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Return of the Grassland Birds

The Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative
Supporting Bird-Friendly Practices on
Working Lands

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RETURN OF THE GRASSLAND BIRDS

INTRODUCTION GABRIELLA HOARD-WEST • BY OCTOBER GREENFIELD

When I think of bird habitat, I don't immediately think of the empty, rolling fields of the Virginia countryside. I think of tall trees reaching to the sky. Sometimes, titlers come from hollows rested within them, and the gently spreading hands of branches cradle a nest neatly created from scrap materials.

A farmer's land is often the home of horses, goats, sheep, cows, and pigs. This working land brings into play the natural cycle of life with smells of fresh-cut hay, manure, old wood, and whiffs of tractor fumes. Perhaps you can hear a stray crow cawing intelligently from the fence line, see the vultures circling nearby, and hear the long, harsh scream from a barn owl.

Reflecting on my morning walk, what I could step on as I stomp through high fields on my farm property, or what the bush hog on the tractor could accidentally hit, nesting birds do not come to my mind. As someone who lives on a horse farm surrounded by the agrarian countryside of Keswick, I had never even considered the incredible impact the seemingly empty grass fields could have on Virginia's birds.

Wildlife habitat restoration coordinator October Greenfield shares with us the importance of grassland birds and the difference we can make in their lives through the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative by supporting bird-friendly practices on working lands.

Once upon a time, Virginia's scenic countryside was enriched by a vibrant chorus of bird-song. With their ashy bright-yellow breast and black V-neck adornment, Eastern meadowlarks serenaded from atop fence posts. With their fuzzy cream-colored bonnets, black and white bobolinks are known as "R2D2 birds" for their bubbly and robotic song. Red-winged blackbirds belting out songs from high perches and showing off their bright shoulder patches.

And the cryptic grasshopper sparrow, whose insect-like buzz and camouflage plumage usually go unseen. These are some of Virginia's iconic grassland birds, which once played a vibrant springtime symphony accompanied by a frenzy of courtship and nest-building activities amidst the growing grasses of meadows and fields. "Grassland birds" is a catch-all phrase encompassing the many species that rely on grasslands for nesting, finding food, and living through the winter. But sadly, more than 80% of America's native grasslands—and more than half the population of grassland

birds (720 million birds)—have been lost since 1970, their songs along with them. Here in Virginia, our iconic northern bobwhite and eastern meadowlarks, for example, have lost more than 75% of their populations. There's no single reason for the decline. Still, the human effects of agriculture, with its modern machinery, use of biocides, and consumer demands, are profound, and grasslands have suffered more than any other North American terrestrial ecosystem. Isn't it ironic, then, that farmlands are the very place where these birds are making a comeback?



Eastern Meadowlark

PERCY ULSAMER

Simple Strategies Make A Big Difference

Our remaining grassland birds have generally adopted hay fields and pasture lands as surrogate habitats. That means that the conservation of these birds falls largely on private landowners and farmers. So, the Piedmont Environmental Council and the Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes came together to form the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI). This creative program is incredible in its simplicity. It partners with farmers and landowners to stem the tide of

grassland bird decline, improve the resiliency of working landscapes, and simultaneously have a positive economic impact on the farmers and overall positive outcomes for all who depend on those lands. With generous funding from The Cornell Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the Sarah K. de Coizart Perpetual Charitable Trust, VGBI pays farmers \$35 per acre for two straightforward bird-friendly changes that we call "best management practices," or BMPs. These practices protect grassland birds during their

vulnerable nesting session while remaining financially viable for farmers.

