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## Grassland Songbirds Need Acknowledgement



*This male Bobolink flew from Michigan to Argentina and back – the longest migration distance of any North American songbird.*  
Photo © Greg Smith

*Grassland-nesting songbirds are declining.*

It is not difficult to find statements to this effect from any of a number of sources on the internet. However, we don't need to read about it in order to know it's true on a local level. Through almost three decades of living in this rural setting north of Williamston we have witnessed the erosion of breeding populations of three on the list - the Eastern Meadowlark, the Bobolink and the Savannah Sparrow.

Some twenty years ago while driving around the block on Shaftsbury Road during one of our June youth birding camps, we were sure to encounter all three species in overgrown expanses under plenty of open sky. Hay fields, alfalfa fields and other expanses of early successional growth fit the bill. Back then, we were assured of encountering a Meadowlark perched on a wire over the grassy acres. In the sunshine its lemon-yellow breast would be offset by a stark black V-neck as it raised its head and sang a flute-like *tee-YAH-tee-yer* that echoed across the fields. Male Bobolinks, mostly-black blackbirds except for a pale yellow nape and patterns of offsetting white on their backs, would fly with stiff wingbeats over waves of tall grass while singing their jumbled territorial notes for others to hear. A Savannah Sparrow, streaky-brown, like most native sparrows, but sporting a yellow eyebrow that is more easily seen through binoculars, would flutter up from the grassy depths, land on a nearby fencepost, throw its head back and sing a lispy *sit-sit-sit-SEEEE-say*.

As the years ticked by, we noted fewer individuals of all three species. In fact, in recent years we had begun to occasionally miss tallying one of the three on a birding camp trek around the block. This year? Unsettlingly, for the first time since moving here in 1989, we suffered a local shutout of all three. Some habitat still remains, and there may be a persisting individual or two in a couple of remaining patches, but most passes on a June morning will yield the presence of not a single individual of these birds by sight or by song.

Scientific publications often sum up the reasons for the declines with two words: habitat loss. However, a variety of human-centric circumstances can lead to the reproductive failure of these birds. For instance, one June morning in the mid-90s when the birds were still common, youth birding camp participants and I stood at the side of Shaftsbury Road watching the behavior of the Meadowlarks,



*Good breeding habitat.*

Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows through binoculars. The students would learn to recognize their copious, varied and overlapping songs among an orchestra of others, like Red-winged Blackbirds, Eastern Kingbirds and Indigo Buntings. We would spot individual birds - beaks crammed with insect matter - drop into the grasses to feed hidden nestlings then emerge seconds later to search for more.

Upon returning to the site the following morning the kids were visibly upset - even angry - over the change. The entire hayfield had been mowed. Yesterday's sea of densely-packed stalks that provided abundant, nourishing insect life and effective cover against heat and predators

for the growing young had been converted into acres of drying, cut-grass mats. The many nests and their contents were certainly either flattened or chopped to pieces. The air was eerily devoid of song. We scanned the field, fence posts and wires for any individuals of these three species to no avail. We finally spotted a lone Meadowlark fly across the field and land in middle of the sea of matted grass. It ambled about giving an occasional staccato alarm call. These birds were surely in shock. Their whole reason for existing there had been dashed in a lightning strike of human activity. If the hay harvest was pushed back by only two weeks the young of nearly all the nesters would be grown and fledged.

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated occurrence on a single June for this swath of field. I observed the timing of the mowing to be perfectly aligned with peak nesting season most every year. These birds did not have the time or the availability of habitat to start over. Their reproductive effort summer after summer was wasted. Eventually, these birds would be destined to die having left little contribution to the continuation of the species.

Another local case involves shifting land use based on the whims or profit-motives of the landowner. Just a half mile north of this hayfield could be found another massive expanse of grassland. Once again, these three species were common and apparently reproductively-successful year after year. While passing on the road I had met and

talked with this particular landowner numerous times. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that he was aware of the Meadowlarks and Bobolinks, knew they were nesting within his acres of grass, and wanted them to have reproductive success on his land. Then, when he passed away a few years ago, the land-use decisions fell into different hands. The following spring the grassland had been plowed-under and replaced with acres of corn. Row crops have now become the norm here, and the birds that reproduced on this particular spot on the planet have disappeared.

