

GRASSLAND HABITAT

Conservation Initiative



Upland sandpiper



Eastern meadowlark



Grasshopper sparrow



Northern harrier



Eastern box turtle

PHOTOS BY PAUL J. FUSCO

October 2006

Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection

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Commissioner*



This document is an edited PDF version of the information provided by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection at the October 17, 2006 announcement of Connecticut's Grassland Habitat Conservation Initiative.

Introduction to the Grassland Habitat Conservation Initiative

The continuing decline of suitable grassland habitats is a major threat to the well-being of Connecticut's bird population.

Grassland habitats provide critical nesting and breeding grounds for approximately 80 bird species in our state, 13 of which are listed under the Connecticut Endangered Species Act (see appendix). These lands also support an abundance of other wildlife, including mammals, reptiles and numerous invertebrate species.

The decline in grassland habitats is most severe in the Connecticut River Valley:

- Most of the prime habitat in the state is located along the river valley, from the Hartford area north to the Massachusetts line.
- This valley is the primary migratory corridor for grassland bird species that return to this area of the state each spring to breed and rear their young.
- While these lands are attractive to birds, they are also under intense development pressure for the construction of everything from housing and retail stores to corporate offices.

Recognition of the Challenge

Fortunately, there is growing recognition of the need to protect these valuable grassland habitats.

- In 2006 Connecticut's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy was approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A key focus of this strategy, which was developed by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), is to identify the species and habitats in greatest need of conservation. Grasslands are one of the priority habitats identified in the strategy.
- The Connecticut Audubon Society, in its 2006 report, "Connecticut State of the Birds," and Audubon Connecticut, in its 2003 report "Protecting Connecticut's Grassland Heritage" have identified grassland conservation in Connecticut as an important conservation priority.

Given the importance of grassland habitat, the continued loss of this habitat to development, and the considerable interest from conservation organizations that support efforts to preserve grassland, DEP has selected grassland conservation as the first major statewide action to be addressed under Connecticut's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy.

Steps to Preserve Grassland Habitat

As part of a new, comprehensive effort to preserve and protect grassland habitat, DEP:

- Committed \$3.2 million in state bond funds available to the department for the acquisition of grassland habitat.
- Set aside an additional \$4.5 million in state bond funds for future acquisitions of grassland habitat.
- Will request and utilize stewardship funds and other sources of funding to create, enhance, and maintain grassland habitat on new acquisitions.
- Initiated field surveys in the Connecticut, Shetucket and Quinebaug River valleys to determine the abundance and distribution of grassland birds and identify the location and quality of existing habitat and lands suitable for the creation of grassland.

- The surveys will continue in 2007 and 2008 and will ultimately include the rest of the state.
- Field survey activities undertaken in 2006 have identified two additional sites located in the Connecticut River Valley that are a priority for acquisition as well as a population of grasshopper sparrows that was previously unknown.

Ensuring Success Through a Strong Focus

The grassland habitat initiative is a major priority within DEP. As a result, the agency will establish a high level of coordination among its various divisions to keep a strong focus on the success of this effort. As an example of this approach, the Wildlife Division recently provided funding from its Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) to a private landowner who agreed to create and maintain grassland habitat on his property in eastern Connecticut.

DEP's efforts will be coordinated with other key state agencies through a **Leadership/Policy Committee**. This committee will include agency heads or their designees from the:

- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Economic and Community Development
- Department of Transportation
- Office of Policy and Management.
- DEP recognizes that efforts to protect grasslands can conflict with efforts to preserve agricultural lands. To avoid any potential conflict, the agency will work with the Department of Agriculture and the agricultural community to ensure that the grassland habitat initiative aligns with and supports farmland preservation and working farmlands.
- DEP will also create a **Technical Working Group** comprised of representatives from a broad spectrum of interested stakeholders to help build partnerships and foster a collaborative effort. Among the partners who will be invited to serve on this group are:
 - Federal agencies
 - Conservation organizations
 - Municipalities
 - Advocates for preservation of open space and working lands
 - Agricultural interests
 - Economic development interests

Establishment of the Technical Working Group will enhance the exchange of information, identify opportunities to leverage available funding, build broad based support for the initiative, and avoid duplication of efforts.

