

Hawthorne Valley Farm

2025 Breeding Bird Survey



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Image: A male Bobolink in a Hawthorne Valley field.

Introduction

Amid global declines in bird populations, grassland and shrubland species are among the hardest hit, with significant losses over the past 50 years. Historically, the open prairie habitats of the Midwest supported large numbers of ground-nesting grassland birds, but with the rise of intensive agriculture and development, their populations have plummeted. Hayfields have served as a substitute breeding habitat for many of these birds, allowing them to expand their range into the Northeast during the 19th century. With increased mechanization of haying and the use of techniques like baleage that allow for earlier first cuts, many of these fields no longer serve as suitable breeding grounds. Concurrently, the increase in reforestation throughout our region reflects a reduction in these open farm habitats.

Agriculture in the Northeast declined during the 20th century, and as farm fields were abandoned and passed through the stages of succession, there was an initial increase in transitional shrubland habitats before they reverted to forests. With this reforestation, shrublands have become increasingly uncommon. Shrub-dominant habitats naturally occur from disturbances like fire and beaver activity, but because these processes are now suppressed across much of the landscape, human intervention is necessary to maintain them. At Hawthorne Valley Farm, some pastures and hayfields are consciously managed to support grassland and shrubland birds of conservation concern. We assessed their populations during the 2025 breeding season.

Methods

In June 2025, we conducted point counts across Hawthorne Valley Farm fields following the same methods as surveys conducted in 2005 and 2021. We visited a total of 42 survey points and noted all birds seen or heard within a 100' radius circle centered in the given field or field section. Points were located roughly equidistant from the field edge and outside of direct overlap with any other point-count circles. After a 5 minute wait, counts were conducted for 10 minutes, and the number of birds seen or heard inside and outside the census circle were recorded. Birds observed outside of the circle were recorded separately. This year, surveys were conducted between 11 June and 25 June.

Results and Discussion

We recorded a total of 68 bird species in or near our points, including three NYS High Priority Species of Greatest Conservation Need (Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, and Brown Thrasher), and two NYS Species of Special Concern (Grasshopper Sparrow, Red-shouldered Hawk). We documented 18 species associated with shrublands and early successional forests, and five grassland species (Table 1).

Brown Thrashers, a declining species that depends on shrublands, thickets, and messy forest edges, were observed in or near our survey circles at two sites this year. Blue-winged Warblers, another shrubland species, were previously recorded in 2005 but not in 2021. This year, we recorded Blue-winged Warblers within our survey circle at two shrubland sites. Prairie Warblers

entered our survey circles at three sites. In the 2025 State of the Birds report, Prairie Warblers were listed as a Yellow Alert Tipping Point species, meaning that over 50% of their population has been lost in the past 50 years. Even seemingly common species, such as the Field Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, and Wood Thrush, are now considered tipping point species with steep population losses and immediate conservation needs.



Image: Three juvenile Barn Swallows on a powerline being fed by a parent.

Bobolinks, another tipping point species, entered our survey circles at 20 locations, with a total count of 69 birds. As with previous years, they were most abundant in the fields off Schnakenberg Road (Figure 1). This is a dramatic increase from 2021 surveys in which 18 were counted at seven points throughout the farm. However, the 2021 surveys were conducted towards the end of the breeding season with large Bobolink flocks that rarely entered survey circles. In 2005, 49 Bobolinks were counted across 17 survey points, indicating a 41% increase in the number of individuals from 2005 to 2025 (Table 2). Climatic variations, such as drought and temperature, can impact local bird populations each year, so additional surveys are needed to understand population trends over time.

Two Eastern Meadowlarks were heard calling outside of a survey circle in the Schnakenberg fields (Figure 1). This species was previously observed in Tom's Field. This year, the Schnakenberg fields also supported the rare Grasshopper Sparrow, which was recorded for the first time just outside a survey circle (Figure 1). Like other grassland birds, juvenile Grasshopper

Sparrows cannot fly when they first leave the nest and instead walk beneath the dense protective cover provided by grasslands or in this case, hayfields. The delayed mowing schedule that Hawthorne Valley Farm practices can greatly benefit these vulnerable fledglings.

