



Unison Preservation Society

NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

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UNISON, VIRGINIA

Studying Grassland Birds in Unison

By Howard Lewis

Since 2010, Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL), part of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, has been conducting a major study throughout Virginia of grassland birds.

VWL selected grasslands and grassland birds for research because, first, the grasslands themselves have not been studied nearly as much as other habitats such as forests, swamps or wetlands and, second, many of the birds dependent upon grasslands have seen dramatic population declines over the past fifty years.

Because most farms and associated grasslands in Virginia are privately owned, VWL has partnered with around 60 farms scattered across Virginia to conduct this research work. A few of these farms are located in Loudoun County, one of which is the Lazy Dog Farm on Bloomfield Road about a mile and half west of Unison where my wife and I have lived since 2001.

VWL SURVEY WORK ON LAZY DOG FARM

We first learned about the VWL through a local Middleburg newspaper in 2016 and decided to offer nearly 28 acres of fields on the east side of our farm to the VWL for their research. Most of this land consists of open fields with around three acres of shrubland, wetlands and forest on the south side of the property. Riders and dog walkers use the mowed paths running around the perimeters of these fields daily.

The first VWL survey was done in 2017 and included not only birds but also pollinators. The 2018 survey focused only on birds. Future surveys will include an analysis of the grasses and soils in the fields.

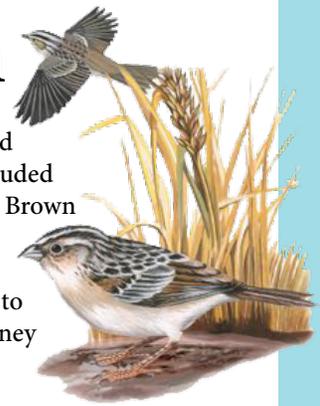
For the bird surveys, VWL scientists visited three times each spring to conduct what they called “point count surveys.” Two survey poles were placed at least 200 meters from each other and 100 meters from any forest. The surveys take place at the same spot each year. The scientists spend 10-minute intervals at each pole counting the birds they both see and hear. (A pollinator trap was also set up at one of the poles in 2017.)

In 2017, we were haying both of the fields being studied, but decided to stop doing so in 2018. Instead, we bush-hogged them in July and October and will continue the same practice this year—more on this subject in a moment.

Since beginning their work, the different teams of scientists identified nearly 45 different species of birds in the 200-meter circle around each survey site. Roughly a quarter of those identified were birds of special concern for VWL’s research. The Grasshopper Sparrow was one of the most frequently seen. While these sparrows are still relatively widespread, their population across North America has declined by nearly 70 percent since 1970 and even more dramatically in the mid-Atlantic.

Along with the Grasshopper Sparrow, other grassland birds of special concern

that were identified in the surveys included the Field Sparrow, Brown Thrasher, Eastern Meadowlark and Eastern Kingbird, to name a few. Chimney Swifts, Prairie Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Scarlet Tanagers, Yellow-billed Cuckoos and Common Yellowthroats were among the shrubland birds spotted. All are target species for VWL’s research work.



WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

If nothing else, the VWL research has made us much more aware of the number of bird species in our fields. Before the VWL work began, we might have guessed there were around 15 different species in these fields but, as noted above, the actual number is three times that amount. Knowing what’s there is a first step, but VWL’s purpose, as their information packet explains, is “to help local landowners understand their properties—using science to conduct surveys of indicator species (bird, plant and pollinator) and collect data that over time could elucidate the impact of different land management practices...”

So, what have we learned so far, or think we’ve learned?

Hedgerows Really Matter: A lot of birds such as Bluebirds and Tree Swallows are dependent upon grasslands for their food



Grasshopper Sparrow.



Eastern Meadowlark.



Eastern Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

supply, but are not classified as true grassland birds because they don't rely on the grasslands for nesting. They need hedgerows and woodlands nearby where they can build their nests in tree cavities (or in bluebird boxes on the edges of the fields). So, having hedgerows right along the edges of the fields where the VWL is conducting its research is almost literally allowing these species to have their cake and eat it too. When we cleaned up our hedgerows four years ago, we were more concerned with saving the oak, maple, hackberry and other native trees that were being overwhelmed by invasive vines, in particular, as well as by non-native shrubs and trees. We appreciate now that we were also doing a lot to improve the habitat for a large number of birds.

