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4. GRASSLAND DEPENDENT WILDLIFE

WORKING LANDS, CONSERVATION AND COOPERATION: AGRICULTURAL GRASSLANDS AND GRASSLAND BIRDS IN ONTARIO, CANADA

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Grassland birds breeding in Ontario include species such as Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper, Vesper Sparrow and Loggerhead Shrike. But Ontario has a modest amount of native prairie ecosystem (Rodgers 1998), so the birds are largely dependent on “grasslands” that include working lands growing perennial forage crops like hay and pasture for livestock (McCracken et al 2013). Like much of North America, Ontario’s grassland bird species are declining and perhaps more similarly, “farmland” birds of Europe show the same downward trends.

Specific drivers for grassland bird declines in Ontario are complex (Ethier & Nudds 2015, 2017; McCracken et al 2013). But changing crops over many decades are certainly one of the drivers (Smith 2015). Increasing area devoted to annual crops is a major trend, especially soybeans and corn, as is decreasing acreage of perennial forages, hay and pasture. Pasture and hay acreages and cattle numbers in Ontario have declined 62%, 40% and 49% since 1976. High land prices, modest or worse returns for beef producers and high annual crop prices during 2008-13 all contributed to these trends.

Ontario passed a new Endangered Species Act in 2007, updating a 1975 statute. The new law emphasizes science in identifying species at risk and employs a

unique legislative structure for species designation. A Government appointed Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario determines the status of species and legal listing occurs through a regulation filed after the committee decides on the status (“automatic” listing). No ministerial or Cabinet input goes into species listing and no public consultation occurs related to listing of species. Legal habitat and species protection then “automatically” take effect unless specific regulations take precedence. Passage of the legislation involved significant advocacy and controversy among stakeholders (Olive 2016).

Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark were designated threatened in 2010 and 2012. Both species nest in hay and pasture May-July. The estimated Ontario population of Bobolink is 570,000 (2010) birds and Eastern Meadowlark is 130,000 (2010). Before European settlement, both species had limited populations in Ontario. Populations declined significantly since 1960s, triggering the percentage decline criterion for threatened species, regardless of population size or breadth of distribution (McCracken et al 2013).

The nesting period for the Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark overlaps with normal hay harvesting and grazing activities (May to mid-July; Diemera & Nocera 2016; McCracken et al 2013). Concern arose that the “automatic” habitat protections might prevent normal hay harvest and pasture grazing. Over 30,000 Ontario farmers grow forages on about 1.5 million hectares, so Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark may nest on thousands of farms. This was perhaps the first threatened species designated in Ontario that depends so directly on working agricultural lands for its habitat, and yet where blanket prohibitions would so directly conflict with production activities and the livelihoods of producers. This apparent paradox belies how a voluntary stewardship approach might better suit the coexistence of both forage-based livestock agriculture and grassland birds.



Photo: Steve Maslowski

A major concern is that nutritional value of late harvest hay and pasture is much lower than earlier harvest (McCracken et al 2013; Mussell et al 2013) and the potential economic impact of reduced animal growth and production with lower quality forages. Another concern was about future potential of land for development might be compromised (important for non-farm landowners) and this has led many non-farm landowners renting farmland (about one third of all farmland is rented) to disallow the growing of hay (Luo, 2015). This counter-productive effect reduces the hay acreage available to grassland birds for nesting, as well as negatively impacting livestock and forage producers. Further, this detracts from soil health by reducing the use of perennial hay and more diverse crop rotations that build soil health. This is an example of a perverse incentive, often documented as resulting from unanticipated effects of implementation of some public policy interventions (Byl 2015; Olive 2014).

The Ontario government responded to the Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark situation in 2011 with a temporary exemption from species protection to allow normal farming activities while a longer term solution was developed. A multi-stakeholder advisory committee (Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark Round Table) was set up to provide advice and recommendations on ways to protect the species and

their habitat, while still allowing agricultural operations to continue. This was co-chaired by the President of Ontario Federation of Agriculture and an avian biologist from Bird Studies Canada. Compromise and consensus-building was needed to reach agreement while the agriculture temporary exemption in place. Government staff provided advisory and secretariat support to the round table.

In 2013, a species recovery strategy was completed (McCracken et al 2013) and the Round Table recommendations were released for comment (McCracken & Crews 2013). The Roundtable proposed a package of stewardship incentives, research and monitoring, education and outreach, along with a 10-year exemption extension for agriculture. This analysis led to the government decision in 2015 to endorse a package of initiatives including education, incentives and research, along with a regulatory amendment that extended the agricultural exemption to 2025. A significant Grasslands Stewardship Initiative is a key commitment that is still under development (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry 2015).

In parallel with the activities noted above, new agri-environmental stewardship programs aimed at species-at-risk on Ontario farms were being developed and implemented using Canadian federal and Ontario provincial funding. A farm organization, Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, is the delivery agent for these initiatives which include the Species-at-Risk Farm Incentive Program, Grassland Habitat Farm Incentive Program and the Species at Risk Partnership on Agricultural Lands. This development of new programs helps deliver on the need for voluntary stewardship education and incentives for grassland bird conservation. The related educational best management practice documents (e.g. Kyle & Reid 2016), funding programs and communications work have helped change the nature of the discussion and attitudes about species-at-risk and farming.

The changing attitudes and gradually reduced controversy between 2010 and 2017 result from the compromise solution developed and also growing

knowledge and interest in species-at-risk among some farmers. It also reflects evolution of thinking in approaches to implementing this type of legislation and learning from experience. The stewardship funding from governments reflects that evolution. Having a farm organization promoting species at risk programs is a significant change in the range of organizations addressing these issues. All these factors contribute to the changing attitudes and social norms and illustrate the importance of multi-stakeholder consensus-building.

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