

NOVEMBER 2021

Grassland Stewardship Initiative

Funding Information and Application



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About the Program

The Grassland Stewardship Initiative (GSI) is a habitat restoration initiative implemented by Grasslands Ontario, a division of Forests Ontario. The goal of this initiative is to support the conservation and recovery of Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark populations through the management and protection of high-quality grassland habitat in Ontario.

Program Objectives

In Ontario, the recovery goal for Bobolink is to maintain a stable and self-sustaining population of at least 65% of its 2015 population size (~ 302,000 individuals) and for Eastern Meadowlark of at least 72% of its 2015 population size (~ 79,600 individuals) throughout the species' current range by 2036. The primary objectives of the Grassland Stewardship Initiative are to:

- Promote voluntary landowner participation (including conservation organizations, institutional and industry sectors, rural non-farm landowners, hobby farmers, production farmers, and Indigenous communities);
- Promote greater public awareness and appreciation of grasslands within Ontario and the species which inhabit grasslands;
- Create, maintain, and enhance grassland habitat through management practices and activities for Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark within suitable areas in Ontario;

- Develop partnerships within the agricultural community and seek new partnerships with other sectors and organizations to advance the objectives of the GSI.

Landowner and Site Requirements

Sites enrolled in the program must meet the following guidelines:

- The site must be located within the core breeding range for Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark (Appendix A, Figure 2).
- Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark have been observed near the site in the past year **or** the site contains ideal habitat features for either species.
- The site is **not** owned by Provincial or Federal government agencies, ministries, and/or departments.
 - Private and public land is eligible (including Conservation Authority lands).
- The site is **not** located on habitat offset areas under the Endangered Species Act*.
- Projects must avoid land conversion of natural ecosystems (eg – GSI may not be used for the destruction of wetlands, forested areas, or other valuable habitats).

**Projects located on sites which are achieving offsets over and above existing legal requirement plans to benefit Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark specifically, as identified in an ESA permit, authorization, or regulation, will be considered for enrollment on a case by case basis.*

The following requirements must be met and documents submitted prior to enrollment in the Grasslands Stewardship Initiative:

- All documentation has been submitted to Grasslands Ontario by **January 19th, 2022**.
- A Site Suitability Assessment has been performed and summary submitted to Grasslands Ontario to determine whether the site is suitable for Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark (see **appendix A**).

- A Habitat Quality Assessment to determine current site quality condition has been completed and/or overseen by an experienced individual in conjunction with the landowner and summary submitted to Grasslands Ontario (see **appendix B**).
 - Condition of habitat quality determined after Habitat Quality Assessment will define whether the site is considered low, medium, or high-quality habitat and dictate the types of activities landowners are eligible to undertake (see **appendix C**).
 - This initial condition of habitat quality (low, medium, or high) does not impact the likelihood that the project will receive funds and is instead associated with what types of activities are eligible for funding.
- Additional project funders/sponsors (confirmed and projected) have been identified to Grasslands Ontario.
- A detailed description of activities has been submitted to Grasslands Ontario. Refer to **Appendix C** for list of eligible activities.
 - Associated budgets, proposed funding for each year of the project, and the projected total cost of the project must also be submitted to Grasslands Ontario. Please use the attached Excel document “GSI Funding Application 2021_Workplan and Budgets” and include any supplementary or supporting documentation to your application.
- In subsequent years as per the agreement, the delivery partner or landowner must submit annual summaries of activities and habitat use through the Grasslands Ontario database.
- The landowner will be required to enter into a 15 year landowner agreement which allows future Habitat Quality Assessments and audits to take place on their land and states that they will follow good Habitat Management Practices.

Project Review and Funding Evaluation

Grasslands Ontario will provide between 35-100 percent of eligible project costs. Project approval and funding criteria considered includes (in no particular order):

- Matching contribution funding and amount (in-kind and financial).
- Submitted project proposal including Site Suitability Assessment, initial Habitat Quality Assessment, proposed project cost, and description of activities and associated budget.
- Proximity to other GSI projects or existing grassland habitat.
- Likelihood of project outcomes achieving medium to high-quality habitat for Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark.
- Project meets all eligibility requirements.

