Bobolink

Dolichonyx oryzivorus

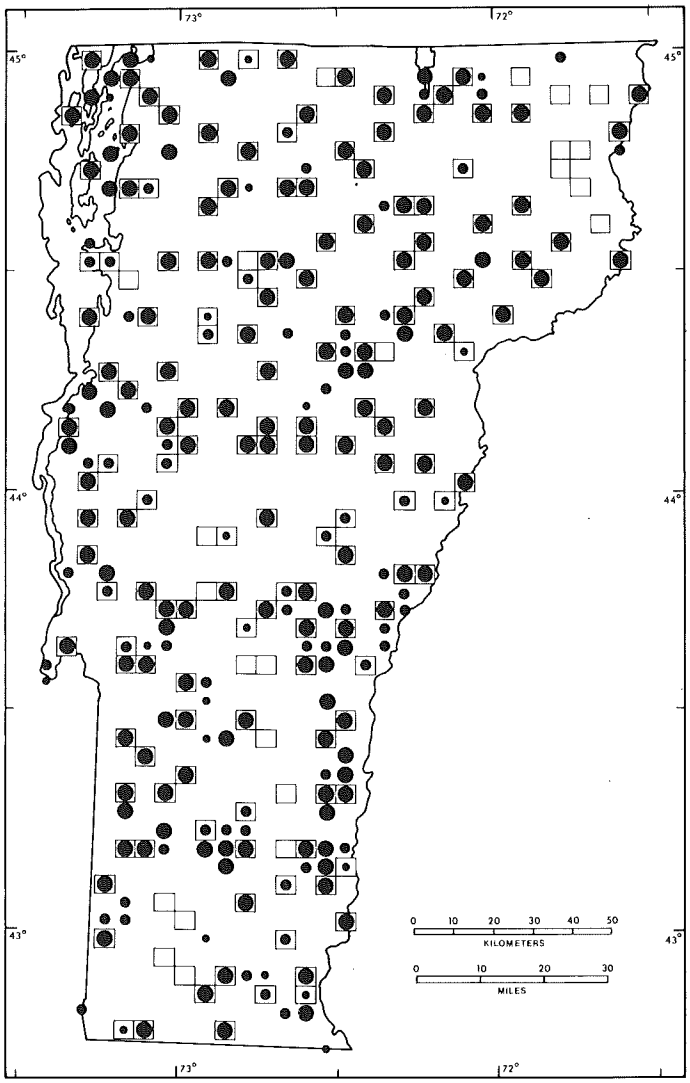
The Bobolink inhabits extensive fields with dense herbaceous cover. The species is most commonly encountered in hayfields, but it will also inhabit grain and alfalfa plantings and weedy, fallow fields. Bobolinks avoid extensive shrubby growth, and areas having large amounts of willow, alder, or spiraea are generally not used. Sufficient ground cover to protect the carefully hidden nest and the young, which apparently depart the nest before they can fly well, is vital.

The Bobolink is a long-distance migrant, wintering from southwestern Brazil south to northern Argentina. It returns to Vermont in early May; an extreme early arrival date is April 26. Males on territory are easily detected by their exuberant, bubbly songs, often given in flight, and by their constant pursuit of other males and of the rather drab, sparrowlike females that arrive later. Bobolinks are loosely colonial; polygynous males usually mate with two or more females. Territories, like those of the related Red-winged Blackbird, appear to be centered around the nest site. Foraging takes place away from the site in surrounding fields. The nest is built in late May on the ground, in a hollow under thick vegetation. Locating a nest is very difficult, as the inconspicuous female will land some distance away and walk to it. Consequently, data have been collected on only six clutches in Vermont; their dates range over a 3½-week period from June 6 to July 1. The species is easily confirmed when young are in the nest and directly after fledging by watching for parent birds carrying food. During the Atlas Project the species was frequently confirmed. The species has potential high productivity, commonly laying clutches of 5 or 6 eggs. Such productivity may in part allay the typically high losses common to ground-nesting species. Fledgling dates from Atlas Project data range from June 26 to July 23 (five records).

After the young have been raised in mid to late July, Bobolinks gather in flocks as the males molt out of their conspicuous buff, black, and white plumage into the female-like winter plumage. The autumn migration commences in late July and peaks in late August; flocks often frequent cornfields, marshes, and fields of reed canary grass. The Bobolink is generally gone by late September, although there are a few October records, including an extreme late date of October 24.

In Vermont, where the dairy industry persists, the Bobolink is a common bird. Few hayfields in the state are without at least one pair of these entertaining birds. There has been considerable concern for the species over the last 50 years as a result of changes in the harvesting practices of dairy farmers, who now cut hay and "green feed" two to three times in a summer, sometimes starting as early as late May. Although these practices might be expected to effect a population decline in the Bobolink, there has been no decline in Vermont, where the species seems to return each year in undiminished numbers. Nest losses resulting from early haying are apparently compensated for by renesting efforts.

In coastal New York, the species has become uncommon or rare as a result of the increasing encroachment of development



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 156 (87%)

Possible breeding:	9 (6% of total)
Probable breeding:	22 (14% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	125 (80% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	30	97	19
Green Mountains	43	80	28
North Central	18	95	12
Northeast Highlands	8	50	5
East Central	19	100	12
Taconic Mountains	16	100	10
Eastern Foothills	22	92	14

on suitable habitat and of changes in farming (Bull 1974). The Bobolink should be carefully monitored in Vermont, as such changes may eventually alter much of this state as well.

Although the Bobolink occurred in 87% of the priority blocks, it was generally absent from elevations above 765 m (2,500 ft) and from heavily forested regions, such as the broad southern portion of the Green Mountain range and the Northeast Highlands; there it was present only on the western periphery and in the Connecticut River valley.

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