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## **Groups Urge Restoration and Protection of NJ's Rarest Wildlife Habitats**

### ***Conservation Partnerships with Private Landowners Essential to Saving Key Grassland Habitats, Critical Species***

Federal, state and nonprofit conservation officials joined forces today to highlight the importance and process of restoring New Jersey's rarest habitats – grasslands and other habitats in early succession such as shrublands.

Landowners have an essential role to play in preserving New Jersey's most critically endangered habitats and can benefit financially by voluntarily conserving critical natural resources on private pastures and farmland, the experts said.

“New Jersey's grasslands have reached a critical juncture. Strong, voluntary partnerships are needed to protect these areas and prevent the large number of threatened and endangered species from disappearing from New Jersey,” said Eric Stiles, vice president of conservation and stewardship for New Jersey Audubon Society. “Grassland conservation is a private-public partnership, based on financial rewards to willing landowners, and involving state and federal agencies.”

New Jersey has lost agricultural and grassland habitat at an alarming rate, from nearly 1 million acres in 1972 to less than 850,000 acres in 2001, based on the latest available state data. And in just a six-year period – from 1995 to 2001 – nearly 26,000 acres of agricultural lands were lost to development.

“Grasslands and other early successional habitat are New Jersey's most critically endangered habitats,” Stiles said.

Eric Schradung, Senior Fish & Wildlife Biologist and Private Lands Coordinator for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service based at its New Jersey Field Office in Pleasantville, said, “Much of the land in New Jersey is privately owned, so protection of our essential natural resources depends on partnerships with willing landowners. Agricultural grasslands, which provide shelter, safety and nourishment for grassland birds, are the most rapidly disappearing land type in New Jersey.”

“Since they lack trees, the agricultural landscapes of pastures and farmland that contain New Jersey's grasslands are easier and cheaper to develop and often targeted first by developers,” New Jersey Audubon's Stiles said at a press conference today at the

ecologically important and strikingly beautiful Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge in the Sussex County community of Sussex.

The Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge was chosen for the event to demonstrate the successful grassland restoration and management practices occurring there. The refuge is a gem in an expansive, historically agricultural area of the northwestern part of New Jersey.

Nearby Wantage and Vernon townships in Sussex County and Pohatcong in Warren County feature enormous tracts of grasslands hosting critical bird species whose populations are in jeopardy. Critical habitat for grassland dependent species, also found throughout other areas of New Jersey, has been rapidly disappearing due to development. As habitat dwindles, bird and other species decline.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Endangered and Nongame Species Program are providing financial and other incentives to farmers to restore native habitat and to manage their lands to benefit wildlife.

New Jersey Audubon Society, the state's oldest and most respected conservation organization, is advocating grassland preservation and restoration of native vegetation that provides habitat for species that are listed as threatened, endangered or of special concern by the state.

Landowners can learn about how they can manage property of any size to benefit wildlife through a new handbook, "New Jersey Audubon Society's Guide to Incentive Programs for New Jersey Landowners." It is a clearinghouse for information about state and federal programs that provide financial and technical assistance.

The guide is available on NJ Audubon's Web site at: [www.njaudubon.org/Conservation](http://www.njaudubon.org/Conservation) or by calling (908) 766-5787.

"State and federal habitat management programs provide a win-win situation for farmers and for natural resources," said Kim Korth, a biologist who oversees the Landowner Incentive Program under the state Department of Environmental Protection's Endangered and Nongame Species Program.

There has been a dramatic loss of grassland and other early successional habitats statewide and major impacts to the species that use them. Forty percent of the birds on New Jersey's endangered list rely on grasslands, while almost 30 percent of birds listed as endangered, threatened or of special concern are considered early successional species. Over 85 percent of New Jersey's listed insects including butterflies rely on grassland and early successional habitat.

New Jersey still contains important grassland and early successional habitat including habitat for the largest single populations of frosted elfin and arogos skipper globally,” said Korth, referring to species of butterflies.

Established native vegetation such as Indian grass, little bluestem, big bluestem and switchgrass have many benefits, including needing less treatment, such as fertilizer and lime, than traditional grasses.

“Tall native grasses have provided habitat to grasshopper sparrows, bobolinks, northern harriers, upland sandpipers and more,” said Tim Dunne, biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service based in Clinton.

Most farmers’ traditional hay and pasture crops are cool-season grasses and legumes such as timothy hay, rye grass, orchard grass and alfalfa. These get their first cutting in late May or early June – timing that corresponds to the peak nesting season for grassland birds. As a result, breeding bird pairs selecting these hayfields are doomed to fail.

The result is the destruction of habitat and further declines in both the number of individual birds and the number of species.

Habitat management to benefit wildlife includes farmers creating buffers, filter strips and other areas that are undisturbed during the nesting season, said Dunne.

NJ Audubon’s Eric Stiles added, “Without adequate protection, creation and management of their nesting habitats, grassland birds will continue to decline in New Jersey until they are locally extinct. Federal and state incentive programs offer some hope.

“Grasslands are top priorities for these programs. But in order to succeed best, these programs must focus on areas where converting to grasslands is the most feasible. That’s not all. In addition, effective management is needed on lands owned by nonprofit conservation organizations and by federal, state, county and municipal agencies in regions where grassland management should be a top priority,” said Stiles.

The Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge was established by an act of Congress in 1990. It hosts more than 200 species of birds, as well as a variety of plants and other animals. While the refuge was created primarily to provide habitat protection for migratory waterfowl that inhabit its wetlands, it manages native, warm-season grasslands. They provide critical habitat for important threatened and endangered bird species including bobolinks and savannah sparrows that inhabit the uplands.

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