Project proposals must be submitted to Grasslands Ontario by **January 19th, 2022**. Each proposal submitted prior to the deadline will be evaluated and a notice of project approval will be given by February 2nd*. Capacities of the delivery partners will be assessed, and additional training may be identified prior to project approval.

**Date subject to change.*

Funding Application: Grassland Stewardship Initiative 2021/2022

Please submit applications and/or questions to Rebecca Pearce-Cameron:

Email: rpearce-cameron@forestsontario.ca

Phone: 1-877-646-1193 ext. 236

Applicant Information

Name:

Organization:

Phone:

Email:

Project Information

Project Name:

Group of properties and/or landowners involved:

Ownership:

Total Property Size (ha):

Project Size (ha):

Project location (e.g. address, lat/long):

Main Contact:

Phone:

Email:

If applicable, insert Farm Business Registration Number:
Land use on site over the last three years (choose all that apply):
Abandoned field
Privately owned farm/grassland
Active row crop land
Hay/pasture land
Fallow
Other:
Current Site Protection Status:
None
Easement or equivalent (1-5 years)
Easement or equivalent (>5 years)
Agricultural lands within the Greenbelt

Project Description:

Describe the project, noting the project type (creation, enhancement, maintenance, combination), applicant qualifications and background, project length, objectives, number of landowners involved, size of the project area (ha), other efforts (if any) associated with the proposed project and any interesting or unique project or landowner features. Suggested maximum 250 words. Supplementary information can be attached to the end of this application (see Appendix D for list of suggested optional supplementary documents).

Description of the Landscape:

Please include a screenshot/map with the project area outlined (if the project spans multiple areas, please delineate all project areas Eg. Field A 4 ha Prescribed Burn and Field B 5.25 ha Invasive species control) on Google Maps (or equivalent) and/or a site plan; describe any landscape challenges or considerations, describe the landscape context including habitat fragmentation or connectivity in the surrounding area. Suggested maximum 250 words. Supplementary information can be attached to the end of this application (see Appendix D for list of suggested optional supplementary documents):

Project Funding Summary:

Please see attached Excel document “GSI Funding Application 2021_Workplan and Budgets”. All funding associated with this project should be outlined in the “Project Funding Summary” tab. The “Example Project Funding Summary” tab gives an example of what information should be included. Please note that only funding associated with the project timeline in this application should be included. If project funding was received in previous years please do not include this in the Project Funding Summary. This information can be attached to this application as a supplementary document.

Work Plan and Budget:

Please see attached Excel document “GSI Funding Application 2021_Workplan and Budgets”. All funding associated with this project should be outlined in the “Work Plan and Budget” tab. The “Example Work Plan and Budget” tab gives an example of what information should be included. All project activities should be listed, including those funded by other partners. See Appendix C for a list of GSI funding eligible activities.

Summary of Site Suitability Assessment may be attached separately. Please refer to Appendix A for information required in the Site Suitability Assessment.

- An acceptable format for the Site Suitability Assessment Summary is a copy of the Site Suitability Assessment Tree (**Appendix A, Figure 1**) with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers circled.
- Further detail as outlined in the questions found in Appendix A can be attached when clarification or supplemental information is required for ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers within the Site Suitability Assessment Tree.

Summary of Habitat Quality Assessment may be attached separately. Please refer to Appendix B for information required in the Habitat Quality Assessment.

- The recommended deadlines (May 1st – July 31st; Appendix B) for completion of the Initial Habitat Quality Assessment have passed for the 2022 planting season. As such, historical information or observations by the partner or landowner will be considered in place of new information collected during the recommended period.
- An acceptable format for the Habitat Quality Assessment Summary is a copy of the table found in Appendix B filled out to the best of the applicant’s knowledge. Please attach any relevant supplemental information where specific answers are unknown or being estimated based on historical or anecdotal information.

Funding Application Package Requirement Checklist:

- Funding Application form (pages 6 – 11) has been filled out and includes applicant information, project and landscape descriptions, and a Google Maps screenshot of the project area/site plan.
- Additional project funding sources/sponsors have been identified and outlined in the Project Funding Summary table (see attached Excel spreadsheet “*GSI Funding Application 2021_ Workplan and Budgets*”).
- A detailed description of the work plan including proposed activities and budget has been provided in the Work Plan and Budget table (see attached Excel spreadsheet “*GSI Funding Application 2021_ Workplan and Budgets*”).
- Suitability Assessment (**appendix A**) has been performed, summarized, and attached to Funding Application Form.
- Initial Habitat Quality Assessment (**appendix B**) has been performed and current site condition has been determined, summarized, and attached to Funding Application Form.
 - Please note: for the 2022 season, the ideal dates to perform the Habitat Quality Assessment have passed. Historical information or observations by the partner or landowner are acceptable in place of performing a formal initial Habitat Quality Assessment for the 2022 season.
- Optional supplementary documents (see suggestions in **appendix D**) have been attached to this application.

