

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Don't Mow, Let some Grass Grow

By Jeff Tome

For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Figure 1 This field is perfect for field nesting birds such as bobolinks and should not be mowed until July. (Photo by Jeff Tome.)

Big grassy fields are disappearing across the region, and some birds are disappearing with them. It seems odd to tell people not to mow, but it's true. The perfect huge lawn is not always a good thing.

For those of you with tiny lawns, I apologize. You should still mow your grass, though the optimal height for lawn health is three inches, so you may be able to get away with mowing less. For those of you with huge expanses of mowed area, feel free to let some of it grow. There are birds and other animals that depend on it that have traveled a long way to visit your field.

Take the Bobolink for example. It travels about 5,000 miles from the southern reaches of South America to find a big field. There, it builds a nest on the ground and sings a bubbly cheerful song. Some folks call bobolinks "skunk blackbirds", since they look like a blackbird with a white stripe down the top.

After they get here, not only are they insulted with awful names, they are also killed. One biologist I know says bobolinks disappear into mowed fields like stars disappear into a black hole. Once they are destroyed, they never come back.

The nests and sometimes the birds are destroyed when the fields are mowed down. The birds will try to make a new nest, but this is often mowed down soon after when the grass starts growing again. The birds then fly 5,000 miles back to South America, having wasted a lot of time and effort trying to raise a family in the Chautauqua watershed. Bobolinks are very loyal birds and will often return to the same place year after year until they can no longer make the journey. After that, the bobolinks' bubbly song will not be heard over that field again for quite a while, if ever.

I should note that bobolinks prefer hay and alfalfa fields. Most baby birds have fledged by the time farmers bale the alfalfa that the bobolinks prefer, assuming that that is happening in mid-July. The birds are more threatened by folks who brush hog and mow huge areas around their house.

If you have a big field, let it grow through the first part of the summer to give nesting birds a chance. Meadowlarks, woodcock, and numerous other birds nest in the same habitat, and all are slowly disappearing. It is becoming harder and harder to find birds that used to be common around the region.

Fields serve another important purpose too. They slow down water after a rainstorm, allowing it to sink into the ground more. They also slow the water down to prevent it from washing out areas and carrying mud and other things to Chautauqua Lake.

Overall, lush green fields serve a global purpose. They provide a home for weary birds to nest in after a 5,000-mile, month or two-long flight. The least we can do is be good hosts and let them raise their babies before they go. If, along the way, that also helps keep sediment out of the lake and lets more water be absorbed in to the ground even better. If your neighbors complain that your big field is starting to look bad, just smile and say that you are letting it grow for the birds and will mow it down later.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2008 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2008!