

**Breeding Bird Survey Report  
Lawton Farm Recreation Area,  
Scituate, Rhode Island**



**Prepared for: Scituate Conservation Commission**

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report describes the results of a series of breeding bird point count surveys conducted at the Lawton Farm Recreation Area in Scituate, Rhode Island during May and June of 2025. To identify breeding bird species and evaluate habitat preferences of these species, point count surveys were conducted at three sites on the property representing shrubland, forest, and field habitats. The results of these surveys showed an increase of species richness with a total of 41 unique species observed across the 3 sites. Highlights of the 2024 survey results are listed below.

- 1) *The total number of species observed this year (41) was greater than observed in 2024 (36). This year, the most abundant species were the Bobolink (31), the Gray Catbird (22), the Red-winged Blackbird (15), the Eastern Towhee (12), and the Yellow Warbler (12).*
- 2) *Over the 14 consecutive years that these surveys have been conducted on the property, 82 unique species have been observed at Lawton Farm.*
- 3) *Bobolink continue to be observed at Lawton Farm in Field 1, and identical to 2023 & 2024, were seen in Field 3, though only a single individual.*
- 4) *The abundance across all sites in 2025 was 226, an 11.33% increase compared to the results of the 2024 survey series.*
- 5) *IQR analyses of the abundance and richness trends from 2012-2025 revealed that the incredible number of individuals observed in 2020 & 2022, and the high number of species observed in 2022, are outliers compared to the longer-term trends of the avian community on the property.*

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## 1. Introduction

This report describes the results of a series of breeding bird point count surveys conducted at the Lawton Farm Recreation Area in Scituate, Rhode Island in May and June 2025. Lawton Farm is a 54.4-acre parcel consisting primarily of open fields and shrubland, except for approximately 20 acres of forested wetlands and a small stand of upland hardwoods in the southwest corner. The ownership of the property is divided between the Scituate Land Trust, which purchased 39.4 acres (plat 9-1, lot 9) of the property via a conservation easement in 1990 through an Open Space Grant from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), and the Town of Scituate, which purchased the remaining 15 acres (plat 9-1, lot 272) the same year. The 15 acres owned by the Town does not have a conservation easement or any other type of protection that would prevent development. The Scituate Town Council has assigned the task of managing the Lawton Farm property to the Scituate Conservation Commission (SCC). The SCC is an advisory board that works to promote and develop natural resources, protect watershed resources, and to preserve natural aesthetic areas within the Town of Scituate. A property management plan for Lawton Farm was developed in 2009 and the SCC continues to implement the conservation and management objectives described within the plan.

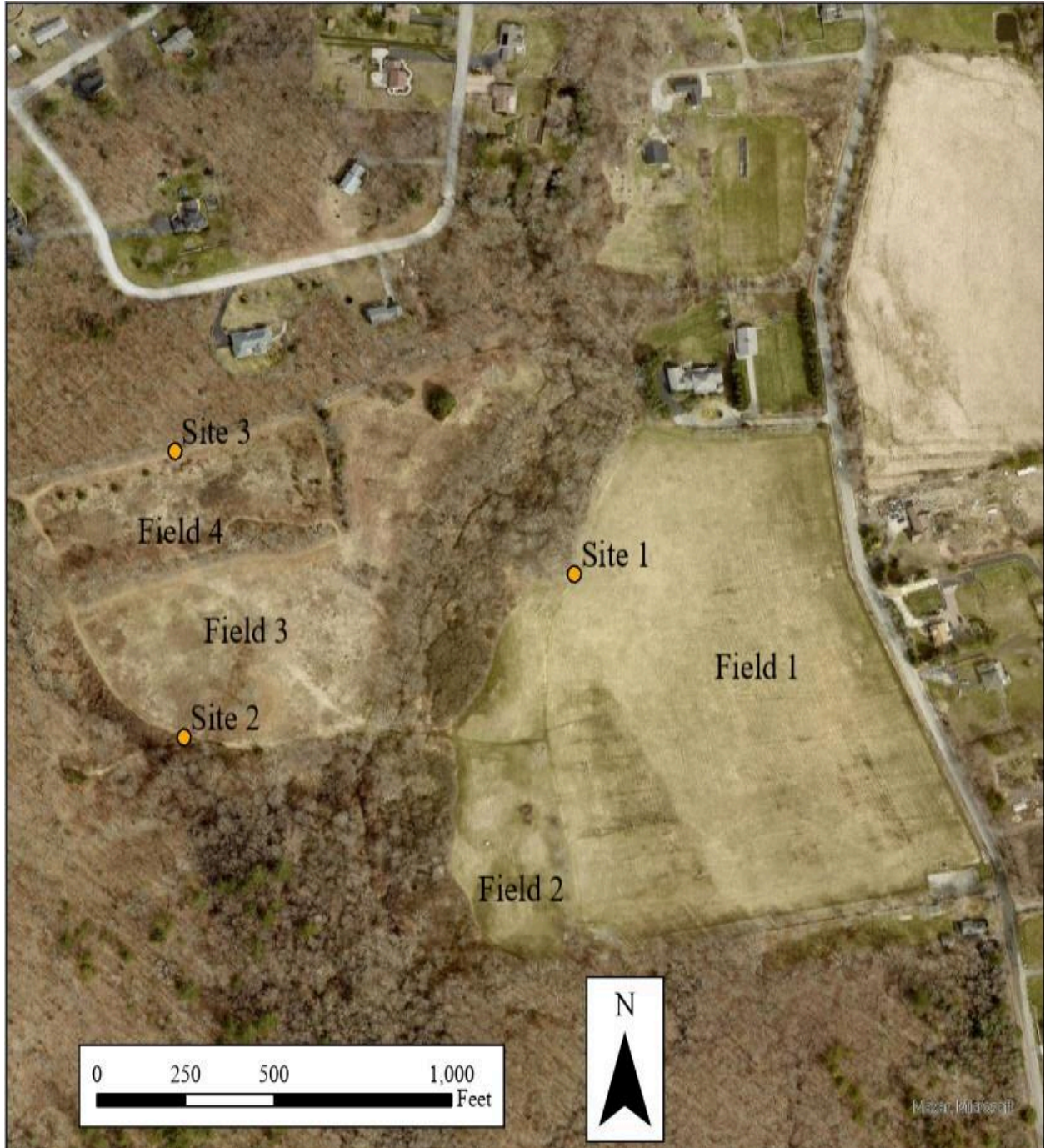
An important objective for the property is to maintain grassland habitat for Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) and Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*). To evaluate the progress of this management objective and to better understand bird use of the valuable shrub and grassland habitat that the property offers, point count surveys have been conducted since 2012. This report provides results of the 14th consecutive year of point count surveys at Lawton Farm.

