



ONTARIO SOIL AND CROP IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

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Haying and bird habitat harmonize at Moira Ridge Farms

By Lois Harris for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

May 26th, 2014 - Cliff Maclean has a passion for nature, farming and his life in eastern Ontario. He and his wife own a heritage house and 260 acres of land north of Belleville called Moira Ridge Farms – or as he likes to call it, his ‘little piece of Paradise’. His property is divided into 80 acres of hay fields and 180 acres of old growth forest, tree plantations and an alvar (a limestone plain that supports rare plants and animals normally native to prairie grasslands).

In 2013, Cliff applied for and received funding from the Grasslands Habitat Farm Incentive Program (GHFIP) because he delayed having his hay harvested until after mid-July, when the Bobolinks in his fields finished their nesting period. The GHFIP is aimed at maintaining grassland habitat for bird species that are at risk, such as the Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark.

Cliff and his wife Heather have owned the farm since late 2000, when they moved from Mississauga. After their children grew up, the couple was looking to have a place in the countryside, and Heather specifically wanted a heritage limestone farmhouse. When they saw the eastern Ontario property advertised, they checked it out, fell in love with it, bought it and moved in.

One summer a few years later, Heather noticed a big flock of fledgling birds flying around one of the fresh-cut hay fields. She showed Cliff, they took pictures, did some research, and found out that the birds were Bobolinks.

By chance, the field was harvested later on in July that year, so when they learned that it was safer for the nesting birds to harvest at that time, they decided to continue the practice in subsequent years. They also discovered that their feathered friends fly all the way from Argentina and Brazil to nesting grounds in North America.

“We said that if they were willing to work that hard to get to our fields, the least we can do is help them get the job done,” Cliff remembers.

So in 2012, when Cliff learned about the GHFIP through his local Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) representative Stan Meeks, he decided to get involved.

The program was delivered by the OSCIA and funded by Environment Canada. GHFIP is based on a competitive bid system and an Environmental Benefit Index to identify and reward proposed projects that show the greatest environmental merit for the money invested. The EBI converts responses to questions asked at the application stage into a score that reviewers are able to use to identify an application's benefit to grassland birds.

Through the program, farmers could apply for cost-share funding to implement Best Management Practices (BMPs), including:

- improving pasture and grazing systems by mowing invading shrubs, installing fencing and/or re-seeding fields,
- retiring marginal land,
- protecting environmentally sensitive areas,
- providing alternative watering systems for livestock and
- altering the timing of hay harvesting.

There were no caps on how much funding applicants could request and no limits to the number of Best Management Practices farmers could apply for, although the entire application was approved or rejected as a whole.

For his bid, Cliff estimated the number of Bobolinks he had, the reduction in the nutritional content of his hay because of the delayed harvest, and the revenue losses that resulted from the reduction.

"The process was straightforward and educational," Cliff said. "The fact that it was all online was convenient, but it was the first time for this program, so we spent lots of time getting through the glitches."

Having worked with information technology for decades, Cliff understood the kinks that need to be ironed out when new services are launched. He praised Christine Schmalz, Senior Environmental Co-ordinator at OSCIA, for her patient efforts in getting him through the process.

Cliff figures he has about 16 different listed species at risk living on his farm, and is a big booster for maintaining the natural beauty of the entire county. As an active member and past Chair of the Hastings Stewardship Council, Cliff frequently helps other local landowners take care of their properties.

"I would absolutely recommend the program to others," Cliff says. "If we're doing what we are doing and it works, it could work on other farms where they could hay earlier or later than the birds' nesting period."

The Spring 2014 application intake for GHFIP has now come to a close. Interested applicants are encouraged to check the OSCIA website regularly for

future opportunities through GHFIP, as well as additional cost-share opportunities.

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For more information, contact Christine Schmalz at christine.schmalz@ontariosoilcrop.org or 1-800-265-9751



Suggested photo caption: A male Bobolink perched on a fencepost. Bobolinks are one of the more than 200 species listed as 'at-risk' in the province.

Photo credit: OSCIA