Managing for Native Grassland Birds

A Natural Resources Conservation Service Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) for Tennessee & Kentucky

Native birds deliver multiple benefits to working lands operations, but they are in trouble and need our help.

The Southeast once was one of the most diverse grassland regions of North America, but more than 99% has been converted to crops or forest, and its shallow wetlands drained. It is no wonder, then, that scientific data indicating widespread declines in populations of landbirds across North America show some of the **steepest recent declines in grassland birds** such as the Eastern Meadowlark and Northern Bobwhite.

The "Native Advantage" RCPP will boost habitat conservation efforts on private lands, especially near existing wildlife management areas and bobwhite focal areas.

Our Goals

- Assist interested landowners in recovering native grassland plants and animals, which can benefit their operation's value and bottom line.
- Recover some of the hundreds of species of plants and animals, particularly grassland birds, that enrich our lives by making their homes in the native grasslands of Tennessee and Kentucky.

The Benefits Birds Provide

- Birds serve as an indicator of good stewardship of natural resources. For example, the number and type of birds present on a farm indicate overall quality of habitat such as food availability and opportunities for nesting.
- Studies have shown an increase in bird diversity—raptors, songbirds and other landbirds—provides an ecosystem "service" for pest removal and control on both crops and woodlands.
- Birds consume only about 2% of grassland seed production annually, while also playing a role in seed dispersal.
- Birds are beautiful, highly visible compared to many wildlife species, with interesting behaviors. They are an integral component to landscapes managed for aesthetic value and agritourism.
- Birds and wildlife are important to the outdoor recreation economy, of which hunters and anglers are a signficant component. In Tennessee and Kentucky, roughly 60% of hunters and anglers also watch wildlife, and more than 3/4 of hunting takes place solely on private lands.

The "Native Advantage" RCPP for Tennessee & Kentucky

Habitat management for the birds

Problems

- The Native Advantage RCPP is focusing on habitat management for three grassland bird species that represent a broad range of grassland bird habitat needs: **Eastern Meadowlark**, **Northern Bobwhite**, and **Henslow's Sparrow**.
- Both the Meadowlark and Bobwhite have experienced **>75% loss in population** size since 1970, while the declines in Henslow's Sparrow are unknown.
- All three of these species (and many others dependent on grasslands) are in danger of **halving their southeastern populations** in time spans of as little as 7 to 30 years!
- Declines are due primarily to loss of habitat quantity and quality.

Solutions

- Since all 3 species nest on the ground, **chicks require space** to move among the grasses after hatching to feed and to elude predators. This is possible in native bunch grasses that grow in clumps, but not in thick stands of tall fescue.
- Henslow's Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark like **tall grasses** with plenty of **litter for nesting**. Meadowlarks will tolerate some non-native grasses, but Henslow's Sparrows prefer thick stands of native grasses and will not tolerate active grazing. Neither like a lot of woody vegetation.

- Bird habitat can be **compatible with managed grazing** of native grasses. Technical resources are available through the RCPP to design bird friendly grazing.
- Bobwhite need large expanses of native grasses for nesting and brood-rearing. They also need **access to patches of shrubby vegetation** for winter cover and to escape from predators.
- Henslow's Sparrows usually need large **80-acre blocks** (or more) of grassland habitat, but are sometimes found in smaller patches of large grassland landscapes.
- Bobwhite need roughly 1500 acres of suitable habitat within a 6000-acre area to sustain viable populations, which means it's **important for landowners to work together** to maintain populations over the long-term.

American Bird Conservancy · National Wild Turkey Federation · Pheasants Forever · Quail Forever · Southeastern Grasslands Initiative · Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources · United States Department of Agriculture NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service · Central Hardwoods Joint Venture partnerships for conservation · Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency · NBCI National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative · TN Department of Environment & Conservation · Arnold Engineering Development Complex