

Managing Habitat for Farmland (Grassland) Birds

Farms and open space provide habitat for many kinds of birds and wildlife, including pests like non-native European Starlings and House (or English) Sparrows, common birds such as Red-winged Blackbirds and Song Sparrows, and even larger birds such as Wild Turkeys and Mallards. However, one specific group of farmland birds is declining incredibly quickly, and there are even two species in this particular group called “Grassland Birds” that no longer breed in New York.

Grassland birds build their nests directly on the ground in hayfields, pastures, and old fields, and the nests are prone to predation by raccoons, skunks, snakes, foxes, coyotes, and more. The nests can also be flooded during heavy spring rains, and intensively cutting hay and grazing can negatively impact nesting grassland birds. However, these issues are manageable, and relatively minor compared to the permanent loss of agricultural hayfields and pastures that has been occurring since the early 1900’s.

Grassland bird species	Breeds in NY	Overwinters in NY
Northern Harrier	Yes	Yes
Upland Sandpiper	Yes	
Short-eared Owl	No longer	Yes
Sedge Wren	Yes	
Henslow's Sparrow	Nearly gone	
Grasshopper Sparrow	Yes	
Bobolink	Yes	
Loggerhead Shrike	No longer	
Horned Lark	Yes	Yes
Vesper Sparrow	Yes	
Eastern Meadowlark	Yes	Occasionally
Savannah Sparrow	Yes	

Two-thirds (2/3) of New York’s farmland has been lost over the past century. The availability of grasslands on these farms has been further reduced by the shift to crop monocultures (such as corn, soybeans, and winter wheat) that provide little or no grassland bird habitat compared with the diverse, beneficial mixes of grasses and legumes that are common in hayfields and pastures. The grassland birds are the best indicators of the health of New York’s valuable grassland habitat, but many other wildlife species also depend on grasslands for part or all of their lifecycles. Every preserved or created grassland patch demonstrates the private landowner’s commitment to preserving New York’s unique wildlife heritage.

If you own or manage grasslands, such as hayfields, pastures, abandoned fields, or any open, treeless space, here are a few basic tips for improving and managing habitat for grassland birds:

- **Connect “open-space”** – Grassland birds need relatively large fields (20 acres and larger, depending on the species). A small patch surrounded by open space, even if the surrounding fields are not grasslands, is better for grassland birds than a field surrounded by trees.
- **Clean up fence lines** – Although hedgerows provide important habitat for some wildlife, along with other benefits such as erosion control and wind and snow breaks, even small trees and shrubs pose problems for grassland birds, for two reasons. To a bird flying over a field just a couple feet above the grass, a line of brush delineates the edges of a habitat patch and determines how large the field appears to the grassland bird (see the note about “open-space, above). Also, the other wildlife that benefit from hedgerows and brush lines include weasels, raccoons, skunks, foxes, crows, and more—all species that love to eat grassland bird eggs and nestlings. In this special case, reducing the woody corridors that intrude into or border grasslands helps young grassland birds to survive.

- **Control shrubs and woody vegetation in the field** – Abandoned fields make good grassland bird habitat, but only for a few years. Once shrubs and saplings are established the habitat quickly becomes unusable for grassland birds, and bringing it back into good condition becomes harder and more expensive. If a field is large enough to be used by grassland birds, a regular plan of mowing, haying, or grazing is important to keep it as grassland, but timing is crucial (see the following note)! Mowing each patch every 2 or 3 years, or a rotating fraction (1/3 or 1/2 of the patch) each year, is preferable to mowing annually.
- **Time mowing and hay-cutting to allow young grassland birds to escape** – The nests, eggs, and flightless young of ground-nesting grassland birds are obviously vulnerable to the wheels and equipment of mowers and tractors. The following mowing/haying dates are ranked in order of value to breeding grassland birds from highest to lowest:
 1. After 20 August only.
 2. Once before 20 May, and once after 20 August.
The following options will allow only limited successful breeding:
 3. Once before 1 June.
 4. After 20 July only.
- **Maintain a healthy mix of grass and other beneficial plants** – Both native plants (such as goldenrod and some asters) and non-natives (knapweeds, mugwort, and honeysuckles) can easily spread in grasslands. Regular mowing (as soon as possible after the dates listed above) helps maintain healthy grasslands. For some invasive species, more aggressive techniques are needed, such as early spot-mowing to prevent flowering and spread of seeds, or other controls for heavy infestations.
- **When grazing, keep stocking rates low enough to maintain nesting cover** – High intensity grazing (including rotational grazing) removes the vegetation needed as cover for grassland bird nests, exposing the nests to severe weather and visual predators, and also subjects nests to the risk of trampling. Maintaining “refuge patches” that are not grazed are also a critical component of any sound rotational grazing prescription that advertises wildlife benefits. Grazing at low intensities is also extremely useful for maintaining open, grassy fields, although occasional clipping (after the breeding season) is sometimes needed.

Helpful Resources

Because grassland birds are such a high conservation priority, programs are frequently available that provide technical assistance (such as detailed site management plans) and, occasionally, financial support for habitat management (subject to availability and landowner eligibility). These opportunities will be posted on Audubon New York’s website, and more information can be obtained by contacting the Grassland Bird Program, participating landowners, and local NYSDEC and USDA offices and service centers.