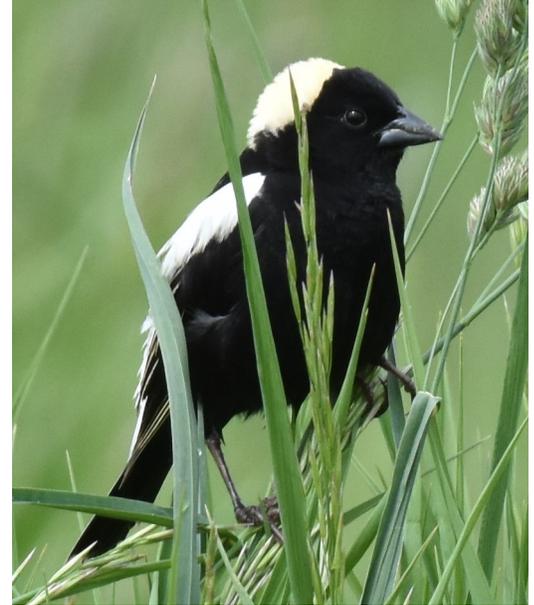


Grassland Habitat Conservation

by Laura Suomi-Lecker, Technical Director
Somerset County Soil and Water Conservation District
www.somersetswcd.org

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.



Unfortunately, this remarkable bird species is in trouble. Steep population declines have put them on the State of the Birds *Watchlist* of birds of highest conservation concern since 2014. Grassland birds as a whole have suffered the steepest declines of all U.S. birds (www.stateofthebirds.org).

Bobolink Summer Calendar

Bobolinks arrive in Maine starting in early May. Nests are built beginning from the end of May through early June, and consist of a well concealed cup of grass placed on the ground in a field. Nestlings, tended by both the male and female, are fed exclusively insects, while adults also consume a variety of weed seeds. Nestlings mature through June and into July and in Maine are generally flighted by July 15-20th. Thus, delaying a field cut until this date allows the birds a good chance to have some nesting success.

In addition to threats to grassland habitat from re-forestation and development, changes in timing and frequency of hay harvesting have further hastened grassland bird species decline. Bobolinks, meadowlarks, and sparrow species require undisturbed fields for nesting. Haying occurs earlier and more frequently in recent decades, coinciding with the nesting period. Even fields not used for hay production are often cut during the nesting timeframe. Thus, the human impact on breeding populations is significant and results in widespread nesting failure across much of Maine's habitat each year.

What can we do? Delaying a field cut until July 15th will allow the birds a chance of nesting success. However, if the field is not needed as livestock feed, leaving grassland standing until August 15 or later is a great practice to allow grassland birds, pollinators, and other wildlife feed and cover.

For farmers that need to produce high quality feed on fields with nesting bobolinks, leaving un-mowed blocks within the field is an option to save some nesting habitat. The bigger and the more compact the blocks are, the better. Birds will concentrate nesting activities in field centers, as this offers the best protection from predators. Contact the Somerset SWCD for assistance with block layout.

Finally, even if you do not have a large field, you can provide food and cover for birds. Consider letting mowed areas 'go natural'.

Shrinking your managed lawn and letting the rest grow wild will save you labor, time and fuel costs while helping wildlife at the same time. The more natural grassland area we can create and maintain in our landscape, the greater the benefit. In addition to helping grassland birds, this type of habitat provides food and cover for many birds and pollinators as well as other wildlife. In turn, encouraging beneficial birds and insects can provide a natural tool for weed and pest control.

So take some time this summer to enjoy the sights and sounds of beautiful grassland birds. Help provide and protect bobolink habitat and you will likely be rewarded by their return year after year. Contact the Somerset County Soil and Water Conservation District office for more information on our Ag Allies grassland bird education and assistance program. Ag Allies has worked statewide with landowners farmers, and land trusts to increase nesting success of grassland birds through on-farm incentive payments, technical assistance, outreach and education. (<https://www.somersetswcd.org/ag-allies>).



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. Photo by Glori Berry, courtesy of Avian Haven.