

GRASSLAND BIRD TRUST NEWSLETTER



JULY 2022

News on the Wing
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GIFT IN HONOR OF STEVE SANFORD

Anonymous donor honors Steve Sanford, Grassland Bird Trust's volunteer guide extraordinaire, great friend and supporter, by making a generous gift.

Steve has guided a number of birding walks for Grassland Bird Trust (GBT) at the Important Bird Area in Fort Edward, as well as at his beautiful Pencil Brook Farm in Cambridge, NY. Last year at a GBT event, he also engaged a curious audience with a riveting talk on basic bird science.

Steve retired from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation as DEC's Chief Ecologist. He is a painter, a sculptor, and a boat builder. He was recently interviewed for the PBS program *AHA! A House for Arts*: WMHT Public Media – *Steven Jay Sanford's Workshop* | *AHA! A House for Arts* on Facebook.

Thank you, Steve, for being a wonderful volunteer and teacher, and for helping GBT to conserve critical habitat for endangered and at-risk grassland birds!



THE GRASSLANDS' SUMMER BIRDS RETURN!

By Roberta Kravette

Summer in the Grasslands! The chirps and croaks and buzzing of a million unseen creatures floating on the clover-scented breeze foretell the return of friends old and new. To arrive back to our grasslands, they made amazing treks – some across open ocean and others across perilous stretches of industry. They dodged skyscrapers and faced inclement weather, food deserts, and unimaginable obstacles.



GBT's work to reestablish and preserve habitat is helping to bring the upland sandpiper back to our grasslands.

OUR GRASSLANDS ARE THEIR REFUGE

While the birds are fun for us, *our grasslands are crucial for the birds*. Unfortunately, many grassland birds are ground nesters – a hazardous business! As grasslands disappeared, these species looked toward farmland as their nurseries.

Prior to the 20th century this helped some, but changing farm practices mean they now face death by harvesters, pesticides,

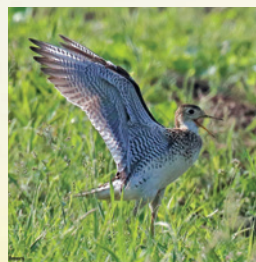
and farm animals. And as intensive row-cropping takes over from hay fields and dairy farms, even more nesting habitat is lost. Our protected grasslands are their refuge and safe place to raise their next generation.

Below are a few of our returning summer neighbors. How many have you seen?



BOBOLINK

Spring has arrived when the field by the Alfred Z. Solomon viewing area explodes with little black birds wearing backward tuxedos and buff-colored hats! There are few more excellent avian delights than watching their frenetic mating display over the grasslands.



UPLAND SANDPIPER

Our grasslands are far away from the shorelines of the Atlantic or the Great Lakes where you would expect to find most shore birds, but unlike its cousins, this sandpiper prefers prairies and grasslands, and ours are perfect. They can also be seen on wheat and corn farmland.



EASTERN MEADOWLARK

The eastern meadowlark's song wafting over our fields and meadows announces its early spring return. Look for their distinctive silhouette on fence posts and wires. Males puff out their chests, point their bills to the sky, show off their distinctive black chest "V," and sing

their hearts out to defend their territory. You might also catch them "jumping" straight up in the air, in that same pose with legs dangling.



KILLDEER

Killdeers are real characters, running across the grass, jolting to a stop every few feet, then looking around expectantly to see if their sprint kicked up any insect snacks. See if you can catch them picking up extraneous stones and tossing them back over their shoulder,

adding to their ground-scape nest. Killdeers can be found on school sports fields, lawns, the edges of farmland – even your driveway!

Our area's unique mix of open grasslands, consisting of open fields with deciduous trees lining the edges, provides warm weather for many songbirds, including colorful warblers, orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks, and other passerines. Many stay to nest and raise families here. When you search for our grassland birds, **look in nearby trees and bushes**. The American Birding Association recommends limiting the use of recordings and other audio methods of attracting birds, especially in areas occupied by threatened and endangered species. **Scan the QR code to read the full article with fun facts and hints online.** ▶



FOLLOWING THEIR NOSES: SENSE OF SMELL IN BIRDS

By Dr. Samantha Carouso Peck

For decades, people thought birds had no sense of smell. Then an oil company made an accidental discovery. When they added the smell of rotting meat to natural gas (so the oil company could find pipeline leaks more easily), vultures started honing in on the leaks, mistaking them for a meal. We now know that turkey vultures have one of the most extraordinary senses of smell of any animal, able to detect rotting meat from over a mile away.



Species like this savannah sparrow can detect the quality of a nest site by sniffing for predators.



