

# Habitat Conservation Mowing

by Laura Suomi-Lecker, Technical Director

**Somerset County Soil and Water Conservation District**

[www.somersetswcd.org](http://www.somersetswcd.org)

In recent decades, grassland birds, including species such as Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Savannah Sparrows, are showing the steepest population declines of any group of birds in the Northeast and all of North America, making them a continental conservation priority. As grassland has been developed, overgrown, or replanted to alfalfa, habitat loss is thought to be one of the major contributing factors to their decline.



It is spring and the bobolinks have arrived once again in the fields and meadows of Maine. These birds are most conspicuous from their beautiful, bubbling song, which is punctuated with sharp metallic notes. The male bobolink is a handsome and distinguished black and white bird with a yellow nape, easily identified from quite a distance. These birds are remarkable migrants, arriving here to breed each spring all the way from their winter homes in Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. They travel about 12,500 miles round-trip every year, one of the longest migrations of any songbird in the New World. Throughout its lifetime, a single bobolink may travel the equivalent of four or five circum-navigations of the earth. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, a migrating Bobolink can orient itself with the earth's magnetic field, thanks to iron oxide in bristles of its nasal cavity and in tissues around the olfactory bulb and nerve. Bobolinks also use the starry night sky to guide their travels.

Because they need open hayfields for nesting, bobolinks are natural beneficiaries of dairy and other grassland farms. In fact, it is due to the open fields maintained by farmers that these birds have significant habitat here at all. Unfortunately, however, managing hayfields for production often inadvertently causes nest failure and mortality of nestling bobolinks and other grassland birds. Bobolinks arrive in central Maine around May 10-15 and numbers increase through late May. Early nests are built by May 20-25. Bobolink nests consist of a well-concealed cup of grass placed on the ground in a field. Nestlings are tended by both the male and female, and are fed exclusively insects, while adults also consume a variety of weed seeds. Bobolink babies mature through June and fledge through the end of July. This time frame often comes into conflict with optimizing hay quality - leaving hay standing until the end of July greatly reduces the protein content of the forage. Farmers managing their fields for livestock feed mow their hay at least once and often twice during the nesting time frame, which often results in complete nesting failure. Unlike other grassland birds - such as Savannah Sparrows and Meadowlarks, which may have multiple broods in a season - Bobolinks will nest only once.

So what can be done to help make hay harvest more compatible with grassland bird nesting? *Obviously, any field that isn't needed as livestock feed can be left standing until after August 1.* If you are lucky enough to have bobolinks on your land and can allow them to have standing hayfields through August 1, you will give them (and other grassland birds) their best chance for a successful nesting season, and you may be rewarded by their return to your fields year after year. *For farmers that need to produce high quality feed on fields with bobolink populations, leaving un-mowed blocks within the field can help reduce nestling fatalities.*



This bobolink nestling was found in Somerset County after its nest was destroyed by haying. It was taken to Avian Haven Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center where it was raised until ready for release at the Village Farm property in Freedom.

Photo by Glori Berry, courtesy of Avian Haven

Dr. Peter Vickery, president of the Center for Ecological Research in Richmond, Maine, indicates that given the varied shapes of most hayfields, specific configurations are tough to recommend, but *the bigger and the more compact the blocks are, the better. For instance, a few long strips left in a field are not nearly as good as that same area in a single block or circle. Compact blocks reduce the likelihood of nest predation. Consistency is also important and the same area should be left standing throughout the breeding season, and if possible, year after year.*

Jeff Norment, State Biologist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) suggests that since most grassland birds generally gravitate to field centers, it is best to leave un-mowed nesting areas in the interior of a field as far away from field edges as possible. This will help reduce predation and increase the chance of the blocks being used by nesting birds. Not mowing hay at night or during dawn and dusk can also reduce fatalities.

Polly Shyka and Prentice Grassi of the Village Farm in Freedom have been experimenting with creating bird blocks in their fields for several years now. This year, Prentice says that an area along their vegetable gardens was left un-mowed and many bobolinks were observed using that area. He states that building ecological diversity benefits not only the birds but the farm as well. Encouraging beneficial birds and insects provides a natural tool for weed and pest control on the farm.

So next time you are enjoying the sights and sounds of some of these beautiful grassland birds, thank your local farmer for helping to provide this critical habitat. And if you are interested in creating or enhancing habitat for grassland birds on your land, contact your local NRCS or Soil and Water Conservation District office to find out more information on practices and programs for this purpose. Finally, you can get more information from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. See more photos and hear the beautiful bobolink song at <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/>.