

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

People and Wildlife Living in Harmony

Our Native Grasslands and Birds

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Will We Lose Them Forever?

By Joe Coleman

*The Bobolink is gone—
The Rowdy of the Meadow—
And no one swaggers now but me—
The Presbyterian Birds
Can now resume the Meeting
He boldly interrupted that overflowing Day
When supplicating mercy
In a portentous way
He swung upon the Decalogue
And shouted let us prey—
—” The Bobolinks Are Gone”
by Emily Dickinson, c. 1883*

While most people know that neo-tropical forest birds, such as our wood warblers and thrushes, are declining, many people are unaware that grassland bird populations have declined faster and for longer periods than any other group of birds. The reason for this is the loss of our native grasslands. Since the 1950's, grassland and shrub-land in eastern North America **have declined by more than 98 percent** (Noss, Laroe and Scott, Biological Report 28, National Biological Service, Washington DC, 1995).

The novels and poems of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century describe a landscape of small farms edged by hedgerows. Many farmers rotated their crops, leaving fields uncut for entire growing seasons. This resulted in habitats where grassland birds thrived. That landscape has largely disappeared, replaced by sprawling suburbs with well-manicured lawns or large industrial-style farms which are intensely cultivated. Hedgerows have been removed to increase efficiency. All of this has resulted in grassland birds disappearing at a rate that surpasses any other bird species. A look at individual state lists of endangered and threatened species shows that the largest group of birds on most of these lists is grassland bird species. These include Loggerhead Shrike, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper and Northern Harrier. Other birds, such as the Bobolink, have seen their numbers decline drastically in the northeast. In the nineteenth century, Bobolinks numbered in the millions and even were considered a nuisance by some. They were shot by the thousands or captured and sold as cage birds due to their beautiful song and striking appearance. In spite of this, their numbers did not decline until recently when their habitat of meadows and pastures began to disappear.

Many other grassland bird species have seen their numbers plummet even more. The Henslow's Sparrow is now federally listed as threatened. Loggerhead Shrikes have almost disappeared from many states they once frequented. Northern Bobwhite Quail populations have plummeted throughout the east. While there is a great deal of debate



over the reasons, there is little doubt that loss of habitat because of changing agricultural practices and sprawling suburbs is one of the most important reasons. Quail depend on our native bunch grasses to thrive. Unfortunately, fescue grasses, which create thick, matted ground cover and little overhead cover to shield the birds from hawks and the mid-day sun, have come to dominate our agricultural landscape. While fields planted with native bunch grasses are the ideal, fallow “weedy” fields also provide better habitat for Northern Bobwhite Quail. And, it is not only loss of habitat that has caused the sharp decline, but that voracious predator — the domestic cat — has contributed also. Research has shown that domestic cats are a significant factor in declining bird populations. Because of this, the American Bird Conservancy has instituted its “Cat’s Indoors!” campaign for safer birds and cats (see <http://www.abcbirds.org/cats/>).

Historically many people have thought of pre-Columbian eastern North America as dense forest. However, research shows that the eastern forests were not as monolithic as once thought. Forest fires, beavers, and certain soil conditions were important factors in creating and maintaining scrublands, wet meadows and even prairie-like grasslands. Beavers were, and still are in areas where they are allowed to thrive, critical to creating habitats that several threatened and endangered species utilize. Beavers create one of our most productive and lush habitats — wet and moist meadows, mostly on floodplains and on their edges. One can just imagine how much healthier and productive the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve could be if a healthy beaver population was allowed to develop there so these mammals could help in creating natural habitats. Research in other natural areas shows that Banshee Reeks could support and benefit from a much larger beaver population.

