



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Saltmarsh Sparrow *Ammospiza caudacuta*

State Status: **Special Concern**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Saltmarsh Sparrow is 5-6 inches in length with a sharp tail, streaked breast, and buffy-yellow facial pattern surrounding a gray ear patch. Its primary vocalization is a buzzing hiss, preceded or followed by several sharp notes: *tuptup-sheeeeeee*. It is a non-territorial species where males occupy large and typically overlapping home ranges. A pair bond is not formed and females are solely responsible for nest building and caring for young. Their clutch size ranges from 3-6 eggs, incubation averages 11.8 days, and chicks fledge from the nest 9-10 days after hatching. Older nestlings (≥ 5 days) are known to climb up vegetation above the nest to evade flood waters. Saltmarsh Sparrows rapidly re-nest following nest failure, and they are known to double brood throughout their range. Following nesting, adults and young remain in the vicinity and molt on the breeding grounds before initiating fall migration (Greenlaw et al. 2018).

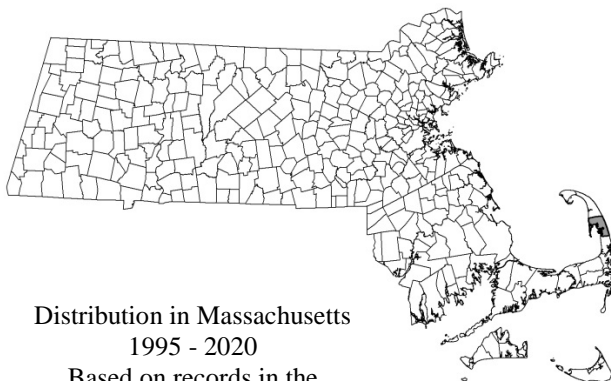
DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: The Saltmarsh Sparrow is a short distance migrant and obligate tidal saltmarsh specialist that is the only species of breeding bird endemic to the saltmarshes of the Northeast. Their



Photo by Dominic Sherony

breeding range includes saltmarshes from Virginia to Maine, and they spend winters in similar habitat from Maryland to Florida. This species arrives on their Massachusetts' breeding grounds in early/mid-May and begin nesting by late May or early June. Fall migrants occur in coastal salt marshes from late summer through October.

Breeding Saltmarsh Sparrows in Massachusetts are restricted to coastal salt marshes, where they may be locally abundant. The Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2 Project (2007-2011) confirmed breeding in 41 of 1037 (4.0%) survey blocks and reported probable breeding in 13 blocks (1.3%) and possible breeding in 23 blocks (2.2%; Walsh and Petersen 2013). Although this species seemingly has been relatively stable in Massachusetts over the last few decades, this sparrow can be readily found in the Great Marsh and within suitable habitat from Boston, throughout Cape Cod and islands, and along Buzzards Bay.



Distribution in Massachusetts
1995 - 2020
Based on records in the
Natural Heritage Database

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

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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HABITAT DESCRIPTION: The Saltmarsh Sparrow inhabits coastal salt marshes dominated by saltmeadow cordgrass (*Spartina patens*) and saltwater cordgrass (*S. alterniflora*). Nests are placed on or near the ground, just above high tide levels, and in saltmeadow cordgrass in the upper (i.e., drier) areas of salt marsh, often referred to as high marsh.

THREATS: Sea-level rise exacerbating high tide flooding is the primary factor reducing reproductive success and threatens long-term persistence of this species in New England. Predation pressure has been identified as a major threat in the mid-Atlantic region (Roberts et al. 2017), and that also may become an issue in Massachusetts. Additionally, any activities that would destroy, fragment, or otherwise degrade salt marsh habitat, including dredging, ditching, filling, diking, or oil spills, may be threats to Saltmarsh Sparrows.

REFERENCES:

- Greenlaw, G.S., and J. D. Rising. 2018. Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 112 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists' Union.
- Roberts, S. G., R. A. Longenecker, M. A. Etterson, K. J. Ruskin, C. S. Elphick, B. J. Olsen, and W. G. Shriver. 2017. Factors that influence vital rates of Seaside and Saltmarsh sparrows in coastal New Jersey, USA. *Journal of Field Ornithology* 88 (2):115-131.
- Walsh, J., and W. Petersen, editors. 2013. *The Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2*. Massachusetts Audubon Society. Scott & Nix, Inc. New York City, NY.
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Updated 2020

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