



The Bobolink

The Bobolink is one of the most visually-striking passerines in North America. The males—conspicuous physically, behaviorally, and vocally during the breeding season—look like they are wearing a tuxedo backward, leading some observers to refer to this species as the “skunk blackbird.” Male Bobolinks sing a long, bubbly song, often while flying low over their territories in a characteristic, helicopter-like flight.

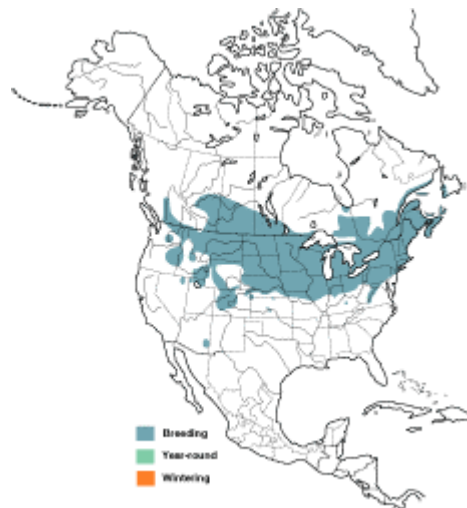
In addition, this North American breeder is an extraordinary migrant, traveling to south of the equator each autumn and making a round-trip of approximately 20,000 kilometers. One female known to be at least nine years old presumably made this trip annually, a total distance equal to traveling 4.5 times around the earth at the equator! Why these birds make such an arduous journey each year is not as well understood as how they do it; the mechanisms of orientation and navigation in this species have been rigorously studied by several investigators. Magnetic clues appear to be particularly important for migrating Bobolinks.

Bobolinks are most often found in the glaciated northern and central counties of Ohio.

The last week of April marks the arrival of the first spring migrants in Ohio

Nest construction starts towards the end of May and continues into June. Occasionally young may remain in the nest through mid-July. Fall migration peaks between late July and early August.

(Peterjohn 1989, Peterjohn and Rice 1991).



In Ohio, bobolinks nest primarily in grassy hayfields and pastures, clover/alfalfa hayfields, wet prairies, and the grassy margins of marshes. Grassy hayfields appear to be the preferred nesting habitat throughout the species' range.

Bobolinks usually nest on the ground at the base of grass or forb clumps. Nest-site vegetation averages 10cm in height (range: 5-20 cm) and most sites included a well developed litter layer.

Bobolinks heavily utilize butterfly and fly larvae for nestling foods. Forbs exploited by bobolinks for their seeds during the nesting season included dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), cinquefoil (*Potentilla* spp.), common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), and dock (*Rumex* spp.) Bobolinks prefer to forage in grassy cover.

Bobolink nesting densities were recorded as declining significantly in situations where hayfields were abandoned (i.e., not mowed, grazed, burned, or otherwise managed). Reports suggest that mowing grasslands every 2-3 years during August prevented development of woody vegetation and maintained the relatively sparse, grass-dominated vegetation that Bobolinks prefer.

Rather, Bobolinks depend on new vegetative growth for nesting and foraging, so vegetation remaining from previous years degrades their habitat quality. Mowing outside the nesting season (after 1 Aug) maintains preferred habitat for Bobolinks. Hay-cropping has likely contributed to the decline of eastern bobolink populations. Bobolinks are affected by hay-cropping because they are late nesters and nest extensively in hayfields throughout the eastern United States. Mowing- induced nest mortality has increased dramatically over the past 50 years because of the trend toward earlier cutting. About 16-23% of the annual hayfield-nesting Bobolinks were destroyed by hay-cropping determined in a New York study area during 1984-86 (Bollinger et al. 1990). If such trends continue, Bobolink populations will continue to decline throughout the eastern United States.

Bobolinks are highly sensitive to habitat fragmentation, and are found most often on large (>50 ha) tracts of grasslands. Thirteen grassland habitats that have been occupied by Bobolinks in Ohio consisted of an average of 12 ha, ranging from 5 to 26 ha each (OH Div. Wildl., unpubl. data).

Maintaining the right habitat for these long-distant migrants is key to the Bobolinks' long-term survival, and parcels such as Byers Woods are important to the ongoing healthy populations of Bobolinks in Ohio.

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