Opinion To save the birds, I'm killing my farm

A blue grosbeak perched in a field planted with native grasses. (Bernadette Rigley)

By Dana Milbank
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Not long after I bought a dilapidated farm in the Virginia Piedmont, I was surprised to learn that it came with its own farmer.

For years, a cattle farmer from up the road, a salt-of-the-earth guy named Travis, rode his big John Deere over and cut the hayfields in late spring and then again in early fall. The arrangement, common out here, works for both parties: The farmers get hay for their cows, and the landowners get their fields mowed for free.

But this summer, I delivered bad news to Travis. I asked him not to cut most of my fields and paid him so he could buy his hay elsewhere. For decades — perhaps a couple of centuries — this has been pastureland and hayfields. But no longer.

Now, this place is for the birds.

I've begun turning the hayfields into pollinator meadows of wildflowers and native grasses, with the goal of providing food and cover for grassland and shrubland birds, as well as for all the other critters who need these biomes to live.

These birds desperately need a break. A landmark study for Science in 2019 found that bird populations in the United States are down by nearly one-third over the last 50 years, the equivalent of removing 3 billion birds from our skies, because they've lost their habitat to development and their food sources to the overuse of pesticides. Birds are an indicator species — it's much easier to see and hear them than, say, amphibians and small mammals — so it's likely that other critters are declining similarly as our planet hurtles into a crisis of

shrinking biodiversity and accelerating extinction.

Grassland birds, which nest on the ground in fields and meadows, have been hit hardest of all. Their numbers are down 53 percent over the last half-century. The primary author of the study, Cornell University ornithologist Ken Rosenberg, tells me that shrubland birds, those that nest near the ground on the edges between fields and forest, are "declining as steeply as grassland birds … in some cases even steeper."

This is because their habitat is disappearing faster than any other. A consortium of governmental and conservation groups reported in 2022 that grasslands are "America's most endangered habitat," with more than 60 percent, or about 360 million acres, lost to agriculture or growing into forest.

Before humans began their meddling, grasslands and shrublands were created by natural disturbances such as fires, windstorms, landslides, insect infestations, beavers and bison that turned portions of forest into meadows and the like. These areas, technically known as early successional habitats, would gradually revert to forest, but for a decade or two would provide temporary havens for the creatures that thrive in grasslands and shrublands. Now, however, people have disrupted that process of natural disturbance, mostly by suppressing forest fires. Forests remain forests, and cleared areas for homes, industry, farms and manicured lawns offer little food or shelter for birds.

"Nobody actually creates this shrubland on purpose," Rosenberg observes. Yet that is what I am about to do.

As though things weren't stressful enough for our feathered friends, heat and drought have been wiping out the birds that are lucky enough to find hayfields in which to make their homes.

The last couple of years, scientists Amy Johnson and Bernadette Rigley with the Smithsonian National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute's Virginia_ Working Landscapes initiative, have begun to make some heartbreaking discoveries as they monitor bird populations in the region's hayfields and pastures: days-old bluebirds, bobolinks and meadowlark nestlings, too young to fly, found dead just outside their nests, trying to crawl away from the oppressive heat. Even these responsibly managed fields, because they are full of non-native, cool- season grasses such as fescue, can't withstand the increasing heat and dryness, so they've been drying up, leaving the birds without cover and protection from the elements.

Virginia Working Landscapes urges hay farmers not to cut their fields until July 1, which gives nestlings enough time to fledge, or to rotate production to leave some fields untouched for a season. It is also encouraging landowners to plant native grasses and wildflowers, which nourish more insects (which in turn

become nature's bird food) and can withstand drought because they have deeper roots. "These native species are a lot more resilient," Johnson, the initiative's director, explains, "so when we get these extended periods of drought and hot weather, they stay green and lush, while our fescue fields are dormant and brown."

It's not easy to convert hayfields into bird-friendly meadows. You have to kill off the fescue and other non-native grasses, fight off the invasive weeds that will try to spread into the fields, and drill in the seeds of native grasses and forbs. Then, every couple of years, you have to level the meadow with prescribed burning or mechanical means to prevent it from growing into forest, thereby mimicking what happened in nature for thousands of years before humans messed everything up.

Creating these shrublands isn't cheap, and there are all kinds of ways in which it can go wrong. But, for the sake of the birds and the other creatures of the fields, I've begun the process — on a wing and a prayer.

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As a child of the suburbs and a resident of the city, my birding knowledge had been limited largely to the ability to distinguish blue jay from cardinal, robin from crow and pigeon from sparrow. Thankfully, artificial intelligence can make us all expert birders. Download the Merlin Bird ID app, produced by Cornell, and you'll be able to identify the call of every bird in the neighborhood.

In the city, it's likely to find the common ones — a Carolina wren, a house sparrow, a northern mockingbird. But out in the country, Merlin immediately populates with 15 or so of the less-usual suspects: ovenbirds, wood thrushes, eastern bluebirds, pileated woodpeckers, red-eyed vireos, black-throated blue warblers and others. I couldn't identify a tufted titmouse if it flew up and bit me on the nose — but Merlin assures me that they are singing all around me.