## 1. Methods

The 2025 point count surveys were conducted at the same sites used in the 2012-2024 surveys. The three sites were originally selected based on the different types of shrubland in addition to forest and field habitats (Table 1 and Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Lawton Farm point count site habitat descriptions 2023.

Site	Description
Site 1	Field with periodic mowing, forested perimeter.
Site 2	Field, shrubland, and forest on perimeter.
Site 3	Shrubland created by irregular mowing of the field, a meadow, and forest.



**Figure 1.** Point count sampling sites at Lawton Farm, Scituate, Rhode Island in 2024. These sites are the same as the point counts conducted from 2012-2024.

**Site 1:** The first survey site was in the central portion of the property on the edge of Field 1 (Figure 1; 41.75792° N, -71.55652° W, Figure 2). The field was bordered by small patches of shrubland to the north and west. This site included a hedgerow of mature trees which was removed in 2012 to connect Fields 1 and 2 to improve habitat for bobolink and other grassland bird species. The eastern portion of the shrubland was dominated by multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*), which transitioned into a small herbaceous wetland to the west. To the north of the shrubland was a small area of forest where red maple (*Acer rubrum*) and white ash (*Fraxinus americana*) are the dominant species. To the east and south of the sampling site was Field 1, which is mowed every other year to maintain grassland habitat; mowing occurs in September to prevent disturbance of nesting birds. The hay bales are sold as construction hay. Bluebird nesting boxes have been maintained in this field over the last 6 years.



*Figure 2. View from Site 1 facing South.*

**Site 2:** The second sampling site was in the western portion of the property on the southwestern edge of Field 3 (41.75715° N, -71.55952° W) adjacent to a patch of shrubland which began management in 2012 for invasive plant removal of species such as autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) and multiflora rose. However, the most prominent species in this area is now the autumn olive. Other prominent species include saplings of black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), and poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*). The

shrubs here are significantly taller than in 2024. The sampling site also included upland forest dominated by white ash and white oak (*Quercus alba*) (Figure 3). A small area of shrubland (~0.25 acres) was cut prior to the annual survey series, and is primarily open soil and grasses (Figure 4).



*Figure 3. Photo of survey site 2, from the Northwest.*



*Figure 4. Site 2 from the east.*

**Site 3:** The third sampling site was along the northern boundary of the property on the northern edge of Field 4 (41.75745° N, -71.55952° W). Field 4 included patchy regeneration of saplings of black cherry, American ash, white oak, and white birch. This sampling site provided the most heterogeneous vegetation mixture. In the past, it contained short grasses and forbs interspersed with shrubs that measure up to four feet tall, but in 2025, reduced mowing and trimming has allowed the saplings here to grow up to fifteen feet tall and the shrubbery to grow much more dense than in previous years. (Figure 4). White oak and American ash were the dominant species within the upland forest located on the northern limits of the survey site.



*Figure 5. Site 2 facing south.*

The methodology used in the 2025 point count surveys followed the same protocol used in the 2012-2024 surveys, with the exception that they were conducted the last 7 years by one observer instead of two. The purpose of the point count surveys was to identify breeding birds within Lawton Farm and to evaluate habitat preferences of different species. The three selected survey sites were separated by greater than 100 m to minimize the possibility of recording the same bird at more than one site. Point counts were preceded by a three-minute wait period in order to minimize the disturbance to birds and to allow them to acclimate to the observers' presence. Point counts were conducted by a primary observer facing south for half of the time and north for the rest of the time to achieve a 360° view of the site. Species identification and abundance were recorded based on songs, calls, direct observations, and fly overs within 100 m of the observation site during each ten-minute point count. The observer made distinctions between birds present  $\leq 50$  m from the site and those between 50 and 100 m from the site. Each site was surveyed on three separate occasions on May 28<sup>th</sup>, June 12<sup>th</sup> and June 25<sup>th</sup> 2024, and all were conducted between 0600 and 0800 hours.

