



Ag Allies Grassland Bird Project

Somerset County Soil & Water Conservation District

Land Trusts Can Make a Difference for Grassland Birds

Land trusts can be leaders in grassland habitat conservation, by adopting sustainable best-fit field management regimes that allow space for nesting and increase the public understanding and awareness of this issue. Damariscotta River Association's Great Salt Bay Farm was a pilot location in 2017. In 2018, the DRA co-sponsored a Cornell Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative funded project to provide technical and financial assistance to help land trusts add grassland bird management practices to fields within their stewardship. These incentive funds will be used in the 2019 field season, and we anticipate continuing the incentives program in 2020.



Male Bobolink, L. Suomi-Lecker 2018

Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) are an iconic sight each spring in the fields and meadows of Maine. In addition to being a delight to see and hear, bobolinks and other grassland birds are true agricultural allies to central Maine farmers as these birds consume large quantities of both insect and weed pests each growing season. Unfortunately, steep population declines have put them on the *Watchlist* of birds of highest conservation concern since 2014.

The Ag Allies project at Somerset County Soil & Water Conservation

District works with landowners across the state, including land trusts, to better manage open lands for grassland bird breeding success.

Bobolinks, meadowlarks, and sparrow species require undisturbed hayfields for nesting. Hay harvesting occurs earlier and more frequently in recent decades, often coinciding with the nesting period. In addition, fields not used for forage production are often cut during nesting timeframe. Thus, the human impact on grassland bird breeding success is significant and results in widespread nesting failure across much of Maine's habitat each year.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Ag Allies Services

- **Technical Support:** We work with field managers across the state to make best-fit management changes to meet the needs of both birds and farmers.
- **Outreach Assistance:** We provide field signage to educate and raise awareness and can assist with community outreach to celebrate your support of grassland birds.
- **Incentive Payments:** Farmer incentive payments may be available to help offset the cost of bird-friendly management changes.

Financial Support for Ag Allies' work with land trusts is generously provided by Cornell Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative and Blake-Nuttall Fund.

What Makes Good Grassland Bird Habitat?

- Fields need to be undisturbed during breeding season – mid May to mid July.
- Depending on landscape, a single field should be 8 or more acres for bobolink and Savannah sparrow habitat; likely 15 or more for Meadowlark or the other grassland sparrows.
- Fields should be a mix of grasses and forbs, with little to no woody-stemmed vegetation. Timothy-clover fields are the “standard” old grassland bird mix.
- Fields should be maintained with lime and fertilizer as needed. Timing and type of materials applied are critical. Avoid application during the breeding season.
- Field configurations that are rectangular or circular (i.e. ones with a large area in the center) are much better than long, skinny fields.
- Any walking or ATV paths should be located around field edges rather than through the center.
- Field vegetation should be fairly dense, with not much bare ground visible.
- Fields should be cut every year to maintain habitat conditions.
- A nearby water source or marsh is a great attraction!

Nesting Calendar

Bobolinks arrive in central Maine around May 10-15 and numbers increase through late May.

Nests are built beginning the end of May through early July. Bobolink nests consist of a well-concealed cup of grass placed on the ground in a field. Bobolinks will not build their nests within 50 m of field edges.

Nestlings are tended by both the male and female, and are fed exclusively insects, while adults also consume a variety of seeds. Successful fledglings leave the nests and are flying by mid July.

Questions about managing your property for grassland birds? We're here to help! Contact us for free assistance and information on our incentive program.

Making Room for Grassland Birds in Maine's Rural, Agricultural Landscape