

BIRD-FRIENDLY HAY FARMING DEMO

KICKS OFF IN HOLLYWOOD, MD

What do Southern Maryland hay farmers and threatened grassland birds such as the Eastern Meadowlark have in common? They are both dependent on the survival of hayfields, and as a result, they are facing increasing pressure to survive in a changing world. Grassland bird populations have plummeted by as much as 70 percent since 1970, while hay farming in Southern Maryland is a continuous casualty of urban and suburban sprawl and conversion of hayfields to monoculture cropland.

This spring, in Hollywood, Maryland, a collaboration of four non-profits have come together to begin testing methods of farming hay that work for farmers and birds. The “Saving Southern Maryland’s Grassland Birds through Bird-Friendly Mowing” project will devote 100 acres of hayfields next to Historic Sotterley to test hay farming methods that can make a difference, big and small, to our declining grassland bird populations.

When a meadowlark builds a nest in a hayfield before the first mowing, it is like building a nest in the middle of railroad track. When the haying begins, there is a good chance that the equipment will harvest not just the hay, but also any nest, eggs, newborn chicks, and even adult breeding birds that lie in its path.



Yet, most hay farmers are not in a position to simply forego spring haying. That first crop is usually the most commercially valuable, and the timing of haying is often dictated more by the weather than anything else. But does that mean there is simply nothing to be done that is both “bird-friendly” and “hay-friendly”?

The coordinators of the Hollywood initiative -- David Moulton, a bird specialist, and Joe Goldsmith and BJ Bowling, hayfield land managers -- intend to demonstrate that there are haying techniques that can strike a better balance between the reproductive needs of the birds and the economic needs of hay farmers. These can range from alterations as simple as adding “flush bars” to the haying machines, so that at least the adults have a chance to escape the cutting blades, to mowing a particular field earlier than the traditional schedule, to avoid mowing during the peak breeding season.



Photo credit: Bill Hubick

“The meadowlark is one of the iconic birds of rural Maryland, and its populations are crashing due to a loss of habitat which hay farmers have nothing to do with,” noted Moulton. “But there are some bird-friendly practices that would make a difference.”

“Most hay farmers I know are interested in learning farming techniques that are good for the environment and make practical sense,” explained Goldsmith. “There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ answer here – but there are options to choose from that we want the farming community to know about.”

“We’re all going to learn something from each other,” added Bowling. “Small changes in traditional farming practices can make a big difference once they are proven to work. That’s what we want to demonstrate.”

The four non-profits involved in launching this project are Farmers Feeding Southern Maryland, Southern Maryland Audubon Society, Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust, and Historic Sotterley, Inc. Results from this year’s demonstration will be publicized through farming and birding networks with the hope that additional landowners will act to assist in this effort.

For more information about this initiative, email David Moulton at Moulton.DavidH@gmail.com or 240 278 4473.