

Meadow Lark

Hard work and determination restores Houston Meadows

“A MALE ROSE-BREADED GROSBREAK!” exclaimed Keith Russell, followed by an exuberant expletive uncharacteristic of Philadelphia’s typically mellow and carefully spoken Audubon Outreach Coordinator. “First one I’ve seen here in years!” Even I could spot the pink chest on the bird zipping above us at the Houston Meadows, near Cathedral Road in Philadelphia’s Andorra neighborhood.

I remember stumbling onto the Houston Meadows six or seven years ago, as tiny patches in the thick forest of the Wissahickon Valley. Now you can see the first meadow from the street — no more stumbling.

Those Meadows, strangled by the encroaching woods, were a pathetic remnant of what Russell explored in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Back then, he and other Philly birdwatchers could see breeding field sparrows, indigo buntings, rose-breasted grosbeaks and other birds of open country that don’t frequent the forests of Fairmount Park. By the early 2000s, many of the birds Russell remembered were gone.

“You would never know you are in the city of Philadelphia,” Russell said as I stood dumbfounded, staring out at rolling hills below us one morning a few weeks ago. The birds are coming back, too. On one short morning outing, we saw or heard 42 species of birds, including field sparrows feeding bugs to their young and a Cooper’s Hawk cruising for other birds to munch on.

Natural areas like this don’t happen by accident, and this one started with a plan hatched by Russell and Tom Wimer, director of Natural Resources for Philadelphia Parks and Recreation (then Fairmount Park) in 2007. At first

they didn’t have any money to restore the Meadows, but they did have a vision.

Some naturalists might think “bureaucrat” is a dirty word, but there is an art to making conservation happen. My respect for Wimer grew as he discussed cobbling together the funding to restore and clear the 40 or so acres of meadow and rehabilitate another 15 acres of surrounding woods. They were then able to take advantage of Recovery Act money available through the U.S. Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service to plant shrubs and seed the newly cleared areas with native grasses, primarily little bluestem. The Friends of the Wissahickon re-routed a trail through the new space. Six years and several grants later, the Meadows are back.

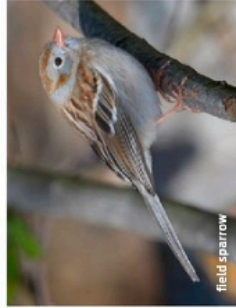
While we were there, the birdsong was interrupted by pet dogs running off-leash and squabbling on the trail ahead of us. This is not just an aesthetic problem. As Wimer emphasized, the Meadows were rehabilitated to provide habitat for birds that like open and shrubby environment: “They nest close to the ground. Dogs running off-leash can disturb nesting birds.”

So, if you come to the Houston Meadows, bring binoculars to see the birds, come early before it gets too hot, and if you bring your dog be sure to use a leash.

BERNARD BROWN is an amateur field herper, herpetologist and founder of the PBREI Campaign (pbrcampaign.org), a movement focused on the benefits of eating lower on the food chain.



cedar waxwing



field sparrow



ovenbird

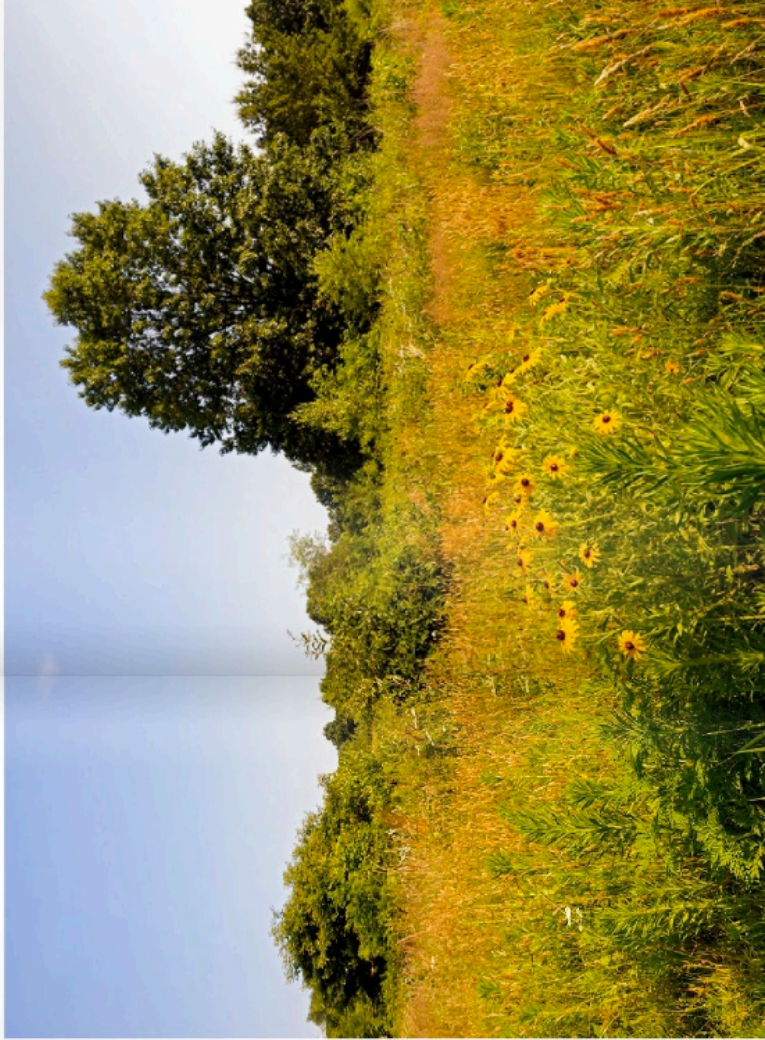


tree swallow



blue-gray gnat catcher

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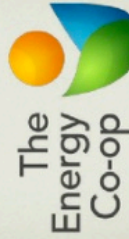
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