To Hay or Not to Hay: With apologies to Shakespeare, this can be a tough question, but VWL research is helping answer it. For example, two grassland birds spotted by VWL scientists in our fields included the Grasshopper Sparrow and the Eastern Meadowlark. For feeding, these two species prefer fields and pastures with patches of short grasses, which makes it easier to forage. VWL researchers see many more of these birds in fields where mowing or haying has occurred during the year in contrast to fields that have been left fallow for extended periods of time.

So, the question really boils down to when the haying or mowing occurs. Grassland birds build their nests on the ground right in the middle of fields and meadows. They need cover from longer grasses to protect the nests from predators since it won't be until late June or early July, before the fledglings have moved on to greener pastures, so to speak. If a field is hayed before this, the nests in those fields are almost certainly destroyed. During mowing, the adults survive by moving into nearby fields or hedgerows, but few, if any, of the fledglings make it. This is pretty much what the VWL re-

searchers told us they found in their 2017 survey when our fields were being hayed.

Some landowners in the Unison area, especially those doing their own haying, may be able to push back spring haying by a few weeks until late June or early July, which would make a big difference in the survival rates of grassland birds nesting in these fields. As indicated above, we decided to stop haying our fields last year and mow them twice a year in July and October. We did so because 1) we weren't doing our own haying and therefore could not control when the haying would happen, and 2) haying twice a year was having a major impact on the soil nutrients in our fields.

Grassland Birds and Pastures: What about the other major source of grasslands around this area—pastures? One might think that a pasture would present its own set of challenges for a ground nesting bird. After all, how many bird nests can survive four legged creatures weighing over a 1,000 pounds tromping on top of them, not to mention that the shorter grass in pastures offer the birds almost no cover from predators?

Actually, the answer to this question is: quite a few. VWL's research shows that grazing animals and grassland birds can co-exist rather well. Rotational grazing, or low intensity grazing with fewer animals on a field, have actually been shown to improve habitat for grassland birds! If a field is intensively grazed, however, there is a moderate to high probability of "nest failure" during the nest season.

How all these moving parts—birds, pollinators, and grasses—fit together is the focus of VWL's research work, including how to develop practical conservation strategies that recognize the needs of the farming and horse communities. In a small way, our farm down the road from Unison is part of the lab where this research is happening. Anyone in the Unison area interested in learning more about VWL or partnering with it should contact Charlotte Lorick at lorickc@si.edu. ■

Envision Loudoun...as a pile of townhouses? Maybe not Catching up with the County Comprehensive Plan

By Tara Connell

Talk to almost anyone in western Loudoun these days about the new Comprehensive Plan and you get the feeling all is lost.

But is that true? Is there really a tsunami of development about to swamp rural Loudoun, caused by a poorly drafted county-wide planning document approved with no concern for what the citizens really want in terms of residential growth, schools, transportation and industry.

Well, no. At least not yet. And here's why:

Right now, the Plan (which is called variously Loudoun 2040, Loudoun 2040 Com-

prehensive Plan or Envision Loudoun) is under review by the county Planning Commission. The Commission is reworking a document dated Oct. 23, 2018 that was crafted in 2017 and 2018 with input from citizens during countywide hearings.

The Planning Commission is expected to deliver its version of the 2040 Plan to the Board of Supervisors by March 21. After that, the Board likely will make its own revisions and formally vote to approve the Plan in July, getting ahead of the Board elections in November.

Most preservationists in the county's rural West point to the Planning Commission's revisions as the reason for the gloom and doom that has engulfed the community over that past few months. Essentially, the commission stripped the Plan of most of the language citizen activists believe is needed to protect the rural part of the county.

Well, that's basically true, says the spokesman for the Planning Commission John Merrithew. "Housing affordability has risen in priority over other factors such as environment and conservation," he said. "Envi-

ronmental policies are not changing. Housing affordability just rose in importance.”

The language was changed because the Planning Commission has taken the position that the county should accommodate whatever market forces need to build additional residential dwellings here, said Al Van Huyck, chair of the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition and a former chair of the county Planning Commission.

Specifically, that means absorbing possibly tens of thousands more people by 2040.

Yes, said Merrithew. “Philosophically, the Commission is taking the position of meeting as much of the housing demand as possible to improve affordability.”

Said Van Huyck: “If the county should accept the Planning Commission’s idea, then the county can’t hold the West.”

That’s the debate in a nutshell.

So, is Van Huyck giving up? “Absolutely not,” he said. “I’m very optimistic that the rural area can remain in tact.”

Wait. What?