Conclusion: The Time is Now to Preserve Grassland Habitat

DEP's *Grassland Habitat Conservation Initiative* is critical to the preservation of our state's natural resources and wildlife. The initiative will help us protect the beauty, charm and unique attributes that make Connecticut such a special place to live.

DEP looks forward to working with a broad based coalition to undertake a coordinated and sustained effort to conserve grassland habitat in order to maintain:

- Biodiversity of bird species in our state

- A diverse and attractive landscape
- Recreational opportunities for our citizens and future generations to enjoy

GRASSLAND HABITAT CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

Goal:

Establish and maintain a permanent network of grassland habitat throughout Connecticut to conserve grassland bird species

Key Findings:

- Conservation of grassland habitat in Connecticut is identified as a high priority in Connecticut's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy and by bird conservation organizations.
- Grassland habitat supports approximately 80 species of birds in Connecticut (13 species are state listed and 21 species are in need of conservation), hundreds of invertebrate species and several mammals, reptiles and amphibians. (see attachment A).
- Grassland habitat is in serious decline due to conversion of grassland and farmland to other uses and successional growth of the habitat.
- Grassland habitat in Connecticut, especially in the Connecticut River Valley north of Hartford, is under intense development pressure.

Objectives:

- Complete a statewide survey to identify the location and quality of existing grasslands and lands suitable to create grassland, and determine the current population abundance and distribution of grassland bird species.
- Establish a statewide goal for the number of acres of grassland habitat necessary to maintain a diverse population of grassland bird species throughout the state and a time frame for acquisition.
- Expand efforts to acquire or protect grasslands or other lands suitable for the creation of grassland habitat in order to reduce the number of threatened and endangered grassland bird species in the state.
- Make acquisition of wildlife habitat a key priority in the revision of the Department's Open Space Acquisition Plan.
- Expand efforts to create partnerships in order to improve coordination, explore opportunities to foster the exchange and dissemination of information, leverage funding and build broad based support for this initiative.
- Develop financial incentives and funding alternatives to help leverage funding.
- Improve the dissemination of information among state and local officials and landowners to help guide land use decisions and the future acquisition of land.

Actions:

- Create a Leadership/Policy Committee comprised of state agency heads or their designees to provide direction to agency staff, foster support for the initiative and assure a coordinated effort.
- Create a technical working group to enhance communication and the exchange and dissemination of information to land use decision makers.

- Complete field surveys of the Connecticut, Shetucket and Quinebaug River Valleys by 2007 and the rest of Connecticut by 2009.
- Develop recommendations regarding financial incentives or funding alternatives to support the initiative and leverage funding.
- Initiate efforts to create and maintain grassland habitat utilizing stewardship funds.
- Develop an outreach strategy to engage and educate agricultural interests, land use decision makers, NGOs, landowners and economic development interests located in critical habitat areas.
- Identify opportunities to leverage available funding and combine working lands and grasslands where possible.
- Develop a habitat management plan for grasslands that address creation and maintenance of habitat and monitoring of species and habitat conditions.

Measures:

- % of grassland habitat and bird survey completed.
- % of acres of grassland habitat acquired or protected vs. goal.
- % increase in nesting pairs of key grassland bird species and number of grassland bird species removed from state endangered or threatened status.

Potential Partners:

- Conservation groups: CT Audubon; Audubon CT; CT Ornithological Association; The Nature Conservancy; CT Farmland Trust; CT Farm Bureau; Working Lands Alliance; Trust for Public Land; Citizens Advisory Council; National Wild Turkey Federation; Quail Unlimited; Pheasants Forever; Ducks Unlimited; CT Woodcock Council; Wildlife Management Institute; Sportsman Organizations; Connecticut Land Conservation Council
- State Agencies: DEP, OPM, DECD, DOA, DOT
- Federal Agencies: USFWS, USDA, FSA, NRCS
- Municipalities: Metropolitan Conservation Alliance, Capital Region Council of Governments (CROG) Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (NCCG)
- Academia: UCONN; Connecticut College; Trinity College
- Business: CT Home Builders, Agricultural Interests
- Private Landowners

Leadership/Policy Committee

Purpose: To provide direction to agency staff and foster coordination and collaboration to build support for broad based cooperative conservation.