Management Recommendations

With widespread declines in bird populations, particularly those that depend on grasslands and shrublands, farm pastures and hayfields serve as important nesting habitats. The diversity and abundance of birds at Hawthorne Valley Farm continues to underscore the value in the management decisions that support these birds. The apparently strong Bobolink population around the Schnakenberg fields and at Tom's Field is encouraging. While we recognize the costs these practices can impose on the farm, we recommend, whenever possible, delaying hayfield mowing and pasture grazing. Recommendations for the earliest mowing and grazing dates range from July 15th (The Bobolink Project) to August 1st (NYS DEC), and even as late as August 15th (The Grassland Bird Trust). The later dates ensure that most young have fledged, a consideration that needs to be balanced with agricultural goals. We also advise continuing rotational cutting of shrublands to prevent forest succession while also maintaining parts of the Farm in this important transitional state.

Table 1. Grassland, shrubland, and other bird species observed in or near our survey circles. Italicized species indicate a NYS High Priority Species of Greatest Conservation Need, and species that are italicized with an asterisk (*) indicate a NYS Species of Special Concern.

Grassland Species	Other Species	
<i>Bobolink</i>	American Crow	Killdeer
<i>Eastern Meadowlark</i>	American Redstart	Least Flycatcher
<i>Grasshopper Sparrow*</i>	American Robin	Mallard
Red-winged Blackbird	Baltimore Oriole	Mourning Dove
Savannah Sparrow	Barn Swallow	Northern Flicker
Shrubland Species	Belted Kingfisher	Ovenbird
American Goldfinch	Black-billed Cuckoo	Pileated Woodpecker
Blue-winged Warbler	Black-capped Chickadee	Red-bellied Woodpecker
<i>Brown Thrasher</i>	Blue Jay	Red-eyed Vireo
Carolina Wren	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Red-shouldered Hawk*</i>
Cedar Waxwing	Chipping Sparrow	Red-winged Blackbird
Common Yellowthroat	Common Grackle	Rock Pigeon
Eastern Kingbird	Common Raven	Swamp Sparrow
Eastern Towhee	Downy Woodpecker	Tree Swallow
Field Sparrow	Eastern Bluebird	Tufted Titmouse
Gray Catbird	Eastern Phoebe	Turkey Vulture
House Wren	Eastern Wood-Pewee	Veery
Northern Cardinal	European Starling	Warbling Vireo
Northern Mockingbird	Fish Crow	White-breasted Nuthatch
Prairie Warbler	Great Crested Flycatcher	Wild Turkey
Song Sparrow	Green Heron	Wood Thrush
Willow Flycatcher	Hairy Woodpecker	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Yellow Warbler	House Finch	
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	House Sparrow	