Appendix A

Guidance Document to Complete Site Suitability Assessment

To determine program eligibility, the Site Suitability Assessment must be completed as a part of the application package. Working through the decision tree (**Fig. 1**) for the Site Suitability Assessment will help to identify whether a proposed site is suitable to support Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark. If a site is deemed suitable, applicants should complete the Habitat Quality Assessment as outlined in Appendix B. If the site is found to be unsuitable for either species, it will not be eligible for the Grasslands Stewardship Initiative at this time.

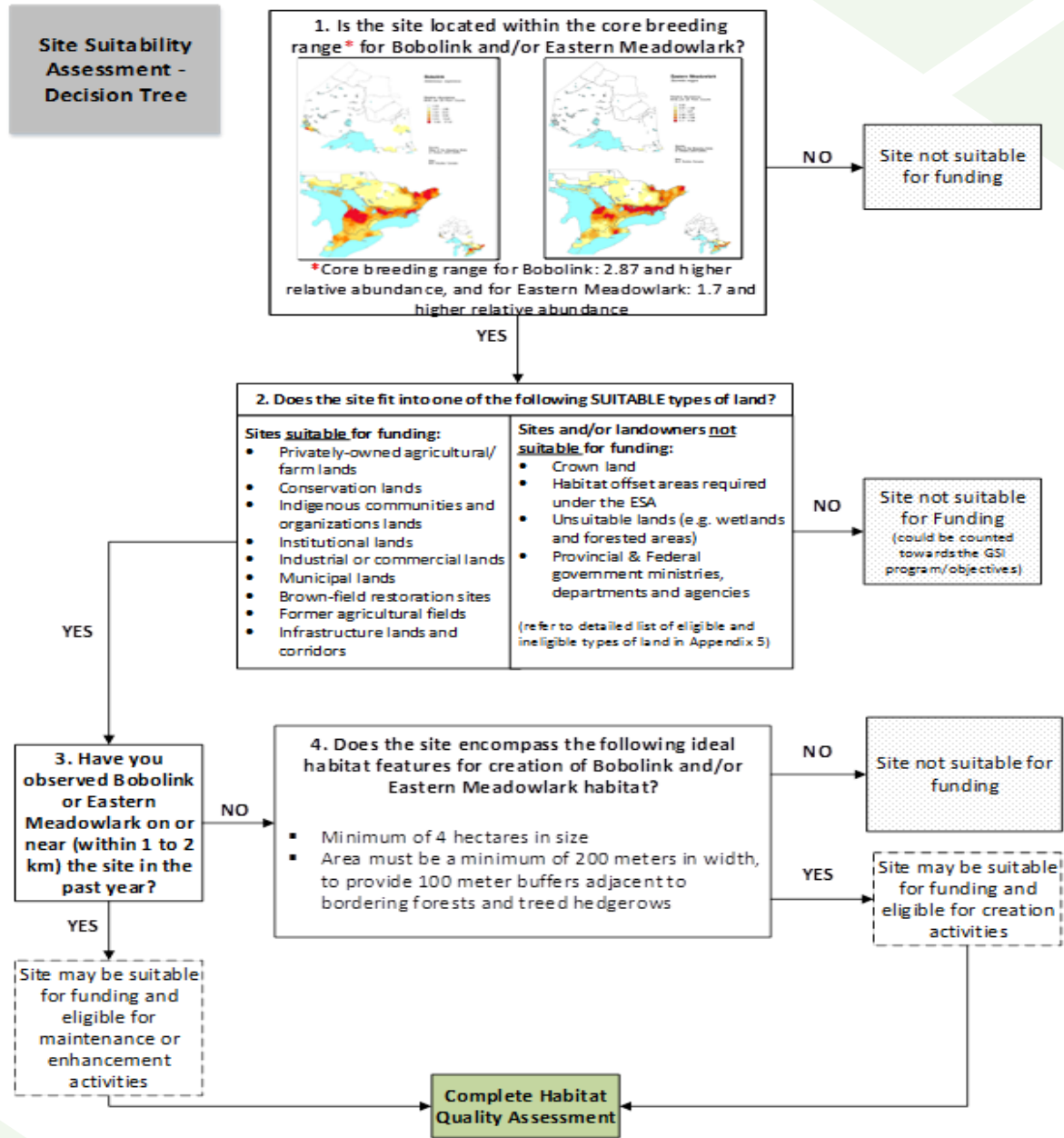


Figure 1. Site Suitability Assessment Tree. For the purposes of the Site Suitability Assessment Summary indicate 'yes' or 'no' on this figure and submit to Grasslands Ontario. If supplemental information is required for any 'yes' or 'no' answer, please refer to questions below.

The following questions are asked in reference to site features to determine whether the completion of the Habitat Quality Assessment (**Appendix B**) is required.

1. **Is the site located within the core breeding range for Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark?**

- Refer to the two relative abundance range maps (**Fig. 2**) of both species to identify whether a site is located within:
 - An area of 2.87 relative abundance or higher for Bobolink, or
 - An area of 1.7 relative abundance or higher for Eastern Meadowlark.