He is optimistic because, he said, the Board of Supervisors has declared support for maintaining the rural area. Board Chair Phyllis Randall held a rural summit in November and stood up for a rural, open West and Board members in general say they want to maintain it, Van Huyck said. “They recognize it is in the county’s best interest,” Van Huyck said. Further, he emphasized: “I believe the majority of the Supervisors are on the side of the residents of both the East and the West.”

So, right now, an army of citizen volunteers are at work to make it feasible for the Board to support changes to the Plan that maintain the character of the rural West by protecting it from uncontrolled residential or economic growth.

It’s a three-step process being carried out under the auspices of the Loudoun Coalition. The steps, Huyck said, are:

- “We have to present to the Board technical, professional work and we’re working night and day to do that.”
- “We have to put in the Plan exactly what we want. We can’t just say we don’t want this or that.”
- “We have to have strong citizen support.”

Here’s why it just might work:

The Loudoun Coalition is an umbrella group of more than 40 county organizations, including the Unison Preservation Society. Of those, at least 10 citizens’ organizations are actively working to draft specific changes,

“We must do more.” It’s time for everyone to get involved and not just leave it to the organized groups.” - Mitch Diamond

spread the word about problems with the revised Plan and rally support for a pro-West version of the Plan.

They are the Heritage Foundation, the Coalition of Loudoun Towns (COLT), the Mosby Heritage Society, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, Piedmont Environmental Council, League of Women Voters, the Waterford Foundation and a new coalition of historic villages, which includes Unison.

Many other groups and individuals also are involved, including Unison’s own Mitch Diamond and Owen Snyder, who have been on the battlefield from the beginning.

Snyder and Diamond are not so optimistic. Said Diamond: “We must do more.” It’s time for everyone to get involved and not just leave it to the organized groups. “Those who want to turn our beautiful rural communities into suburban enclaves are wealthy and powerful...”

“Each of us needs to do our part if we have a chance to be successful. Individuals

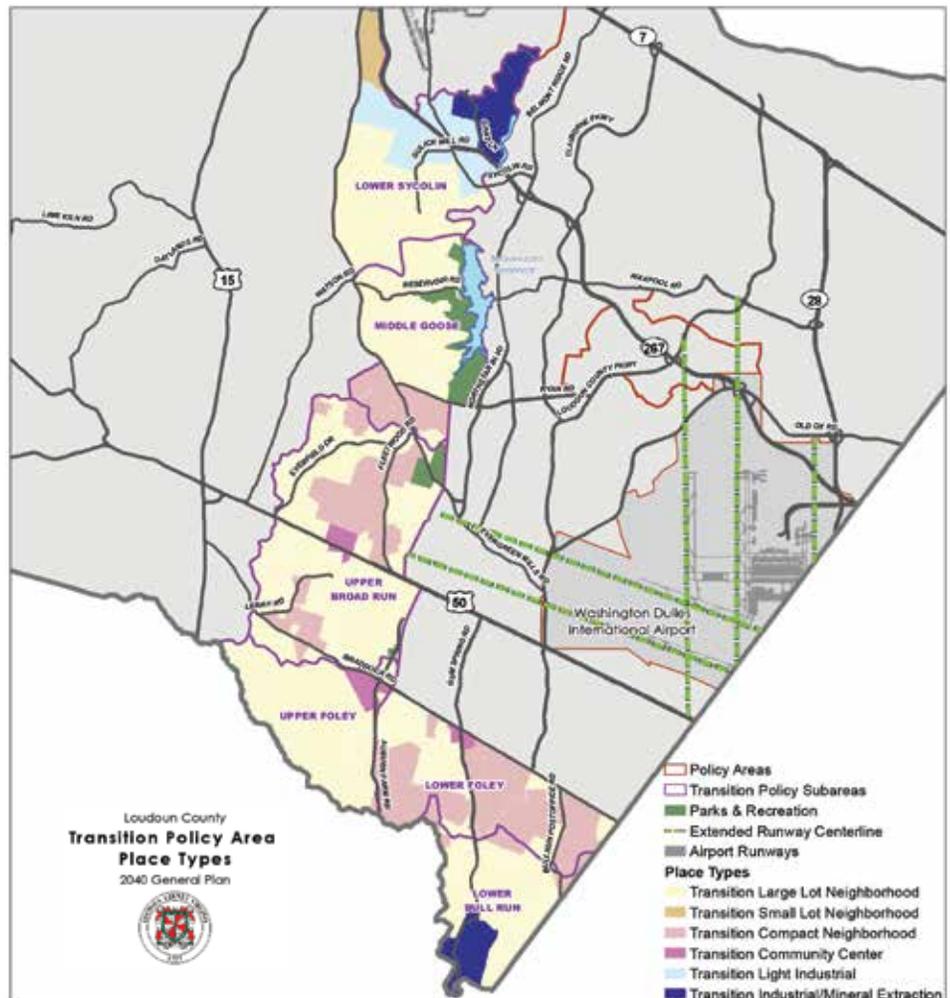
need to reach out to their elected officials, need to write letters and post concerns in the media.”

