCS office.

For guidance on hay and pasture management:

University of VT Extension
www.uvm.edu/extension

University of NH Cooperative Extension
matt.tarr@unh.edu
603-862-3594



Vermont Center for Ecostudies
www.vtecostudies.org

Grassland Bird Conservation



IN NEW ENGLAND



Bobolink (female)

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

Grassland 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, well-concealed in the grass, and feed insects to their young. Grassland birds in New England include the Bobolink, Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, Upland Sandpiper, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

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.

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

Beneficial grassland bird nesting habitat is at least 10 acres in size, square or round (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.

Cutting hay as late in the season as possible will greatly increase nest survival. Hay or brush hog after July 15, or ideally August 1 to ensure fledged young are developed enough to fly away. Some NRCS programs provide assistance to qualifying landowners for carrying out these practices (see back panel).

Harvest the hay after mowing 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. 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 and spread of invasive plants and woody shrubs. Invasive plants and shrubs overtake fields from the edges. Because grassland birds avoid nesting near field edges, it is safe to mow around the edges of fields as frequently as needed to prevent encroachment by invasive plants. For help identifying unwanted plants that invade grasslands, contact your local Extension office (see back panel).

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 will result in quality bird habitat and forage crops over the long-term. Restore fallow fields into grasses by brush hogging and reseeding. For help selecting and applying seed mixes, contact your local NRCS or conservation district office.

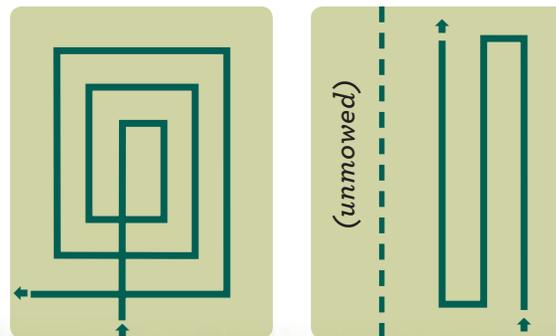
Implement the 65-day Haying Program. In some states the NRCS offers compensation for this practice for qualifying farms. Complete the first harvest of hay and apply manure by June 1. Mow the second harvest of hay at least 65 days later. This practice

allows for at least two cuts per season, and provides enough time for birds to reproduce between harvests.

If mowing multiple fields, consider mowing sections most beneficial to birds last (after July 15, ideally after August 1).

To increase nutrient content of later-cut hay, incorporate late-maturing grasses, preferably a mix of warm-season species such as Big Bluestem.

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



Coordinate your management. Encourage your neighbors to follow management practices that benefit grassland birds. Avoid fragmenting the open habitat in your parcels.

Delaying mowing until late July is the most beneficial option for birds, and the NRCS and Extension can provide assistance and sometimes even financial incentives for this practice.



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

Savannah Sparrow