

Profitable pasture rotations offer good habitat for birds and other wildlife



Dan Specht Case Study Key Points

Rotational Grazing:

- helps Dan Specht manage his pastures to maximize profits *and* offer habitat to birds and other wildlife
- can allow grassland birds to nest in pastures with proper grazing and resting techniques
- produces healthy cattle that bring premium prices in a grass-fed, organic system
- requires adjustment from year to year, and can be as much art as it is science

Grass farmer manages for profits and bird habitat

Dan Specht is concerned about stocking rates, forage nutrition value, rate of gain, and other details for profitable grass-fed beef. But he also hesitates to drive his pickup in a pasture at the time bobolinks are nesting in the spring and early summer because he might destroy a nest.



Dan Specht

The organic grassland farmer from northeast Iowa believes he can manage his pastures in a way that maximizes profit and still offers good habitat for birds and other wildlife.

It's important to Specht that his brome, orchard, fescue, bluegrass,

quackgrass and clover pastures and hayland give ground nesting birds a safe place to build nests and raise their broods.

"I think the closer you can come to a natural system in farming, the less damage you'll do," Specht says. "I grew up fishing in streams and ponds,

"My cattle's only health problems are a foot or eye injury now and then—they don't see the vet much"

and learned early on that you don't fish in Iowa after a heavy rain because the water is full of silt. I think a farmer has some of the responsibility for that," he says.

Specht is proud that his grass farming system doesn't add chemicals to the groundwater, or sediment to surface waters. He farms 700 acres of rolling to steep land in Clayton

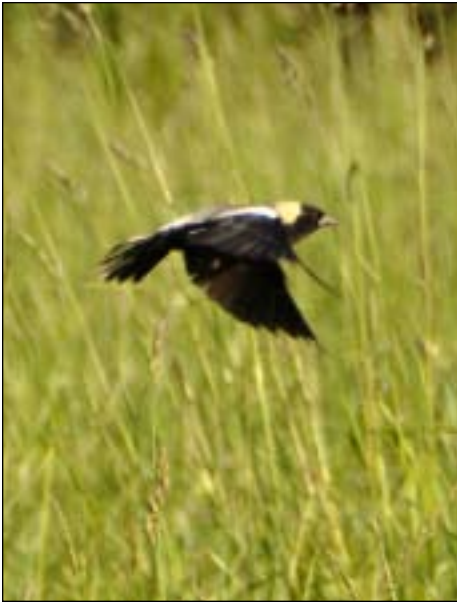
County. Only 40 acres of that is corn or soybeans—the rest is pasture, hay, woodland or small grains.

"You get a premium for grass-fed beef," says Specht, who has been farming organically since 1983 and certified as an organic grower since 1995. He has grazed as many as 200

yearlings in the past, as well as 45 cows. "I buy some yearlings at about 550 pounds plus have the calves from my Red Angus and Angus cows. My market weight for heifers is 950-975 pounds and for steers it's 1050-1100 pounds," he says.

Specht thinks his cattle are healthier on grass only. "They romp and spin on the grass, and I don't have many





"I wouldn't see these bobolinks if my ridgetops were in corn," Specht says.

health issues with them. They don't see a vet except for vaccinations, castration and dehorning," he says.

Grazing as much art as science
He calves in the fall, and since he



Specht moves his cattle to a new paddock every three days. With ten paddocks, they make the circuit in a month.

rotates pastures, the calves can go on a pasture early in the spring, as soon as the grass starts growing. "Figuring out a grazing system each year is about as much art as it is science," Specht says. "It's a little different every year."

After he and a group of neighbors met with master graziers in New Zealand, Specht decided on a rotational grazing system that keeps cattle in each paddock for 3 days. Giving each paddock a month's rest between graz-



ing meant he needed 10 paddocks. “So the cattle make the circuit in a month. I match the stocking rate to that, making sure they will have enough to eat for those three days without overgrazing,” he says.

“A longer return interval is OK, too, maybe up to 6 weeks before they return to the first pasture if there is plenty of feed.”

That interval favors legumes, Specht says. “In organic systems, we don’t use nitrogen fertilizer, so legumes are our source of nitrogen and we have some lush pastures. It can take a good dose of cattle.”

He’s looked at native grasses and had some success with Eastern Gama Grass, but says it’s not a major part of his operation because seed is expensive and it takes time to establish.

While he’ll mow areas that have too many thistles, Specht doesn’t clip pastures or make hay in bird nesting and brood rearing season when birds are most vulnerable, and he’s espe-



Specht has noticed bobolinks like larger blocks of grass (above), but his grass farm is habitat for birds of all kinds (above, right).

