



# Conservation Buffers Program Benefits Grassland Birds

**A** plume of dust rises behind the truck as Jimmy Bryan tours his northeast Mississippi farm with a wildlife biologist. The sound of cattle bellowing can be heard from his feedlot more than two miles to the south. Already this morning, he has been on the phone with his stockyard in Nebraska, sold cattle, moved cattle among pastures, and loaded an 18-wheeler with stock headed for a sale. Later this morning, his crop consultant will drop by to discuss next year's crop rotation.

Mr. Bryan is serious about farming, and has built a very successful row crop and cattle operation, but he is also passionate about birds and is working hard to restore native prairie communities and bird life on his 5,000-acre farm in Clay County, Mississippi. During the past two years, working with Mississippi State University and Wildlife Mississippi ([www.wildlifemiss.org](http://www.wildlifemiss.org)), he has converted more than 400 acres of former cropland and exotic grass pasture to native prairie grasses, legumes, and wildflowers.



Dickcissels are just one of a wide variety of grassland bird species that benefit from habitat buffer programs. Photo: John K. Cassidy

A new conservation practice under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), called *CP33-Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds*, helps farmers like Mr. Bryan achieve their conservation and economic goals. CP33 provides economic incentives for farmers to create early successional native grass buffers (30-120 feet wide) around edges of crop fields to benefit upland wildlife such as bobwhite.

Wildlife biologists call this practice Bobwhite Buffers because of its demonstrated success in restoring bobwhite populations on working agricultural landscapes. Research projects

in North Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Missouri have demonstrated that converting as little as 5-10% of cropland to native herbaceous buffers can increase local bobwhite populations by 70-200%. Some grassland birds, including neotropical species such as Dickcissel and Indigo Bunting, also occur in these buffers. Other species which benefit include Savannah, Swamp, and Henslow's Sparrows.

In modern agricultural landscapes, wildlife habitat is no longer an accidental by-product of cropping practices, but instead must be intentionally created. This means farmers often have to decide between the personal costs of lost crops and the more intangible societal benefits of conservation. Programs such as CP33 are a win-win solution for farmers such as Jimmy Bryan who need to meet their economic needs, yet also wish to be good environmental stewards.

For more information on this program, visit the Natural Resource Conservation Service website ([www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/)).



Row crop and buffer strip on Jimmy Bryan's property; Wes Burger; Indigo Bunting: Robert Royce