Title

Farmers Leading Grassland Bird Conservation

1. Grassland birds in Ontario

Obligate grassland birds, species that nest exclusively in grassland, are an important part of Ontario's biodiversity. These migratory birds nest in Canada and the USA, and winter in the south. The majority of grassland bird nesting habitat in Ontario is found in grass-dominated hayfields and pastures. Common grassland birds include Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

1. *BOBO*
   1. *Typically nest in lush, grassy hayfields and pastures (prefer tall, dense vegetation)*
   2. *Have short nesting season: mid-May to late July*
   3. *Attempt to raise 1 brood of young*
   4. *Nesting cycle ~28 days (not including nest building)*
   5. *Polygamous (often >1 nesting female in each territory)*
2. *EAME*
   1. *Typically use sparser vegetation than BOBO*
   2. *Start breeding early and have a long nesting season: mid-April to mid-August (arrive in March)*
   3. *Attempt to raise 2 broods*
   4. *Nesting cycle ~30 days (not including nest building)*
   5. *Polygynous (often >1 nesting female in each territory)*
3. *GRSP*
   1. *Found in sparsest, shortest vegetation of these 3 species*
   2. *Moderately long nesting season: Mid-May to mid-August*
   3. *Attempt to raise 2 broods*
   4. *Nesting cycle ~24 days (not including nest building)*
4. Challenges for birds in agricultural grasslands

Over the past 50 years, grassland bird populations have declined markedly in Ontario. Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, and Grasshopper Sparrow populations declined by 80%, 84%, and 79%, respectively, contributing to an overall 53% decrease for grassland bird populations in North America. All three of these species are now listed as at risk. Because grassland birds build their nests directly on the ground, well hidden in the vegetation, nests are vulnerable to trampling by livestock, destruction by farm machinery, and exposure after heavy grazing and hay harvesting.

Farmers who manage agricultural grasslands are critical to grassland bird conservation.

1. Stewardship actions you can do

These actions aim to balance agricultural activities 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 for stewardship actions will have the greatest positive impact.

Hayfields

* Cut hayfields with the most nesting birds late or last
* Cut perimeter, delay cut of interior
* (optional) Cut vegetation high as some species may build new nests in fields cut in June or July **(e.g., GRSP and SAVS)**

Pastures

* Graze pastures with the most nesting birds late, such as July, or last in the rotation
* Lite spring grazing (30-40 cattle-days/ha) from late May to beginning of June **(particularly for BOBO, may also work for EAME and GRSP).**
* Light grazing while most nests in area are active **(particularly for BOBO, may also work for EAME and GRSP)**
* (optional) Lengthen rest period (40 – 45 days) between grazing occasions