



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Bobolink
*Dolichonyx oryzivorus***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Bobolink, a long-distance neotropical migrant songbird, is a medium-sized blackbird that nests in grassland habitat throughout the northeast. Unlike many grassland birds, Bobolinks are sexually dimorphic, and the male has a spectacular breeding plumage and complex song. As a result, the Bobolink was described as the “harlequin of the spring meadows” by Edward Forbush. They forage on invertebrates and seeds during the nesting period and rice and other grains on their wintering grounds in the pampas of South America (Martin et al. 1995).

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Bobolinks breed in grassland habitat across much of the northern United States and southern Canada. Prior to European settlement, Bobolinks were likely restricted to river valleys and coastal areas where grassland habitat would have been supported. Bobolinks and other grassland birds expanded their range when much of the landscape in Massachusetts was converted to agriculture. However, as grassland habitat has been lost to reforestation and development these species have steadily declined. Although Bobolinks have shown strong declines throughout eastern North America, in Massachusetts, the Breeding Bird Survey and Breeding Bird Atlas depict a more stable population (Sauer et al 2014, Walsh and Petersen 2013).

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Historically, Bobolinks were most abundant in the prairie of midwestern United States and south-central Canada. Today they can be found in a variety of hayfield or meadow habitat and are often found nesting in large hayfields with a mixture of grasses and forbs. Grassland and agricultural areas are used by Bobolinks during migratory stopovers and as overwintering habitat.

THREATS: On the breeding grounds, the main threats to Bobolink populations are loss of habitat and hayfield

mowing during the nesting period. Grassland habitat has declined dramatically in Massachusetts as it continues to be either developed or reverts to forests. To maintain the remaining grasslands, fields should be mowed annually, but this activity is harmful to grassland birds if it is conducted during the primary nesting period (late May-mid-July). Harvesting hay when birds are nesting has been documented to result in 100% nesting failure (Perlut et al. 2006). Mowing often occurs 2-3 weeks earlier than in the past, and this is thought to be a major player in their global decline. Habitat loss and hunting on the wintering grounds may also be a major contributor to declines in their populations.

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A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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