Objectives:

- Brief staff and key constituent groups on the initiative to build broad based support
- Review progress by the technical working group
- Advocate for partnerships and leveraging of agency resources and legislative proposals
- Promote benefits of the Initiative

Members:

- Agency heads of: DEP, DOA, DECD, DOT, OPM or their designees

Note: Meet quarterly or as necessary to discuss progress and resolve any cuts/funding issues.

Technical Working Group

Purpose:

Foster the exchange and dissemination of information and make recommendations for consideration by the Leadership Policy Committee

Objectives:

- Exchange data on known grasslands, lands that could be utilized to create grasslands, and prime agricultural lands.
- Review agency goals and objectives related to preservation of open space and working lands and economic development goals and objectives.
- Develop strategies for data management, mapping and dissemination of information to key user groups.
- Develop recommendations for funding alternatives and financial incentives.
- Identify opportunities to leverage available funds.
- Develop a statewide goal for the number of acres of grassland habitat to be conserved.

Potential Members:

State Agencies
Federal Agencies
Municipal Agencies
NGO's
Agricultural Community
Land Trusts
Academia
Landowners

Appendix A. SPECIES THAT DEPEND ON GRASSLAND HABITAT

Species Group	Exclusive Use	Status	Preferred Use	Status
Grassland Birds	Upland sandpiper	E, GCN	Barn owl	E, GCN
	Grasshopper sparrow	E, GCN	Long-eared owl	E, GCN
	Horned lark	E, GCN	Short-Eared Owl	T, GCN
	Vesper sparrow	E, GCN	Sedge Wren	E, GCN
	Northern harrier	E, GCN		
	American kestrel	T, GCN		
	Bobolink	SC, GCN		
	Eastern meadowlark	SC, GCN		
	Savannah sparrow	SC, GCN		
	Henslow's sparrow ²	SC		
	Reptiles	Eastern hognose snake	SC, GCN	Eastern box turtle
Smooth greensnake		GCN		
Eastern racer		GCN		
Spotted turtle		GCN		
Amphibians	Eastern spadefoot	E, GCN		
	Blue-spotted salamander	T, GCN		
	Fowler's toad	GCN		
Mammals	Least shrew	E, GCN		
	Southern bog lemming	SC, GCN		
	Red bat	SC, GCN		
	Meadow jumping mouse	GCN		
Invertebrates ¹	Violet dart moth	T, GCN		
	Apamea Burgessii moth	SC, GCN		
	Schinia spinosae moth	SC, GCN		
	Phyllira tiger moth	SC, GCN		
	Pine barrens tiger moth	SC, GCN		
	Sideris rosea moth	C		

Status Designation

E – State Endangered

T – Threatened

SC – Special Concern

GCN – Greatest Conservation Need

C - Common

Note: ¹There are hundreds of invertebrate species that utilize grassland habitat.

²Extirpated as nesting species in Connecticut.

Appendix B. GRASSLAND GENERALISTS

Blackbirds and Orioles:	Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Orchard Oriole, Baltimore Oriole
Cardinals and Allies	Northern Cardinal, Indigo Bunting
Finches	Common Redpoll, Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch
Hawks	Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk
Goatsuckers	Common Nighthawk
Jays & Crows	American Crow
New World Sparrows	Eastern Towhee, American Tree Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, Dark-eyed Junco, White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow
Old World Sparrows	House Sparrow
Owls	Great Horned Owl, Snowy Owl
Pigeons and Doves	Mourning Dove, Rock Dove
Pipits	American Pipit
Swallows	Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Bank Swallow, Cliff Swallow, Barn Swallow
Shorebirds	American Golden-Plover, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, American Woodcock
Shrikes	Northern Shrike
Starlings	European Starling
Thrashers	Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrashers
Thrushes	Eastern Bluebird, American Robin
Tyrant Flycatchers	Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird
Upland game birds	Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite
Vultures	Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture
Waterfowl	Snow Goose, Canada Goose, Green-winged Teal, American Black Duck, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler
Wood-Warblers	Yellow Warblers, Palm Warbler, Common Yellowthroat

This information is derived from Audubon Connecticut's publication, "Protecting Connecticut Grassland Heritage: A report of the Connecticut Grasslands Working Group," 2003. It includes non-nesting species, introduced species, and wetland species that utilize the grassland/wetland interface or flooded grasslands.

Note: Grassland generalists use grasslands primarily for foraging and rely on other habitat types to meet other life-cycle requirements (e.g. nesting).