At the same time, the citizens’ groups of the Coalition are holding meetings not only in the West but also in the suburban and urban East, with the PEC taking the lead on the education programs. As it happens, studies show that residents in the Eastern part of the county cherish open land in the West as much as the rural residents do.

“COLT in particular has taken an active interest in holding the line,” Van Huyck said.

That line is defined in the draft Plan as the “Transition Policy Area,” an area of about 24,000 acres between routes 15 and 28. It has become the flash point of the debate around the plan. It includes housing, light industry (such as digital data storage centers) and Dulles Airport.

In the new plan, 937 acres once classi-





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How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.

Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org.



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fied as Rural have been reclassified as part of the Transition area in order to add housing and suit the needs of the market study. If that decision is allowed to stand, Van Huyck said: "The West will be lost, essentially."

So while COLT and others are focusing on not letting that happen, a number of volunteers in the Coalition are creating specific requests for the plan, such as Transfer Development Rights and Purchase Development Rights.

As defined by the farm community, a TDR and PDR option "would be specifically designed to protect prime agricultural land, working lands and valuable open spaces" from development while allowing owners to receive fair value for their land.

Oversimplifying, under TDRs and PDRs, a parcel of rural land is assigned an intrinsic value and a development "right" is created. A developer can buy that right, which then can be used to develop land in specific suburban or urban areas of the county.

However, language allowing TDRs and PDRs has been removed from the Plan by the Planning Commission as ineffective and inefficient, said Merrithew. "They don't like packing density in East to preserve the West."

Restoring that language, then drafting legislation that creates a program would allow the county to better control and manage where development happens.

Coalition members are monitoring every step taken by the Planning Commission and gearing up for hearings the Board of Supervisors will hold once they receive the report from the Planning Commission in March.

Since a vote on the Plan by the Board is expected in July, Van Huyck said, advocates of the rural lifestyle only have about three months to win the struggle for the future of the West.

"Even so, there is a clear path to winning," he said. "It's just a very difficult path. But we're not dead in the water yet." ■

Unison Updates

Easements Made Easier

Loudoun's Conservation Easement Assistance Program is up and running as of Feb. 7. The Board of Supervisors set aside a total of \$150,000 per year to help eligible property owners defray the costs of putting their land into permanent easement. Easements limit the use of the land, protect its conservation value and can provide tax deductions. Eligibility for the county easement program is by income and size of the property. Maximum amount of aid per landowner is \$15,000. More details are at <https://www.loudoun.gov/5131/Conservation-Easement-Assistance-Program>.

Water, Sewer to Unison....

Unison Preservation Society is helping the village explore bringing a water and sewer system to the historic area. Needed: at least 60 percent of the residents in the designated area to sign on. UPS would like to enlist volunteers to help make it happen. If interested, please contact Hurst Groves at hkgroves@icloud.com.

...Meanwhile, in Howardsville

On January 5, representatives from Loudoun County Government held a community meeting at Austin Grove Church with the current residents of Howardsville and delivered some very good news: After years of delay trying to find a suitable drain field site, the County has executed an agreement with Brad Gable, an adjoining land owner, and the County will now proceed to install a wastewater treatment system in the village. The goal of replacing failing septic systems, or installing indoor plumbing where needed, is now in sight. It will likely take the rest of 2019 to complete required state paperwork and finish system designs. Construction is scheduled for 2020 with hookups possible by the end of that year.

Weddings Bill Defeated

Virginia's House of Delegates defeated House Bill 2364 on Feb. 4 which would have let Loudoun's rural landowners hold large weddings (as many as 250 people) on their property up to 12 times a year despite local zoning restrictions. The vote was 60 to 37, with Unison's Del. Wendy Gooditis voting against. The bill was an example of a recent trend in state legislation attempting to overrule local governments in support of agribusiness.

Unison on TV

Loudoun's rural roads, starring Unison and the Unison Store, can be seen in this lovely WJLA documentary: <https://wjla.com/features/abc7-stories/the-long-road-home-gravel-roads-loudoun-county>.