

ABOUT THE COVER: BOBOLINK

by Barry W. Van Dusen and Richard A. Forster

Editor's Note: Barry W. Van Dusen, who also created our Cox's Sandpiper, Young Least Sandpipers, and Little Egret covers, is an accomplished wildlife artist and illustrator of growing reputation. His paintings and drawings are currently on exhibit, June 17 through July 13, 1990, at the Petersham Craft Center on Route 32 in Petersham, open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.; phone: 508-724-3415. Barry's work has appeared in books and periodicals locally and nationally. To learn of future shows, write him at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, MA 01541.

For me much of the enjoyment of drawing Bobolinks lies in the attraction that large fields and meadows hold especially in June when the grasses and wildflowers grow so rapidly that the scene changes with each passing day. Sitting or standing in one spot, I sometimes focus my binocular on a random segment of meadow and slowly pan through the grasses and forbs. By visually isolating smaller sections of the field, subtle transitions of texture, color, and pattern become more apparent. One grass species gives way to another, and loose colonies of wildflowers add interesting accents and rhythms. Being so exposed, the grassland serves to mirror the summer sky, responding to the slightest shifts in wind, sun, and shadow, bringing to mind the feeling of space and light that one associates with the seashore.

While I admire this intricate tapestry, a striking black-and-buff bird pops into view, asserting itself with startling contrast. No protective coloration here! Leave that to the ladies. This is all show! Male Bobolinks use the same perches repeatedly, favoring low posts or stakes or taller clumps of goldenrod that afford a slight elevation. By positioning myself quietly with several such perches in sight, good views of the birds are only a matter of patience. Even then, I must work fast. The males don't sit still for long. Off they go on another stiff-winged chase over the grasses, pouring out a song that seems to trip over itself in a hurry to burst free.

At Wachusett Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary, where I did these field sketches, Director Joe Choiniere and a committee of volunteers and biologists have initiated a varied plan of maintaining the fields in hopes of finding an optimum strategy to encourage the breeding Bobolinks and other grassland species. Over the past four years, the various fields (some large, some small) have been mowed at different intervals ranging from once a year to a three-year rotation. In addition, there has been experimentation with different methods of mowing—in some instances using a rotary mower and leaving the cut grass on the fields and in others, cutting, baling, and removing the hay. Each year the number of Bobolinks in each field is carefully monitored.

The early results of these experiments seem to confirm what other researchers have found, namely, that Bobolinks mostly prefer old hayfields—fields that are hayed annually for a number of years. The experiments produced another interesting result as well. One year a large field was allowed to grow uncut for an entire season. The cover and food that this field provided enticed the Bobolinks to remain much later in the year than they had previously. It was interesting to watch this somber tribe (most birds having molted into their fall plumage), roving in a loose flock over the ripe grasses, the responsibilities and pressures of the nesting season all but forgotten.

Barry W. Van Dusen

In precolonial times the distribution of Bobolinks was limited to the grasslands associated with inland river valleys and the drier uplands bordering coastal marshes in eastern North America. With the arrival of colonists and the clearing of forests to plant grasses and grains, Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) spread through much of northern United States and southern Canada. With the decline of agriculture and the advent of modern mowing and haying practices, Bobolinks have become a less familiar sight than formerly in the East. Still, in favorite uplands of inland Massachusetts during the latter part of May and early June, groups of frolicking males spew forth their exuberant song, immortalized in "Robert of Lincoln" by poet William Cullen Bryant: "Bob-o'-link, bob-o'-link, spink, spank, spink."

The male Bobolink's plumage is curiously the reverse of typical passerines, being black below and brightly colored above. In contrast, the coloration of the female is a masterpiece of concealment—a heavily streaked pale buff, ideal coloration for her grassland environment. The polygynous males arrive on the nesting grounds a few days ahead of the drab females. Rivalry is chiefly expressed in song and chase, but males also display on the ground by raising the buffy nape feathers, spreading the wings and tail, and gurgling. The female builds a flimsy grass nest on the ground, well concealed within dense vegetation and nearly impossible to detect. In summer Bobolinks feed on insects, seeds of grasses, ragweed, and some grains but during the southward migration are sometimes destructive to rice and other unharvested crops; the specific name *oryzivorus* means "rice-eater." In the 1800s and early 1900s, Bobolinks were slaughtered by the thousands in the rice fields of South Carolina and sold in northeastern city markets as "reed-birds."

Bobolinks migrating north to southern Canada from wintering grounds as far south as the plains of Argentina leave the north coast of South America on a hazardous flight across five hundred miles of open sea to Jamaica, another ninety miles to Cuba, one hundred and fifty miles over open sea to Florida, and then overland to Canada—an annual circuit of ten thousand miles, the longest trek of any North American blackbird.

Richard A. Forster