

Production roundup



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Low-level cattle grazing benefits bobolinks

Cattle grazing operations offer some hope for rapidly declining grassland birds in Ontario. But new research has shown that everything depends on timing and stocking rates.

Zoe Lebrun-Southcott and Andrew Campomizzi, who are with Bird Ecology and Conservation Ontario, have been doing research on grassland birds in agricultural land for the past four

years. They spoke about their findings at the recent Ontario Soil & Crop Improvement Association conference in London.

While admitting they have a definite “bird bias”, Lebrun-Southcott said they’ve “learned a lot from the farmers we work with.” And finding ways for graziers and birds to be successful on the same land has become the focus of their work.

Lebrun-Southcott started her talk by outlining the challenge facing grassland birds. While songbird populations are declining everywhere, grassland species seem to be worse off, she said, suggesting a 53 per cent decline since 1970. Of the 33 species breeding in Canada 17 are in decline.

In terms of individual species, three out of four meadowlarks

have been lost as well as 88 per cent of bobolinks.

The latter are mostly closely connected with agriculture because, in the absence of native grasslands, they prefer hayfields and pastures to nest. As a result, Lebrun-Southcott noted, “the livestock industry is hugely important” to their survival.

Unfortunately bobolinks are actively trying to raise young in the fields between mid-May and mid-July, a time period that coincides with peak haying activities. Young typically fledge between June 4th and 24th. Even then it takes them about a week or so before they’re strong enough to fly any great distance.

Even in undisturbed fields only about 50 to 70 per cent of the nests will fledge young, she noted. Most of the losses are due to predation from raccoons, skunks, foxes, snakes and other birds.

In commercially managed



Ontario bobolink populations have declined by 88 per cent since 1970.

fields the nests often fall victim to mowing or intensive grazing. Even if the nests aren’t destroyed by equipment or under hooves, they’re left exposed and even more at risk from predators, she said.

In addition, hay and pasture acres have declined significantly in the province since 1975, she added. Still, these acres are critical to the future of these birds. By overlaying a map of bobolink nesting in the province and one of hay and pasture operations one can almost a perfect correlation.

Campomizzi then outlined some potential compromises based on field experiments into stocking rates and timing of grazing. The work was done on six rotationally grazed beef operations in the Ottawa Valley.

The operations ranged from 26 to 100 cattle or cow-calf pairs and encompassing between 15 and 55 hectares of pasture. Nesting success was compared between grazed and ungrazed paddocks.

They calculated stocking rates by counting cow-calf pairs as 1.5 animal units. So 10 pairs grazing a two-hectare paddock for six days would out to 15 times 6 divided by 2 – a stocking rate of 45.

In eight paddocks left ungrazed for a whole season, more than half the bobolink nests successfully fledged young. These constituted good nesting habitat, he said.

In the grazed paddocks, with stocking rates ranging from 70 to 167, just 16 per cent were successful, Campomizzi reported. That rate is “too low” to maintain the population, he added.

About a quarter of the nests were trampled by cattle, mostly where stocking rates were greater than 50.

Campomizzi’s conclusion: “As stocking rates increased, bobolink nesting success decreased.” In terms of numbers, at a stocking rate of 100 or more there’s “virtually no chance” of successful nesting. Between 50 and 100 most nests still failed while at less than 50 “there’s a fairly reasonable chance of nesting success”.

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