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Savannah Sparrow

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) provides a number of programs that provide financial assistance to landowners for enhancing wildlife habitat.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat primarily on private land. Through WHIP, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service provides both technical assistance and up to 75 percent cost-share assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat with agreements that generally last from 5 to 10 years. For grassland songbirds, this includes cost-share for delayed mowing of hayfields.

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/vt/programs/farmland/?cid=nrcs142p2_010530/

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was reauthorized in the 2002 Farm Bill to provide a voluntary conservation program for farmers that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible national goals. EQIP offers financial and technical help to assist eligible participants install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land. For grassland songbirds, this includes incentive payments for delayed second cuts after early June harvests.

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/vt/programs/farmland/?cid=nrcs142p2_010526/

See the NRCS websites for information on local service centers, or contact

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Conserving Grassland Birds in the Northeast: A Landowners Guide



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Bobolink





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Eastern Meadowlark

The Importance of Vermont's Agricultural Legacy to Birds

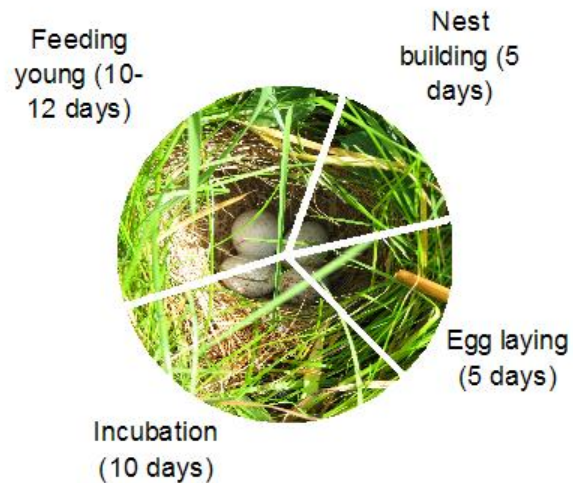
Pastures, hayfields, and other open farm land in Vermont and the Northeast support large populations of Bobolinks, Savannah Sparrows, Eastern Meadowlarks, and American Kestrels. Rarer species such as Northern Harriers, Upland Sandpipers, and Grasshopper Sparrows can still be found locally, as well. All of these birds are completely dependent on open habitats for nesting and raising young.

However, for several reasons, many of these grassland birds have been declining in recent decades. Farmland has reverted to forest as farming has been declined. Agricultural land has also been converted to housing and other developments. Finally, farmers have adopted more intensive management practices that make it much more difficult for grassland birds to raise their young.

Owners of agricultural lands and other open areas can make a real difference in protecting these species by employing bird-friendly management practices while still harvesting forage and enjoying the open vistas and wildlife these habitats provide. By so doing, they can help preserve both Vermont's agricultural landscape and the birds that inhabit it for future generations.

Dependent on Dairy

Grassland birds complete their entire reproductive cycle within the confines of current or former agricultural habitats. Although males may venture to trees or hedgerows to sing, nesting activities take place within the fields. Nests are built on the ground and are constructed mainly of dry grasses. Most insects that are fed to the young are captured from within the fields. For small songbirds, the nesting cycle lasts about 6 weeks, with up to 10 additional days before the young are capable of sustained flight.



Because cutting a field causes virtually all eggs and young birds to perish, these birds are vulnerable to modern farm management with short cutting intervals. First hay cuts typically occur in late May and early June to maximize the protein content of the forage, and second cuts take place only about 5 weeks later. This cutting schedule does not leave sufficient time for adults to successfully raise young. Further, rotation rates in pastures are also short enough that nests are subjected to increased risk of trampling.

What you can do:

Researchers at the University of Vermont have been studying grassland birds with an eye toward management practices that can provide high quality habitat for grassland birds. The following practices are some of the most important bird-friendly management activities:

1. For the best habitat for grassland birds, delay cutting fields until late in the nesting season (after August 1). By this time most young have left the nest and are capable of sustained flight.
2. For fields that cannot be cut that late, delay cutting until after the 4th of July. Many birds will be able to raise young by that date.
3. To prevent encroachment of shrubs and plants like goldenrod, cut fields at least every other year; annual cuts are best.
4. Remove hay to provide the best conditions for regrowth of grass. Birds are more likely to settle in fields that green up quickly in the spring.
5. Birds will continue to nest in uncut portions of fields. Thus, leaving areas with high nesting densities uncut can provide a critical refuge.
6. In grazing systems, fallow paddocks provide important habitat for grassland birds.
7. If forage quality is of primary importance, an early cut (before 1 June) followed by a 65-day period of rest will provide sufficient time for birds to rene on cut fields. Shorter cutting intervals will lead to nest failure.
8. Consistency in management important! Birds are faithful to nesting fields, such that delayed mowing for several years followed by an early cut is the worst possible management scenario.



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Upland Sandpiper