

CONSERVING GRASSLAND BIRD HABITAT ON PRIVATE LANDS IN THE UPPER VALLEY

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Grassland songbirds have shown widespread, long-term population declines as a result of habitat loss, intensification of agricultural practices, and succession of grassland habitat to forest. A number of conservation programs offer incentives for managing grassland habitat, but most private landowners are not aware of the serious threats faced by grassland birds, much less the opportunities to address the problem. We have initiated a targeted bird survey for the summer of 2013 and subsequent outreach program to better manage existing habitat for grassland birds in the Upper Valley of the Connecticut River, an area where populations of these sensitive species have been disappearing. Selected grassland birds for the survey are the Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*), Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), and Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*). Measurable outcomes of our project will include: 1) number of acres converted to recommended management practices; 2) number of landowners provided with information; 3) map of grassland bird hotspots; 4) an estimate of changes in grassland bird populations from a subset of sites surveyed in 1999; and 5) number of citizen scientists engaged in the project. By focusing on increasing habitat quality on lands already managed primarily to maintain “openness”, we can maintain viable populations of grassland birds in the Valley amidst inevitable forest regeneration. This goal is increasingly important as grassland birds continue to decline, even in the heart of their ranges. Our research is a collaborative effort between the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and NH Audubon, in cooperation with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).