

Audubon New York Launches Grassland Bird Conservation Effort

By Michael Burger, Ph.D.

IN FALL OF 2003, Audubon New York launched a new effort to conserve grassland birds and their habitats in New York State. As a first step for the new program, Audubon will play a leadership role in working with other organizations and institutions to comprehensively assess the grassland situation in New York. We will be working to identify opportunities for action as well as conservation objectives and strategies. Addressing these topics will require the combined expertise and efforts of many organizations that have a stake in grassland management and conservation, including federal and state agency personnel, other conservation organizations, and farmers. Audubon will convene the partnership described above and serve as facilitator and coordinator. In addition, Audubon New York will create its own outreach program targeting private landowners because they control the majority of agricultural grasslands in the state and will play a major role in the conservation of grassland birds.

The need for the new grassland conservation program was identified through Audubon's recently completed strategic planning process. It came as no surprise that this emerged as a top bird conservation issue in the state. As a group, grassland birds are declining faster than birds of any other habitat type. Trends from the Breeding Bird

Survey (BBS) indicate sharp declines in New York populations of many grassland bird species since 1966, when the BBS began. For example, 99% of the Henslow's Sparrows, 97% of the Grasshopper Sparrows, 96% of the Vesper Sparrows, and 84% of the Eastern Meadowlark have disappeared from New York in that time. Even the relatively common Bobolink has declined by nearly 60%. What is even more alarming is that these trends often mirror those seen across the entire ranges of these species during the same period. Grassland birds are in trouble practically everywhere, and not just in states at the edge of these species' ranges.

Compared to other terrestrial habitats, grasslands are very dynamic. Their availability and quality as habitat can change rapidly, depending on economics and management decisions made by the individual landowners. Grasslands are patchily distributed in most parts of the state, and their management through mowing, grazing, burning, planting, and fallowing changes frequently—often yearly. The patchy and dynamic nature of most grasslands poses a challenge to managers trying to conserve the wildlife associated with this agro-ecosystem.

The main threats to grassland bird breeding habitats appear to be agricultural management regimes that are incompatible with successful nesting, permanent conversion of agricultural grasslands to non-agricultural uses

through residential or industrial development, and successional habitat changes due to farm abandonment or lack of management. All of these activities usually make grasslands less suitable or unsuitable as grassland bird habitat. To provide good bird habitat, grasslands require periodic management (e.g. mowing and grazing) so that they do not turn into shrublands and eventually forests, but management should not be so intensive that birds are unable to successfully complete their nesting cycles. Some agricultural grasslands, such as hayfields and pastures, can provide important habitats for some grassland bird species while at the same time remaining part of working farms. However, we need to know more about which management practices are compatible with grassland bird conservation and how willing private landowners would be to implement these methods. These are among the questions and challenges to be addressed by the new program.

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Audubon New York reaches out to landowners to encourage forest stewardship and management. (See story on page 4)



IBAs on 2nd Round of Nominations

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The Dynamic Duo Protects New York's Environment

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U.S. PITTENGER & CORNELLAR OF ORNITHOLOGY

The Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) is still abundant in many parts of New York, but like many other grassland birds it has experienced significant declines in the past 35 years.



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