



New York Field Office

Grassland Restoration on Private Land

Grassland: Disappearing Wildlife Habitat

At the time of European settlement, New York State's forested landscape included large tracts of grassland. These tracts were created by wildfire and by clearing and burning by Native Americans. They were sites for agriculture and made good hunting grounds. Wildlife, such as the heath hen, a unique form of the greater prairie chicken, evolved to inhabit them. Today, the heath hen is extinct, and grassland may be one of New York State's most rapidly disappearing wildlife habitats. What causes our grassland to disappear? The answer is a combination of changing agricultural practices, rural development, and natural plant succession.

In the 1930s, when hill farms and horse-drawn teams were common, grassland was abundant. Over the years, the number of farms and the amount of land in hay have declined. Development has eliminated or fragmented grassland across New York.

Fragmentation, or the reduction of large grasslands into smaller ones, makes this habitat less attractive to some grassland birds and can increase losses to predators. Also, natural grass succession changes grasslands into shrublands and forests. Grasslands change naturally as a result of the constant competition among grasses, herbs, annual and perennial weeds, shrubs, vines, and tree seedlings. Ecologists use the term "succession" to describe the way this competition changes the composition of plants in the grassland community over time.

Why Should We Be Concerned?

As grassland disappears, biological diversity diminishes. Grassland is important habitat for game species, including ringneck pheasant, woodcock, and mallard ducks. For example, the 400,000 acres of grassland in New York State's St. Lawrence River Valley support approximately 4,000 nesting mallard ducks – one of the highest nesting densities found anywhere along the Atlantic Flyway. Also, grassland provides essential habitat for many non-game birds, some of them grassland-dependent species. These are a diverse

group of birds, inhabiting primarily grassland communities for breeding, migration, and wintering.

In New York State, some of our most interesting and elusive birds are grassland-dependent, including the upland sandpiper, eastern meadowlark, northern shrike, bobolink, short-eared and barn owls, northern harrier, and grasshopper, vesper, field and Henslow's sparrows. Approximately 70% of grassland-dependent birds are neotropical, migrating north each spring to reproduce, then flying south to spend the bulk of the year in Mexico, Central or South America, or the Caribbean. Population declines for grassland-nesting birds are estimated to be more severe and widespread than for any other group of birds, including forest species. For example, from 1966 to 1995, upland sandpipers declined by 80% in New York State, and grasshopper sparrows declined by 97%. Henslow's sparrows continue to decline at about 12% per year.

Grassland Restoration Success Story

Restoration of grassland habitat on private lands is critical to the well-being of grassland-dependent birds. Grazing or mowing, alone or in combination, are common management techniques. Other restoration efforts involve seeding with natural or naturalized grasses and mowing brush. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program can help landowners determine management options to restore grassland habitat.

In 1994, the Service began a partnership with the Museum of the Hudson Highlands to restore grassland in Orange County. Workers mowed reverted brush land to eliminate woody vegetation and prepare the site for seeding with native grasses such as big bluestem, little bluestem, and Indian grass. The next season, bobolink nested there for the first time.

Where You Fit In

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides an opportunity for private landowners and organizations to restore and protect grassland habitat. Almost any landowner can qualify for the Partners

Program. Lend a hand to birds and other wildlife while reaping economic benefits from your land. Landowners may enter into a protection agreement with the Service. Sites are restored with native self-sustaining plant species only. Land use and management must be compatible with establishing and maintaining the land for grassland-nesting birds. The Service must have access to the restored grassland to verify compliance with the terms of the agreement, but public access is not required.

For further information, contact: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 3817 Luker Road, Cortland, NY 13045. (607) 753-9334.