



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Grasshopper Sparrow

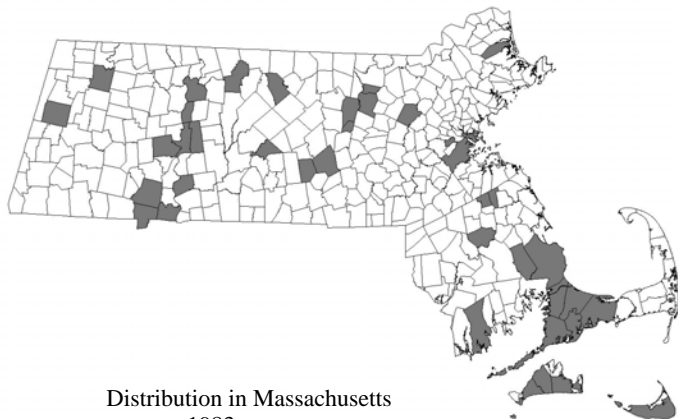
Ammodramus savannarum

State Status: **Threatened**

Federal Status: **None**



DESCRIPTION: The Grasshopper Sparrow is a small sparrow of open fields. It is 4.5 to 5.5 in (11-13 cm) long with a narrow short tail. Each feather of the tail tapers to a point giving it a ragged appearance. It has a flat head which slopes directly into the bill. The upperparts have reddish streaks with contrast with the intervening gray. The dark brown crown is divided by a thin cream-colored center stripe. A yellowish spot extends from the bill in front and below the eye. The sexes are similar. The typical song, often mistaken for the song of a grasshopper, consists of two chip notes followed by “tsk tsick tsurrrr”. Breeding birds also sing a complicated song with many squeaky and buzzy notes intermixed in a long phrase.



Distribution in Massachusetts
1983-current

Based on records in Natural Heritage Database

SIMILAR SPECIES: Young birds resemble adult Henslow’s Sparrows but have dusky brown streaks or spots on the buffy breast and flanks. Adult Grasshopper Sparrows can be distinguished from the Field Sparrow by the latter’s pinkish bill, rusty cap and white eye ring. Other species similar in appearance and also found in the same type of habitat include the Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Song Sparrow but Grasshopper Sparrow differ from these by its buffy unstreaked throats and breast and the yellowish area around the eye. However, its distinctive call best distinguishes it from all other birds.

ECOLOGY/BEHAVIOR: Grasshopper Sparrows eat, sleep and nest on the ground. When flushed, it usually flies up from the grass, flutters rather low and erratically for a short distance and drops into the grass again. On the ground it either hops or runs.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: It is found in the sandplain grasslands, pastures, hayfields and airfields characterized by bunch grasses (rather than sod-forming grasses). It is also found in open knolls, sandplains within Pine Barrens and coastal heathlands. It requires a patchy grassland habitat with bare ground and bunch grasses such as poverty grass (*Danthonia spicata*), bluestem (*Andropogon* spp.) and fescue (*Fescue* spp.). Preferred habitat is characterized by relatively low stem densities and limited accumulation of ground litter. This species is generally absent from fields with over 35% cover in shrubs. Bare ground is especially important, as Grasshopper Sparrows behave much like field mice in their habit of running along the ground to escape predators and to forage for invertebrates.

MIGRATION: The Grasshopper Sparrows arrive in Massachusetts in late May. The male lays claim to a 1-4 acre exclusive non-overlapping territory by singing the “grasshopper” song all day from a tall weed, fence post, haystack, etc. During the non-breeding season both the male and female sing. Grasshopper Sparrows migrate to the wintering grounds by mid-September.

BREEDING HABITS: Grasshopper Sparrows produce one brood each summer in Massachusetts. The well-hidden nests are walled, domed structures of grasses built at the base of clumps of grass. Only the female incubates the eggs, which take an estimated 12 days to hatch. The usually 3-5 eggs are white with spots or blotches of brown to reddish brown which are concentrated on the larger end of the egg. The young, which are wholly dependent on the mother at hatching, leave the nest after 9 days and follow the parent on the ground until they fledge. If found on the nest, the mother flutters through the grass feigning lameness. Though the male does not care for the young, he does react to predators near the nest. Nests may be parasitized by cowbirds. Breeding activity diminishes by mid-August after which the families disperse.

FEEDING HABITS: This species is largely insectivorous. Patches of bare ground are critical to this sparrow’s foraging behavior as grasshoppers, a primary food item, are most often pursued on or near the ground. Grasshopper Sparrows also feed on spiders, myriapods, snails, earthworms, weed and grass seeds.

RANGE: The Grasshopper Sparrow can be found from New Hampshire to California, and south to South Carolina to Mexico, Cuba, the Bahamas and Guatemala. It winters from southern California to El Salvador, and the West Indies.

POPULATION STATUS: The Grasshopper Sparrow is classified as a Threatened Species in Massachusetts, where it is known to nest at fewer than 20 sites. Many of the current locations are in fields adjacent to air fields. This sparrow formerly was abundant on Nantucket, Martha’s Vineyard, and in eastern Massachusetts. Loss of appropriate habitat to land development, changes in agricultural practices (early harvesting and fewer fallow fields), and natural succession (abandoned fields growing up to shrubs and woods) appears to be the primary factor in its decline. Openings created by forest fires once provided habitat but these are now rare.

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