Then Johnson, an ornithologist, came to visit me on the farm one morning, and she showed me in two hours all that I hadn't been able to see. Passing me a pair of binoculars, she led me through the fields:

"Ha! There's a fledgling mockingbird — and there's a red-eyed vireo."

"That was a cedar waxwing calling."

"Oh! Yellow-breasted chat. That's a good bird."

"Your bluebirds have fledglings with them so they've been nesting here somewhere."

She pointed out an indigo bunting in the grass. "Look how blue he is! Isn't he awesome?"

She looked up. “Oh! Who’s that? A kestrel!”

She pointed out birds and mimicked their calls: A Carolina wren saying “tea kettle, tea kettle”; a common yellow throat announcing “Wichita, Wichita”; and a white-eyed vireo demanding, “Quick with the beer, chick.”

The tour went on:

“I just heard the blue grosbeak! That’s what I was waiting for.”

“There in the very tallest tree, that’s her — a female scarlet tanager.”

“Oh! There’s your chimney swift.”

“This is an orchard oriole. That was a Baltimore oriole.”

“Oh! Yellow-billed cuckoo! Yeah!!”

Johnson identified 43 species of birds that morning — not bad for some old hayfields on the edge of a forest. But then she told me about Bruce Jones, who lives a few miles from me. She found more than 80 species of birds in his meadows on a single morning — and no fewer than 187 species in all. And while Johnson spotted only one or two of most species at my place, Jones has them in much greater abundance, including struggling species such as common yellowthroats, field sparrows and prairie warblers.

I felt a serious case of bird envy coming on.

Johnson took me over to Jones’s place, and the two of them led me on a tour. The moment I opened the car door, I heard a cacophony of birdsong coming from dozens of purple martins nesting in gourds Jones had hung for them. We immediately saw a yellow-breasted chat making a call that sounds like droll laughter. A pair of great blue herons flew overhead, followed by a pair of orchard orioles, then two kingbirds chasing a raven. Johnson spied a bald eagle and a blue grosbeak, with its comically large bill, from one of two breeding pairs that live on Jones’s land. There were barn owls in the barn, and Jones has nurtured generations of screech owls, kestrels, bluebirds and wood ducks in purpose-built houses. Johnson says she’ll only see a black-billed cuckoo once or twice a year — but Jones has them, along with bobwhite quail, woodcocks and just about every species that lives in or passes through this area.

Jones has all these birds because, for three decades, he has been perfecting the sort of interventions I am just beginning to make. He turned hayfields into native grass and shrublands, packed with plants with names such as scarlet beebalm, little bluestem, wild bergamot, butterfly milkweed and buttonbush — an extraordinary 700 species in all. He has planted patches of wildflowers exploding with the likes of purple coneflower and blazing star, yellow

goldenrod and black-eyed Susan, white rattlesnake master and mountain mint. He made ponds and vernal pools, complete with basking logs for turtles. He turned old silos over to owls and planted "snags" — dead trees — as perches for raptors. He fenced in acres to keep away the deer and put up bird houses everywhere. He says it has taken 30 hours a week to build and maintain, and an investment in the six figures (which I suspect is even higher).

But he has been rewarded with an almost unimaginable profusion of life. During our tour, we were surrounded by all manner of butterflies — spicebush swallowtails, tiger swallowtails, great spangled fritillaries, silver-spotted skippers — dragonflies and bumblebees, including the threatened bombus pennsylvanicus. "This is outrageous!" Johnson exulted, amid the color and din of all this plant and animal life.

Now, I was really jealous.

A man pulled into my driveway this month in a pickup truck pulling a trailer bearing a small aircraft.

"You called for a drone?" Pete Shanley asked.

In fact, I had.

To save the birds, I brought in this big bird: a 10-foot-square, Chinese- made drone with 8 propellers, capable of carrying 10 gallons of fluid, in this case glyphosate, to kill the grass in my hayfield. (It might seem counterintuitive to douse a field in herbicide to *help* nature, but conservationists broadly endorse the practice.)

Shanley, in shorts, sneakers and fishing shirt, plopped in a lawn chair in the shade of my barn and, using a control pad with two joysticks, sent the drone into the sky.

"Aircraft preparing to take off," it announced. "Stand back at a safe distance." In a moment, the beast was airborne and, from a height of about 30 feet, spraying death on my hayfield. It sprayed the fescue. It sprayed the Johnson grass. It sprayed the foxtail. It returned, flew over the barn — and sprayed me with glyphosate. Programming error. "Sorry about that," Shanley said. My eyes burned for two days.

But it was a small price compared with the other interventions I'm making. I'm installing bluebird houses and screech owl houses, gourds for purple martins, and a fake chimney for chimney swifts. I'm planting hundreds of small trees and shrubs around the edges of the fields. I'm digging ditches that will become vernal pools (breeding grounds for amphibians) and restoring a small pond. I'm attacking the invasive weeds — mile-a-minute, Japanese stiltgrass, Asiatic

bittersweet — that will try to colonize the disturbed land. And, in the spring, I'll be planting the seeds that will, hopefully, produce acres of native grassland and wildflowers over the next couple of years.

Will it work? I have no idea. It could become the field of my dreams, like Bruce Jones's place. Or it could be a costly and time-consuming failure. But a little birdie tells me I have no choice but to try.