

The Hunterdon County Division of Parks and Recreation is dedicated to preserving open space and natural resources, providing safe parks and facilities, and offering educational and recreational opportunities, all contributing to an enhanced quality of life for present and future generations.

This informational brochure was designed by Michelle Renda of Girl Scout Troop 6 as a part of her Gold Award project.

Revised 8/13



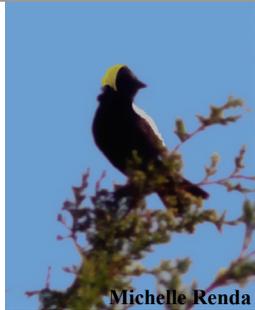
Many thanks to the following for their contributions of photography:
 Ron Austing, www.ronausting.com;
 George Jameson, Patuxent Bird InfoCenter, www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html;
 Patrick Lynch, Patuxent Bird InfoCenter, www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html;
 Marcus Martin, www.photobirder.com;
 Michelle Renda, Girl Scout Troop 6;
 Jeffrey Spendelow, Patuxent Bird InfoCenter, www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html;
 Jim Stasz, Patuxent Bird InfoCenter, www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html

HUNTERDON COUNTY
 DIVISION OF PARKS & RECREATION

Grassland Birds

At Hoffman Park

Hunterdon County's Hoffman Park provides important habitat for grassland birds.



Michelle Renda
Male Bobolink at Hoffman Park

**Hunterdon County
 Division of Parks and Recreation**



**PO Box 2900
 Flemington, NJ
 08822-2900
 (908) 782-1158**

**Office Hours:
 Mon.-Wed, Fri. 8 AM to 4:30 PM
 Thur. 8:00 AM to 6:30 PM**

Grassland Birds

Although Hunterdon County's nesting birds are found in many different kinds of habitat, one county habitat holds special significance. That habitat is grassland, a habitat that nature creates with fire and humans create with agriculture. Grassland is considered by many to be the most endangered habitat on earth. Most grassland is suitable for agriculture, and so it has been radically changed by human activities.

Hunterdon County hosts six native and one non-native grassland species of bird during the nesting season. The natives are Upland Sandpiper, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Bobolink, and Eastern Meadowlark. The first five of these are on the state Endangered and Threatened Species List, and meadowlarks have declined in number in recent years. The non-native grassland nester is the Ring-necked Pheasant, which originated in China and was introduced to the U.S. Pheasants have also declined in number over the past few decades.

Why are Grassland Birds Declining?

Threats to grassland birds include:

- » Loss of farmland to development
- » Predation by domestic animals such as cats and dogs, as well as by human-subsidized predators like raccoons
- » Catastrophic early-season mowing of hayfields, which destroys nests, eggs, and young birds
- » Use of pesticides, which can weaken or kill birds or eliminate their food supply
- » Suppression of fires, which would create more natural grassland

Grassland Bird Management at Hoffman Park

Hoffman Park contains approximately 150 acres of fields. These fields are mowed to prevent them from gradually being taken over by shrubs. The hay is removed and sold as mulch. No field cutting is allowed between April 1 and September 1, which is when grassland birds nest. Additionally, about 10% of the field area is left unmowed annually to create more diverse age structure in the vegetation. Hedgerows are kept low and narrow to maximize the extent of grassland. In 2000, approximately 32 pairs of Bobolinks, nine pairs of Grasshopper Sparrows, four pairs of Eastern Meadowlarks, and two pairs of Savannah Sparrows nested at Hoffman.

Bobolink

Dolichonyx oryzivorus

Amazingly, the Bobolink winters primarily in South America but breeds as far north as British Columbia and Nova Scotia and as far south as



Jim Stasz

Female Bobolink

Colorado and New Jersey. Bobolinks can be found in New Jersey beginning in late April and continuing through mid-September. They typically nest in open hay fields, pastures, and meadows, laying four to seven eggs. Six to eight inches in height, the

breeding male Bobolink (see cover photo) is mostly black with a white rump and back and a dull yellow nape. The female is a rich buff yellow and is streaked with black on the back and crown. A threatened species in New Jersey, Bobolinks have decreased in number in recent years due to urbanization of open land, and early mowing of hay fields. Bobolinks often have eggs or young which are destroyed when the first hay cutting occurs in late May or June. This does not allow enough time for them to reneest, so it costs them all their reproductive effort for the year.

