

Local partnership nets national grant award

SKOWHEGAN — A winged ally of Maine farmers is the focus of a new partnership between the Somerset County Soil & Water Conservation District and the Damariscotta River Association.

A \$5,000 grant from the 2018 Cornell Land Trust Small Grants Program will support the Ag Allies program, a project to educate Maine citizens and work with local farmers and land trusts to provide much-needed safe nesting habitat for steeply declining populations of grassland bird species.

Male bobolinks — black and white and often perched in a hedgerow or on a clump of grass — are an iconic spring sight in Maine hayfields. In addition to being a delight to see and hear, bobolinks and other grassland birds are true agricultural allies to Maine farmers, as these birds consume large quantities of both insect and weed pests each growing season. Unfortunately, these and other grassland birds are declining faster than most other groups of birds due to habitat loss.

The Somerset County

SWCD in 2017, under the leadership of the District's Technical Director Laura Suomi-Lecker, launched Ag Allies to provide education and support for agricultural landowners wanting to help grassland birds. Bobolinks, meadowlarks and sparrow species require undisturbed hayfields for nesting. Delaying the onset of mowing until after birds have fledged is critical for survival.

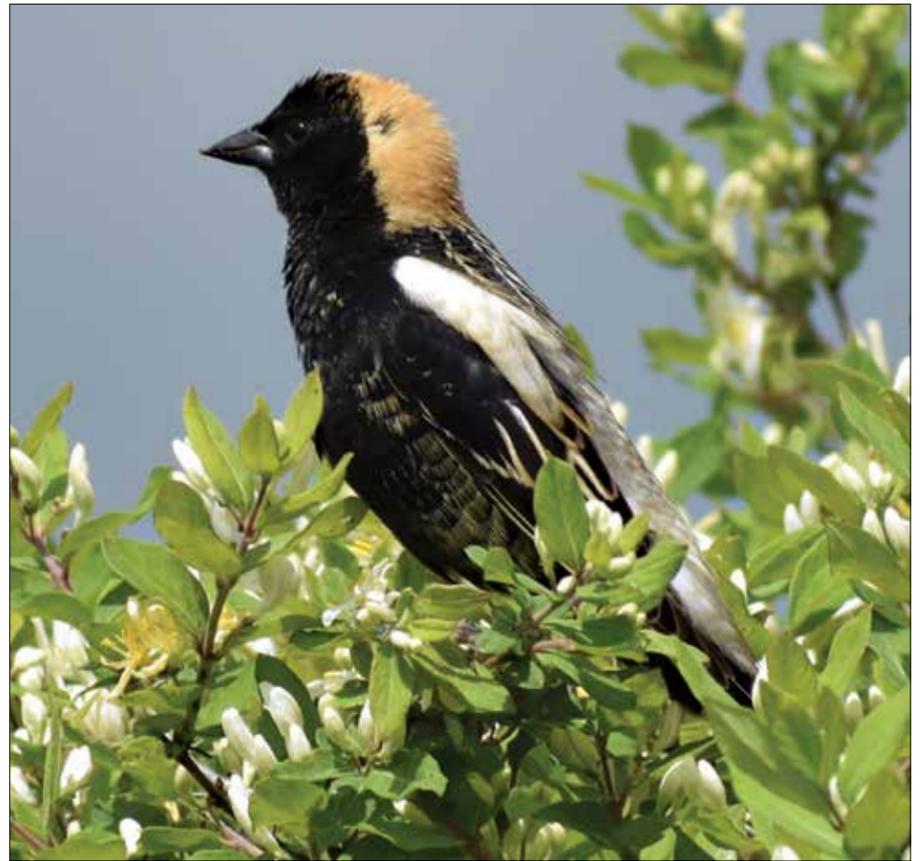
"Ag Allies helps farmers make room for critical conservation on working agricultural lands in ways that accommodate individual farms' management needs," says Suomi-Lecker.

In its pilot year, the program resulted in delayed mowing on more than 400 acres of confirmed bobolink breeding habitat, allowing an estimated 1,000 nestlings to be successfully fledged from these fields. The Damariscotta River Association joined the effort in 2018 to assist with landowner outreach, especially within the Maine land trust community. The DRA manages 60 acres of hayland for grassland birds within its conservation holdings.

"DRA is committed to managing grassland habitat to seek a balance between agricultural needs and the needs of the wildlife that depend on this habitat," said DRA Lands & Stewardship Stewardship Director Jesse Ferreira. "Partnering with the Somerset County SWCD and Ag Allies has really helped us improve our understanding and management of these habitats."

Grant funds will allow Ag Allies to engage with more landowners and have a greater impact on grassland bird conservation.

"By expanding our partnerships to other Soil & Water Conservation Districts and organizations it allows Somerset County SWCD staff to work on far-reaching education and outreach projects. The Ag Allies grassland bird project is a great example of such an effort," said Joe Dembeck, executive director of the Somerset County SWCD. "The receipt of the Cornell grant will allow us to work with the Damariscotta River Association in outreach efforts to Maine land trusts such as Somerset Woods Trustees and Se-



Laura Suomi-Lecker
Male bobolinks are an iconic sight in Maine hay fields, but these and other grassland birds are in decline. A partnership between the Somerset County SWCD and the Damariscotta River Association works with agricultural landowners wanting to support grassland bird conservation.



The haylands at Damariscotta River Association's Great Salt Bay Farm are part of the Somerset County Soil & Water Conservation District's Ag Allies program — an effort to promote grassland bird conservation on agricultural lands.

basticook Regional Land Trust in providing technical guidance regarding

management of haylands for grassland bird species." The Cornell Land Trust

Small Grant Program is part of an initiative launched by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the national Land Trust Alliance to help protect birds on private lands. The goal of the new Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative and associated web site (bird-trust.org) is to improve conservation for declining species by pairing the bird conservation community with land trusts, which collectively protect more than 24 million acres of private land nationwide.

For more information about Ag Allies, contact Suomi-Lecker at laura.lecker@me.nacdn.net, 207-474-8323 ext. 3, or Jesse Ferreira at jferreira@damariscottariver.org, 207-563-1393. ■

Damariscotta River Association photo

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