

Bobolink, *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*

Status:

State: Threatened

Federal: Not listed

Identification

Amid a sea of agriculture, the bubbly “bob-o-link!” song of the bobolink echoes from within an overgrown weedy field. On a fall day at Cape May, a chorus of “plink” notes is heard overhead as a flock of bobolinks passes above a fallow grassland. These are the song and call of the bobolink, a sparrow-sized member of the blackbird family.



Photo by S. Maslowski, courtesy US FWS

Bobolinks exhibit sexual dimorphism (gender differences) in plumage during the breeding season. The nuptial male is black overall with a creamy nape and hindneck, a white rump, and white scapulars (feathers at the base of the wing). The plumage of the female, which camouflages her during nesting, is relatively drab. The female is buffy with dark brown streaking on the back, sides, and rump and has dark stripes on the head. In non-breeding plumage, adult males resemble females. Immature bobolinks also resemble adult females but are more yellow and lack streaking on the sides of the body. All ages and sexes have a short, finch-like bill and pointed tail feathers.

Habitat

Bobolinks inhabit low-intensity agricultural habitats, such as hayfields and pastures, during the breeding season. In addition, lush fallow fields and meadows of grasses, forbs, and wildflowers are occupied. Bobolink nests are often placed in areas of greatest vegetative height and density. Although small numbers of bobolinks may nest in grasslands of 2 to 4 hectares (5-10 acres), larger sized fields support higher densities of nesting pairs (Jones and Vickery 1997a).

Similar habitats are occupied by bobolinks throughout their annual cycle. During migration, bobolinks inhabit fallow and agricultural fields, as well as coastal and freshwater marshes. On their South American wintering grounds, they occur in grasslands, marshes, rice fields, and farm fields.

Status and Conservation

Historic clearing of forests in the eastern United States during the 1700s and 1800s enabled numerous grassland species to expand their ranges, inhabiting the growing agricultural landscape. As a result, the bobolink became a common breeding species in the hayfields and pastures of New Jersey. However, by the early 1900s, bobolink

population declines were noted in the Northeast. The slaughter of migrant bobolinks in rice fields of the southern United States, market hunting, and modernized farming techniques likely caused this decline. During the 1960s and 1970s, changing agricultural practices, the conversion of fallow fields to forests, and the development of agricultural lands further shrunk bobolink populations in New Jersey.

Modern farming techniques, including frequent rotation of hayfields, early mowing of hay, decreased vegetative diversity, and the change from warm-season to cool-season grasses, have rendered agricultural fields less favorable for nesting bobolinks. In addition, alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) fields, which offer poor nesting habitat for bobolinks, have replaced many timothy (*Phleum* spp.) and clover (Fabaceae) fields. The area of land cultivated as hay fields in the northeastern United States declined from 12.6 to 7.1 million hectares (31.1 to 17.5 million acres) from 1940 to 1986 (Martin and Gavin 1995). During the same period, the percentage of sites where alfalfa replaced hay increased from 20% to 60% (Bollinger and Gavin 1992). Habitat loss is largely responsible for the decline of bobolink populations in the United States and New Jersey detected by the Breeding Bird Survey from 1966 to 1999 (Sauer et al. 2000).

Due to population declines and habitat loss, the bobolink was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the bobolink to be “demonstrably secure globally,” yet “imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992).