The Bobolinking Project:
Experiments in Field Ornithology

by Kimberly Meyer Ramirez

Figure 1. Students practicing binocular skills.

Figure 2. Students preparing plasticine eggs for fieldwork.

Figure 3. Monitoring artificial nests.

Figure 4. Baiting artificial nests.

The Bobolinking Project was a part of Audubon's TogetherGreen initiative. The project's main goal was to link young people to stewardship and ecological monitoring opportunities at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and Bartel Grassland in Illinois. Project participants learned about one of the rarest of North America's major biomes, the tallgrass prairie. This habitat is an important breeding ground for many grassland bird species which are among the fastest and most consistently declining birds in North America. A series of outreach activities, educational workshops and hands-on field activities were conducted to show participants what they could do – individually and together – to protect and improve the quality of this ecosystem on which people and birds depend.

Outreach

Ten outreach presentations with a total of 100 attendees were given to high schools and community-based organizations in Plainfield, Oak Forest, Chicago, Frankfort and Wilmington to recruit high school and junior high school students. Additionally, a website was launched in April 2009 to reach a broader audience.

Workshops

Seven workshops were conducted with a total of 80 participants (*Figures 1 & 2*). The workshops gave students the opportunity to learn about grassland bird identification and breeding biology. Students learned about the basic criteria used for bird identification such as size, shape, behavior, field marks and song. They learned how to use monitoring field equipment including binoculars and GPS units. They also were educated about how they could help establish or improve bird habitat in their local area, monitor bird populations and advocate for birds and their conservation needs.

Field experiments

Two field experiments with a total of 80 participants were conducted (*Figures 3 & 4*). Students examined nest predation rates on artificial ground nests at two grassland sites in the Chicago Wilderness region. They assessed potential predation pressures as a function of proximity to a walking trail, grassland site, and type of egg. A total of 208 nests were deployed – 120 at Bartel Grassland and 88 at Midewin. Nests were placed at varying distances (2m, 5m, 10m, 25m) from a walking trail and were baited with one Japanese quail (*Corturnix japonica*) egg and one plasticine egg. Quail eggs (24 x 30mm) were used to simulate a larger songbird egg such as a Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*), Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), and Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*). The plasticine eggs (19mm x 15mm/6.1grams)