To more accurately estimate the number of Bobolinks in Field 1, I conducted a separate Bobolink survey on the third survey date. To do this, I followed the same methodology as in 2024; I divided the field into 4 quadrants, then conducted one 5-minute survey of each quadrant

(figure 11). In these surveys, I counted all Bobolinks that were observed or heard in each quadrant, taking due diligence to not double-count birds between quadrants.

To examine bird species associations with the survey sites, we classified birds into five guilds based on their preferred nesting and foraging habitat. Shrubland birds were those identified as primarily nesting in shrub habitat according to King and Schlossberg (2012). Forest birds were those described as cavity nesting species by Scott et al. (1977). Woodland, grassland, and open habitat birds were classified based on their primary habitat preference listed in Ehrlich et al. (1988).

#### 4. Results

38 unique species were observed within 50 meters of each survey site, 6 more than were observed in 2024. Three additional species, the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*), American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), and Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapilla*), were observed only 50-100 meters from each survey site, for a total of 41 unique species observed. The most abundant species were Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*; 31 observed), the Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*; 22 observed), the Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*; 15 observed), the Eastern Towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*; 12 observed), and the Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*; 12 observed). The Bobolinks were observed in the greatest numbers in Field 1 where they nest and use the area for foraging and cover. However, there was a single observation of one individual in Field 3, but nesting was not confirmed. No Bobolinks were detected in Field 2 or 4. Over the 14 consecutive years that these surveys have been conducted on the property, 82 unique species have been observed at Lawton Farm. This is the second consecutive year that the feral Rock Pigeon (*Columbia livia*) was observed on the property, despite not being observed prior to 2024.

14 species were observed at all 3 survey sites, and 11 additional species were observed at 2 of the 3 survey sites. Site 1 had 4 unique species (species only observed at site 1), site 2 had 7, and site 3 had five unique species. The guild with the greatest number of individuals detected across all survey sites was the shrubland guild (86 individuals detected), followed by the forest guild (39 individuals observed), the woodland guild (35 individuals observed), the open land and grassland guilds (32 individuals each), and finally the urban / agricultural guild (2 individuals observed). Despite being the most abundant guild, only 2 shrubland species were observed, the Bobolink and the Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*).

13 of the 41 unique species observed in 2025 were shrubland species, a slight increase compared to the 12 observed in 2024. The most abundant shrubland bird at site 1 was the Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*; 6 individuals observed). At site 2, the most abundant shrubland species was the Grey Catbird (12 individuals observed). At site 3, the Grey Catbird and the Eastern Towhee were the most abundant shrubland species (7 individuals of each species were observed). Site 3 had the greatest number of shrubland species observed (n=11), while site 1 had the fewest (n=8). However, more shrubland species were observed at all sites in 2025 than in 2024.

During the Bobolink-specific survey on 6/25/2025, the greatest number of Bobolinks were observed in the Northwest quadrant of Field 1 (n=8), followed by the Southeast quadrant (n=7), the Southwest quadrant (n=6), and the Northeast quadrant (n=5). 22 males were observed during this survey, but only 4 females.

**Table 2.** Number of individual birds and the number of individuals counted at the 3 Lawton Farm point count sites during the survey events in May and June 2025. Species reported are not unique to a single survey site, and may reflect species counted at more than one site during a survey event.

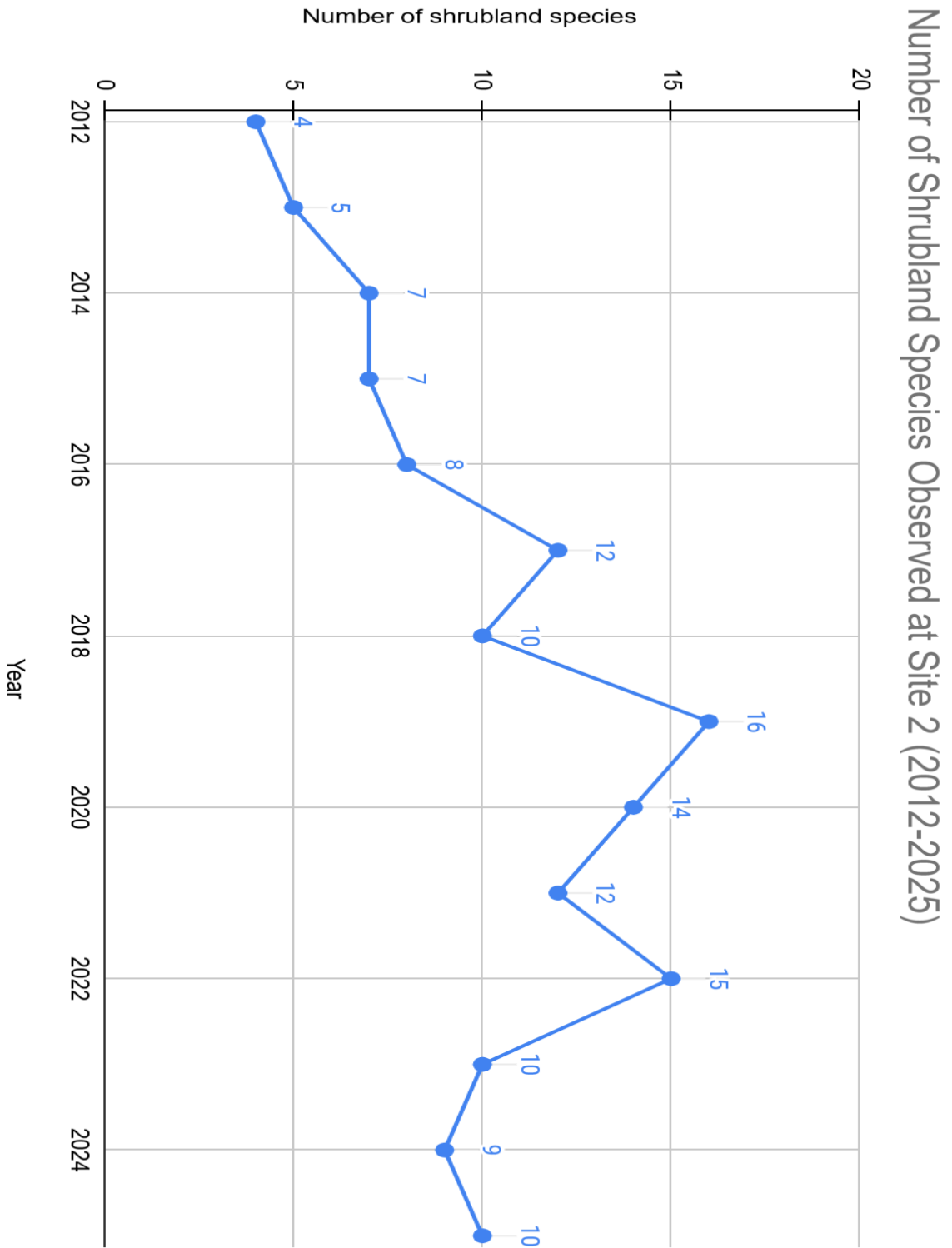
DATE	NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS	NUMBER OF SPECIES
05/28/2025	81	29
06/12/2025	84	25
06/25/2025	67	26