Bobolinks navigate by following their noses, using deposits of iron projecting to their nasal cavities to detect changes in the earth's magnetic field.

Subsequently, other bird species have demonstrated the power of their noses. Many species of sea birds, such as petrels, find fish by smelling for the tiny organisms they feed on. Homing pigeons use the odors in their environment to navigate to their roosts. Honeyguides, an African bird species famous for leading human hunters to beehives to share the spoils of a cracked-open hive, can locate beeswax candles through smell alone. New Zealand's kiwis are almost blind and hunt at night, totally dependent on the nostrils at the tip of their beak to find insects in sand and leaf litter.

Scientists recently made a surprising discovery about smell in white storks. These storks are often seen searching for prey disturbed by tractors in freshly mowed fields. But how do the storks know, from miles away, when a field has just been mowed? Scientists put fresh grass clippings on one field. Then, on another field far away, they sprayed a chemical that smelled like fresh grass clippings. The storks could not tell the difference between the real grass clippings and the chemical that smelled like grass clippings. This showed that the storks rely on smell, not sound or sight, to find food.

The finding that some birds can smell cut grass may have implications for grassland birds that breed in fields, such as bobolinks. Bobolinks migrate extraordinary distances each year, all the way to the South American pampas. How they navigate this trek was revealed when scientists investigated the smell center of their brains. This brain region is full of iron, which projects into their noses. Bobolinks use the iron to detect changes in the earth's magnetic field, which they use to navigate. Females faithfully return to the same field to breed each year, suggesting they are using additional cues, such as recognizing landmarks or, like storks, using their sense of smell.

Smell is also very important for grassland birds trying to evade predators. Predators find grassland bird nests by following the scent of chick poop. In response, the grassland birds work diligently to keep their nests clean.

We have been increasingly discovering that smell has implications for bird social behavior, finding food, and navigation, all of which can inform best practices for conservation.

DONATE TODAY!

Visit GrasslandBirdTrust.org/donate or scan the QR code. Your donation of any amount will unlock a one-year GBT membership for you and your family.





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SHORT-EARED OWL RESCUE

Sometimes, an encounter with a wild animal can change your life. Especially if you're a kid. **Trish Marki** is one of those people who had that happen to her and who can make it happen for other kids.

Trish runs the Wildlife Institute of Eastern New York (aka Silent Wings) in Saratoga Springs. She began life as an animal-crazy kid who persuaded her friends to give her pets as birthday gifts because that way, her mom couldn't return them. Trish was teaching computer skills about 20 years ago when her dog brought home a slightly chewed squirrel. She tried feeding the squirrel for a few days, but the squirrel was not thriving, so she took him to Cara Huffman, a vet technician at the Schroon River Animal Hospital. That's where Trish heard about Cara's volunteer job treating injured wild animals and North Country Wild Care, a nonprofit group that cares for sick, injured and orphaned wildlife. Trish and her husband Bernie were inspired to get their licenses to begin rehabilitating wildlife.

Fast forward about 10 years to 2011 and Trish was running the Wildlife Institute of Eastern NY full time, in addition to rehabilitating injured wild birds with the goal of returning them to the wild. Birds that could not be returned to the wild were evaluated to see if they were suited for educational programs at schools, hospitals, senior centers, etc., or whether they would be better suited for a display environment.

One of Trish's most recent patients is a short-eared owl we'll call Shortie. There's only about 100 short-eared owls left in New York.

Grassland Bird Trust is working to protect these owls by conserving the grasslands they must have to survive. Shortie was found last April in a field, under attack by a murder of crows, probably after being hit by a car. Shortie eventually found her way to Cara Huffman, the vet tech who had saved Trish's squirrel 20 years before. Cara stabilized Shortie, checking for injuries. Cara then sent Shortie to Trish for further care. Trish, in turn, took Shortie to Dr. Joy Lucas, an avian specialist at the Upstate Animal Medical Center, who diagnosed that Shortie's biggest problem is her eyesight. What's next for Shortie? Shortie will be evaluated next by Dr. Christa Corbett, an animal ophthalmologist. As you can see, sometimes it takes a village of volunteers to care for even one injured owl. Shortie isn't equipped to go back into the wild. But if she is calm enough, Trish will try integrating Shortie into her educational programs. Otherwise, she'll find a display environment for Shortie. In either case, she's been one lucky bird.

To learn more about short-eared owls and how you can help GBT, visit [GrasslandBirdTrust.org](https://www.GrasslandBirdTrust.org).

If interested in having Trish give a live bird presentation to a group, please contact owler@gmail.com.



Short-eared owl courtesy Gordon Ellmers. Copyright © 2022 by Gordon Ellmers.