

To the Editor:

BOBOLINKS SPEAK

We are the Bobolinks, and we are very dismayed that Hubbardston town officials and citizens are getting a lot of erroneous information from the Open Space Committee (OSC) [Letter to the Editor 12/21/13]. The Committee is either burying its head deep in the sand or making things up as it goes along, or both. Resources with factual information about us abound right in Hubbardston's backyard (MassAudubon) and on numerous on-line sites. Also, Massachusetts state ornithologist Andrew Vitz has just released a multi-agency report on the status of grassland birds in Massachusetts

The Hubbardston OSC states that Bobolinks are "not imperiled." We and other grassland birds are dropping in numbers in Massachusetts, New England, and most areas of the country. Numerous studies and census data illustrate this alarming decline, which is occurring for various reasons. One major cause is early and more frequent haycropping. The time to help us is now, not when our numbers are so low that we are added to Endangered Species lists.

A misleading remark made by the OSC is that Bobolinks are not "native to Massachusetts." We are native to North America and move into any areas that have open fields. We don't care about state lines. We have been established in Massachusetts as long as fields and pastures have been part of the landscape and certainly are "native."

The OSC Chair writes: "I believe the birds nest at [Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area] because of the . . . management of the property and not in spite of it." Unfortunately, this is wishful thinking. There is no scientific basis for this statement. Indeed, the situation is that ***we attempt nesting*** at the conservation area ***in spite of*** the harmful mowing practices. According to Kim Peters, Chief Scientist/ Director of Bird Conservation at MassAudubon, "the simple presence of Bobolinks on a site in repeated years is not sufficient evidence to support a conclusion that they are thriving or having success breeding and producing fledglings on the site." There are a number of reasons for this, too lengthy to discuss here, but easy to research.

It is a valid point that, "If the fields were not hayed they would revert to woodland and important Bobolink habitat would be lost." But we aren't asking for *no* haying, only delayed haying. If mowing takes place at the end of July to protect us, with a second-cut in early fall after our young have fledged, the fields will not revert to woodland.

We Bobolinks are the first to admit that, while looking for good nesting territory in May, we are attracted to open fields, many of them hayfields. We require grasslands of certain sizes, with certain plant composition, and with plenty of insects to feed our young. Unfortunately, as we select what we think is the best place to build our nests low in the emerging grass, we have no way of knowing whether it will be uncut throughout the nesting season. Late mowing will ensure our survival and also keep trees from growing in.

It is true that, "The farmer voluntarily offered to delay mowing on 10 acres of [Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area] until July 1st." However, these "concessions" aren't helpful. Designating 10 random acres is not beneficial, and most of the designated acres are wet in spring. As noted above, when we select nest sites, we are fussy and need certain conditions! We are not necessarily going to choose to put our nests within the selected 10 acres, and we aren't fond of nesting in wet fields.

As for the July 1st first-cut date, this date is still too early for a first mowing. Many of us are still feeding flightless young in the nest at the beginning of July.

The OSC says that the farmer will "brush hog additional acreage annually to provide further habitat for the birds." We can assure you that Bobolinks won't nest in overgrown patches that have been brush hogged. We prefer hayfields. Other important factors are the structures of fields and the way they're connected. We steer clear of small, isolated fields as part of our survival strategy.

Hubbardston has about 150 acres or so of privately-owned fields that are attractive to us. We'll build nests there, and even have time to lay our eggs and watch some of them hatch. But here's the rub: the majority of those fields are hayfields that are not managed for bird protection. The owners usually mow the fields in June at the height of our nesting season. These areas are referred to as "population sinks," and will not sustain us. Grassland bird survival is becoming dependent on safe havens on public land or private non-profit properties. We are asking for protection on only 35 acres of town-owned conservation land.

The OSC summarizes by saying that the Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area "provides excellent . . .bird habitat." But the benefits of providing the habitat are completely negated if the land isn't managed appropriately.

A plan whereby the Mt. Jefferson Area fields would be mowed twice a season by farmers who agreed to mow late to protect Bobolinks (with a fee also being paid to the Town) was presented to the OSC and rejected. Why?

If there is interest in protecting grassland birds at the Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area, we Bobolinks are happy to help the OSC and others in the community learn more about our ecology, life history, and ways we can live together.

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