These are not incidents unique to our neighborhood. Similar scenarios are surely playing out in various corners of every county and in every state within their ranges. Ironically, to shoot these or any other native North American songbird is a federal crime. It is also unlawful to disturb any actively-nesting native North American songbird. Yet, broad lack of education on native bird identification and ecology enables their destruction on private lands. Despite the fact that people would be rightly appalled by witnessing someone enter one of these fields with a shotgun and blow away every Meadowlark, Bobolink and Savannah Sparrow, within a few years new individuals would find and repopulate good, available habitat. Indeed, the illegal act of shooting them is not nearly as devastating and permanent as



*Eastern Meadowlark.*

*Photo by Greg Smith*



*Female Savannah Sparrow. Photo © Steve Sage*

the removal of their only means to reproduce – the habitat. Governmental agencies look the other way to favor the farming lobby. With such broad ignorance of their mere existence, much less their fight for survival, there is slim hope for the future of these birds.

When discussing conservation issues surrounding other species – whether frog, turtle, butterfly, or bird – this statement rings true in more human-induced ways than can be counted: Regardless of your personal intentions - take away a wild creature's ability to make more of itself, and you will most assuredly drive it toward extinction.

So as not to end this column in too-dismal of a tone it bears mentioning that we encountered a small but thriving population of breeding Savannah Sparrows just two weeks ago while exhibiting at River Days at the edge of downtown Detroit. Across the sidewalk from our tent against a backdrop of the Renaissance Center's looming, silvery silos a several-acre overgrown vacant lot (no doubt, the site of an old building that was razed years ago) was surrounded by chain-link fence. I listened and watched all weekend as a male Savannah Sparrow, inured to the crowds drawn to the event, regularly made the presence of its breeding territory known by flying onto the metal fence next to the busy walkway and singing its heart out. It would stay put and continue singing while group after group of oblivious humanity passed less than ten feet from its perch.

Wild creatures are amazingly resilient. Give them any amount of appropriate space and they will attempt to survive on it. Conversely, to remain oblivious of their existence gives license to others to destroy them for personal gain. Nature Discovery's mission statement is to help *raise* your awareness!



*A spot of Savannah Sparrow habitat appears along Detroit's riverfront.*

Here is a pdf produced by the Michigan DNR to help landowners manage grasslands effectively for songbirds:

[http://www.michigandnr.com/publications/pdfs/huntingwildlifehabitat/Landowners\\_Guide/Species\\_Mgmt/Grassland\\_Birds.htm](http://www.michigandnr.com/publications/pdfs/huntingwildlifehabitat/Landowners_Guide/Species_Mgmt/Grassland_Birds.htm)

Here are links to Youtube videos that show great close-ups of the three species discussed here singing their breeding songs:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDpydv6VbtU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TXIrXiyW6o>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6k8Wcckpdk>

Would you like to see these and other grassland birds in their natural habitat? We would love to give you a special tour through some choice local areas. Arrange an appointment! It is best to do it soon because the breeding (and singing) season for these species is almost done for 2017.

*-Jim McGrath*





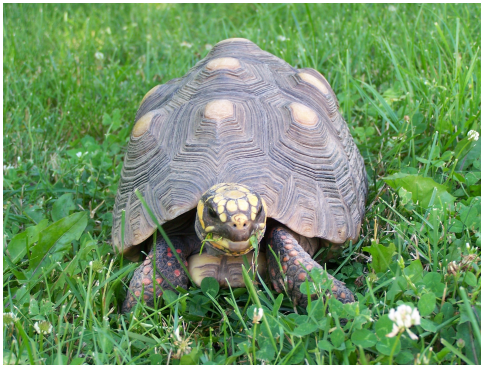
## ***Catch Us on Coffee Break Wednesday, July 5***

Jim is scheduled to appear on Wednesday, July 5 at 9:45am, discussing Michigan wildlife topics. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at [lcc.edu/radio/onair/](http://lcc.edu/radio/onair/) or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at [lcc.edu/tv/watch](http://lcc.edu/tv/watch). We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.

## ***Visit Our Interactive Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Zoo Sunday, July 16***



***Doors open from 1 to 5pm. Admission \$5/person.***



*Kids love to feed Milberta, our always-hungry red-footed tortoise.*

Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help participants of all ages make the most of their visit.