**Table 3.** This table shows the number of male and female Bobolinks observed in each quadrant of Field 1 during the Bobolink-specific survey on 6/25/2025.

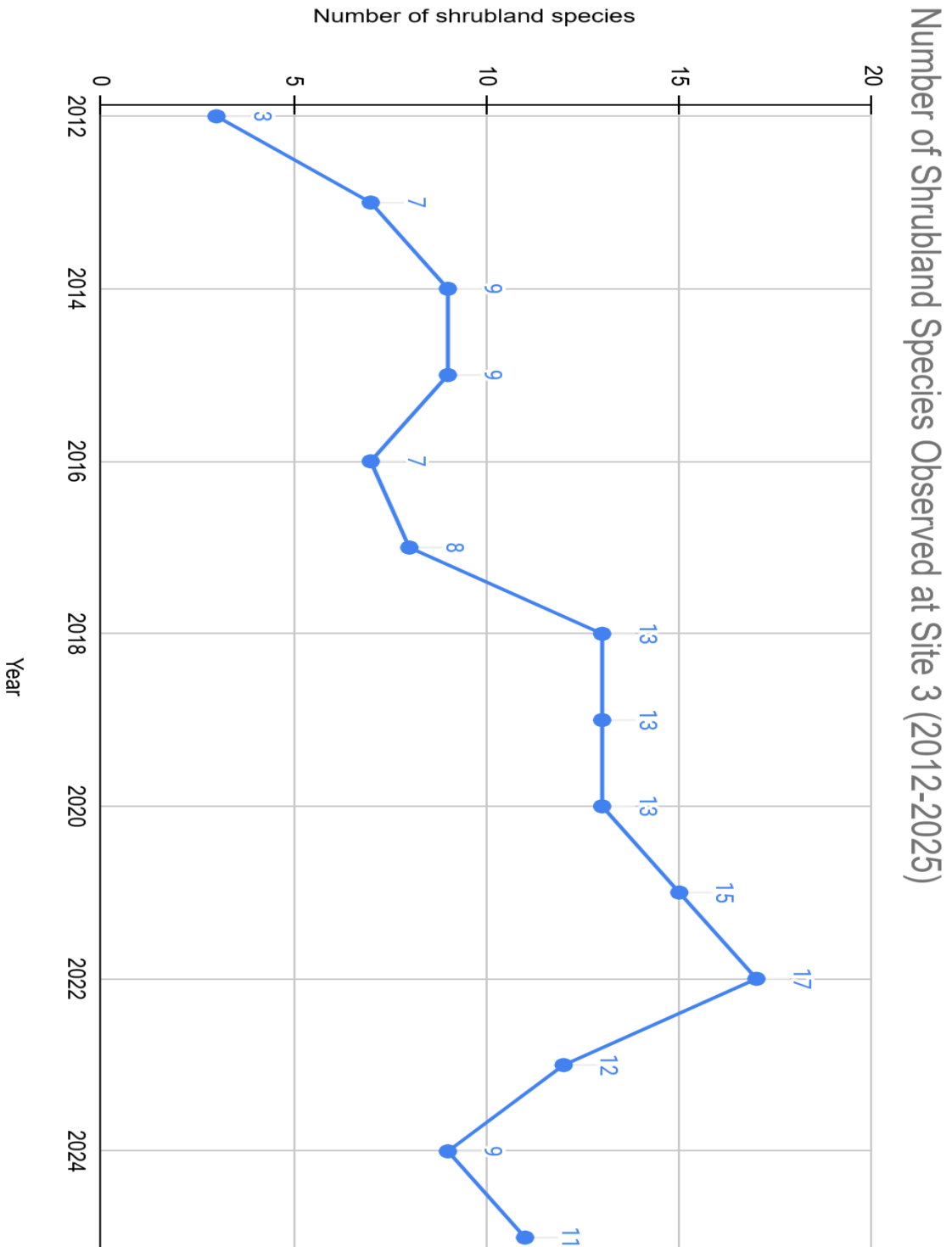
QUADRANT	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Southeast	7	0	7
Southwest	5	1	6
Northwest	7	1	8
Northeast	3	2	5
Total	22	4	26

