



Conserving Bobolinks in Rhode Island, USA

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Short title: Conserving Bobolinks, USA.

Key Message: The introduction of paid ecosystem services for habitat conservation could help save the declining population of Bobolinks in Rhode Island, USA.

Reviewer: Allan Strong and Emi Uchida

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1. What was the problem?

Bobolinks are small migratory ground-nesting birds that nest in open grassy fields, especially hay fields, across North America. They remain in their nesting grounds for about 9 weeks during the summer months before migrating southwards to Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. Although the North American hay fields are an ideal nesting habitat, when these fields are harvested early or multiple times a year, they often do not allow sufficient time for young birds to fledge. As a result, and with loss of native prairies, Bobolink populations are declining due to rapid loss of habitat. Over the last two decades, there has been a drastic decline in the Bobolinks population continentally (Sauer et al 2012).

The primary threat to their breeding habitat comes from the reduction in the number of hayfields, and a shift from timothy and clover hay crops to alfalfa. Due to technological advances, hayfields have also been harvested with increased frequency and intensity of cutting over the past 30 years (Allan Strong, pers. comm.). Frequent harvesting ensures that maximum nutrients are retained in the hay. To harvest the highest quality hay, the farmers must mow before the young Bobolinks can fly. Within 24 hours of mowing, any young that survive the mowing event perish to predators. The changes in harvesting times coincide with the peak nesting season for Bobolinks, thus disrupting their nesting activities.

Due to economic pressures, large areas of farmland are being converted into built-up areas as well as to cash crops such as corn and soybeans. The Bobolink Project can generate on-farm income to counteract some of these development pressures that threaten open farmland. The project aims at conserving Bobolink populations through measures that assure the maintenance of suitable nesting habitat.

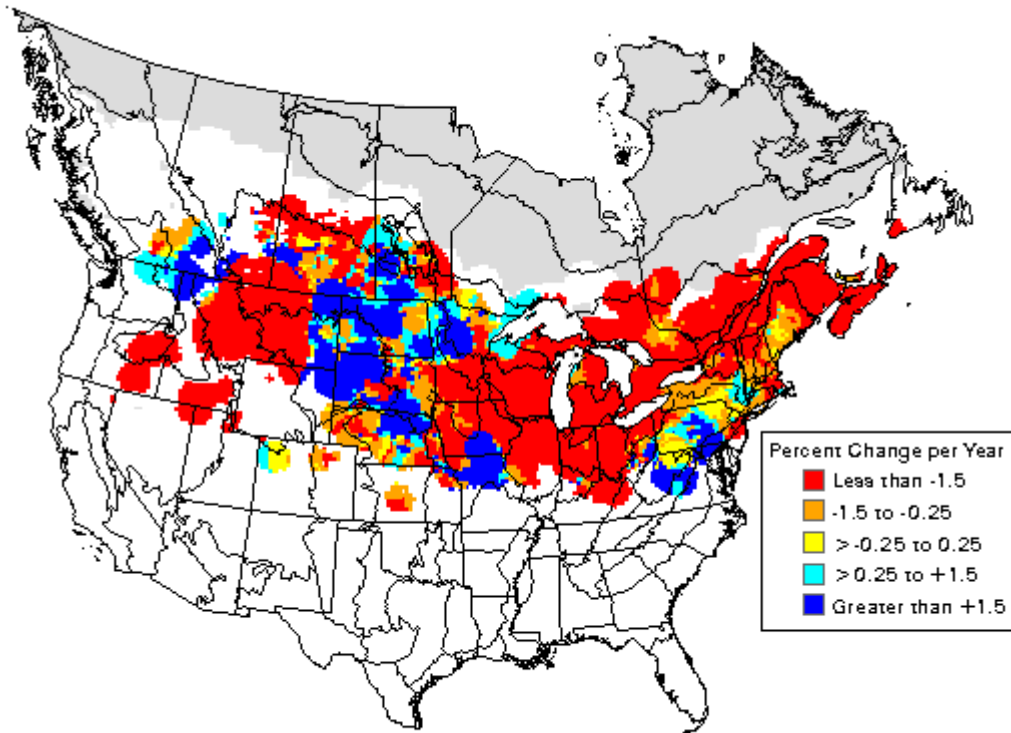


Figure 1 – US-Trend map of Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*), 1966-2011; Source: Sauer et al 2012, available at <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/tr2011/tr04940.htm> (last access April 2013)

2. What was done to solve it?

One of the aims of the Bobolink Project is to promote payment for ecosystem services as a new marketing opportunity for local farmers and a tangible way for community members to participate in ecosystem preservation. Amidst stiff competition from large farming operators in the United States, paid ecosystem services to provide wildlife habitat for native birds open up a new market for local farmers.

In 2006, the University of Rhode Island (URI) and EcoAsset Markets Inc. (EAM) initiated an economic experiment to bring together farms and residents of Jamestown in support of hayfield management for grassland-nesting birds like the Bobolink. In subsequent years, the initiative expanded across the state of Rhode Island and entered parts of Vermont in 2010.

The study applied methods of experimental economic decision making and economics of mechanism design for delivery of public goods. The concept of the “public goods problem” states that the lack of specified property rights of a common resource leads to people acting merely in their own individual and immediate self-interest, overusing and thereby eventually depleting the resource. The very people with the capacity to preserve the ecosystem are also the people whose existence depends upon modifying them: local farmers. For two years, 2007 and 2008, the Bobolink Project team initiated a community-based market, the Nature Services

Exchange of Jamestown, to gauge the willingness of residents for participation in an exchange between households and farmers to fund hayfield conservation.

The Bobolink Project uses community members' contributions to pay farmers to delay mowing of hayfields until after the young birds are ready to leave their nests (The Bobolink Project Official Website, 2013).

The initial outreach was centred on direct mail and newspaper advertisements. Other modes of marketing like internet social networking, posters, brochures, Birdwalk Invitations were also found to be useful in subsequent years, especially for younger populations.

A unique approach was used to raise funds from the community. Each year, the project area was divided into the number of groups necessary to support the number of hayfields available for Bobolink habitat protection. Residents from the non-farming community were randomly assigned to each group which was responsible for raising enough money to protect one field. This approach helped to spread costs across the community. Only the funds required to be paid to farmers were kept and any excess was returned back to the donors. The project managers act as liaisons between community donors and farmers. On one end, they negotiate with farmers and at the other they solicit monetary support from community members.

3. Lessons learned

Although there has been no specific policy uptake, the Bobolink Project has been running successfully to support several farms to delay harvesting.

References and further information:

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Sauer, J. R., J. E. Hines, J. E. Fallon, K. L. Pardieck, D. J. Ziolkowski, Jr., and W. A. Link. 2012. *The North American Breeding Bird Survey, Results and Analysis 1966 - 2011. Version 12.13.2011* [USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD](http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/), available at <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/> (last access 21.03.2013)

The Bobolink Project Official Website. <http://www.bobolinkproject.com/>, last access: Jan 2013