

GRASSLAND BIRDS AT THE PLATTSBURGH AIRFIELD IBA: AN UPDATE

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In 1995 I published an article in *The Kingbird* describing a Grasshopper Sparrow colony I discovered in 1994 at the Plattsburgh Airforce Base (PAFB), Clinton County, while working there under contract with the New York Natural Heritage Program (Gretch 1995). In 1997 this site was identified by Audubon NY as one of the 127 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in New York State, defined as sites “essential for sustaining naturally occurring populations of bird species” (Wells 1998). Again in 2004, the status of this site was reviewed by the IBA program, and even though most of the grassland bird populations had declined to such a degree that they no longer met the “species at risk” thresholds, the site was still listed as one of the 136 IBAs in the state because of the number of Grasshopper Sparrows it supported (Burger 2005). Following the closure of PAFB in 1995, the site has been administered by a series of development agencies and finally the County of Clinton, under which it has been transformed into a county and international airport. There are plans to build a terminal, access road and parking facility along the runway (R. Hensel, pers. comm.). These plans may lead to further habitat degradation and disturbance at this site.

In 1995 I wrote, “With the impending change soon to occur at the base, I felt it was important to try to quantify the size and extent of the population.” It was hoped that these baseline data would be used to develop a wise management plan for this critical bird site. This unfortunately never came to pass, and now we are faced with the potential demise of this site as a breeding area for Grasshopper Sparrows and other grassland birds. The present article is a follow-up to Gretch (1995), a summary of the current status of the site and its grassland breeding birds, and an account of efforts to protect and manage the site for long-term conservation purposes in the face of threats to develop it for commercial purposes.

METHODS

The survey described herein was intended to document the populations of grassland birds at the PAFB site for a decade (1994-2003); it was, however, truncated to only nine years because I was denied access to the property in 2003 by its new administrators, Clinton County, the Clinton County Airport, and the Plattsburgh International Airport—although I made them aware of how critical the tenth and final year of the inventory was, and despite a second request offering to delay the count to later in the season. Permission to access

the site to conduct the bird survey had previously been granted through the Airforce Base Conversion Agency (AFBCA), followed by the Plattsburgh Airbase Redevelopment Corporation (PARC).

The survey was performed each year from 1994 through 2002 on approximately the same date (between June 11-16) and the same time of day, starting between 7:30 and 8:00 AM, when bird song was still exuberant. Tall vegetation such as mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) was often used as singing posts by males. The standardized survey route conducted by car along a periphery road that parallels the runway. Stops were made every 1/10 mile and all birds heard and seen were recorded. Grassland bird species surveyed included Grasshopper Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Horned Lark. There were other species of birds recorded such as Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink and Northern Harrier, however they were not detected frequently enough to show any trend in abundance. I was aware that there was development pressure to place a new airport terminal along the western edge of the runway in the middle of the Grasshopper Sparrow colony. Therefore, I made very specific notations about the precise location of each Grasshopper Sparrow recorded during the surveys.

RESULTS

The numbers of grassland birds recorded for each species, as well as the total number of grassland birds for each year of the survey, are shown in Table 1. All four species declined over the period surveyed, and the three sparrow species in particular showed a precipitous decline. The first indication that the site was clearly changing was in the observed decline in numbers of Grasshopper and Vesper sparrows after 1996. A few years later, the same trend appeared in the Savannah Sparrow and Horned Lark data. It has been reported that Grasshopper Sparrow populations can fluctuate widely for reasons that are not understood (Smith 1997). However when one observes simultaneous declines in four species at the same site, it seems more reasonable to attribute a role to changes in the site itself, rather than to synchronous demographic fluctuations. Looking at these data, it is my carefully considered conclusion that the site is in serious decline. Graph 1 shows the declining numbers of Grasshopper Sparrows recorded during the nine years of the survey. Bar Graph 2 shows that numbers of Grasshopper Sparrows peaked at about 2.1 to 2.2 miles from the entrance gate, and diminished at the north and south ends of the runway habitat. Conditions are most favorable for this species in dry, well-drained soil with sparse tufts of grassy vegetation and exposed sandy soil—characteristics shown by the habitat toward the middle of the site.

Table 1. Counts of Grassland Birds at the Plattsburgh Airfield (1994-2002).

Year	Grasshopper Sparrow	Vesper Sparrow	Savannah Sparrow	Horned Lark	Total
1994	17	12	19	3	51
1995	12	11	22	6	51
1996	14	11	13	7	45
1997	7	7	19	7	40
1998	8	2	13	4	27
1999	6	4	16	6	32
2000	8	2	4	2	16
2001	2	1	8	0	11
2002	5	1	5	2	13

Figure 1. Counts of Grasshopper Sparrows at the Plattsburgh Airfield, 1993-2002.

