

Conservation Matters

Title: On Hayfields and Bobolinks

Submitted by: Jennifer Tuthill, Alexandria Conservation Commission

Hayfields have rhythms. They grow, or not. Get rain and moisture, or not. Get cut on time, late, or not at all. Add to this rhythm the timing for cutting hay, adjusting to the whims of weather and schedules. This has been our hay world in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. Thirty or so acres of fairly productive fields which we depend upon to feed four horses and to provide hay for whomever cuts our fields, to be taken for their own use. Every summer we wait anxiously for the weather to provide the needed window of days (at least three) for good haying, and for the schedule of the hay farmer to include us. We hope for two cuts, one in early June and another in the end of July or beginning of August.

This is the hay rhythm that marks our summers. Watching grass grow, watching the weather, trying to predict when optimum cutting will occur. Some years we have been lucky with two excellent cuts, other years we have settled for one late cut.

Then, almost unnoticed at first, Bobolinks appeared. They may have come for a year or two before we knew they were in our fields, but we noticed them one year with a single, late hay cut. Sitting on tall stalks of uncut grasses, Bobolinks are noticeable for the black/white/and yellow markings of the males shown upon taking flight. Their song is a beautiful burbling, melodic melody, unique and appealing. When startled, they fly up and around their nesting area, with their special Bobolink calls. For two consecutive summers we had two pairs of Bobolinks, nesting in the same areas each year. It didn't take long to learn that Bobolinks only nest on the ground, in hayfields and meadows, and that given their ground nests, we were literally mowing over and killing their young with every June or July haying. Full on Bobolink protection began- we avoid walking paths in the field, prevent the dog from running anywhere near, and stop riding the horses nearby. The overall Bobolink population has seriously declined in the past fifty years, due to one very simple fact. Haying. Our agriculture practices have changed. Intensive farming has resulted in earlier, and more frequent, haying of fields. Bobolink populations have been decimated as a result. Farmers I have spoken with have been blissfully ignorant of the Bobolink dilemma, even of their existence. Intent on cutting fields, often with a list of farms to serve, ground nesting birds are not on their radar. The machinery noise causes the birds to fly away before they are noticed by the tractor driver. An occasional fawn left hidden in a field is a constant concern, but not birds. And so what if you mow over a few nests?

Last summer, we had five nesting pairs of Bobolinks in our field. We believe they may be returning birds who originally fledged here, since this species is known to return to the same nesting sites year after year. Luckily, having had a number of single and late cut hay events, our field has provided successful breeding results. Bobolinks are returning here, nesting successfully and requiring the exact same window of time for fledging as needed for a successful hay crop. Cut the hay in June and July, and we kill the birds. Save the birds during June and July, and we lose out on a good first as well as a second cut. We get grass that is past its prime and far less nourishing for livestock. Asking a hay man/woman to skirt around four or five sections of field in order to protect nesting birds is an impossible request, met with incredulity.

We are faced with a serious dilemma every summer: which should take priority, conserving a small number of a possibly almost-endangered bird species, or creating a healthy abundant hay crop to feed our animals? Our management plan is based on providing hay for our horses from our own fields, without needing to buy hay. Our ethics are based on providing good wildlife management and conservation practices. We have agonized over this rhythm of nature as hay season approaches, and as more Bobolinks choose to breed in our hay field. Conservation issues vary, and are often complicated. Our Bobolink issue is both simple, and difficult. And like many things in life, there is no right answer.

To see a short video of one of the Bobolinks in our field, go to <https://youtu.be/ohTQSiHdgnE>

For further Bobolink information, visit The Bobolink Project/Helping Farmers Protect Grassland Birds bobolinkproject.com