

# Grassland birds in Ontario

## Balancing agriculture and conservation

Birds that nest exclusively in grassland are an important part of Ontario's biodiversity. These migratory species nest in Canada and the USA, and winter in the south. Between 1970 and 2017, the number of grassland birds across North America decreased by 53%, with some species experiencing steep declines. The three species below are listed as at risk in Ontario and Canada.



Hayfields and pastures provide the majority of grassland bird nesting habitat in Ontario. Because grassland birds build their nests directly on the ground, nests are vulnerable to trampling by livestock, destruction by farm machinery, and exposure to predators after heavy grazing and hay harvesting. Population declines are linked to the loss of nesting habitat and intensification of farming practices.

### Suitable habitat

Medium to large grass-dominated fields with few shrubs, adjacent to open areas. Vegetation preferences vary by species. Bobolinks typically nest in grasslands with tall, dense vegetation; whereas, grasshopper sparrows prefer shorter and sparser vegetation. All three species sometimes nest in the same field.



# Conservation on farms

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Farmers who manage agricultural grassland are integral to grassland bird conservation. The actions below aim to balance farm management with providing grassland bird species at risk time and space to raise young in some actively-farmed areas. Targeting areas with the most nesting birds (or most suitable habitat) for conservation actions will have the greatest positive impact.

## In Hayfields

Delay haying until **mid-July** or later

### Alternatives

- Delay as long as possible (even early July is better than mid-June)
- Cut perimeters first, delay interior cut
- Cut fields with high bird abundance last
- Cut large fields last

## In Pastures

Create a nesting refuge: delay grazing until **mid-July** or later

### Alternatives

- Delay as long as possible (even early July provides some birds a chance to raise young)
- Light grazing from late May to the beginning of June (bobolink will stay and renest if enough vegetation remains), then rest paddock until mid-July
- Lengthen rest period after grazing to at least 40 days (if vegetation is short after grazing, bobolink will disperse, but eastern meadowlark and grasshopper sparrow will likely stay and renest)
- Reduce grazing pressure during peak nesting in fields with high bird abundance

MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV

↑  
**peak nesting**

Attempts 2 broods

arrival

breeding

post-breeding & migration



Eastern meadowlark



Grasshopper sparrow



Bobolink

Attempts 2 broods

Attempts 1 brood

Bobolink and eastern meadowlark breeding territories frequently contain more than 1 nesting female; whereas, grasshopper sparrows pair with only 1 mate.