ALSO, check out our “farm” of growing giant silk moth caterpillars. Young *Cecropia* (the largest moth on the continent!), *Polyphemus*, and *Promethea* Moth larvae are available with complete written care instructions at a special discount for Sunday’s visitors – two of a species for only \$5! This is an awesome summer project for kids or adults!

*A beefy, fifth-instar *Cecropia* caterpillar takes up most of a hot dog bun and eats at least 10 whole leaves a day!*



# *There is Still Time to Raise Giant Silk Moths this Summer*

*Cecropia, Polyphemus and  
Promethea larvae will be  
available for two more weeks.*

*This is like raising Monarchs  
– on steroids!*

*Four larvae with complete  
care instructions for \$12.*



## *Around the State in July*

- ❖ Thursday, July 6: 10am. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Saranac Library, Saranac.
- ❖ Thursday, July 6: 1pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Clarksville Library, Clarksville.
- ❖ Saturday, July 8: 12pm. Garden Critters Presentation; Leila Arboretum Children's Garden, Battle Creek.
- ❖ Saturday, July 8: 2-5pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ludington State Park.
- ❖ Wednesday, July 12: 7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Lake Bluff Audubon, Manistee.
- ❖ Saturday, July 22: 10:30am. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Huron County Nature Center.
- ❖ Sunday, July 23: 2pm. Making a Biodiverse Backyard Presentation; Farmington Library, Farmington.
- ❖ Wednesday, July 26: 10:30am. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Interlochen Library, Interlochen.
- ❖ Thursday, July 27: 11am. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Glen Lake Library, Empire.
- ❖ Thursday, July 27: 2pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Traverse District Library, Traverse City.
- ❖ Sunday, July 24: 10am to 2pm. Michigan Turtles Exhibit; Williamston Farmer's Market.



## *A Few Openings Remain for Budding Naturalists Half-Day Camp, July 10-13*

*For students, 5-6 years old. A handful of openings  
remain for this limited-enrollment,  
unique and intensive camp.*

*Contact us to enroll!*

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/summercamps.pdf>

# *Truth, Science, Free Press, Water, Under Attack*

*For the record, Nature Discovery does not support the current “personality” as president of the United States. To do so would be a gross contradiction to our mission statement. We will not compromise our mission - to promote the preservation of natural diversity, clean air, clean water, a stable climate, and sustainable living - because we might offend a few supporters of this administration’s reckless, self-serving agenda. Defense of truth, scientifically-based decisions, and sustainability is not “political” in itself, yet, all three are being sullied and disregarded by the current administration, the likes of which have never been seen in the history of our (newsflash!) already great country.*

*A free-functioning press was put in place by our nation’s founders to blow the whistle should any governmental servants begin abusing their position - meant to serve the citizens - for personal gain or power. Environmental regulations are put in place to keep personal and corporate greed from running rough-shod over our citizens’ rights to live in a healthy environment. Trump’s tyrant-like actions and regular, increasingly outlandish and disturbing shenanigans to undermine the function of the free press are serving as adequate distractions. (BTW, Fox News does not qualify as “the free press,” but masquerades as such). Meanwhile, the corporate enemies of regulation assigned to key cabinet positions are getting to work...*

*“It goes without saying that the Trump administration doesn’t care about the environment, public health, or its duty to protect our most precious natural resources—and that is why it’s up to us, the American people, to hold them accountable. We will fight this and every other attempt by polluters and the Trump administration to destroy our water resources.” -Michael Brune, executive director of Sierra Club*

<https://thinkprogress.org/clean-water-rule-repeal-official-fl12e35f5b35>

An Unprecedented Attack on Your Clean Water

[https://www.americanrivers.org/2017/05/unprecedented-attack-clean-water/?gclid=Cj0KEQjw-ezKBRCGwqyK0rHzmvkBEiQAu\\_-LEavYn43s0JxhnzufZOCe0INTyf\\_rywm8r1L6-2ztxgaAhE38P8HAQ](https://www.americanrivers.org/2017/05/unprecedented-attack-clean-water/?gclid=Cj0KEQjw-ezKBRCGwqyK0rHzmvkBEiQAu_-LEavYn43s0JxhnzufZOCe0INTyf_rywm8r1L6-2ztxgaAhE38P8HAQ)



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