

RE: Meeting July 2, 2012

To the Open Space Committee:

I am writing to request that the Committee examine its management plans for the Mt. Jefferson and Malone Road fields for the purpose of protecting wildlife. I am out of the state during this vacation period and cannot attend the meeting on July 2nd.

As of today, June 29, 2012 numerous Bobolinks remain in the fields at the Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area. Nests with young are probably still present. The number of birds and the behaviors I am seeing, as well as observations I made early in the season, suggest to me that many nests were destroyed in the areas cut in early June, maybe as many as a dozen or more.

PROPOSAL

I am proposing that the OS Committee adopt a hayfield management policy that will protect Bobolinks, Savannah Sparrows, and other nesting birds as well as other animals that use tall grass areas during the breeding season. Many towns and other public land managers have adopted protective measures by delaying mowing of hayfields until mid- or late-July (or later).

WILDLIFE

- The hayfields at Mt. Jefferson attract Bobolinks, Savannah Sparrows, and, to a certain extent in wet areas Red-winged Blackbirds, for nesting. Other birds nest on the edges and use the fields as feeding areas. Wild Turkeys, White-tailed Deer, rabbits, and other small mammals sometimes utilize the tall grass areas for nesting/giving birth, and also for feeding and as hiding places from predators. The presence of rare, threatened or endangered plants or animals is mostly unknown (a thorough inventory of biota would be helpful) but American Bittern has used the fields for foraging, and anecdotal information suggests that Eastern Meadowlark (now practically extirpated from central MA and suffering population declines state-wide) used to nest here.
- Bobolinks arrive in May, set up territories, and soon commence nest-building and egg-laying. Young are hatched and raised during a 4-6 week period in June and July. Mowing during this period destroys nestlings that cannot yet fly. Having used a great deal of energy to reproduce, adult Bobolinks will abandon the area and don't attempt re-nesting anywhere else in that season. Bobolink populations are low; they cannot be sustained in fields where there is intensive haying over a period of years.

HAYING STRATEGY

- There are various strategies that have been studied and tried in an effort to develop a plan whereby Bobolinks are able to have high nesting success and farmers can harvest hay. One of the most successful strategies is to postpone first cutting to July 15th or later. Another strategy involves a more labor-intensive and cooperative effort which employs mid-May cuttings in a portion of the hayfield, late cutting in the remainder of the field, and then a final cut of the entire field. (Mr. Laine stated that he cannot do any early mowing at Mt. Jefferson because the soil is too wet.) Various patterns of strip and patch cuttings might be feasible in

a situation whereby a cooperative and pro-wildlife farmer works with volunteers to map out a protective strategy.

- MassWildlife has adopted protective late-mowing practices on many of its properties in order to protect fawns and Wild Turkey poults; mowing must take place there after July 15th. MassAudubon's mowing guidelines also suggest waiting until after July 15th to make a first cutting.
- Bobolinks fared better in the years before improved plant technology and efficient harvest machinery, before hay was as intensively managed as it is today, with farmers wanting two or more cuts out of their fields each season.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A change in the mowing practices would mean a change in the lease contract. It could result in reduced payment (for a single cutting), the lease fee being entirely waived, or some sort of "trade-for-services." In the latter two cases, the farmer keeps the hay but doesn't pay a lease fee.

Generating income is not traditionally one of the major purposes of preserving open space. The Mt. Jefferson hay lease brings about \$1,078 annually to the Fund for Hubbardston Preservation, but this must be weighed against the importance of helping a species in trouble, managing the property in a humane way, and contributing to the enjoyment of town residents who watch and study wildlife. (In fact, it seems rather ironic that hay lease monies go toward "preserving" Hubbardston but harming wildlife.)

The Mt. Jefferson/Malone Road property belongs to everyone in Hubbardston. If the decision on this matter boils down to money, can the \$1,000 be generated in another way?

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

I would like to suggest that the committee think of the management plan for this property as a living and breathing document that is not etched in stone or in place "in perpetuity." Land management plans should be fluid in order to meet the needs of changing landscapes, weather/climate patterns, wildlife populations, and community priorities. Contracts can be re-negotiated and re-written. New and creative proposals can be entertained; jobs can be put out to bid. New research, observations, and studies can be taken into account. Words like "pledge" and "promise" should be avoided--they are politically-loaded and suggest inflexibility.

I would be happy to pass on information about Bobolink ecology and management and sample plans from other communities to anyone who is interested. I also would be more than willing to work with a cooperative, reliable, and pro-wildlife farmer/hay-grower on a management plan specific to the Mt. Jefferson property.

Thank you for considering my ideas.

Wendy Howes