**Table 4.** The number of Bobolinks observed during the Lawton Farm survey series from 2023-2025.

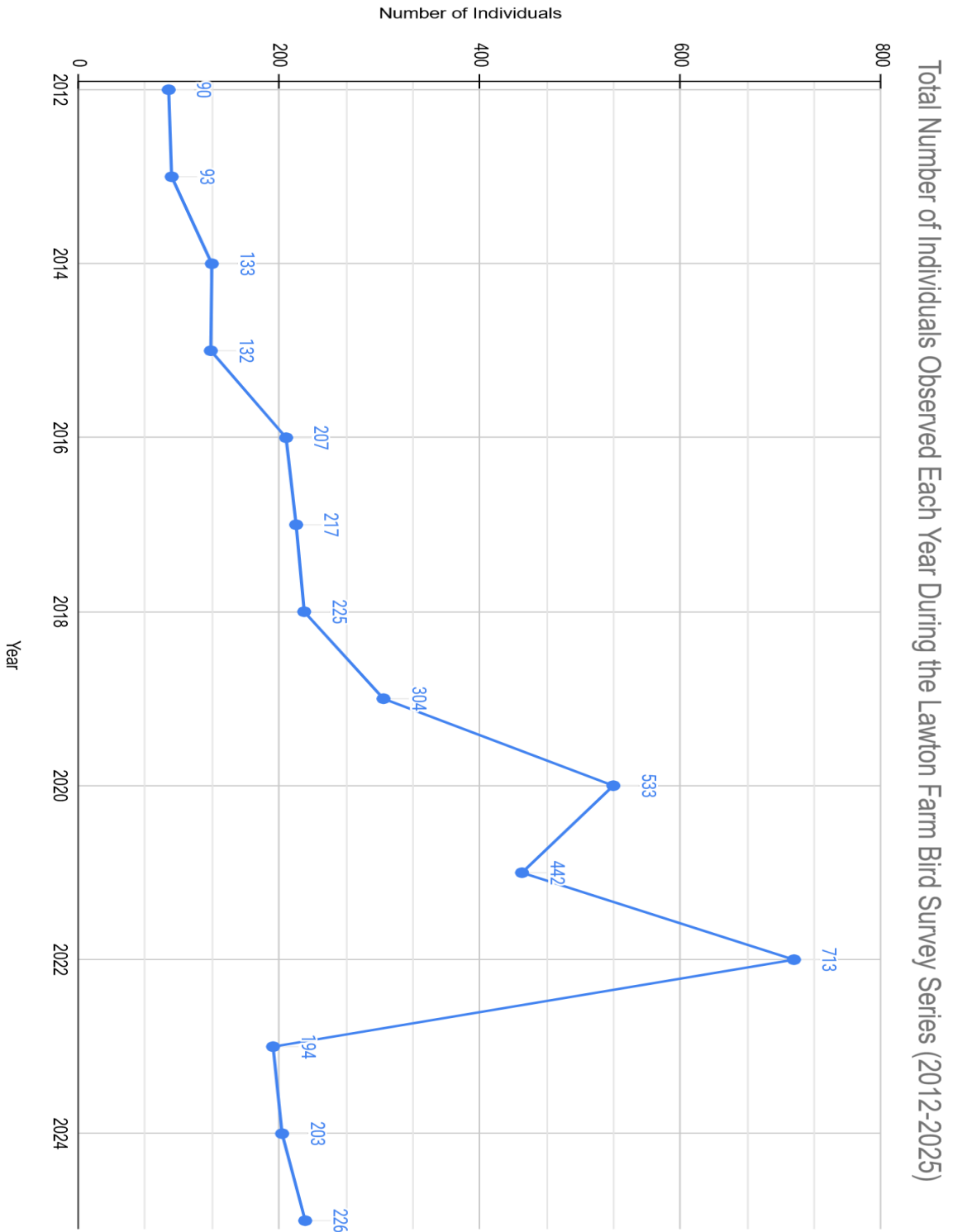
NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS IN 2023	NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS IN 2024	NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS IN 2025
16	25	31



