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My name is Kevin Tolan. Since 2019 I've been involved with grassland conservation through my position as a biologist at the Vermont Center for Ecostudies. Beginning in 2021 we've coordinated Eastern Meadowlark surveys for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, and authored the draft Vermont Eastern Meadowlark Recovery Plan.

For years the Rockingham Upper Meadows site provided breeding habitat for the now state-threatened Eastern Meadowlark, in addition to Bobolink, which are a Species of Greatest Conservation Need. These species nest on the ground in hayfields and are highly susceptible to mowing activities, intensive grazing, and changes in land use. They are also area-sensitive, meaning their breeding density decreases in smaller habitat parcels: in other words, one 80-acre field will have a higher density of grassland birds than eight 10-acre fields.

Thanks to the large size of the Upper Meadows site, among the largest contiguous hayfields in Windham County, it has a high potential for grassland bird occupancy that can't be duplicated elsewhere with smaller fields. Additionally, this site is one of two known in Windham County with Eastern Meadowlarks present annually, and has been a priority site for conservation due to the recent history of successful Eastern Meadowlark breeding. It's the only known site in the county with a realistic chance of successfully fledgling Meadowlark.

The loss of such a large, prominent grassland may have a wider-ranging impact on the grassland bird population. Because grassland birds tend to return to the same field annually to breed, the loss of this site may render many birds nestless if they're unable to secure breeding habitat in proximity to the Upper Meadows. Additionally, young birds tend to remain within several miles of their natal fields, further reducing their capacity for dispersal across the surrounding landscape. The site should be managed for grassland birds in perpetuity to aid in the success and stability of Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark populations throughout the region.

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