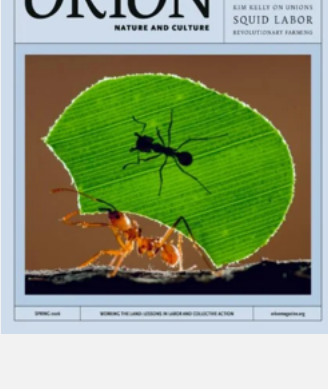
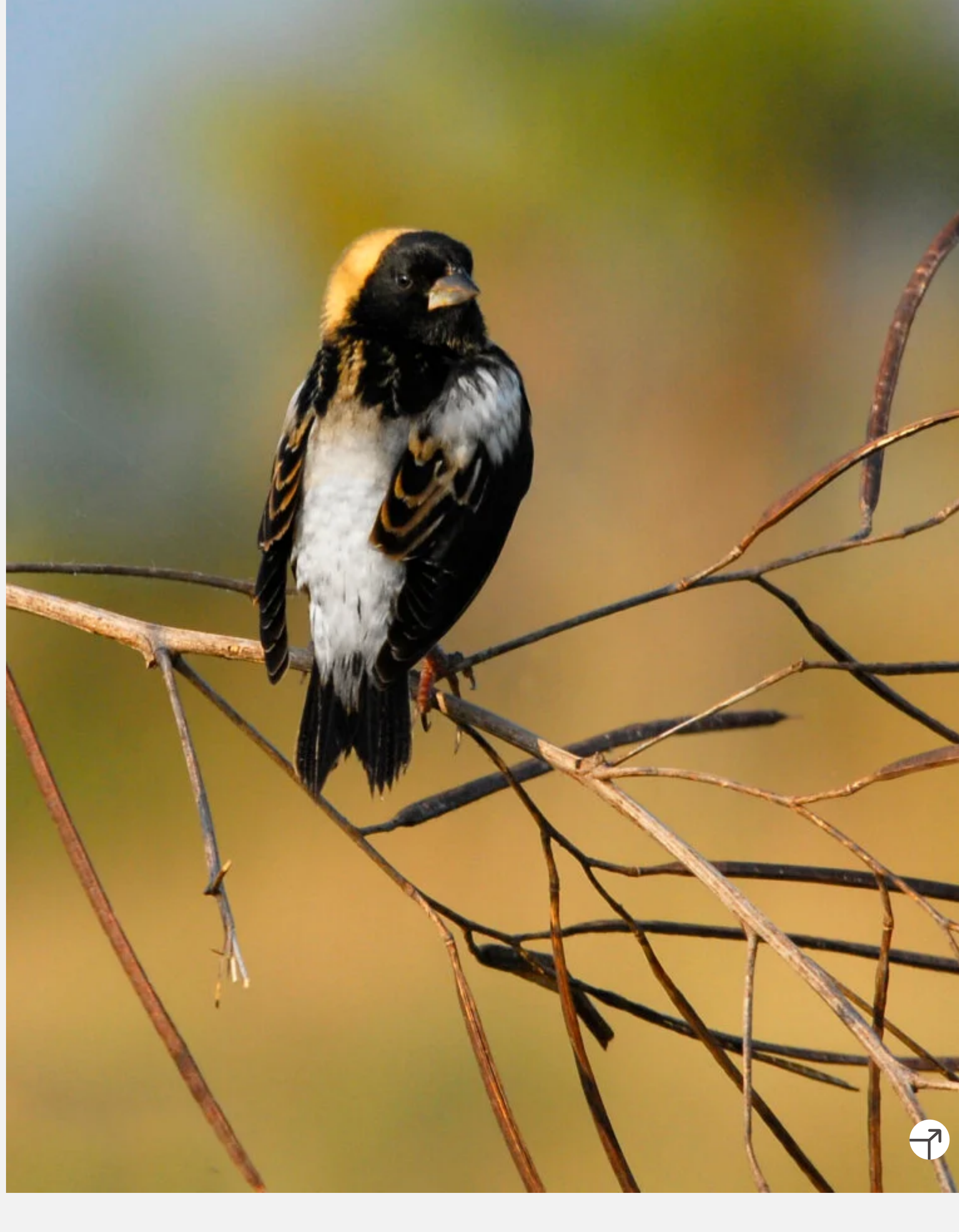