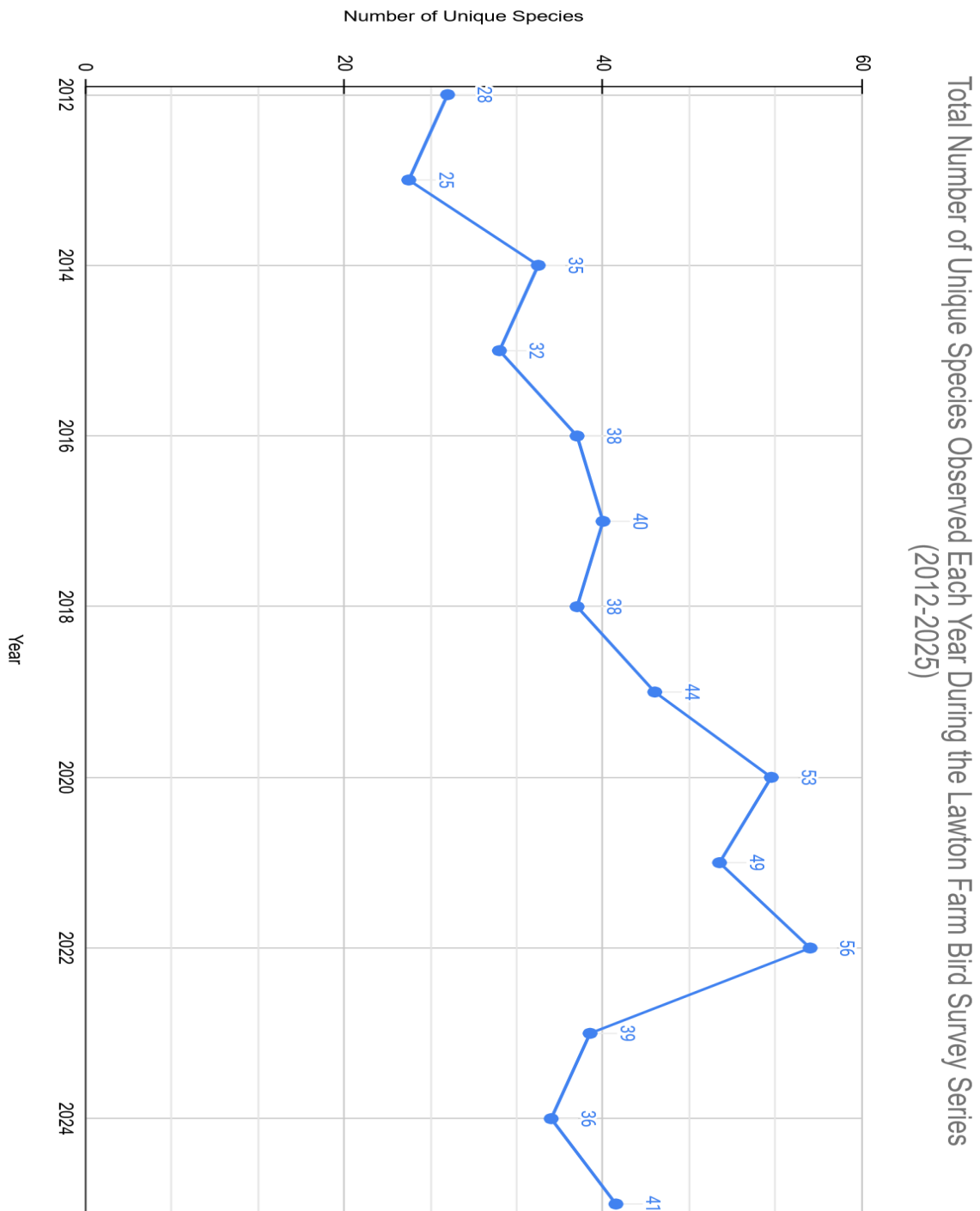
**Figure 6.** The number of shrubland species observed at point count site #2 at Lawton Farm from 2012-2025.



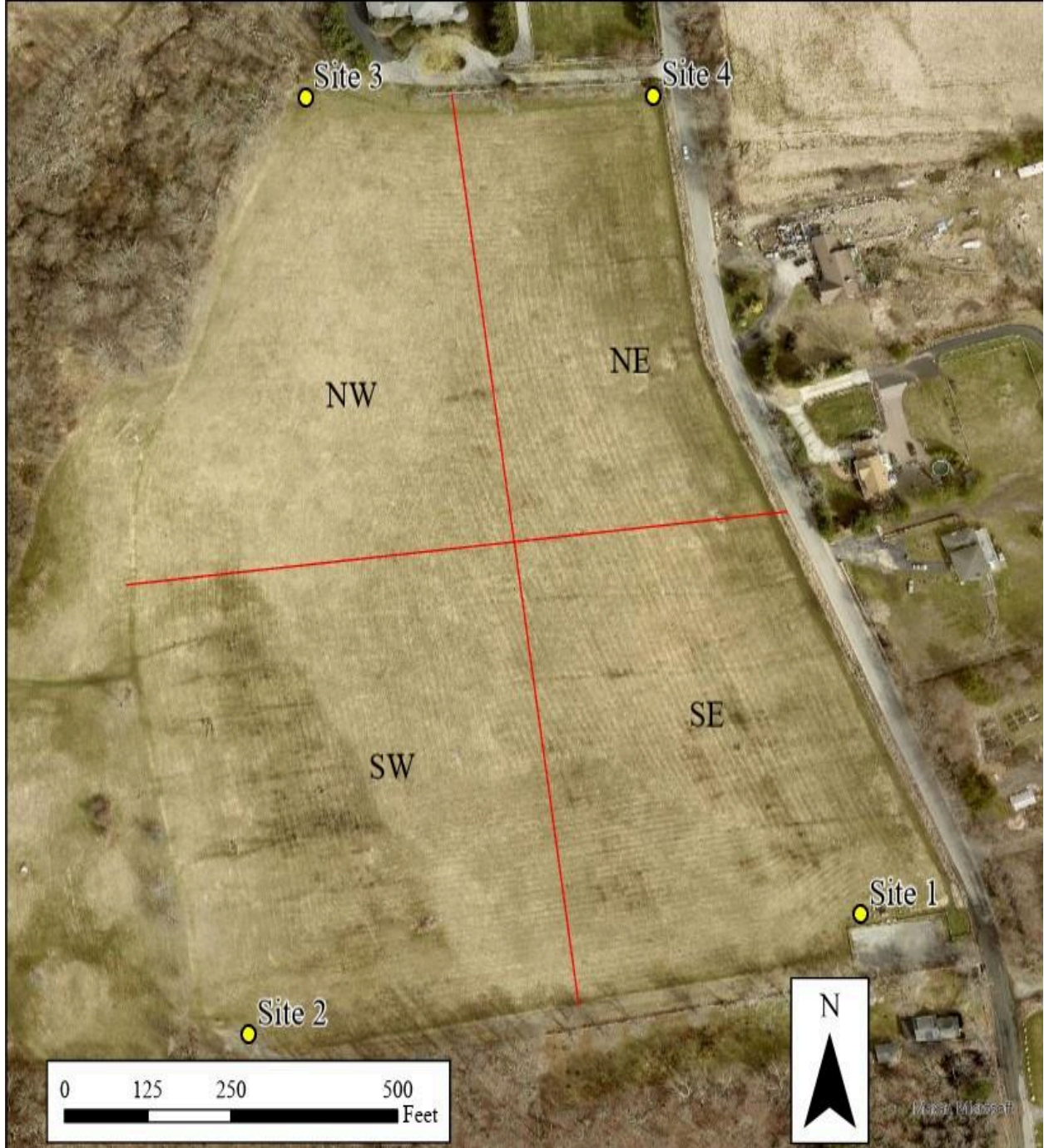
**Figure 7.** The number of shrubland species observed at point count site #3 at Lawton Farm from 2012-2025.