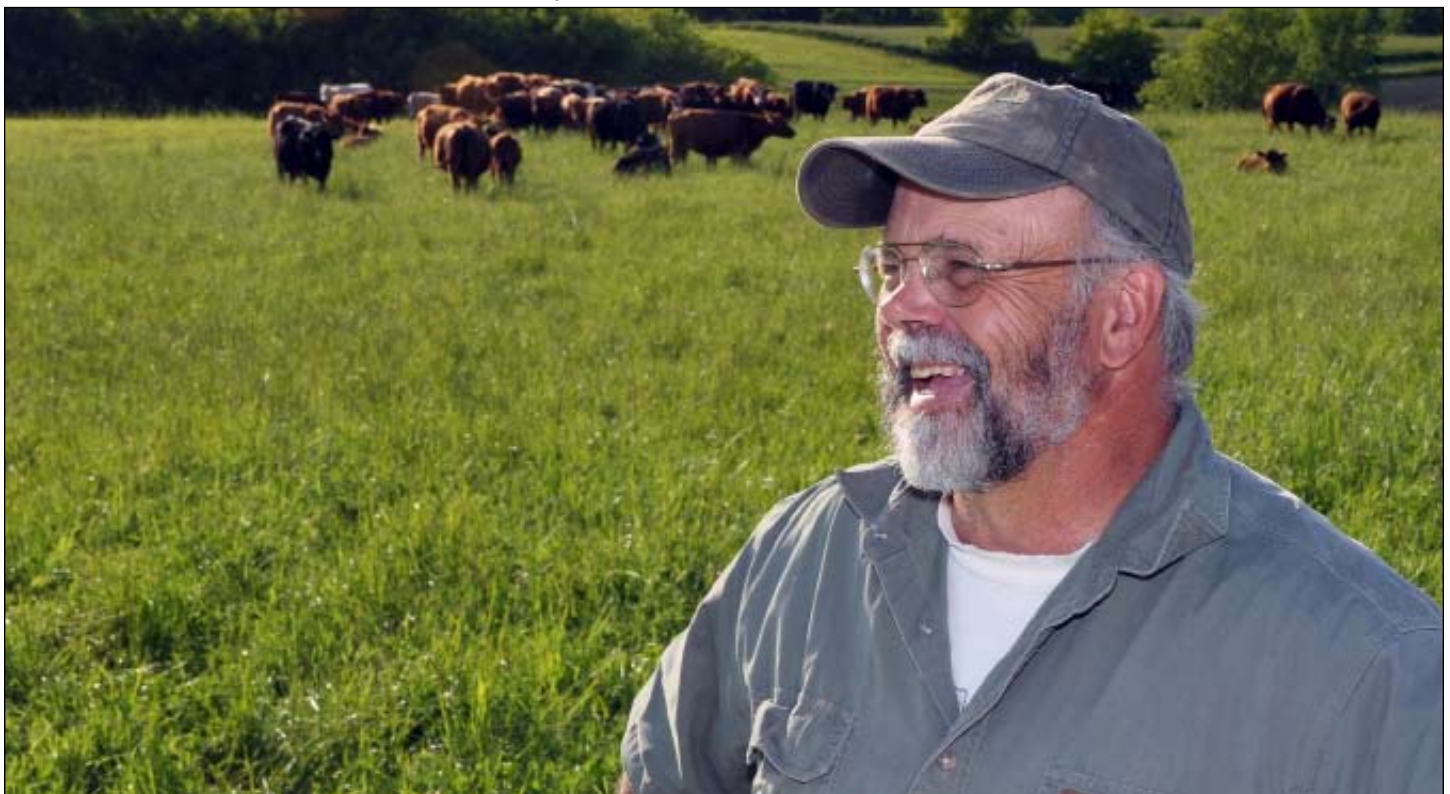
cially careful to leave grass longer in late spring and early summer when most birds need it. “But birds nest at different times,” he notes. “The main thing is to have more good grasslands to attract the birds, and then manage the grasses as best you can.”

Specht has grassland birds nesting in the pastures he’s grazing. “But you can’t graze it short during nesting season or the birds will move on you,” he says.

Goal: more local grass-run farms

“I really want to try hard to get local producers in this area working together for a common goal of grass-run farms,” Specht says. “One of my neighbors, Ryan Jepsen, has things started. There are about a dozen of us with hogs and cattle on grass, using organic methods. Some of us are certified organic.”

He’d like to see more native prairies in the mix, too. “People always claimed a crop of native prairie hay would out-feed any other kind of hay, and it would be fun to try,” he says.



One of 5 Case Studies investigating the benefits of well-managed grazing to the land, livestock and people—brought to you by the Leopold Center’s Grass-based Livestock Working Group.