LAY OF THE LAND

Grassland Rock Stars

"Most things about these birds are unusual—and excellent cocktail party trivia"

BY JULIA ZARANKIN



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EVERY SPRING, I SCAN the meadow at my local urban birding patch for the fleeting glimpse of a bobolink zipping over grasses like a helicopter while singing its signature buzzy, rapid-fire song reminiscent of R2-D2. Seeing these confident avian rock stars sporting platinum blond hairdos atop black-and-white evening-wear plumage is always a cause for celebration, even on their breeding grounds in southern Ontario.

Most things about these birds are unusual—and excellent cocktail party trivia—including their onomatopoeic name in honor of their song, which has been described by ornithologist Arthur Cleveland Bent as “a bubbling delirium of ecstatic music that flows . . . like sparkling champagne.” That such glorious vocal delirium can last ten seconds, with up to a hundred phrases performed while airborne, is a testament to bobolinks’ capacious air sacs that add oxygen flow to their lungs while they exhale and belt out their pyrotechnics. The nineteenth-century poet William Cullen Bryant popularized the bobolink’s common name by suggesting that the bird’s feisty metallic song, transcribed as “Bob-o’Link” (actually derived from a certain “Robert of Lincoln”), inspired the eponymous poem about the bird’s life cycle. The bobolink has also been called “rice bird,” because of its predilection for feasting on rice on its wintering grounds, “meadow wink,” and the less flattering “skunk bird.”

Add to that an unorthodox *anything goes* mating system: bobolinks are both polygamists and polyandrists. While the male practice of mating with several different females during breeding season isn’t unique, coupling that predilection with females who lay eggs fathered by several different males might raise eyebrows if it weren’t so fantastically egalitarian.

These showstopper birds also happen to have one of the longest migratory trajectories of any North American songbird—flying 12,500 miles every year from their wintering grounds in the grasslands of South America to breed in northern U.S. and southern Canadian hayfields and meadows. Over the course of its life, a bobolink’s odometer will clock approximately five flights around the globe. All of these transcontinental journeys take place at night when bobolinks navigate the starry sky thanks to a built-in compass—the iron oxide in the tiny bristles of their nasal cavity.

Superlative physique and record-breaking flights aside, bobolinks are also essential laborers of the grasslands; their insect-packed diet transforms the birds into potent and natural pest control agents. By gleaning a buffet of insect larvae and arachnids from the base of vegetation, they not only consume a protein-rich diet to fuel egg production, nest building, and energy for their offspring to grow quickly but also help eliminate pests from prairie grasses.

Yet their dependence on grasslands is the very thing that makes them especially vulnerable. Bobolink numbers are declining at an alarming rate as their preferred habitat is rapidly disappearing because of agricultural practices that have turned prairie into farmland. Frequent mowing practices are a deathtrap for the young in their nests snugly ensconced on the ground. The cards are stacked against grasslands (and with them, all the birds that call this habitat home). Not nearly as flashy as dramatic mountain ranges and coastlines, grasslands are now the most endangered habitat on Earth.

My first bobolink sighting fifteen years ago was all about its flamboyant plumage, but when I watch the birds now, I’m struck by the ways they’ve opened my eyes to the nuance of workmanship in our natural spaces. As is always the case in birding, the more you look, the more you see. Bobolinks are gateways to noticing how grasslands, the most unassuming of landscapes, are, in fact, teeming with life.

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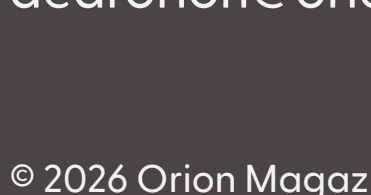
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