

Funding For a Song

By Nancy P. Weiss

How much is the sound of bird song worth? Can we place a monetary value on the heart stopping-sight of a bobolink in flight? Should neighbors invest in the possibility that their dollars might preserve a species so fragile that it might fail to reproduce at all?

These are just a few of the questions Stephen Swallow, professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, has been testing as part of the Bobolink Project, a joint effort by faculty and students at the University of Rhode Island (URI) and UConn.

Swallow, who grew up in Missouri and proudly displays a photo of President Harry Truman on his office wall, wanted to apply market practices to environmental problems. He is interested in how to link supporting the public good; in this case, the preservation of habitat conducive to supporting nesting bobolinks, to what people will invest in the process. Swallow is “creating, inventing and testing rules of exchange that reduce the advantage a person has from being a ‘free rider in the environment.’” By paying—Swallow calls it the “willingness to sacrifice”—a donor can demonstrate their values for environmental benefits.

The Bobolink Project was developed because of a variety of factors that link the examination of economic principles to environmental action. The colorful migratory birds, which typically fly 5,000 miles from Argentina to North America, were chosen because they are attractive to birdwatchers and have a distinctive call that permits easy identification. Bobolinks were common grassland birds throughout New England until the twentieth century, when they began to decline. As hay-fields turned to housing developments and mowing practices changed, the ground-nesting bobolinks faced near total annihilation.

As director of the Bobolink Project, Swallow and his colleagues worked with farmers in Rhode Island and Vermont to try to protect nesting grounds through a unique partnership of farmers and private citizens. Bobolinks hatch and raise their young when hay is at its highest nutrient value for farm animals. They naturally have a high mortality rate but if the fields are mowed while the birds are nesting, the devastation is nearly 100 percent.



Stephen
SWALLOW

Professor
Department of Agricultural
and Resource Economics

Swallow developed a plan whereby farmers would be paid to harvest their fields at a later date after the bobolinks had fledged. A monetary value was placed on the difference between the value of the hay cut at optimum time and when harvested somewhat later in the summer. Farmers could then afford to support wildlife on their land.

Swallow created a system to connect area residents who care about wildlife and bobolinks in particular, to a fund that would compensate farmers through private gifts. But, based on the rules of exchange, the gifts are only retained when farmers are able to take action in return.

Through a Conservation Innovation Grant funded by USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service he received while at URI, Swallow began the Bobolink Project. The first effort was built on one farm field and with one group of homeowners in Jamestown, Rhode Island.

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE, HEALTH AND NATURAL RESOURCES



"This field will depend on you," Swallow told nearby residents, who donated several hundred dollars to the project in 2007. The habitat was valuable for the intangible benefits received by preserving wildlife. Bobolinks nested and were protected.

Swallow brought the project that had begun at URI to the University of Connecticut and continued collaboration with the University of Vermont (UVM), UVM Cooperative Extension and the University of Washington. At UConn, funding for the project has come from the USDA NIFA (National Institute of Food and Agriculture) and AFRI (Agriculture and Food Research Initiative).

Swallow worked to balance fields and dollars. His experimental market raised pledges of over \$31,000 during the summer of 2013 to protect bird habitat on 200 acres of hayfields (20 fields, each comprising 10 acres). In 2014, he raised \$32,848 in pledges and the market was able to protect 340 acres of hayfield, an increase of 140 acres over the pilot year of 2013. Eight farms in Vermont's Addison and Chittenden counties received \$1,600 in 2013 and five farms received \$961.60 in 2014 for each 10-acre parcel.

Swallow explains the approach: "Although we raised roughly the same amount of money in both years, we were able to increase the acreage dramatically by increasing the

competition among farmers. We did that by asking farmers to enter into a bid process that applied the same principles as they face for their regular farm products, determining a common price that every provider got paid; in 2014 the process led us to more acres that could be provided by their farmers at lower cost, so donors' money could cover more acres."

In 2013, 210 people pledged to contribute; in 2014 the number of contributors increased to 234. Contributions from respondents ranged from \$5 to \$2,500, with an average contribution of \$145 per consumer for 2013. In 2014, the contributions ranged from \$10 to \$5,000, with an average contribution of \$157.50 per consumer.

Through the Bobolink Project, Professor Stephen Swallow has created a bridge between farmers and their neighbors to preserve two valuable resources, ground nesting birds and locally harvested hay. Swallow's model grew from one field in Rhode Island to 340 acres in 2014. Using economic principles of exchange, Swallow is giving citizens the chance to join with their neighbors to save important elements of their communities: local farmers and beautiful, melodic bobolinks.