

Old field habitat is unique and is probably the least common upland cover type in our area. This is unfortunate because old field habitats are relatively easy to maintain and provide a great variety of benefits ranging from habitat function to water quality and beyond. For example, old fields enhance water quality by providing greater buffer function than mowed fields or lawns. The dense aerial vegetation intercepts precipitation, much like a forest canopy, and the tangle of roots stabilize the soil surface. In this way the old field habitat helps to prevent erosion and promotes infiltration which reduces sediment input into the watershed and reduces flash flows that cause flooding and stream bank erosion.

In addition, old fields provide a specialized and unique habitat that cannot be replicated by forest. As there are forest interior breeding birds that require specialized forest habitats, there are bird species that are old field specialists and require suitable areas of old field habitat for breeding and for migration stop overs.

In my lifetime I have witnessed the a substantial decline in populations of numerous grassland/old field species. Bobwhite, meadow larks, horned larks, and bobolinks are all much less common today than just twenty or thirty years ago. A recent MOS Annual Birding Report confirms my empirical observations and provide statical documentation of these declines. A 1995 report by the USFWS, in its discussion of grassland species populations trends concluded "that long term prospect for most grassland species remains bleak". That report is twenty years old now and there have been few efforts made to reverse that trend in our area.

An old field is not just a haven for specialized birds species. It is a unique habitat where many species of asters, goldenrods, Queen Anne's lace, cool season grasses, joe-pye weeds, New York ironweeds, and vervains - to name just a notable few species - intermingle providing a diversity of habitat opportunity for plants and other non-bird wildlife. Old fields provide a living bouquet of flowers and grasses that host multitudes pollinators like butterflies, bees, and wasps as well as moths, spiders and other insects. Old fields are key habitat locations for the native milkweeds and the iconic monarch butterflies that rely on them for survival.

In winter the old field habitat changes its face but the dense tangles of vegetation that remain provide cover and shelter for birds, rabbits, foxes, mice, moles and voles, as well as countless eggs, larvae and insects that overwinter there. A maze of hidden tunnels and resting places and dens exist beneath the sea of brown drying stems. This structure provides valuable cover that a mowed field cannot. Old field vegetation also provides a banquet of seeds that many species require to survive the winter. Finches and sparrows can often be seen dangling from old seed heads and scratching though the undergrowth of an old field, foraging on the plentiful seeds that are present there.

Creation of viable old field habitats can be as simple as changing mowing patterns and setting aside land where natural succession can occur. But, admittedly, there are some complications in the maintenance of hold fields that do require attention. One is the need to control invasive species such as multiflora rose, Johnson grass and thistle. Unfortunately the list of potential invasive species is long, these species can invade field habitats and they must be addressed because they diminish the value of the field and can also threaten adjacent crop and pasture land. With some planning, and with some trial and error, an appropriate maintenance strategy can be developed.