**Figure 8.** The total number of individuals observed at all survey sites during all surveys at Lawton Farm in each year from 2012-2025.



**Figure 9.** The total number of unique species observed at all survey sites during all surveys at Lawton Farm from each year from 2012-2025. These species are not unique to a year, but rather are unique during each year. Many of these unique species were seen during multiple years.



**Figure 10.** Field 1 divided into 4 quadrants for the Bobolink-specific surveys conducted on 6/25/2025. Sites 1-4 were where I stood to survey each quadrant. Quadrants are labeled by their cardinal direction; “SE” = Southeast, “SW” = Southwest, “NW” = Northwest, “NE” = Northeast.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The number of unique species observed at Lawton Farm in 2025 was greater than that observed in 2023 and 2024. This is a hopeful trend, as there was a continuing decreasing trend from 2022-2024. Furthermore, there was also an ~10% increase in the number of individuals observed in 2024, this number has continued to increase since a major drop from 2022-2023. At the end of the 2024 season, I suggested that it was possible that Lawton Farm was undergoing a “multi-year lull in bird activity” because of decreased values in both fields compared to 2020-2022. However, conducting interquartile range (IQR) analyses of the entire dataset from 2012-2025 revealed that 2022 was an outlier in both diversity and abundance, and 2020 was an outlier in diversity only. This indicates that the habitat quality at Lawton Farm did not drastically decline from 2022-2025, but rather that the diversity and abundance observed in 2025 are more similar to the rule, and that 2020 and 2022 are the exceptions.

Following the results of 2024, the Bobolink was again the most abundant species observed on the property. Furthermore, there is a continued upward trend in the total number of Bobolinks observed each season during the survey series (Table 4). However, when I conducted this year’s Bobolink-specific survey, there were only 26 individuals observed, a sharp decline from the 41 observed in 2024. However, it is important to note that the third survey and single Bobolink-specific survey were both conducted during a significant heatwave in the area. Periods of greatly increased heat and humidity and significantly reduce bird activity and abundance (Costa et. al, 2023), which may have contributed to these results.

At sites 2 and 3, the shrub cover was much greater and taller than it has been in past years. However, an increased diversity of shrubland species compared to 2024 were observed at both sites. Other studies have found similar results, where bird diversity peaks in areas of intermediate shrub cover (Sirami et. al, 2009). These findings suggest that the vegetation regrowth at sites 2 and 3 are supporting a greater diversity of bird species at Lawton Farm. However, I still recommend that the abundant autumn olive at site 2 be removed to promote native plant regrowth, as shrub cover of native shrub species will benefit the bird community much more than shrub cover of invasive shrub species.

In 2024, the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) and the Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) were the second and third most abundant species, respectively. However, comparing the results of the 2025 survey series to the 2024 survey series, there was a 52.17% decrease in the number of American Robins observed and a 52.9% decrease in the number of Tree Swallows observed. However, neither of these species were observed in great abundance in the 2023 survey series, so the greater values in 2024 may be attributed to natural variance. According to the 2020 IUCN Red List of the American Robin, the population is stable and of least concern. Aerial insectivores, birds that hunt for prey insects in flight, like the Tree Swallow, have faced some of the greatest population declines amongst bird species in the United States (Cox et al, 2020). Fortunately, Lawton Farm is in a great position to support a larger population of this species, but some changes to the management of the habitat will need to occur. As I suggested previously, removing the abundant autumn olive on the property, especially at site 2, will greatly improve the habitat quality for Tree Swallows. In shrubland areas, shrubland-dependent species

will not use an area that has 55%< non-native shrub cover (Tarr, 2022). Furthermore, an increased number of nesting boxes could be installed on the property, as these provide artificial habitat and have been found to greatly increase the reproductive output of Tree Swallows (Norris et al, 2018). Another potential cause for a reduced number of Tree Swallow observations this year could be late-season nest box colonization of nest boxes by House Wrens (*Troglodytes aedon*). During my time as the Coordinator of the Rhode Island Eastern Bluebird Nest Box Monitoring Program for The Audubon Society of Rhode Island, I often found that once the Tree Swallows had migrated for the winter, House Wrens would take the nest boxes as their own. However, House Wrens use many twigs and sticks as nest material, so if these nests are not removed prior to the following breeding season, the nest boxes will be unavailable to Tree Swallows and other cavity-nesting species. To solve this problem, The Scituate Conservation Commission may consider organizing a volunteer day in February or early March of 2026 to clean out the nest boxes on the property.

