

Grass filter strips provide good breeding and wintering habitat for birds

Conservationists should continue to encourage landowners to install grass filter strips because they provide good breeding and wintering bird habitat. That recommendation was made in a report by researchers at the University of Maryland (UM) after a study of bird use of 87 grass filter strips in Maryland from 2004 to 2007.

The filter strips were enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Researchers studied bird use and nesting in warm- and cool-season grass filter strips bordering crop fields.

“In general, both warm- and cool-season grass filter strips provide better habitat for birds than crop field edges without filter strips. Filter strips should not be too dense and they should be managed to encourage plant species diversity,” says Peter Blank of UM.

The researchers also conducted an experiment in 13 filter strips to determine the effect of mowing in late summer or fall on wintering birds. They mowed a section of each filter strip and left another section unmowed. Bird density and species richness were dramatically higher in the unmowed sections. “There were hardly any birds in the mowed sections at all. Mowing before the winter made the filter strips practically useless to wintering birds,” Blank says.

Other findings included:

- Fifty-six bird species were observed using filter strips during summer and 22 species during winter.
- Grassland bird density was higher in warm-season compared to cool-season grass filter strips.
- Cool-season grass filter strips dominated by orchardgrass tended to have fewer birds.

- Generalists and successional/scrub species were the dominant bird guilds using filter strips. Most filter strips were too narrow to support grassland-dependent birds.
- Nine bird species were found nesting in filter strips; the majority of nests were in forbs and shrubs.

Among the recommendations researchers made for bird habitat:

- Conservation agencies should continue to promote the planting of filter strips. Planting warm-season grasses will likely provide better habitat for grassland birds.
- When mowing is necessary, mow in late winter or early spring to provide additional habitat for wintering birds.
- Encourage plant species and structural diversity and discourage monocultures by maintaining a mixture of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Avoid planting highly competitive orchardgrass; it can often dominate other plants.
- Install wide filter strips (>200 feet) to create better bird habitat.

The study shows CREP and CRP are beneficial to wildlife and offers very good information for land managers and conservation agencies, according to Charlie Rewa, a biologist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Beltsville, Maryland, who facilitated the study for the NRCS.

Funding was provided by the NRCS Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC).

The AWCC, located in Madison, Mississippi, is a fish and wildlife technology development center.



Photo by Beth Olsen



Photo by Jared Parks

Filter strips used in Farm Bill programs

Summary of:

Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center
Project # 68-3A75-4-104

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