

Brighton pastures are important

I'd like to discuss the environmental importance, especially to birds, of the Brighton Pastures in the 400-acre area bounded on the north and south by Westfall Road and the Erie Canal, and on the west and east by South Clinton Avenue and Winton Road. These pastures provide breeding habitat for grassland bird species, including bobolinks, eastern meadowlarks, savannah sparrows, and grasshopper sparrows, as well as for other birds and animals. There are numerous other grassland species, but those mentioned are the ones known to occur in the Brighton Pastures.

Nearly all grassland bird species are in decline in the United States and in New York state. For example, according to the Breeding Bird Survey of the U.S. Geological Survey, grasshopper sparrows have declined in New York by a nearly catastrophic 96 percent between 1966 and 1996. Meadowlarks have declined at least 80 percent, and savannah sparrows have declined about 50 percent. Grasshopper sparrows are legally protected as a species of special concern by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation. However, this classification was made more than 10 years ago, and the species has declined further in the meantime.

The decline of grassland birds seems to be little known to the public, even though the subject has received a certain amount of media attention recently. For example, National Public Radio aired a story produced locally by WXXI the week of July 24. There was a story in *The New York Times* Dec. 31, 1996, "Birds That Nest in the Grasslands Find Their Habitats Under Siege." There is also a 1997 story on the National Wildlife Federation Web site at <http://www.nwf.org/nwf/natlwild/grassam7.html>. Their plight has also been discussed in the

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"Stokes Birdwatch" program that aired on public television (Episode No. 108).

All of these sources agree that the primary reason for their decline is loss of habitat. The natural grasslands where they originally lived have virtually disappeared. The birds have survived, and in some cases expanded their populations, by adapting to man-made grasslands such as pastures and hay fields. Now, unfortunately, this habitat, too, is disappearing because of the decline of agriculture and the encroachment of urban sprawl.

The Lake Ontario plain/Finger Lakes region of western New York, which includes Brighton, has one of the highest rates of consumption of agricultural land in the United States, according to the American Farmland Trust. This rapid consumption cannot be justified by population growth, because the rate of land consumption is much greater than the local rate of population growth. The Brighton Pastures will certainly disappear in the near future unless action is taken to preserve them, and with their disappearance, the populations of grassland birds that currently nest there would decline further. Their disappearance would be a classic case of urban sprawl encroaching on agricultural land. Towns like Brighton can and must take responsibility for stopping urban sprawl and the accompanying losses of natural and agricultural land.

There are a number of possible solutions to the problem. Some towns, such as Pittsford, are buying development rights. Some towns in

other states have actually imposed a tax, supported by their citizens, to buy and preserve open space. There is a state/federal program called Wildlife Habitat Incentive Plan that helps public and private landowners to defray the cost of maintaining land for conservation purposes. The program is especially interested in grassland habitat. The Lake Plains region is one of the highest-priority areas. Targeted species include grasshopper sparrow, eastern meadowlark, and bobolink. Thus, WHIP seems tailor-made for preserving the Brighton Pastures.

To preserve grassland, it is not sufficient to leave it to the forces of nature. Neglect would result in the grassland reverting to woodland through the natural process known as succession. The management options for preserving grassland include mowing, burning, and grazing. The latter is the traditional use of the Brighton pastures. It is also the management option that is the most benign for the birds, if grazing is not excessive. With mowing or burning, timing is crucial. Mowing or burning too early in the season causes nesting failure.

A group headed by Dan Rosen has proposed a community farm on the pasture land that will become the new Brighton town park (guest editorial in *The Brighton-Pittsford Post* on Aug. 19). This proposal is consistent with the survival of grassland birds, provided that a sufficient amount of land is set aside for pastures or hay fields and that it is managed appropriately.

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