

Breeding Bobolinks and the Voice Of America Park in Butler County

The Voice of America (VOA) is a 625-acre tract of land located in West Chester Township (Butler County), Ohio. From 1943 until 1994 the U.S. government transmitted radio broadcasts throughout the world from this location. In the late 1990s, roughly 525 acres of grassland were turned over to West Chester Township and Butler County MetroParks (BCMP). West Chester will turn the majority of its VOA land into athletic fields to meet community recreational needs. BCMP has not decided how it will use its parcel.

On 20 May 2001 Charles Holliday found a willet on a flooded softball diamond, as well as more than two dozen bobolinks and a number of savannah sparrows in the adjoining fields. West Chester was planning to mow the undeveloped portions of their property during late-May and June, but once they learned of the possibility of nesting birds, they decided to hold off mowing until late summer. A group of birders organized, and on 6 June began a weekly survey of the VOA, concentrating on the areas of the property that seemed to hold the majority of bobolinks. The goal of the survey was to ascertain if bobolinks and other grassland birds were breeding at the VOA.

The survey confirmed breeding bobolinks on 4 July when a single juvenile was observed begging for food and being fed by adult birds. On 11 July, two juveniles were observed. One was missing a primary or two, and both were seen begging for food from adults. No efforts were made to find nests, and the standards used to separate juveniles from adult females were conservative. This probably accounts for the low number of juveniles recorded from June through July, though on average 31 bobolinks were tallied each week.

From 6 June through 27 June, the surveyors saw on average 7 females and 34 males per trip. On 4 July, when the first juvenile was found, the number of females rose to 36 out of 59 total birds. Given the difficulty of separating juveniles from females in the field during the breeding season, the dramatic increase of "female" bobolinks on 4 July could result from fledglings leaving the nest and joining the adult birds; it could also be a result of busy females taking care of young nestlings, or possibly both. By 18 July the bobolinks were deeply into molt and the surveyors ceased trying to separate males from females, adults from juveniles. Every male had either buffy-yellow spots on the sides, or solidly buffy sides, which contrasted with the rest of their black underparts. A few had one buffy side, the other basic black. At least one female (assumedly) was dull white on one side of the breast, and buffy-yellow on the other side.

The VOA fields are comprised largely of cool-season grasses such as meadow fescue *Festuca elatior*, orchard grass *Dactylis glomerata*, and timothy *Phleum pratense*. There are a number of forbs, as well, plus the expected invasives (Rick Dage, pers. comm.). Because most of the VOA will eventually be developed, no long-term management plan, other than mowing, exists. It is possible, however, that between West Chester and BCMP there could be a 200+ acre grassland, the majority belonging to BCMP, when development is completed. BCMP is considering a

management plan that would keep their acreage in grass and forbs, but recreational development of BCMP's 200 acres is still a possibility. It's not clear how long this habitat will be available.

Surveyors were pleasantly surprised to find sedge wrens at the VOA on 25 July. There were as many as 8 sedge wrens by 4 August. The survey is still in progress.

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In addition to nesting bobolinks, sedge wrens became late summer features at the Voice of America Park in Butler Co. These photos were obtained on 5 August 2001 by holding a digital camera up to the eyepiece of a spotting scope. Photos by Mike Busam.