

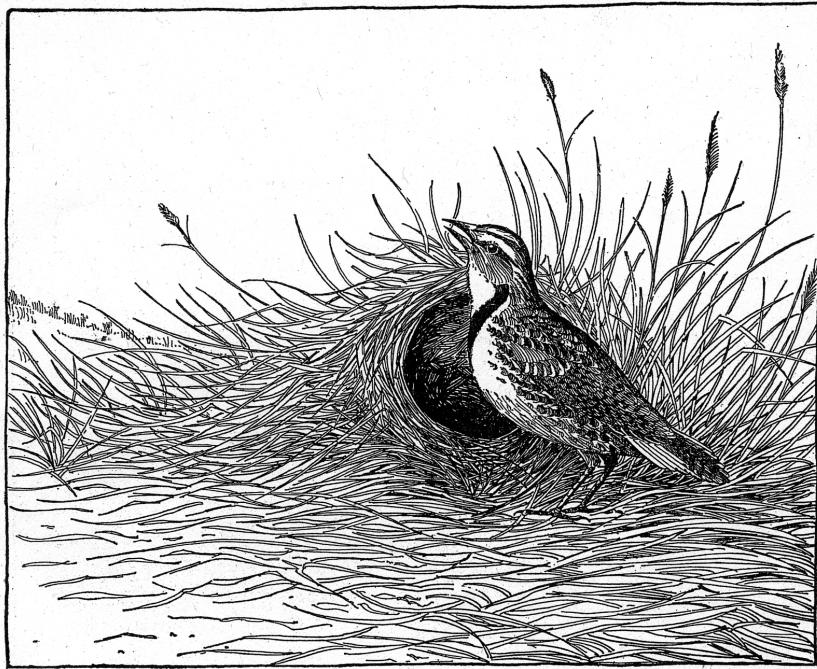
## *The Cruelest Month*

I have come to dread the month of April. The officials who rule this community have decreed that any testing to determine the suitability of developable land must be run between the end of March and the beginning of May, when the groundwater levels are generally at their highest. It is not a bad rule, but it has meant that April has become a season of apprehension for those of us in this town who care about the fate of the earth.

One mile from my house there is a field that once served as a horse pasture. Every year in April, usually about the tenth of the month, meadowlarks used to appear in that field and begin staking out their territory. I would hear them singing their plaintive whistle every time I'd walk by, and the song became a sort of signal, one of many in these parts, that spring was upon us, and all was right with the world. But two years ago in April, as I was passing that field, I saw a backhoe parked by the side of the road.

The meadowlarks that turn up in the field each spring are not long-distance migrants. They appear from parts south—just about the time that the forsythia blooms and the grass on the nearby lawns is turning green. The males announce their presence at dawn, and, if you walk by at any time of day and know what to look for, you can see or hear them. They choose a particular rock in the center of the field to broadcast from. Two weeks later, at the beginning of May, you begin to see the females, and for the rest of the season, as the grass grows longer and the spring rolls into summer, you can hear them singing. By late May or June, when the nestlings are hatched in their little covered-over ground nests, the birds quiet down. But, if you watch, you can still see them, sailing past on their kitelike triangular wings.

Later in the week back in that fateful April two years ago, the backhoe moved out into the field and dug a series of trenches. A little later in the day, men with clipboards appeared and stared down into the holes, and that evening, when I went by, the trenches had been refilled. The meadowlarks showed up on schedule a week or so later and set up their territory. But I knew the meaning of the



trenches; they were test holes, and the meadowlarks' fate would be decided by engineers with calculators in sad little offices decorated with calendars of New England past.

Meadowlarks require open grassy fields and pastures for their nest sites. If the grass is too short, as on a golf course or a lawn, they cannot construct their domed, ovenlike nests. If the field grows too old and sprouts long grasses, young trees, or shrubs, they will not nest. And of course, if the field becomes a development, they will not nest. Common logic holds that they will go somewhere else. But current economies have dictated that there is no somewhere else.

In early autumn, after the backhoe appeared in the meadowlarks' pasture, a bulldozer cut a hole in the wall surrounding the meadow and drove what looked like a road directly into the middle of the field and then disappeared.

The field languished in a sort of undeveloped limbo. Then one day the bulldozer reappeared, pushed some more earth around, and a few days later a sign went up announcing a new housing development.

By November more soil had been pushed around. By December foundation holes were dug, and the place that had been a field had evolved into a sort of strip mine, with great spoil piles of soil mounded here and there, bulldozers lurking at the former field edges, a few foundations, and of course mud, a veritable sea of mud.

By January the mud froze and was covered with a blanket of snow. By late March the snow had melted and the mud returned, and on April tenth I heard again the song of meadowlarks in the air.

The meadowlark whistle is a sorrowful little song, repeated over and over. In better times it brings up deep-seated, pleasant associations—greening pastures, flowering crabs, the smell of soil, and a high, windy blue in the air. But last April it sounded what it is: rueful, plaintive, and sad.

North of us in the boreal forest where the majority of passerine birds nest, vast sections of land are clear-cut for pulp to make paper. South of us, in Central and South America, vast sections of forest are cleared for cattle ranches. Here in Massachusetts, in this indeterminate land of mixed hardwoods, suburbs, and fields, there is no such drama; the world declines in bits and pieces.

*May/June 1994*