



**Natural Heritage  
& Endangered Species  
Program**

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*Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife*

**Seaside Sparrow  
*Ammodramus maritimus***

State Status: **None**  
Federal Status: **None**

**SPECIES DESCRIPTION:** This is a dark, olive-gray sparrow, 6 inches in length, with a sharp tail and a small yellow patch in front of the eye. Its song is *cut-cut-zhe'*-eeeeee, similar to Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, but with a stronger accented *zhe* in the middle.

**DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE:** Seaside Sparrows are near the northern limit of their breeding range in Massachusetts. The species is rare and very locally distributed in salt marshes in the vicinity of Plum Island and Parker River in Essex County, at Sandy Neck and Monomoy on Cape Cod, and at South Dartmouth in Bristol County. It winters in salt marshes from North Carolina to southern Florida. NHESP does not track occurrences of Seaside Sparrows in Massachusetts.

**HABITAT DESCRIPTION:** Nesting occurs in salt marshes, on or near the ground, and just above high tide levels. The birds nest in both high and low salt marsh, the former dominated by saltmarsh hay (*Spartina patens*), black grass (*Juncus gerardii*), and scattered marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*); the latter dominated by saltwater cordgrass (*S. alterniflora*). Seaside Sparrows are more likely to nest in lower, *S. alterniflora*-dominated sections of marsh than are Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Nests are susceptible to flooding from especially high tides. This species seems to be limited to

a subset of the largest and least degraded salt marshes in Massachusetts, suggesting that it may be sensitive to the size of wetland area or some other landscape features in its selection of salt marsh habitat.

**THREATS:** This species is at risk in Massachusetts because of its rarity, limited distribution, and narrow habitat niche. Modification or degradation of its salt marsh habitat – for example, by dredging and filling, ditching, diking, invasion by exotic vegetation, spraying of insecticides, oil spills, or long-term effects of sea level rise – could threaten local populations.

**REFERENCES:**

- Petersen, W.R., and W.R. Meservey. 2003. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts.
- Post, W., and J. S. Greenlaw. 1994. Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 127 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.:The American Ornithologists' Union.
- Veit, R., and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

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**A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan**

**Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife**

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