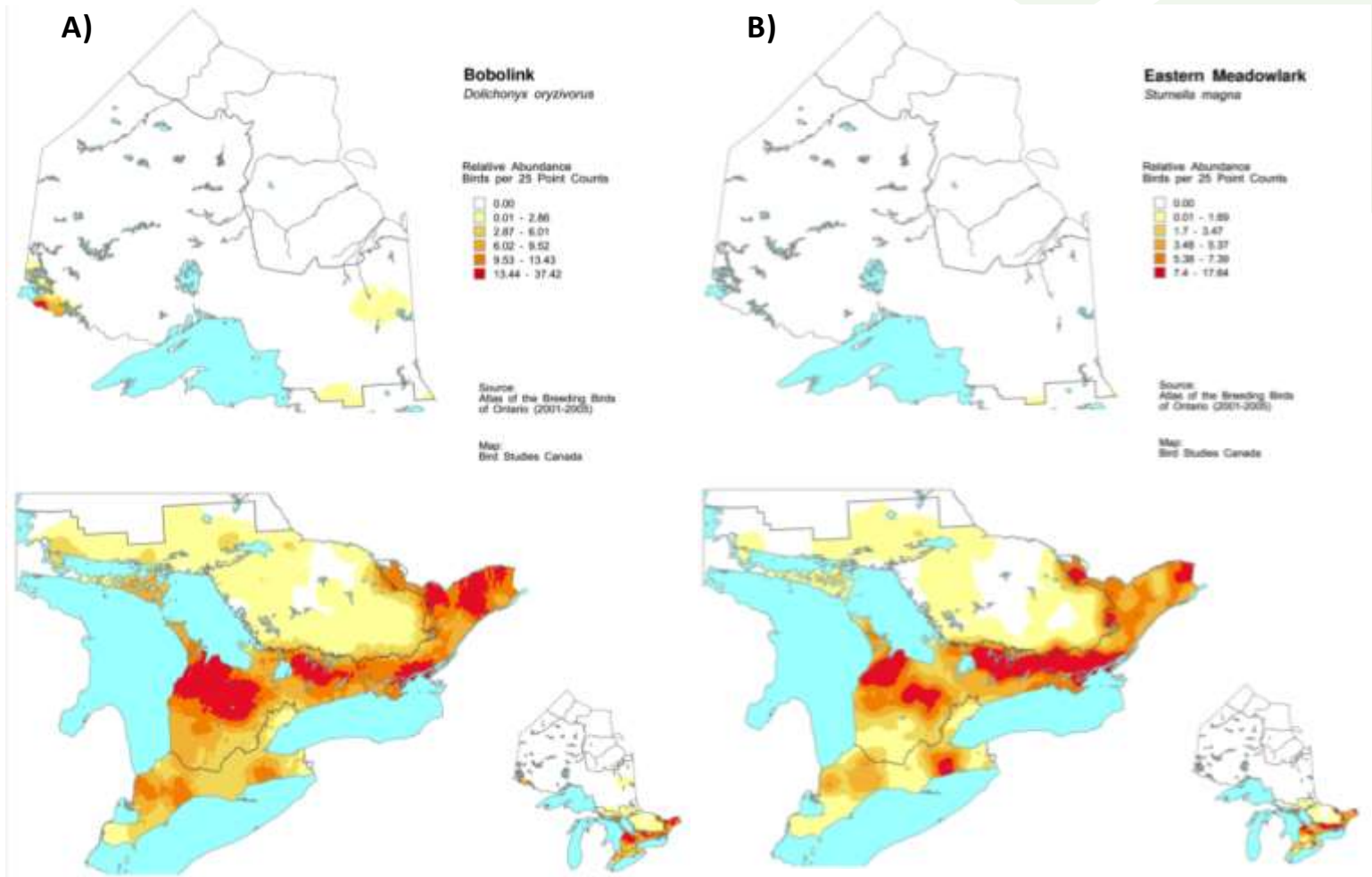


Figure 2. Relative abundance of **A) Bobolink** and **B) Eastern Meadowlark** in Ontario in 2001-2005 based on breeding bird atlas point count data.

2. Does the site fit into one of the following suitable types of lands?

The following types of open lands and/or landowners could be eligible under the Grassland Stewardship Initiative:

- Privately-owned agricultural or farm lands used primarily for hay and/or pasture management
- Private lands including non-farm lands
- Conservation lands, including Conservation Authority lands, private nature reserves, land trusts, etc.
- Indigenous communities and organizations
- Institutional lands (e.g. colleges, universities, schools, churches, etc.)
- Industrial or commercial lands
- Municipal lands (e.g. parks, undeveloped open space, decommissioned landfill sites, storm water management areas, etc.)
- Brownfield restoration sites
- Former agricultural fields and other cleared lands
- Infrastructure lands and corridors (e.g. transportation and utilities)

Sites and/or landowners not suitable for funding (detailed list, hectares could be counted but not funded):

- Crown land
- Provincial government ministries and federal government departments and agencies
- Habitat offset areas required under the Endangered Species Act, s.17
- Lands which are unsuitable (e.g. wetlands and forested lands)

3. **Have you observed Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark on or near (within 1 to 2 km) the site in the past year?**

- It is possible that the presence of either of these species could be on sites without the “optimal” habitat conditions as defined in Step #4 below; the presence of either of the species could make the site suitable for funding and eligible for maintenance or enhancement activities.

4. **Does the site encompass the following ideal habitat features for the creation of Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark habitat?**

i. **Habitat Size:**

- Four hectares is the minimum eligible project size
