Title

Farmers Leading Grassland Bird Conservation

1. Grassland birds in Ontario

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. The majority of grassland bird nesting habitat in Ontario occurs in grass-dominated hayfields and pastures on farms. Grassland bird species at risk are 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*
   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. Bobolink, eastern meadowlark, and grasshopper sparrow populations declined by 80%, 84%, and 79%, respectively, in Ontario, contributing to an overall 53% decrease for grassland birds in North America. All three of these species are listed as at risk. 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.

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

1. Conservation actions on farms

These actions 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 for conservation actions will have the greatest positive impact.

Hayfields

* Cut fields with the most nesting birds late (mid-July or later) or last (early July or later)
* Cut field perimeter, delay cut of interior (until mid-July or later)
* (other) Cut vegetation high as some species may build new nests in fields cut in June or early July **(e.g., GRSP)**

Pastures

* Graze pastures with the most nesting birds late( mid-July or later), or last in the rotation (early July or later)
* Light spring grazing from late May to beginning of June and then rest paddock until mid-July **(particularly for BOBO, likely also benefits EAME and GRSP).**
* Light grazing while most nests in area are active **(mid-May – mid-July; particularly for BOBO, likely also benefits EAME and GRSP)**
* (other) Lengthen rest period (40 – 45 days) between grazing occasions