Robert Askins, in his book Restoring North America’s Birds, writes “Relatively small changes in management practices, *such as shifting mowing schedules to avoid **the nesting season** [bolding mine], replacing introduced turf grasses, or prescribed burning can improve or create good habitat... People have not only destroyed natural grasslands directly, but they have also interrupted or dampened many of the natural processes of disturbance, such as fires and beaver activity that once created the early successional habitats that grassland species need. Eventually these natural disturbances may be reintroduced to extensive areas in eastern North America. In the near term, however, artificial grasslands represent our best hope for maintaining grassland species.*”

While large natural areas like the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, the Dulles Greenway Wetlands Mitigation Project, the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship, and other natural areas are essential to maintaining and protecting large populations of wildlife, every one of us can make a difference by simply changing some of our own behaviors. Converting a field to warm-season grasses means that it can be hayed in mid-summer after the nesting season is over and still provide nutrient-rich hay for livestock. If you have a field that is not used for hay, it is even easier to cut it only once a year, preferably in late winter. Cutting in late winter (late-February through the first of April) is not only easier, it also allows our local grasslands to provide shelter and food to the many species that depend on them. If you have to cut during the summer due to wet conditions in your fields, do so in mid-July when almost all nesting has finished. This will allow the grasses to grow back and provide some shelter and food during the winter months.

If all of us do our part, the following bird species may thrive once again:

Upland Sandpipers once nested in the Lucketts area of Loudoun County. With thin necks and long tails, they are small-headed sandpipers which live in dry open grasslands. They are now listed as a State Threatened Species in Virginia.

Northern Bobwhite Quail are secretive birds that are more often heard than seen and are found in brushy woods and fields in coveys of up to 20 birds. They are small, rotund game birds, ruddy in color, with a short, dark tail. The male has a white throat and white eye brow stripe, while these are buff in the female. Once seen frequently in Loudoun County, they are now a rare sighting.

Loggerhead Shrikes are similar in size to Northern Mockingbirds. Many birders consider them honorary raptors because of their hook-tipped bill and hawk-like behavior. While an effective hunter, the bird, because of its weak talons, often impales its prey, mostly insects, on thorns and barbed wire. The shrike prefers closely-grazed pastures with bordering hedgerows which it uses for nesting, perching and roosting. While habitat loss, especially the removal of hedgerows, is probably one of the biggest reasons for this bird's decline, there is concern that the spreading of toxic chemicals also may be one of the reasons. Listed as a State Threatened Species in Virginia, they are increasingly difficult to locate in Loudoun County.

Bobolinks are described by Roger Tory Peterson as "solid black below and largely white above, suggesting a dress suit on backwards... Their song, in hovering flight and quivering descent, ecstatic and bubbling, starting with low reedy notes and rollicking upward." Because of their attractive looks and beautiful song, Bobolinks were popular cage birds in the nineteenth century. Caging them is now against the law; however, recent loss of habitat has continued their decline.

Dicksissels are described by Scott Weidensaul in his book, Living on the Wind, as "a lovely finch with a canary-yellow breast and a black goatee" that depends on hayfields, pastures, weedy fallow fields, and the weedy margins of ditches and roadsides. Loss of habitat has sorely reduced their numbers.

Grasshopper Sparrows are secretive birds that sing like an insect. The buff-yellow coloring on their shoulders, in combination with their flat heads, makes them very notable. Because of its secretive nature and small size, this bird is heard a lot more than seen. Generally, it sings from low perches (fence posts, shrubs and tall weeds). While locally common in "weedy fields," it is non-existent in manicured lawns.

Vesper Sparrows are fairly large with distinct white edges to their outer tail feathers, a rusty shoulder, and a thin but distinct eye ring. Their song is sweet and musical. Its decline is directly linked to modern agricultural practices.

Henslow's Sparrows utilize wet meadows and grassy swamps dotted with small shrubs, just the kind of habitat beavers create. Where the Grasshopper Sparrow is buff-yellow, the Henslow's Sparrow is olive-green, though both have flat heads and short tails. Roger Tory Peterson

describes its song as a hiccupping tsi-lick, while James Rising refers to it as an unobtrusive insect-like sound which carries surprisingly far. Henslow's Sparrows are now federally listed as Threatened. It has been some time since any have been found nesting in Loudoun County. Rather than see these birds disappear forever from our area, wouldn't it be wonderful if we were able to see all of these species make a come back in Loudoun County. Together we can make this happen.

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