The program is available to farmers in 16 counties across the northern Virginia Piedmont, Blue Ridge, and Shenandoah Valley. The strategies are simple: delayed haying and summer stockpiling. Delayed haying holds off the first spring cutting of hay on select fields until after July 1. It also keeps livestock, tractor activity, and chemical disturbances off the land until then. This practice is a game-changer for our grassland birds because it allows most of them to raise



Northern Bobwhite

PERCY ULSAMER



Grasshopper Sparrow

BERNADETTE RIGLEY



Savannah Sparrow

OCTOBER GREENFIELD

at least one successful clutch of young. It can also benefit farmers by spreading labor requirements and producing higher-ber mature hay suitable for feeding dry cows, horses, and retired animals. Landowners can also maintain their eligibility for lower taxes through the state's Land Use Valuation program. Fritz Reuter at Little Milan in Fauquier County was one of our first participants, and he says his delayed haying has also offered an ecological benefit. "We produce hay for mulch, which allows us to slowly move the needle toward restoring at least some of the native flora of our hay fields. Delayed cutting correlates nicely with the timing of when our native warm season grasses are most active—in the heat of the summer—and can out-compete dormant vegetation like fescue and orchard grass," he said. Summer pasture stockpiling moves cattle grazing, tractor activity, and chemical disturbances off selected fields between April

15 and July 1 or a little later. This pasture management lets the grass grow to the ideal grass height for nesting birds and results in better soil health and improved forage availability in late summer, which has the additional benefit of reducing hay feeding days and annual feed costs. This practice works very well for protecting grassland bird nests. Plus, we work directly with farmers to choose which fields are enrolled in the program, ensuring they can still meet their grazing needs. Another of our first-year participants was Sam Grant, who leases pastures at Francis Mill Farm in Loudoun County. He participated in the summer pasture stockpiling and is pleased with the results. "The best of this program is how little impact it had on my normal grazing schedule. I delayed grazing the field until mid-July with no negative impact, and the morning visits from birders were discreet and pleasant."

Signs are Good

The first two years of the program have been incredible. Ten farmers formally enrolled 500 acres in the incentives program in our pilot year, and several of those added 1,300 acres without the incentive. In 2023, 19 farmers new to the program enrolled 1,000 acres in the incentive program, while 600 pristine acres participated without the stimulus, and many farmers who experienced the first year continued for a second year without the incentive. In 2024, increased funding will allow us to offer the financial incentive for up to 1,500 acres. We're all so encouraged that VGBI is showing promising signs of how agriculture and wildlife conservation can benefit one another—and in such a short time! "I've been hearing more bobwhites than ever before," said Patty Lane, an employee of Eldon Farms in Rappahannock County. "This program has reached much further than the fields we enrolled. I hope better hab-

VGBI Nest Box Program

Many species of birds that use grasslands for forage and cover do not necessarily nest directly in the grasses. Some require natural cavities, which often come in the form of old woodpecker holes in snags (dead, standing trees). For this reason, you should leave snags untouched on your property so long as they don't pose a safety hazard. Fewer available snags mean fewer cavities, so installing nest boxes can help fill the gap. Nest boxes also allow researchers to band and track adult and fledgling birds, providing insights to breeding biology, movement, foraging, and habitat preferences. Plus, nest boxes are another way landowners can connect and engage with many at-risk bird species, generating an even greater level of stewardship over those birds and the habitats on which they depend.

VGBI can offer advice on which cavity-nesting species could benefit from nest boxes on your property, how to obtain the boxes you need, and where to place those nest boxes.



VGBI volunteer Steve Johnson and co-coordinator October Greenfield check a kestrel nesting box.