- A field survey must be conducted during the height of breeding season (May 1st – July 31st) to estimate parameters including the number of Bobolink/Eastern Meadowlark present, the presence of other species of interest, grass/herbaceous coverage, grass height, etc.
- Note: applicants could use Google Earth or AgMaps to estimate field dimensions, distances to forest edges, and other “birds-eye view” criteria

ii. **Bordering forests and tree hedgerows:**

- There must be a buffer area of 100 m away from a forest or tree hedgerow
- Bordering forest cover is defined by an area with a width of 10 m or more and excludes hedgerows and windbreaks
- Bollinger and Gavin (2004) define **forests** as trees > 12 m tall and habitat > 10 m wide and **hedgerows** as trees > 8 m tall and habitat < 5 m wide

iii. **Width of site:**

- Ideally, the site would be a minimum of 200 m in width

Appendix B

Guidance Document to Complete Habitat Quality Assessment

If a site is deemed suitable and eligible for funding upon completion of the Site Suitability Assessment, applicants should then complete the Habitat Quality Assessment as a part of the application package. The Habitat Quality Assessment will differentiate between high, medium, and low-quality grassland habitats; the quality of habitat is critical to the survival and reproduction of viable Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark populations. **Please note that the results of the Habitat Quality Assessment will not impact the decision to award funding for the project but are instead used to determine which eligible activities the project will receive funding towards (see Appendix C for eligible activities based on habitat quality).**

If the application is successfully enrolled in the GSI, partners or landowners will complete the Habitat Quality Assessment at the beginning of the breeding season (May 1st to July 31st) prior to commencing activities in year one, again at the beginning of year three, and at the end of year five to show pre, mid, and post-activity changes.