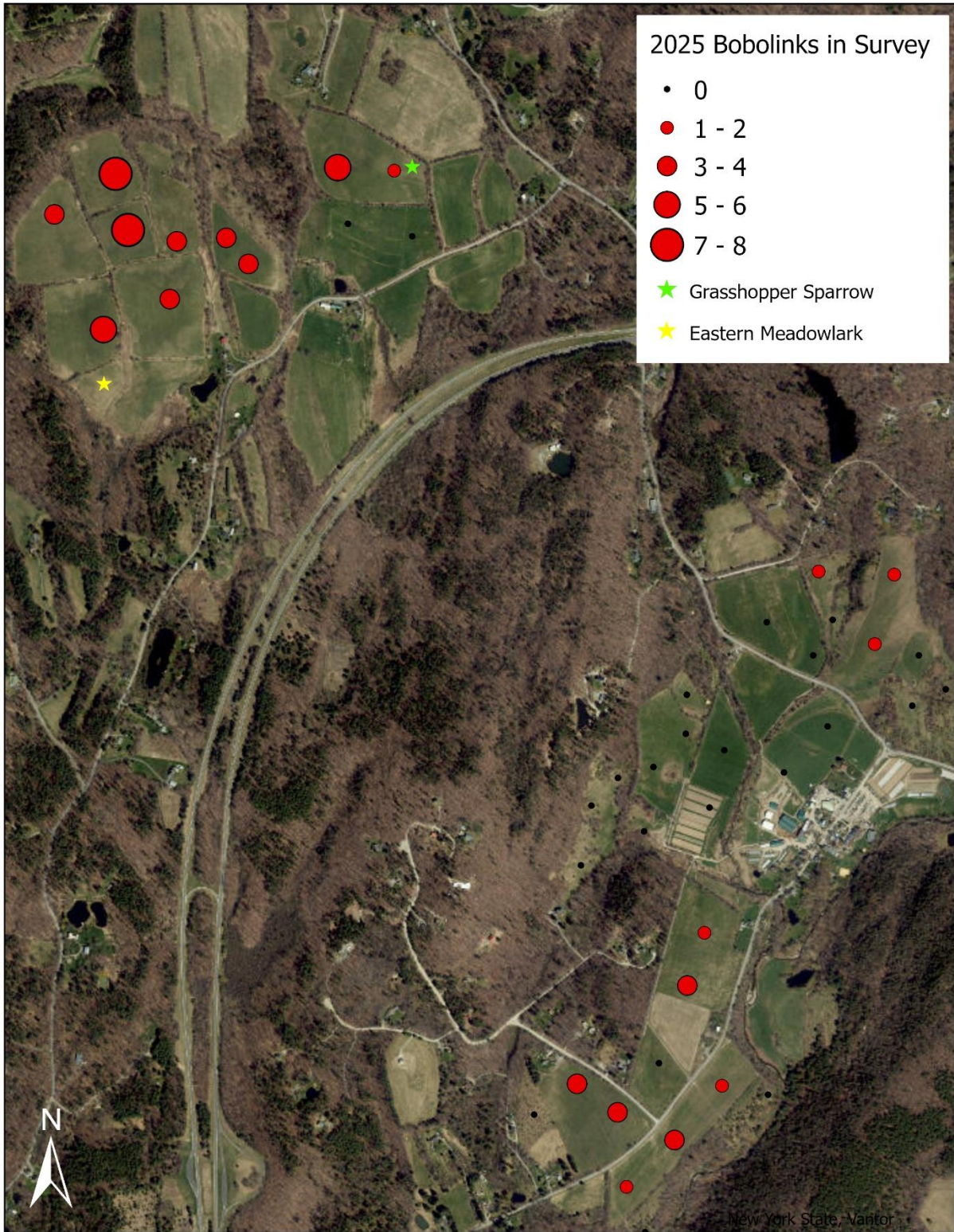


Figure 1. The number of Bobolinks that entered each 100-ft radius survey circle, and the areas that Eastern Meadowlarks and a Grasshopper Sparrow were heard.

Table 2. The number of birds observed during point counts within the 100-ft radius circle each year, and the percentage change from 2005 to 2025. Methods for 2005, 2021, and 2025 were the same length of time and at the same number of points. Methods differed in 2016, and those numbers are included only for rough comparison.

Species	2005	2016	2021	2025	% change 2005-2025
American Goldfinch	6	N/A	6	12	100%
Barn Swallow	27	41	12	18	-33%
Bobolink	49	122	18	69	41%
Brown Thrasher	0	N/A	0	1	100%
Eastern Kingbird	0	N/A	2	0	0%
Eastern Towhee	0	N/A	2	2	200%
Empidonax Flycatcher	3	N/A	0	2	-33%
Field Sparrow	6	4	4	3	-50%
Grasshopper Sparrow	0	0	0	1	100%
Gray Catbird	1	N/A	4	18	1700%
House Sparrow	0	0	4	1	100%
Prairie Warbler	1	3	1	4	300%
Red-winged Blackbird	19	N/A	5	18	-5%
Savannah Sparrow	11	6	0	9	-18%
Song Sparrow	8	22	15	8	0%
Tree Swallow	10	18	9	4	-60%
Yellow Warbler	1	N/A	1	5	400%

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