

Local non-profits and land trusts partner with NRCS to create more attractive opportunities for farmers to conserve at-risk grassland birds

North America's native grasslands have suffered the most intense impact by humans of any of the country's terrestrial ecosystems, resulting in grassland birds experiencing a steeper decline than any other guild of birds. Remaining grassland birds have now adapted to using hayfields and pasturelands as surrogate habitat—an ecological trap under the wrong conditions, or a unique opportunity for conservation under the right conditions.

The Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI), a partnership between Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL), The Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), American Farmland Trust (AFT), and Quail Forever (QF), is entering its fourth year developing collaborative, high-impact ways to reverse the declines of grassland birds on working lands in Virginia's Piedmont, Blue Ridge, and Shenandoah Valley. Recognizing that regenerative agricultural practices can help reverse these declines, VGBI draws on the research, expertise, and programming of partners to promote a suite of best management practices that benefit grassland birds while building healthier farms, facilitating more functional and productive ecosystems.

With the majority of remaining grasslands in Virginia currently held in private hands and under agricultural use, the future of grassland and grassland bird conservation now depends heavily on the actions of landowners and agricultural producers. Recognizing this, VGBI has built out programming that focuses on filling gaps in technical assistance and financial support in order to accelerate the adoption of bird-friendly best management practices (BMPs).

With initial funding support from the Cornell Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative, and drawing from extensive local research conducted by VWL, VGBI created an in-house incentives program that offsets any perceived financial risk for producers willing to experiment with the adoption of priority BMPs vetted to protect grassland birds during their vulnerable nesting season—delayed spring haying and/or summer pasture stockpiling for livestock. The incentives program has been very well received, successfully enrolling more than 5,000 acres from 2022 to 2024 and far surpassing its originally anticipated impact. However, the program is designed to grease the wheels of change, and cannot sustain producers for multiple years if they come to find that these new practices require long-term financial support.

Recognizing the importance of sustained adoption for ensuring lasting conservation impact, VGBI partnered with Virginia NRCS staff to develop solutions. That partnership bore fruit through two new conservation practice scenarios:

- **Conservation practice 511 (Forage and Harvest Management)**, previously not available in Virginia, now allows producers to be compensated for delaying their first cutting of hay in the Spring. The practice's default delay date had been August 15, a date that VWL research showed was unnecessarily late in order to accommodate the bulk of the grassland bird nesting season, and so that date was moved forward to July 1 to work better for more hay producers.
- **Conservation practice 528 (Prescribed Grazing)**, a grazing management practice that involves rotating livestock across multiple paddocks in the management of the forage system. A practice scenario called summer stockpiling involves resting one or more paddocks between May 1 and July 15 to protect the critical nesting period of many grassland birds.

Both the 511 and 528 conservation practices are available through NRCS' EQIP and CSP programs depending on applicant eligibility. Note that NRCS financial assistance programs are designed to provide an incentive to assist with the cost of implementing conservation practices.

VGBI's financial incentive program now seamlessly interfaces with NRCS financial assistance programs to better conserve grassland birds while taking into account the needs of farmers in Virginia. Additionally, the technical and financial assistance associated with the program are no longer limited to VGBI's 16-county service area, and are now available through NRCS programming state-wide.

For more information about the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative, please contact coordinators Justin Proctor (ProctorCJ@si.edu) or October Greenfield (OGreenfield@pecva.org), or visit vagrasslandbirds.org.