Parameter	Habitat Quality		
	Low	Medium	High
1A) Which of the following best describes the site <i>(If more than one, select the quality level with the greatest extent)</i>	Row crop/grain	Old field (grass dominant)	Hay (grass dominant)
	Old field dominated by coarse herbs or scattered trees/shrubs	Field or paddock with light to moderate grazing	Ungrazed paddock (before Jul 31 st)
	Hay (alfalfa dominant)		Native grassland (including restored)
	Heavily grazed field or paddock		
<i>Check one quality level:</i>			
1B) Which of the following best describes your haying or grazing practices?	Field is harvested, mown, or grazed before July 31 st	Field has delayed haying or grazing in central area for rotational systems	Field is not harvested, grazed, or mown before July 31 st
		Not harvested, grazed, or mown	
<i>Check one quality level:</i>			

If a site scores in the low category for either of the above parameters (**1A** or **1B**), the site will automatically be deemed low quality.

Parameter	Habitat Quality		
2) How much of the site is covered by grass <i>(Including non-native grass, but not legumes)</i>	Low	Medium	High
<i>Check one quality level:</i>	≤25%	26-75%	>75%
3) On average, what is the height of grass cover within the site in the 1st week of June? <i>(Including non-native grass)</i>	<10 cm or >100cm	10-40 cm	41-100 cm
<i>Check one quality level:</i>			
4) How much of the site has shrubs or trees >1 m in height?	>15%	5-15%	<5%
<i>Check one quality level:</i>			
1) How many other grassland bird species have been seen on the site over the past year?*	0 species (or unknown)	1-2 species	>2 species
<i>Check one quality level:</i>			

*

American Kestrel	Grasshopper Sparrow	Northern Harrier
Barn Owl	Henslow's Sparrow	Savannah Sparrow
Common Nighthawk	Dickcissel	Short-eared Owl
Eastern Bluebird	Loggerhead Shrike	Upland Sandpiper
Eastern Kingbird	Northern Bobwhite	Vesper Sparrow

The following parameters (6 and 7) will be weighted higher than the previous parameters and can be used as a deciding factor where a site is between habitat quality categories.

Parameter	Habitat Quality		
	Low	Medium	High
6) How many Bobolink have been seen on the site in the past year?	Not present	≥ 1 male	Breeding evidence
	Unknown		
	<i>Insert #s and/or identify type of breeding evidence</i>		
7) How many Eastern Meadowlark have been seen on the site in the past year?	Not present	≥ 1 male	Breeding evidence
	Unknown		
	<i>Insert #s and/or identify type of breeding evidence</i>		

Total # of Low, Medium, and High



Appendix C

Eligible Activities

The following eligible activities have been separated into three main categories for either the **creation** (starting with low quality), **enhancement** (starting with medium quality), or **maintenance** (starting with high quality) of sites. This list is not comprehensive, if other best management practices are available, they will be taken into consideration.

Create – the creation of a minimum of 4 hectares with a minimum width of 200 meters by planting, seeding, or restoring land that currently has no or little value to Bobolink and/or Eastern Meadowlark. This could include new grassland sites or sites where poor or moderate quality habitat currently exists.

The following activities may be eligible for the **creation** of grassland habitat:

- Planting seed mixtures that contain a combination of between 60% and 80% grasses, including at least three species of varying heights, with the remaining 20% to 40% forbs or legumes, but with no more than 25% alfalfa. Cool season species could include but are not limited to: Kalm's brome (*Bromus kalmii*), Canada wildrye (*Elymus canadensis*), eastern riverbank wildrye (*Elymus riparius*), downy wildrye (*Elymus villosus*) and other native Ontario tallgrass or meadow species.
Note: sites with Farm Business Registration Numbers with forage species requirements, are permitted to use standard forage species such as timothy (Phleum pratense), smooth brome (Bromus inermis), Canada bluegrass (Poa compressa), and orchard grass (Dactylis glomerata).
- Creating or restoring native grassland/tallgrass prairie or related native open communities through planting, seeding, and tending.
- Enlarging of remnant tallgrass or open grassland community areas to a minimum of 4 hectares in size and 200 meters in width.

Enhance – where good or moderate quality grassland habitat exists, and frequent active management is undertaken every 4 years or less to improve grassland habitat quality for Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark.