HUGH KENNY

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Red-winged Blackbird

OCTOBER GREENFIELD



Bobolink

MARTIN COLOMBO

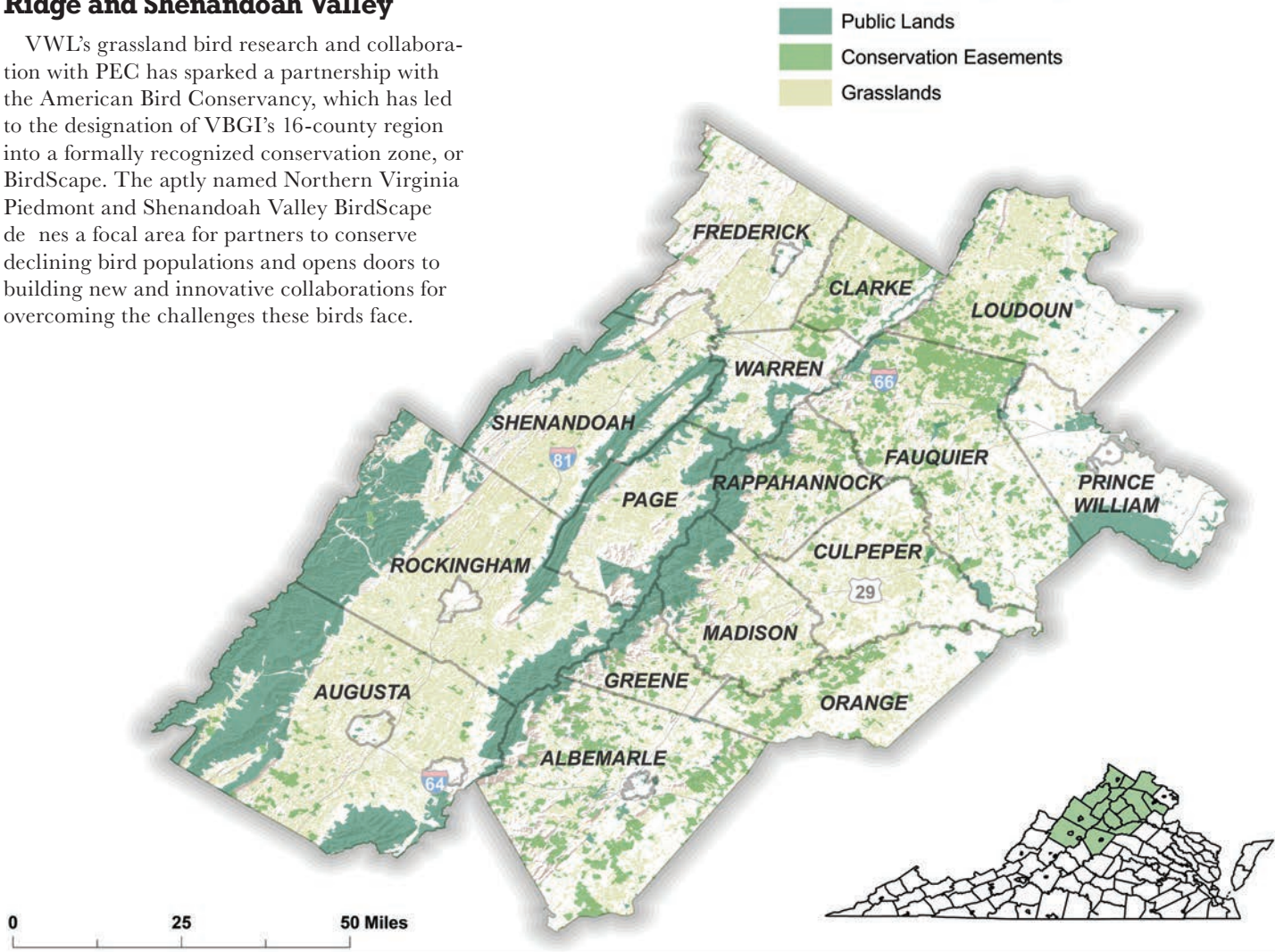
its and understanding are occurring and that this will continue in future years," she said. Citizen scientists who volunteer time each year conducting bird surveys on many of the properties enrolled in the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative have made some exciting discoveries. Bobolinks, increasingly rare across their range, were documented on several participating properties on which the landowners had not previously seen them before implementing grassland bird-friendly BMPs.

One participating landowner in Madison County, a member of Old Rag Master Naturalists, had an inspiring encounter with bobolinks. "I went out at 7:45 this morning and heard all this bird chatter down in the hay field. They went silent, flew up out of trees, and circled before landing in a neighbor's treeline, about 40 of them. As I got closer, another flock of about 35 birds flew in and started chattering. I picked them up on the Merlin app, and it was Bobolinks! I

Working in 16 counties across Virginia's northern Piedmont, Blue Ridge and Shenandoah Valley

VWL's grassland bird research and collaboration with PEC has sparked a partnership with the American Bird Conservancy, which has led to the designation of VBGI's 16-county region into a formally recognized conservation zone, or BirdScape. The aptly named Northern Virginia Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley BirdScape defines a focal area for partners to conserve declining bird populations and opens doors to building new and innovative collaborations for overcoming the challenges these birds face.

Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative Working Region



VGBI's service area includes Albemarle, Augusta, Clarke, Culpeper, Fauquier, Frederick, Greene, Loudoun, Madison, Orange, Page, Prince William, Rappahannock, Rockingham, Shenandoah and Warren counties. Image credit Watsun Randolph

got a great look at these colorful birds—bright yellow on the back of its neck, brilliant white wing bar, and rump. And then a third look in, this time almost 50. It was awe-inspiring!”

How to get involved in 2024—as a farmer or volunteer

Now through November 15, VGBI is taking applications from farmers interested in receiving financial incentives for protecting nesting grassland birds during the 2024 haying season. Because most grassland bird species require vast expanses of grasses for nesting, we're asking for a minimum 20-acre commitment. Ideally, that 20 acres is, for the most part, a contiguous patch of land surrounded by other hay fields or pastures. To learn more about the program and to apply, visit vagrasslandbirds.org/incentives.

Our participating landowners and farmers have been concentrated in our northern Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley counties. With VGBI's coordinator, Justin Proctor, based out of Warren County, and me as co-coordinator based out of Fauquier County, we recognize that our capacity to serve the southernmost counties within our work region has been limited. We hope to see more participation across our southernmost counties, including Albemarle, further increasing the adoption of bird-friendly practices on work-

Celia Vuocolo
(formerly) of Quail
Forever

Favorite grassland bird:
Bobwhite Quail

October Greenfield
Wildlife Habitat Restoration
Coordinator and Virginia
Grassland Bird Initiative
Co-Coordinator
The Piedmont Environmental
Council

Favorite grassland bird:
Barn Owl

Jacob Gilley
Mid-Atlantic Sustainable
Grazing Manager
American Farmland
Trust

Favorite grassland bird:
American Kestrel

Amy Johnson
Program Director
Smithsonian's Virginia
Working Landscapes

Favorite grassland bird:
Eastern Meadowlark

Justin Proctor
VGBI Coordinator
Smithsonian's Virginia
Working Landscapes

Favorite grassland bird:
Horned Lark



HUGH KENNY

HELPFUL RESOURCES

vagrasslandbirds.org

pecva.org

ing farms in the Piedmont. To help us get there, we're thrilled to announce that our team is expanding. The Piedmont Environmental Council has received grant funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to hire a part-time VGBI staffer based in Albemarle. This person will most immediately organize landowner workshops geared toward demonstrating grassland bird-friendly BMPs in action. They will also meet with farmers interested in enrolling in the VGBI Incentives Program, working to create conservation plans that protect grassland birds while simultaneously supporting the farmers' production goals. They'll also hold outreach events for landowners and conservation professionals, such as farm tours, bird walks, and other educational pro-

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grams. We're excited about this position's added capacity to do grassland bird surveys on the ground at properties enrolled in the program. The surveys help us learn how grassland birds respond to the program. This person will be joining our team this fall, just in time for the opening of our Incentives Program application.

Even if you're not a farmer, the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative also offers exciting volunteer opportunities. The Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL) recruits and trains citizen science volunteers to conduct biodiversity surveys across the northern Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley each year. These surveys are part of an ongoing study to collect data that, over time, could elucidate the impact of various land man-

agement practices on native biodiversity, including pollinators, plants, and birds. The data they collect is helping VGBI refine its management recommendations to best match the needs of birds and working landscapes.

As the seasons transition toward fall, some grassland bird species are fueling up to migrate to their wintering grounds. As some species depart, others will arrive, marking the return of Virginia's overwintering grassland bird species. As you drive past local farms in the coming months, please keep your eyes peeled for life within the grasslands, including the moth-like flight of short-eared owls, the distinctive white rump patch of northern harriers gliding low over fields, and songbirds like horned larks foraging on the bare ground beneath the standing vegetation.

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