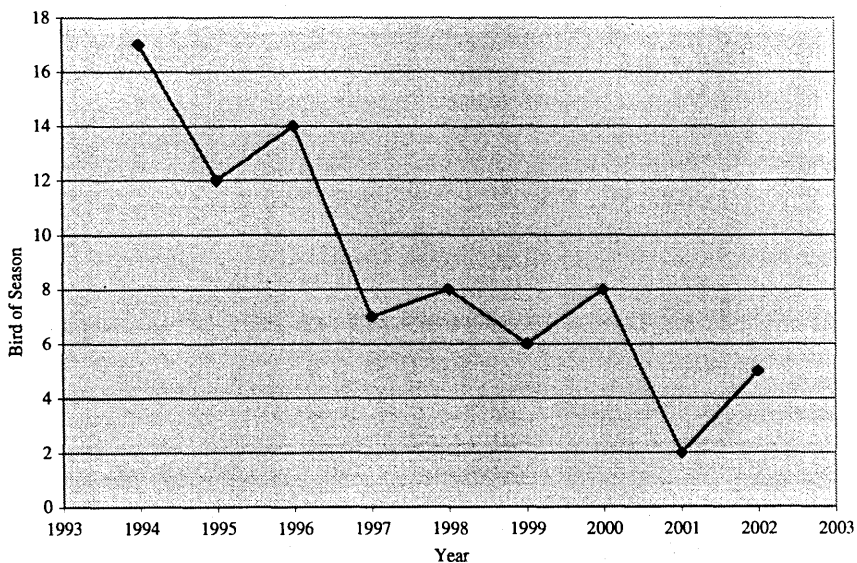
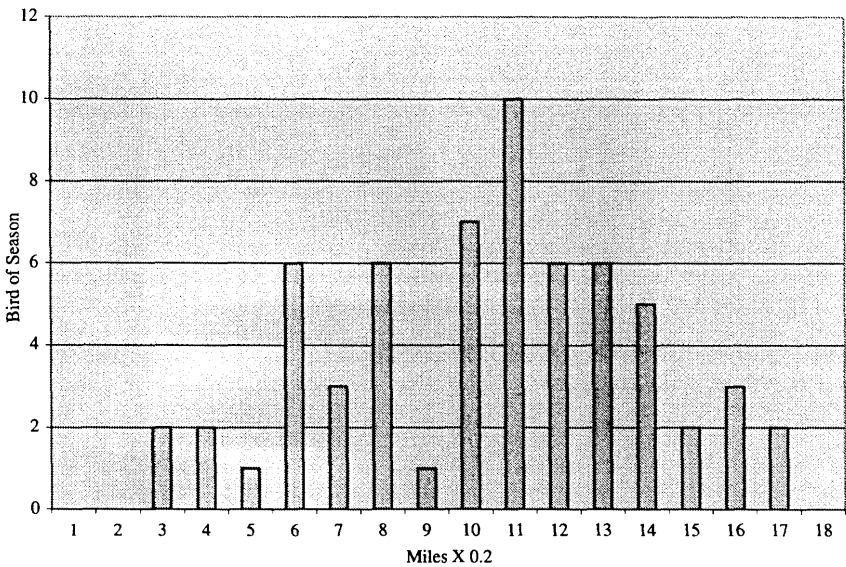


Figure 2. Distribution of Grasshopper Sparrows along runway at the Plattsburgh Airfield, 1993-2002 (annual counts pooled).



CAUSES OF DECLINE

Jones and Vickery (1997) stress the importance of restricting mowing during the breeding season. Recommendations in the Grassland Management Plan for Bradley International Airport include delaying mowing until August 15, when birds have fledged. These authors say Grasshopper Sparrows can raise two broods over the summer, and the second brood usually fledges in early to mid August (Jones and Vickery 1998). Although this information was provided to PARC, part or all of the grasslands around the runway were mowed when I visited on June 11, 1998, June 14, 2000 and June 15, 2001. I have asked whether these examples of early mowing reflected a deliberate change in the management regime for the site, following the base closure in 1995, but I have never received an answer. Whether the early mowing has been deliberate or inadvertent, the failure to develop a grassland management plan that includes a mowing regime consistent with the breeding season of these birds has jeopardized the site.

