

Participants at a workshop co-run by VCE in Amherst, NH learn how to survey grassland birds in the field.



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Grassland Ambassadors

Conserving Our Cultural and Ecological Heritage. | BY LIZA MORSE

Squinting, binoculars in hand, we scan the field for movement. Soon our efforts are rewarded with an explosion of flight as a male Bobolink emerges from the grass, circling his domain with a bubbly R2-D2-like song. The female proves more elusive, but soon she emerges from the grass, and, not to be overlooked, a male Savannah Sparrow sings out with a buzzy *tsip-tsip-tsip-tsee-srrr*. It is late May in St. Johnsbury, and a group of local landowners, or Grassland Ambassadors as we call them, have gathered at the property of Karen Bufka to learn about managing for and monitoring the birds on their own land.

Like many grassland landowners in Vermont, Karen relies on a local farmer to hay her field. Thankfully, this year Karen and her farmer were able to delay mowing until after the Bobolink nesting period. But as the number of Vermont farmers declines, haying—delayed or otherwise—may become increasingly difficult. Vermont’s farming population is aging; a 2002 report from the Vermont Council on Rural Development found that the average age of principal operators of Vermont farms was 54, up from 49 in 1978. The study also found that the percentage of Vermont farmers whose principal occupation was farming had decreased 20% between 1974 and 2002. With mounting economic challenges facing farmers, younger Vermonters may be prevented from entering the profession or taking on the family farm, likely exacerbating this trend away from farming.

You may wonder why a wildlife conservation organization should be concerned about agricultural decline. It comes down to the inexorable link between

human land use and grassland birds. In an otherwise forested state, Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows—the target species of VCE’s Grassland Ambassadors program—exist on the landscape largely as a result of agricultural activities that maintain open grasslands.

In the face of a declining agricultural economy and plummeting grassland bird populations worldwide, conservation of grassland birds in Vermont represents a welcome opportunity to conserve both our cultural and ecological heritage. By working with farmers and owners of grassland habitats to find a pragmatic balance between human and avian needs, VCE’s Grassland Ambassadors program aims to do just that. Thanks to these farmers and landowners who go on to champion the conservation of grassland birds in their own communities, our outreach initiates—as Karen Bufka put it—“a powerful ripple effect.” Start a ripple effect in your community by contacting us at grasslands@vtecostudies.org. ^{FN}