

The Miracle of Richfield: Managing a Former Coliseum Site as a Grassland

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The Richfield Coliseum (41°14'43"N, -81°35'38"W) in Richfield, Summit County, near the intersection of I-271 and SR 303 west of Peninsula, opened in 1974. This was the same year, coincidentally, that President Ford signed the bill creating the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreational Area (CVNRA; later Cuyahoga Valley National Park,

CVNP), which adjoined the coliseum land, and the year we moved our young family to Ohio, just a few miles from both locales. The coliseum was home to at least seven professional sports teams (the Cleveland Cavaliers, Crusaders, Barons, Force, Crunch, Lumberjacks, and Thunderbolts) and hosted concerts, circuses, the Ice Capades, and antique shows, among other events. In the 1975–1976 season, the Cavaliers won the playoff series (4 to 3) against the Washington Bullets, through many heroics and last-second shots, in what has been dubbed the “miracle of Richfield.” But once plans for Gund Arena (now Quicken Loans Arena) in Cleveland were announced in 1991, the Richfield Coliseum became economically obsolete. Its doors closed permanently in 1994, and the hulk of an abandoned concrete and steel building and adjoining paved parking lots sat idle for five years.

After about 60 developers



The current appearance of the coliseum grasslands. The Cuyahoga Valley National Park was declared an Important Bird Area by Audubon Ohio in 2004. Photo by Dwight Chasar, 03 Nov 2007.



Female (carrying food) and male Bobolink approaching a nest site at the coliseum grasslands. This is the only reliable nesting site for this species in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Photo by Dwight Chasar, 10 Jun 2008.

offered to buy this property, with proposals such as office parks and outlet malls, the Trust for Public Land purchased the vacant coliseum and its 327 acres for \$7.4 million in January 1999. Subsequently they transferred the whole to the National Park Service for \$9.27 million; the property then became part of the CVNRA. By May, the building was demolished, the parking lots removed, and the debris buried in the basement of the coliseum and covered with topsoil. The resulting 60 acres were grassed in with 5,000 pounds of seed to stabilize the soil. The park intended the land to be allowed to regenerate as forest. John Debo, superintendent of the park, said, “the grave will be covered with topsoil, and 10 years from now, it will be the beginning of the area’s newest woodlands” (Goforth 1999, p. A1). Lee Chilcote (1999) said about the property (p. 3), “Five years from now a young forest will have sprouted here, and, as the trees grow, they will be visible for miles across the Cuyahoga Valley.”

My wife Ann and I had been volunteers for the park for 17 years and had been censusing birds and regularly leading bird walks in

the park for 10 years. Doug Vogus (Greater Akron Audubon Society, GAAS) brought to our attention in 2001 that the “Keep Out” sign at the site had been removed, and, because the grasses were growing, he thought that interesting birds could be there. During several surveys in May, we found a few Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks, a Henslow’s Sparrow, 12 Savannah Sparrows, 6 to 8 Grasshopper Sparrows, and even Spotted Sandpipers in the drainage area in the middle of the field. We were excited because we knew of no other area in or near the CVNP where grassland species could be found. As we were leaving the field on 23 May 2001, we fortunately encountered Meg (Benke) Plona, biologist, and Kim Norley, landscape architect, both employees of the park, who were there to view the landscaping. We told them about these bird sightings and suggested that the area be preserved as grassland. They said the plan was to let the field naturally succeed to forest, but that if we felt differently, we should write a letter to John Debo supporting our position.

Ann and I carefully crafted a letter to Debo, supporting preservation



The Henslow's Sparrow was slower to populate the grasslands than other sparrows, but in 2010, at least eight singing males were counted. Photo by Dwight Chasar, 10 Jun 2008.

of the coliseum site as grassland. The letter pointed out that grasslands and grassland birds were nonexistent in the park or surrounding environs and that birding was the fastest-growing outdoor pastime in the United States. We suggested that grassland birds would bring more birders into the park (now the CVNP) and that birders in turn would spend dollars in the adjoining communities. Furthermore, the Bobolink and Henslow's Sparrow are on the Audubon National Watchlist, and the latter is on the State of Ohio list of Species of Concern. Superintendent Debo forwarded our letter to Lisa Petit, wildlife biologist in Resource Management at CVNP, for her views. Birdie Smith, another long time birder and volunteer, also wrote a supporting letter to Debo.

Lisa Petit explained what transpired in the Valley Volunteer (Petit 2001, p. 1):

Because the primary mission of national parks is to preserve and protect natural and cultural resources, park policy prevents making active changes to the natural environment to promote certain species or groups of species. So in accordance with National Park Service policy, plans for the Coliseum site were simply to restore the area by planting grasses as soil stabilizers to prevent erosion and

allow natural succession to return the site of forest lands.

Active management of resources is usually done to minimize harm to resources rather than to create new forms of the resources. However, when species of special concern, whether endangered, threatened, rare or declining, are found within the park, National Park Service policy allows for the preservation and protection of those species. In any case, protection through habitat management might be allowed.

Today, the area is being managed as grasslands, with one-third of the acreage mowed on a rotating basis each fall. Invasive Autumn Olive trees (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) adjacent to the field are being removed by CVNP volunteers. As a result of this management and the changes in the grasses themselves, sparrow populations have varied over the past 10 years.

The GAAS has conducted a yearly Summit County summer bird count in June since 1978, counting species and numbers of individuals throughout the county (all data are archived at <http://www.akronaudubon.org>). This bird count has covered the coliseum grasslands each year since 2001. Table 1 shows data for selected bird species for a

one-visit count in June. Grasshopper Sparrow increased rapidly in the early years and quickly dropped into single figures. Henslow's Sparrow took five years before populating the grasslands, but is at its highest now. Savannah Sparrow quickly increased, peaked in four years, and has dropped into single digits today. Bobolink numbers can be overwhelming in flight and song, with Eastern Meadowlarks mixed in. In 2003, a Sedge Wren claimed a territory, and in 2010 up to six territorial males were present, with at least one confirmed nest. The site has hosted other species during migration, including Wilson's Snipe, Sora, various shorebirds, Short-eared Owl, Northern Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk, and Nelson's Sparrow. American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, and Peregrine Falcon have been seen above the field.



A single Sedge Wren claimed territory in the grassland in 2003. This species did not appear again until 2010, when at least six males were on territory, with two confirmed nesting. Photo by Joe Zellia, 10 Jul 2010.

In 2004, Audubon Ohio designated the CVNP as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and the grasslands became the park's poster child. This is the only location in the park that is posted as an IBA and that is actively managed specifically for bird habitat. The CVNP uses this as an example in land use restoration and management. "The Richfield Coliseum project is one of the most important conservation success stories in northern Ohio and also a remarkable story of land restoration," said Christopher Knopf, Ohio director of the TPL (Huba 2006, p. C4).

There has been ongoing discussion among birders regarding the name for these grasslands. We prefer Coliseum Grasslands, because this name suggests the site's previous use and evokes memories in older birders, and because it will raise questions from future young birders as to how it got its name, and, subsequently, became the second "miracle of Richfield."

Literature Cited

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