

The Lakeshore Guardian, 2010 July
Thumb Habitats
Bobolinks
by Bill Collins

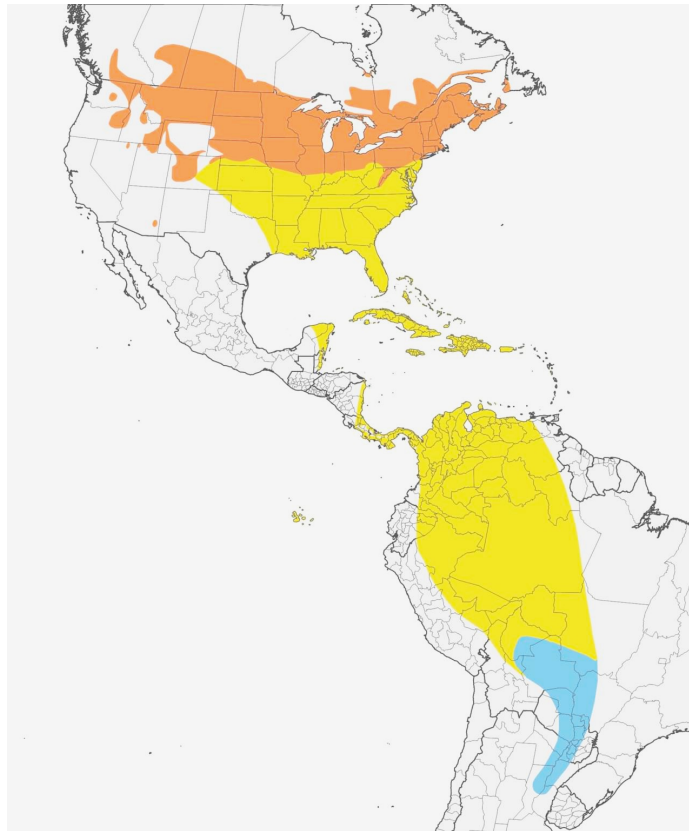
If you want to get some strange looks in the Thumb, at least inland of M-25, tell people you take your first hay cutting in July. Well, only on part of our fields. Haying in early summer takes a heavy toll on ground nesting birds. Most young don't survive a June cut. Ecologically, I'm not concerned about pests like Cowbirds, but as with the far too numerous White-tailed Deer, neither do I take pleasure in a fawn mangled by the hay mower.

Less common species are my concern. On our land, it is mainly the Bobolink, a bird in the Icteridae Family along with New World blackbirds, grackles, cowbirds, meadowlarks, and orioles. The Bobolink, or *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, is the only species of their genus in North America. They appear similar to Red-winged Blackbirds without wing bars, but the adult male has a white to light gray back and the back of its head is pale yellow to cream. Females are light yellowish-brown with brown to black streaking.



Two male Bobolinks on a fence in our hay field. Photograph by Bill Collins.

Bobolinks inhabit mature grasslands. Their breeding range extends across the northern United States and southern Canada. Their winter range is mainly the grasslands of southwestern Brazil, Paraguay and northern Argentina. A round-trip of over 12,000 miles, Bobolinks make one of the longest annual migrations in the Western Hemisphere.



Bobolink range map showing winter range in light blue, migration range in dark yellow, and breeding range in dark orange. Map credit: Cornell Lab of Ornithology, All About Birds, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Bobolink/maps-range>

Male Bobolinks are usually heard before seen. From early May through June they cut loose with a bubbly, electronic song reminiscent of “R2-D2” of Star Wars. In establishing territory and courtship, the males swoop and hover over the fields, rapidly flapping their wings, and emitting a hyper burst of chirps and tweets before settling down to the ground or a fence post. This is repeated all day.

By late June, males are largely unheard as they are busy helping one or more of their female partners feed young and defend the nest. Females lay three to seven eggs in a cup-shaped ground nest in dense grass and weed stems. Nests are very difficult to find as the adults do not fly to and from the nest directly, but walk.

The original breeding range of Bobolinks was probably restricted mainly to the Great Plains. With European settlement came vast deforestation in the east and grassland birds like the Bobolink expanded their range significantly. By the early 1900s, automobiles and tractors began replacing horses. Hay fields were converted to cropland and no longer suitable for grassland birds. At the same time, tractors and modern implements helped convert most of the Great Plains to cropland, displacing Bobolinks even from their original territory. So, the Bobolink could be considered mostly an ecological refugee in Michigan.

There has also been trouble for the Bobolink in its South American winter range. Much of the native grassland has been lost to agriculture. The Bobolink's range in Argentina was recently reported to have decreased by at least 25 percent. Bobolinks are killed as pests in South American rice fields, but in Argentina they are sold as pets. Bobolinks are beneficial to most North American crops because they eat large amounts of insect pests and weed seeds. In the early 1900s however, Bobolinks were shot by the thousands in the rice fields of the southern United States and even served in restaurants. They are still eaten in Jamaica where they are known as "butter birds." One more thing to try someday.

The species is considered secure for now, but Bobolinks have declined significantly in recent decades. From 1966 through 2007, Breeding Bird Survey data indicates an annual decline of nearly 2%, or about half over 41 years. The biggest declines were in the 1980s, probably due to a combination of reforestation of fallow land, larger farm equipment enabling more extensive tilling, more intensive hay production, a continued shift from grass to alfalfa hay, and increased agricultural production in South America.



Male Bobolink flying in our hay field. Photograph by Bill Collins.

To avoid killing young Bobolinks in our region, cutting before July 15 is discouraged. Late July and early August is best. Obviously, this is very late if cool-season grasses dominate your fields. Seeds have started dropping, the nutritional value is way down, and you risk not getting another good cut. One strategy is to take your first cut in May as you might normally. If eggs are destroyed, a pair may produce a second clutch. The drawback is the shorter grass provides less suitable habitat and increases the chance of nest predation. It's the June cut that is so devastating to young grassland birds because they are usually unable to fly yet. Most are killed directly by the hay equipment. Surviving young are then often killed by predators that easily hunt the freshly cut fields. Leaving small uncut areas can help.

2009 was the first year I intentionally delayed our cut on about 20 acres. Bobolinks tend to return to areas where they bred the previous year. With heavy grazing and regular hay cutting, I think very few Bobolinks successfully reproduced in our fields before 2009. This year I've noticed an increase in Bobolinks and other grassland birds, including Eastern Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows, and even a few Sedge Wrens. Next, I hope to establish warm-season grasses that mature in August and make a late cut more reasonable.