There have been other major disturbances to this habitat. In August of 1999 the base hosted a Phish Concert with attendance of about 100,000 people (Conley 1999). In July 1997 there was an Air Show with an attendance of 16,500 people. In addition, after the base closed, I believe traffic along the periphery road bordering the runway had increased due to environmental clean

up. In fact the reason I was denied access to the base in 2003 was because “the perimeter road is a designated haul route for a contractor working on a soil decontamination project” (Hensel 2003).

Until recently the west side of the runway was undeveloped with a long continuous narrow strip of land, over three miles, available for grassland birds to nest undisturbed. All major buildings occurred on the east side of the runway. As a member of the runway re-use committee I recommended that the new terminal be placed on the developed east side, reserving the west side for grassland birds. As of 2005 the terminal is planned for the northeast side of the runway (Ralph Hensel, pers. comm.), but without a grassland bird management plan for the site the populations are likely to continue to decline.

EFFORTS TO PROTECT THIS SITE

The first year of the survey I was under contract with the New York Natural Heritage Program, but after that I took full responsibility for conducting the annual survey and advocating for the protection of this site. The president of the High Peaks Audubon Society at the time (1994) and I met with PARC’s executive director and leveraged a seat on the Technical Advisory Committee. This was a committee that advised PARC on how the runway would be reused. I made numerous and major presentations to this committee trying to educate them about the valuable natural resources they had, and attempted to steer them in the direction of options that would minimize impact on the Grasshopper Sparrow colony; this included placement of the terminal and construction of a crosswinds runway. Despite promises to the contrary no mention was made of the site’s IBA status or ecologically sensitive nature in the interim or final report of the Plattsburgh International Airport Master Plan (PARC 1997).

After witnessing ongoing precipitous declines in several species of grassland birds, I issued a written “alert” and organized a meeting with PARC and others to see if we could agree on a management plan to protect this site. On November 12, 1999 this meeting was held with PARC, the New York State DEC, AFBCA, Audubon and local press in attendance. Jeff Wells, then Audubon NY’s Director of Bird Conservation, talked about the importance of the site for grassland birds. Among other things, we discussed finding a way to ensure that this habitat would continue to support a viable breeding population of grassland birds. It was agreed that we would make PARC aware of other airport management plans for grassland birds including those at Westover Airforce Base and Bradley International Airport. Following this meeting there were continuous attempts by Audubon NY’s IBA Program Coordinator to develop a management protocol for the airfield that would benefit wildlife without compromising the goals and mission of PARC. An additional management plan for Vermont airports was also sent for their review.

Even so, all efforts to date to develop a management plan have failed. After years of advocacy and communication, I have concluded that this significant bird habitat is not a priority with either PARC or Clinton County.

DISCUSSION

The IBA process has categorized at-risk species, and ranked the Grasshopper Sparrow as 'highly at risk' in New York State. This category includes species whose restricted distributions and modest populations place them at risk of local or regional extirpation (Burger 2005). The PAFB site was designated an IBA largely on the basis of its unique status as the only large colony of Grasshopper Sparrows in Clinton County.

In contrast, the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this site seriously underestimates the value, quality and sensitivity of the grassland habitat bordering the runway, without any objective biological data to support the new interpretation. The EIS (1995) states, "Most of the land disturbance would occur on property supporting habitat of relatively low biological value." It continues, "The loss and alteration of wildlife habitats with the proposed action are not expected to significantly affect regional wildlife populations because of the low sensitivity levels of the species present.... In addition impacts are not expected to be significant because of the presence and quantity of suitable adjacent habitats." There is no suitable adjacent habitat of any quantity or quality for Grasshopper Sparrows to nest.

Although it seems pointless to debate the intentions underlying the EIS and its dismissive conclusions, the bottom line is very disheartening for the entire IBA program and the cooperative spirit on which it depends. If language such as that quoted above can emerge as decisive in planning for the future of a well-studied site, formally recognized as one the 136 most important bird sites in NY State, it seems to me that the conservation community must reassess its basic assumptions about the ability of objective data to influence policy decisions. Wells (1998) wrote, "Implementing conservation actions for grassland sites will clearly be a major challenge (Wells 1998)." My experiences at PAFB have tended to confirm this statement. It is also my conclusion that the IBA program, if it is to have any hope of success, depends on presenting a strong and united front by all concerned, from individual birders, to local and state bird organizations, and local and state environmental protection agencies. I therefore was glad to hear that a broad group of partners in New York State was recently formed with the purpose of working cooperatively to coordinate planning, monitoring, research, and conservation efforts for grassland birds in the state (Jillian Liner, pers. comm.).

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