The following activities may be eligible for **enhancement** of grassland habitat:

- Controlling encroaching trees and shrubs and removing invasive woody (e.g. Sea Buckthorn) or herbaceous (e.g. dog-strangling vine, spotted knapweed) species in grassland areas
Note: refer to your municipal and provincial laws to ensure proper permissions prior to removal.
- Conducting a prescribed burn using a rotational approach as per established best management practices.
- Removing low-value treed fencerows only if dominated by invasive exotics such as buckthorn, lilac, Tartarian honeysuckle, etc.
- Over-seeding or using other management techniques to improve and/or rejuvenate pasture quality and enhance grassland habitat.
- Establishing temporary fencing and/or water supplies to exclude livestock from selected rotational grazing paddocks for the duration of the breeding season or to control grazing density.
- Restoring marginal areas to enhance grassland habitat quality.

Maintain – where suitable high-quality grassland habitat exists and activities such as grazing, harvesting, burning, or cutting are managed so as to benefit grassland birds. This may involve delaying harvest or grazing activities in combination with some management done every 4+ years or more frequently to prevent succession.

The following activities may be eligible for the **maintenance** of grassland habitat:

- Delaying grazing as part of rotational grazing systems.
- Delayed haying.
- Deferring clipping of pastures for control of weedy species.
- Delaying cycle of replacing older hayfields.
- Conducting a prescribed burn using a rotational approach as per established best management practices.
- Controlling of encroaching trees and shrubs through mowing or chipping.
Note: this is to prevent current grassland from becoming shrubland, not to destroy existing high-quality shrublands.

Ineligible Activities

- Projects that are required to meet legal requirements are not eligible for funding. These include activities that are being undertaken to fulfill legal requirements or conditions identified in an ESA permit, authorization, or regulation.
 - One exception on a case by case basis, may be projects which are achieving offsets over and above existing legal requirement plans to benefit Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark specifically.

Eligible Costs

Grasslands Ontario will provide between 35-100 percent of eligible project costs to sites awarded GSI funding.

Eligible Costs:

- Site preparation (e.g. vegetation control)
- Equipment rental (e.g. tractor, disks)
- Purchase of seed and seeding
- Labour provided by landowner or contractor (documented number of hours) for project activities only (i.e. does not include hay-cutting costs)
- Maintenance costs associated with modified grazing management (based on standard payment per year)
- Maintenance costs associated with delayed haying
- Administrative costs to implement project (5-10% of total funding requested)

Ineligible Costs:

- Purchase of land (e.g. associated legal fees, land transfer tax, etc.)
- Property taxes
- Activities, lands, and applicants that are not eligible under these guidelines
- Costs associated with harvesting hay
- Equipment purchase or cost-share (eg. tractor, disks)

Appendix D

Supplementary Information

The following is an example list of documents you may include in your application. You are not limited to this list only, but please note that these documents are optional.

- Additional maps including:
 - Project site situated in broader landscape, proximity to other agriculture, development, conserved land, etc.
 - Land use cover of total property (settlement, cropland, wetland, forest, grassland, etc)
- Supplementary bird sightings/surveys
- Soil information
 - Soil samples/analysis
 - Soil series
- Photographs of site
 - Vegetation makeup
 - Field work that has taken place already (eg. tillage, herbicide application, cover cropping, fertilizer application, previous prescribed burn, etc.)
- Information on previous projects on the site including previous funding partners

Appendix E

Reporting

Applicants successfully enrolled in the GSI will be required to report on project activities using the GSI online reporting system. The following is a list of the metrics/information that applicants successfully enrolled in the GSI may be asked to provide at the time of reporting, additional to the project information collected in this document. Please note, this list is not comprehensive and will be agreed on at time of MOU signing. Depending on project activities, some of these reporting requests may not be applicable to your project.

- Project activity updates
- Photos of project (before, during, after, project activities, etc.)
- Site specific information
 - Soil series
 - Previous land use
 - Previous land cover
 - Presence of species at risk
 - Soil organic carbon lab assessment
- Project specific information
 - Seed mix(es) and species composition
 - Seed source (company)
 - Chemical inputs
 - Prescribed burn plans
 - Mow plans
 - Invasive species present or removed
- Other information as required