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**Table 5.** Bird species observed within 100 m of the point count center during three survey events consisting of 10 minute counts at three sites within Lawton Farm Recreation Area, Scituate, Rhode Island, in 2025. Observations were based on singing, calls, visual observation, and fly overs. Guilds were assigned based on preferred breeding habitat; S = shrubland, F = forest, W = woodland, G = grassland, O = open land, U = urban/agricultural, M = marshland/riparian areas. Presence of a species was indicated by a “1” in the presence / absence columns, absence was indicated by a “0”.

Species	Bandin g Code	Guild	Site #1	Site #2	Site #3
American Crow	AMCR	W	0	0	1
American Goldfinch	AMGO	S	0	0	0
American Redstart	AMRE	W	0	1	0
American Robin	AMRO	W	1	1	1
Baltimore Oriole	BAOR	W	1	0	0
Barn Swallow	BASW	O	1	0	0
Black-and-white Warbler	BAWW	F	0	0	0
Black-capped Chickadee	BCCH	F	1	1	1
Black-throated Blue Warbler	BTBW	F	0	0	0
Black-throated Green Warbler	BTGW	F	0	0	0

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	BGGN	W	0	0	0
Blue Jay	BLJA	W	0	1	0
Blue-winged Warbler	BWWA	S	0	1	1
Bobolink	BOBO	G	1	1	0
Brown-headed Cowbird	BHCO	W	0	1	0
Brown Thrasher	BRTH	S	0	0	0
Canada Goose	CAGO	O	0	0	0
Carolina Wren	CARW	S	1	0	0
Cedar Waxwing	CEDW	S	1	0	0
Chipping Sparrow	CHSP	W	0	0	0
Common Grackle	COGR	O	1	0	0
Common Yellowthroat	COYE	S	1	1	1
Chimney Swift	CHSW	U	0	1	0
Chestnut-sided Warbler	CSWA	W	0	0	0
Double-crested Cormorant	DCCO	O	0	0	0
Downy Woodpecker	DOWO	F	0	0	0
Eastern Bluebird	EABL	O	0	0	1
Eastern Kingbird	EAKI	O	0	0	0
Eastern Phoebe	EAPH	W	1	0	0
Eastern Towhee	EATO	S	0	1	1

Eastern Wood-pewee	EAWP	F	0	1	1
European Starling	EUST	U	0	1	0
Field Sparrow	FISP	S	0	0	1
Gray Catbird	GRCA	S	0	1	1
Great Crested Flycatcher	GCFL	F	0	0	0
Hairy Woodpecker	HAWO	F	0	0	0
House Finch	HOFI	O	0	0	0
House Sparrow	HOSP	U	0	0	0
House Wren	HOWR	S	0	1	1
Indigo Bunting	INBU	S	0	0	0
Least Flycatcher	LEFL	W	0	0	0
Magnolia Warbler	MAWA	F	0	0	0
Mourning Dove	MODO	O	1	0	1
Northern Cardinal	NOCA	S	1	1	1
Northern Flicker	NOFL	F	0	0	0
Northern Mockingbird	NOMA	S	0	0	0
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	NRWS	O	0	0	0
Ovenbird	OVEN	F	0	0	0
Palm Warbler	PAWA	S	0	0	0
Pine Warbler	PIWA	F	0	0	0

Prairie Warbler	PRWA	S	0	1	1
Red-bellied Woodpecker	RBWO	F	0	1	1
Red-eyed Vireo	REVI	F	1	0	1
Red-winged Blackbird	RWBL	O	1	0	1
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	RBGR	F	0	0	0
Red-tailed Hawk	RTHA	W	0	0	0
Ring-necked Pheasant	RNPH	G	0	0	0
Rock Pigeon (feral)	ROPI	O	0	1	0
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	RTHU	S	0	0	0
Scarlet Tanager	SCTA	F	0	0	0
Song Sparrow	SOSP	S	1	1	0
Tree Swallow	TRSW	O	1	1	0
Tufted Titmouse	TUTI	F	0	1	1
Turkey Vulture	TUVU	F	0	0	0
Veery	VEER	F	0	0	0
Vesper Sparrow	VESP	G	0	0	0
Warbling Vireo	WAVI	W	1	0	0
White-eyed Vireo	WEVI	S	0	0	0
White-breasted Nuthatch	WBNU	F	0	0	0
White-throated Sparrow	WTSP	F	0	0	0

Wild Turkey	WITU	G	0	0	0
Willow Flycatcher	WIFL	S	0	0	0
Wood Thrush	WOTH	F	0	1	0
Yellow Warbler	YEWA	S	1	1	1
Yellow-rumped Warbler	YRWA	F	0	0	0