A couple of years ago, I was driving north on Dufferin Rd 124 to one of our field research sites and saw a car pulled over next to a canola field. The next day, there was another car in almost the same spot and another just up the road. I realized they'd all stopped to take selfies in front of the strikingly yellow canola that was in full bloom. I've never seen anyone taking a selfie in front of a hayfield or a pasture. Agricultural grasslands have a subtler beauty that is often overlooked. They're not remarkably colourful or breathtaking, but I've spent hundreds of hours in hayfields and pastures, watching and listening to gather information about Bobolinks and other bird species that nest in these fields. When you immerse yourself in a grassland, you see how full of life they are and how much is going on in these unassuming landscapes in Ontario through spring and summer.

Bird Ecology and Conservation Ontario, a small non-profit organization, has been researching birds at risk in agricultural landscapes since 2016. Our work has been largely focused on the Bobolink, a charismatic species that never ceases to amuse us each year with its interesting behaviours and individual personalities. Most of our field work occurs on farms—in hayfields and pastures managed for cattle and sheep. Having grown up in Toronto, my farming knowledge is limited, but studying grassland birds on farms has been a fascinating opportunity to glimpse the complex world of farming, learn about the relationship between the fields and the birds, and between the birds and the farmers who create this habitat.

Grassland bird populations are declining at an alarming rate. A recent research paper in Science reported a loss of 720 million grassland birds across North America since 1970. In Canada, 17 of 33 grassland bird species were recently assessed as in decline. Bobolinks, a poster species for grassland bird population declines, are still commonly seen singing from fence posts and doing helicopter-like flight displays over hayfields and pastures in southern Ontario. But between 1968 and 2008, Canada lost 88% of its Bobolink population. It's hard to believe this species is in peril with so many of these birds still around, but the steep downward trend of the population, alongside other bird species that share this habitat, isn't something we should ignore.

There are many factors contributing to the decline of the Bobolink population and other grassland bird species, including factors in their breeding and non-breeding habitats. Bobolinks overwinter in the southern interior of South America, making a 10,000-km journey each spring to their nesting grounds which span the northern US and southern Canada. For Bobolinks in Ontario, loss of nesting habitat (primarily due to a decrease in the amount of hay and pasture in the province) and changes in agricultural practices (such as earlier and more frequent mowing of hayfields and more intensive grazing of pastures) are considered two important factors contributing to their worrying population trajectory.

What's tricky is that Bobolinks and several other grassland birds, such as Eastern Meadowlarks and Grasshopper Sparrows, primarily nest in working landscapes on private farms where their nests, built on the ground, are vulnerable to inadvertent destruction and exposure to predators when mowing or grazing occurs. But these hayfields and pastures only exist because they're being created and maintained by farmers. Mowing and grazing are necessary for farmers to be able to make a living and continue to maintain these grassland landscapes which provide habitat for so many species. With many farmers moving away from grass farming for financial reasons, bird conservation strategies can't place restrictions on these farmers that cause financial hardship. This would help neither the birds nor the farmers.

One of the farmers we worked with in 2019, Tarrah Young, recently wrote about grassland birds in her farm newsletter. She talked about the birds as stakeholders, which I think is a useful perspective to approach this conservation challenge. These birds rely on hayfields and pastures for nesting habitat, and although other private landowners and various levels of government have roles to play in creating and maintaining
habitat for these species, the vast majority of these birds are nesting on farms. And while it’s essential to realize that this habitat will only continue to exist for the birds if the farmers who manage it can make a living off of the land, I think it’s helpful to recognize that the birds are stakeholders too and they’re an important part of agricultural grasslands.

The situation is disheartening at times. Birds are disappearing from our landscape and there isn’t an easy solution to change their population trajectories. But each farmer we work with inspires us in some way, whether it’s their decision to balk the trend and plant grass instead of row crops; their intense interest in the birds, illustrated in touching ways, for example the annual spring arrival dates of Barn Swallows written on a barn door dating back many years; or their fierce protection of the birds, for example by putting up electric fencing around nests to keep out mammalian predators after a bout of predation in a pasture.

This spring, we’ll continue our research in agricultural grasslands to learn more about the relationship between grassland birds and management activities and to look for conservation opportunities. Despite worrying news about bird population declines, the birds aren’t discouraged. During the peak of the nesting season life is palpable in the fields—it can feel like there is nowhere to go without being in a bird’s way. Watching from the fence line of a field, a male and female Bobolink with a nest nearby will start alarm calling and approaching me, telling me to go away, worried for the safety of their vulnerable nestlings nearby. Moving down the fence line to let them continue feeding their young, I’ll enter the territory of an Eastern Meadowlark that will start voicing its concern about my presence. Moving still another way will lead to a Savannah Sparrow and a Field Sparrow annoyed at my disruption of their nesting activities. While it can be slightly frustrating to find a good vantage point from which to observe the birds without disturbing them, it’s reassuring to be reminded of how much life there still is in these landscapes and how determined these little birds are. They will do their utmost to survive and raise their young, if we can find ways to provide them with the space they need to do it.

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