

Randy Dettmers
Senior Biologist
Division of Migratory Birds
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035
Tel: 413-253-8567

Dr. Michael Stauder, Chair
Board of Selectmen
7 Main Street, Unit# 3
Hubbardston, MA 01452

March 28, 2013

Dear Dr. Stauder:

A group of citizens from Hubbardston asked me to provide a letter in support of managing town-owned hayfields in a manner that is beneficial to grassland birds. I am providing the following information for your consideration, and I ask that this letter be entered into the public record.

Bird species that use grassland habitats have experienced the steepest population declines of any group of birds in North America over the past 40 years. As land use and agricultural practices have changed over this time, remaining grasslands have become smaller and more isolated. However, with proper management, small grasslands (e.g., 30-50 res) can provide important habitat for some species of grassland birds, such as bobolinks, meadowlarks, and savannah sparrows. These birds build nests, raise young, and forage in fields, meadows, and pastures during late spring and through most of the summer (e.g., May-August).

Mowing or haying during the nesting season will at least disturb these grassland birds from their nests or from caring for their young. At worst, it can cause direct mortality when birds or their nests get caught in or run over by machinery. All migratory birds, including these grassland birds, are protected from such harm under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) works to uphold the intent of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by conserving and protecting migratory birds through collaborative conservation actions with willing partners and land managers. The USFWS focuses particular attention on species that have experienced steep population declines, like grassland birds, so that proactive measures can be implemented before such species become threatened or imperiled. One relatively simple measure that can be implemented for grassland birds is to delay mowing or haying activities until at least July 20 each year. Such a time frame provides enough time for these birds to complete a nesting attempt and raise a brood of young to the point where they can more easily avoid machinery working in a field. Waiting until August 1 is actually the preferred date from the

perspective of benefits to the birds, but July 20 acknowledges a trade off between the needs of the birds and what farmers prefer in terms of hay quality.

In Massachusetts, open fields owned and managed by town governments can provide important habitat for grassland birds, given the amount of forest land and developed land otherwise occupying the landscape of the state. However, if these fields are not managed in a manner that allows grassland birds to successfully breed and reproduce, we are likely to see continued population declines in these species. I encourage you and your town to consider the value that town-owned lands could have to grassland birds and to consider approaches to managing those lands that would benefit this group of declining species. I would be happy to discuss this topic, provide additional information, or suggest management recommendations if you are interested.

Best regards,

Randy Dettmers