



# Protecting Grassland Bird Habitat

## FACT SHEET FOR LANDOWNERS



More than 90% of grassland bird populations declined in eastern North America between 1966 and 1989 - a rate higher than any other type of wildlife in North America.

Birds are an important part of biodiversity in the Credit River watershed. Through their songs, movement and visual presence, birds connect us to nature. Sadly, according to many researchers, species of grassland birds are at risk of becoming extinct both in the Credit River Watershed and within Canada<sup>1</sup>. Over the last 50 years, growth and harvesting of hay and a shift to alfalfa crops has contributed to the decline of suitable habitat for grassland birds.<sup>2</sup>

Our watershed is home to four Grassland birds designated as “Species at Risk”, meaning that they are in danger of extinction or of disappearing from Canada. These species include:

- **Henslow’s Sparrow** (Endangered)
- **Bobolink** (Threatened)
- **Eastern Meadowlark** (Threatened)
- **Common Nighthawk** (Special Concern)

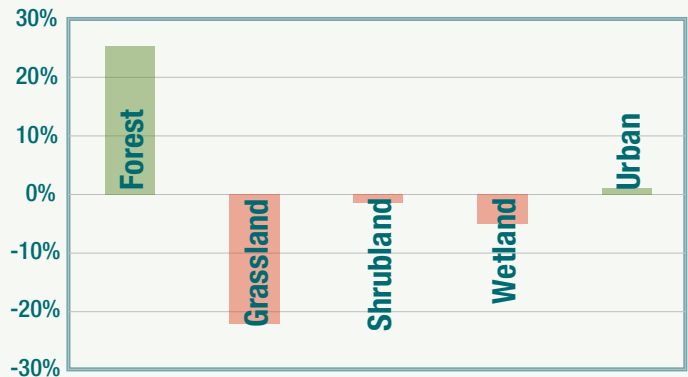
see [www.creditvalleyca.ca/grassland-bird-factsheet](http://www.creditvalleyca.ca/grassland-bird-factsheet) for more information

### Threats to grassland birds:

Local grasslands and meadows face intensive pressure from urban sprawl, farming and direct habitat loss. These pressures have negatively impacted grassland birds resulting in population declines since the mid-1900’s. This is due in part to the increased mechanization and intensification of hay harvesting and crop conversion.<sup>4</sup>

Recent breeding bird surveys<sup>5</sup> indicate that grassland birds, as a group, have declined more than any other type of bird in North America and are continuing to decline at alarming rates<sup>6</sup>. Grassland birds are threatened by habitat loss due to changes in land use and cover type. These grassland birds create their nests on the ground in tall grass fields in early June. Peak hay harvesting season is late May to early June. Nests and fledglings can be protected if harvest is delayed in fields where active nests are found.

### Net Gain/Loss of Birds by Habitat Type



Proportion of species that show long-term, statistically-significant population trends in North America, based upon Breeding Bird Atlas results from 2001 - 2005<sup>3</sup>.

### Why protect Grassland Birds?

Birds provide ecological services such as seed dispersal, pollination, and pest control. The benefits of protecting grassland birds include:

- **Fewer pest insects:** a pair of grassland bird species can consume over 5kg of insects during a growing season<sup>7</sup>.
- **Lower incidences of rodents**<sup>8</sup>
- **Increased pollination** of flowers and crops.

Grasslands also represent an important ecological legacy in our watershed. For thousands of years prior to settlement, the environment here in Ontario was dotted with numerous and often vast areas of prairie grasslands.

## How you can protect Grassland Birds:

Grassland birds have 3 main requirements:

- Large expanses of connected grasslands creating a 'grassland landscape'. Most grassland-nesting birds won't nest in fields smaller than a certain size (10-50 ha), but smaller fields that are close together can provide linked habitat.
- Suitable grassland vegetation. Grassland birds prefer native tall grass species that conceal and protect their nests which are on the ground.

Safe nesting areas in the summer; and suitable winter habitat for wintering grassland birds.



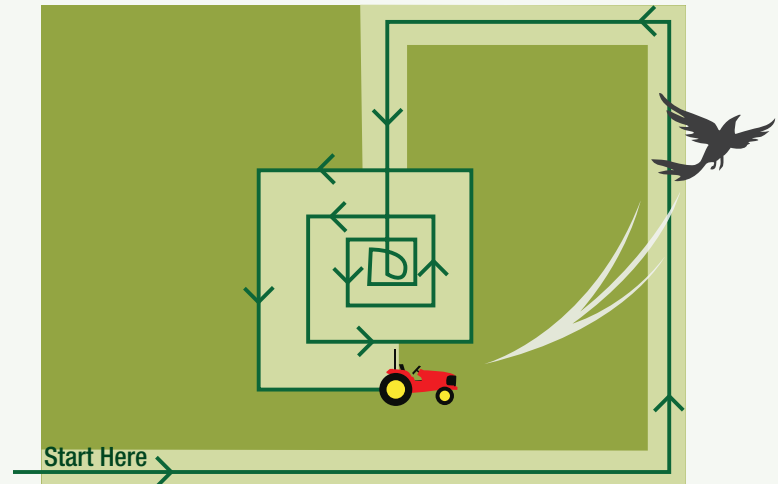
Bobolink nest in a hay field

The collective impact of many landowners taking action can be profound. As a farmer or local landowner you can take the following action to protect grassland bird species on your field:

1. **Cut later:** wait until July 15th to avoid disruption of nesting sites.
2. **Plant late-season grasses** such as Timothy instead of Orchard Grass.
3. **Rotate cutting of areas and grazing** in fields to allow natural regeneration of soils and grasses.
4. **Modify cutting speed (slower) and pattern (spiral out from the middle).**
5. **Increase cutting height** to a minimum of 6 inches.
6. **Practice "Conservation Tillage"** by lowering the frequency and intensity of mechanized soil disturbance.
7. **Restore your field** to a native grassland ecosystem, if possible.

## Cut Slowly in a Spiral

Give the birds time to escape.



Growing late-season hay can be a viable option for landowners and managers to protect grassland bird habitat. Late season hay can be used as bedding hay, fodder for mature livestock with good body condition (cows, sheep, horses) and mulch. The benefits of late-season hay harvesting include the protection of fledglings and nesting site habitat for rare grassland bird species, as well as shorter hay drying times.

## Tax Savings Opportunities:

**Conservation Easements** re-zone your land for conservation use only. The resulting decrease in property value is applied as a tax credit.

**Canada-Ontario Environmental Farm Plan** In this program, landowners develop environmentally-friendly management plans for their farms in order to access cost-share funds.

[Interested in incentives and cost-share programs available to you?](#)

Contact CVC's Agricultural Extension Program Coordinator

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<sup>1</sup>Friesen, L. 1994. A literature review on wildlife habitats in agricultural landscapes. COESA Report No.: RES/ MAN-009/94

<sup>2</sup>Bollinger, E.K. and T.A. Gavin. 1992. Ecology and conservation of eastern Bobolink populations. Pages 497-506 in J. Hagan and D. Johnston (eds). Ecology and Conservation of Neotropical Migrant Landbirds. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

<sup>3</sup>McCracken, J.D. 2010. Where the bobolinks roam - the plight of North America's grassland birds. Bird Studies Canada.

<sup>4</sup>ibid

<sup>5</sup>ibid

<sup>6</sup>ibid

<sup>7</sup>McGaughey, E. 2004. Birds on the farm: a stewardship guide. Ontario Nature.

<sup>8</sup>ibid

Front Photo: Bobolink by Kris Vande Sompel