Eastern Meadowlark

Sturnella magna

The Eastern Meadowlark winters primarily in the southern United States but breeds as far north as Minnesota and southern Ontario and as far south as Arizona, Texas, and Florida. Eastern Meadowlarks commonly migrate northward through New Jersey beginning in March and southward from August through mid-October. Eastern Meadowlarks typically nest in grassy, weedy fields, open meadows, drier areas of salt marsh, airports, and farmlands, laying three to seven white eggs, spotted with brown and dull lavender. Nine to eleven inches in height, the robin-sized meadowlark is stocky and brown-streaked with a white-edged tail, a bright yellow throat and breast, and a prominent black V crossing its chest. In New Jersey, the Eastern Meadowlark is most frequently encountered in the Kittatinny Valley, and in Hunterdon and Salem Counties. Listen for its sweetly whistled song, often given from atop a fence post or shrub: “*tee-yah, tee yair.*”



Ron Austing

Eastern Meadowlark

Grasshopper Sparrow

Ammodramus savannarum

The Grasshopper Sparrow winters from Texas to North Carolina and South to Central America. It breeds in a range from southern Manitoba to southern Maine and as far south as central Texas and Georgia. Grasshopper Sparrows typically migrate through New Jersey in late April and May and again in October and November. They nest in dry, weedy fields, open pastures, airports, and fallow farmland. Grasshopper Sparrows were common summer residents of New Jersey until the 1950s, when the number of old fields and farmland began to decline. Progressively earlier mowing of hayfields also contributed to their decline. About five inches in

length, the Grasshopper Sparrow has a buff-colored breast, a pale stripe on its crown, a



Patrick Lynch

Grasshopper Sparrow

short, pointed tail, and dark rufous upperparts with a scaly pattern. A threatened species in New Jersey, the Grasshopper Sparrow is absent from heavily urbanized areas, brushlands, and thick forests. Its song is a buzzy, insect-like trill.

Savannah Sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis

The Savannah Sparrow winters from Oklahoma to coastal New Hampshire and south to Cuba and Central America. Its breeding range extends from the Northwest Territories to South Dakota and east to New Jersey. Savannah Sparrows prefer open fields, meadows, pastures, and manmade habitats such as airports and farmland for nesting. Now a threatened species in New Jersey, the Savannah Sparrow once bred in coastal areas, especially in filled salt marshes. Today the species is a rare nester on agricultural sites scattered around New Jersey. Sometimes confused



Marcus Martin

Savannah Sparrow

with the Song Sparrow, Savannah Sparrows are five to six inches in length, pale and streaked, with a yellowish eyebrow and pinkish legs. The tail is shorter than that of a song sparrow, and normally square or notched, not rounded. Savannah Sparrows typically lay four to six pale blue-green eggs, spotted or speckled with dark brown. Their song is similar to the Grasshopper Sparrow's buzz, but softer and multi-parted. This species seems to use hedgerows more often than Grasshopper Sparrows, and flies with a distinctive, jerky motion.

Eastern Bluebird

Sialia sialis

The Eastern Bluebird winters from southern New England southward, and breeds in a range from southern Canada to as far south as Texas and Florida. Not truly a grassland bird, the bluebird nests in natural or manmade cavities in farmland or in open swamps with standing dead trees to nest in. Competition for housing with the House Sparrow and European Starlings caused a temporary decline in the number of these birds in New Jersey, but the erection of bluebird-specific nesting boxes has helped rebound the population. Seven inches in height, the Eastern Bluebird is bright blue above and on its wings and tail, with a rusty throat and breast, and a white belly.

Eastern Bluebird Male



Jeffrey Spendelow

Look for bluebirds near the many bird boxes that have been erected for them at Hoffman Park.

American Kestrel

Falco sparverius

The American Kestrel winters in most parts of the continental United States and can be found breeding all over North America. The kestrel often migrates through New Jersey in the spring and fall and a few remain here for the winter. Another “part-time” grassland user, kestrels nest in cavities, such as hollow trees and old barns, but always near open fields. Because the kestrel relies on such open land for hunting small prey, a decline in open land is the most likely cause for the decline of the kestrel in New Jersey. Nine to twelve inches in height, with an average wingspan of twenty-one inches, the kestrel can be identified by its rusty-colored tail and back and its pair of black stripes on the face. The male also has slate-blue wings. Swift fliers, Kestrels are members of the Falcon family. Watch for kestrels hovering or perched on posts or small trees.



George Jameson

American Kestrel Female

Northern Harrier

Circus cyaneus

The Northern Harrier can be seen migrating through New Jersey almost any time of year, and often winters in the state's coastal salt marshes and grasslands. The Northern Harrier is considered an endangered species in New Jersey, and nests almost exclusively in coastal salt marsh habitat. These birds are typically sixteen to twenty-four inches in height with a three and a half foot wingspan. Both genders are marked by a white rump and a long tail, but the female is brown while the male is pale gray. At all times of year, the harrier depends on grasslands and marshes for the small animals it preys on. The species is most often seen coursing low over fields, turning and rocking from side to side as it hunts. When a harrier spies a prey animal, it will turn suddenly and pounce on it.



George Jameson

Northern Harrier Male

What You Can Do

- » Support open space initiatives, especially those that include natural lands management.
- » Keep all pets on leashes or indoors, especially during the April through September nesting period. **Pets must be leashed at all times at Hoffman Park.**
- » Limit your use of pesticides.