

Cathryn Abbott, Dummerston, VT.

My name is Cathryn Abbott and I live in Windham County. I first learned of the exceptional conservation opportunity presented by GRH's Upper Meadows while coordinating a region-wide grassland bird outreach initiative for Vermont Center for Ecostudies and NH Audubon from 2015-2018. Grassland birds are declining more rapidly than any other group of New England birds. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Birds of Conservation Concern 2021 Report lists bobolinks, eastern meadowlarks, and northern harriers as highest conservation priorities, and each of these species relies on grassland habitat at Upper Meadows. Vermont's Fish & Wildlife Department recently designated eastern meadowlarks as Threatened, and bobolinks continue to be prioritized as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Historically meadowlarks, bobolinks and other grassland birds nested in the CT River Valley in good numbers. Population declines in recent decades mirror the loss of grassland habitat as family farms are developed or revert to forest. Changing agricultural practices on surviving farms also play a role: haying in early summer, conversion of hayfields to row crops, and the use of pesticides each have negative impacts on grassland birds. I've been fortunate to work at several local sites where farmers (already squeezed by financial constraints) have set aside some acres or modified their haying schedule in an effort to support grassland birds. It is a lot to ask of our surviving farms, and yet many try to find a way to help.

Upper Meadows, by way of its prime location along the Connecticut River, by way of its size (100 unfragmented acres), and by way of its owner, presents a one-of-a-kind opportunity for Windham County's grassland birds. There is nothing else like it in southeastern Vermont. Delayed-mow management may levy a heavy burden and be out of reach for a family dairy farm, but delayed-mow management is completely compatible with GRH's land needs. It does come with a cost, however. The value of late-cut hay is much lower than that of early-cut hay, and does not cover the costs that the farmer incurs to carry out the late harvest.

Starting in 2023, the entire Upper Meadows acreage has been in delayed-mow (no cutting until August 1). This gives the young birds time to develop flight skills necessary to avoid farm equipment. Bobolinks are thriving in unprecedented numbers at the site. State threatened Eastern meadowlarks are also nesting at Upper Meadows. But the EQIP grant that is subsidizing this delayed-mow management expires in 2025. Grassland birds exhibit strong site fidelity with the majority of adults returning each spring to their natal grounds. It is vital that these birds returning to Upper Meadows find viable nesting habitat in the spring of 2026 and beyond.

I am grateful to GRH for their efforts to enhance grassland bird nesting habitat at Upper Meadows. They have been a strong partner in this conservation work. GRH has facilitated meetings focused on field management, allowed grassland bird workshops at the site, and granted access for bird surveys. I respectfully request that GRH expand their support to include the financial costs of continuing to delay-mow Upper Meadows.

I respectfully request that as mitigation for impacts to the CT River, GRH manage the Upper Meadows in Rockingham in perpetuity for grassland Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Thank you for considering my comment.

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