Virginia’s grasslands are host to some of North America’s most vulnerable species, including native wildflowers and grasses, pollinating insects, and resident and migratory birds. But farmlands and associated grasslands in Virginia have been disappearing over the last 50 years. As these habitats become fragmented, developed, and intensified with agricultural use, much of the biodiversity that supports our community’s physical, environmental, and economic welfare is lost.

WE NEED YOU!

More than 90% of Virginia’s landscape is privately owned, making landowners the main stewards of our remaining biodiversity. Each year, VWL recruits new landowners whose properties serve as sites for our biodiversity surveys. By joining the VWL landowner network, you will help us advance grassland research and help inform conservation practices across the region.

HOW IT WORKS

Scientists and landowners meet to assess properties for surveys.

The VWL team works with you to understand the specifics of your property, determine the landscape’s suitability for surveys, establish locations, and explain survey protocols.

The VWL team surveys plants, soil, & wildlife on properties.

VWL staff and a team of Smithsonian scientists, graduate students, interns, and trained community volunteers survey a range of bird and plant species and collect soil samples. These data provide our team with a snapshot of the biodiversity on your property.

VWL provides each landowner with a final survey report.

At the end of each season, we share a summary report of the species observed during the surveys. This is an exciting opportunity for you to have an inventory of the grassland plant and bird communities found on your property.

Data supports conservation and land management decisions to better serve grasslands and you.

We use data from all participating farms to inform long-term studies on the relationships between land management and native biodiversity, and to help guide conservation planning with community partners.
**Survey Goal**

- **Bird Surveys**: Quantifies grassland bird diversity and abundance in fields during the breeding season.
- **Plant Surveys**: Measures plant species composition, vegetation cover, and structure throughout the growing season.
- **Soil Surveys**: Assesses soil health by determining relative acidity and nutrient content.

**Timeline**

- **Bird Surveys**: May 15 - June 30
- **Plant Surveys**: June - August
- **Soil Surveys**: May - August

**What We Do**

- **Bird Surveys**: Conduct “point counts” by recording every bird seen or heard within 100 meters of a survey site over a 10-minute period. Point counts are conducted three times throughout the breeding season.
- **Plant Surveys**: Document plant species, structure, and cover in 7-21 sampling quadrats along pre-set transects. Surveys are conducted twice during the growing season.
- **Soil Surveys**: Collect and combine eight soil cores at each survey point to gain an average measure of soil characteristics at each site.

**What to Expect**

- **Bird Surveys**: We visit your property three times during the survey period, arriving within three hours of sunrise and spending 45-60 minutes on point counts.
- **Plant Surveys**: We visit your property twice, once in the spring (June) and once in the summer (August), spending 6-8 hours on site each visit.
- **Soil Surveys**: We sample at the same sites where grassland plant and breeding bird surveys are conducted.

**How to Prepare**

- **Bird Surveys**: Please refrain from haying, bush-hogging, or heavily grazing your field during the survey period. If these activities are necessary during the survey period, please coordinate timing with our team.
- **Plant Surveys**: Please refrain from haying, bush-hogging, or heavily grazing your field during the survey period. If these activities are necessary during the survey period, please coordinate timing with our team.
- **Soil Surveys**: No specific preparations are needed for soil surveys, but our team is happy to answer any questions you may have for this survey method.

**THINGS TO NOTE**

- Surveys generally require 20-30+ acres of grassland habitat on the property. Surveyed fields can be under any form of management (i.e. grazed, hayfields, pollinator meadows, fallow fields).
- Due to the nature of sampling methods, the species reported in the landowner survey report do not necessarily reflect all species on a property. Our team is happy to discuss survey results with you.
- Biodiversity surveys are just one of the many ways to be involved in VWL as a landowner! If we cannot perform surveys on your property due to capacity limits, our team will connect you with other opportunities.

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**Learn More**

- Visit our website at [vaworkinglandscapes.org](http://vaworkinglandscapes.org) or find us on social media: [Virginia Working Landscapes](https://smithsonian_vwl)
- For more information about our surveys and how to join the VWL landowner network, please contact our Survey Coordinator, Erin Shibley: [ShibleyE@si.edu](mailto:ShibleyE@si.edu)