

Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*)

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The genus name comes from the combination of two Greek words, *amos* (sand) and *dramein* (to run). The species name was given to honor John S. Henslow, a well-known scientist in the 1800's. Henslow's Sparrow is one of the smallest sparrows in the genus *Ammodramus*.

The Henslow's Sparrow is considered a grassland specialist. Populations have declined for several years, mainly due to habitat loss. It prefers large areas of suitable habitat of grasslands, weedy moist meadows, shrubby fields, or overgrown pastures. Main vegetation is grasses mixed with other smaller plants, but the grasses usually aren't so thick that other plants are crowded out. A scattering of small saplings or tall weedy stems is often present, and the soils are typically rather moist.

Birders in North Carolina know that its secretive nature and weak song make it difficult to locate. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers the Henslow's Sparrow to be a "Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern". Partners in Flight lists this as a species of the highest conservation concern in North Carolina.

The Midwestern U.S. once had abundant habitat for this species in expansive prairies before settlement by Europeans, and in the southeastern United States there were extensive open pine savannas. The species is affected by habitat loss and degradation stemming from a variety of causes including urban development and the normal succession of grasslands to shrubland or forest. There are local breeding populations of Henslow's Sparrow in the western portion of coastal North Carolina and wintering birds can be found in wet grassy timber harvest areas and open pine savannas. The breeding populations in coastal North Carolina are the largest known east of the Mississippi River.

Description/Voice

Size: 13 cm (5 in) in length with a wingspan of about 6.5 inches. Color: Greenish-buff head, central crown stripe, and nape; dark striping on head; wings dark chestnut with some buff markings; tail dark with chestnut markings; streaking on chest and flanks; belly white. Other things to look for: the head appears flat and large, and the tail is short and spiky.

The song of the Henslow's Sparrow is a short 'se-lick' or 'tsillik'. It is dry and insectlike, sounding somewhat like a weak 'hiccup'. The flight call is a high-pitched trill, reminiscent of a Cedar Waxwing. This species often sings at night, like many other grassland sparrows.

Habits

The Henslow's Sparrow is mostly insectivorous, but also eats spiders, snails, and seeds. Most of the food is found by searching the ground and low vegetation.

The breeding season begins in mid-May, peaks later that month until mid-June, and extends into early July. Breeding habitat includes moist, grassy areas. The nest is usually either on the ground or suspended in the vegetation up to 15 cm (6 in) above the ground. Ground nests are commonly near the base of a tuft of grass to provide some protection. Occasionally, birds will create a roof by bending and weaving vegetation over the nest. The nest is built out of grass and other plant material. The female lays 3-5 eggs that she incubates for approximately 11 days. The young fledge about 9-11 days after hatching. Both adults feed the young while they are in the nest and feed them for a short period after they leave the nest.

This species is migratory, but most birds spend the winter in the lower southeastern coastal plain or along the Gulf Coast of the United States.

Management Recommendations for Henslow's Sparrows

General

-Actively manage grasslands to control woody encroachment through the use of fire, grazing, or mowing. A mosaic of management prescriptions including both disturbed and undisturbed areas is recommended.

-A few small woody plants and some standing dead weedy stems should be present. Late winter burning carried out every 2-3 years is sufficient, mixed with a mowing program beginning after September that leaves some clumps of vegetation and standing dead weeds present, as well as not mowing grasses too short prior to the breeding season. Mowing and haying should not be conducted prior to and during the height of the breeding season (April 1 - July 30).

-Design grassland plantings for area-sensitive birds to minimize the amount of linear edge. While circular plots are ideal, square plots are preferred to rectangular plots of similar acreage. Plots should be as large as possible in size.

Detailed Management Options for Grassland Birds

Where 50 acre or greater contiguous restorations are not possible, establish several smaller scattered restorations. In this design, individual patches should be at least 15-20 acres in size and preferably be located within a mile of each other. Guidelines for minimizing edge on these patches should be followed. It is highly desirable that any adjacent, grassy habitats such as pastures, hayfields, and grassed waterways be incorporated into the overall design by using them as connections between grassland patches or as non-woody, open edges.

Locate plantings at least 100 yards from forested areas and activity centers such as homes and farmsteads. Immediately adjacent land uses should be structurally open. The planting should not be bordered by tall fencelines or groves of trees because this woody vegetation attracts nest predators and nest parasites. Open pastures, hayfields, small grains, and even row crops are acceptable adjacent habitats.

Use mixtures of tall and short grasses for plantings because some characteristic prairie bird species prefer short vegetation height (like Grasshopper Sparrow), whereas others prefer intermediate to tall vegetation height at the start of the breeding season. Native warm season grasses are preferred. Recommended grasses for prairie plantings include big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, Eastern gamma grass, purpletop, dropseed and switchgrass. Monotypic stands are not recommended.

Include forbs (native flowering herbaceous plants) in the seed mixture or supplement with nursery grown stock, if possible. Most grassland bird species prefer at least low to moderate forb cover. Forbs provide vital habitat components such as song perches and above-ground nesting substrates for many species. Where possible, use existing 'natural' firebreaks as borders of the restoration. Roads, lakes, streams, and frequently mowed areas are good examples of firebreaks. In addition, these edges also may help retard the encroachment of exotic weeds and woody vegetation on to the grassland.

Where existing grassland habitats border forested tracts, allow prescribed fires to burn slowly through the adjacent forest edge into the woods as opposed to installing a firebreak along the forest edge. This management technique will create a more natural open or 'feathered' edge between the grassland and forest rather than a sharp, contrasting wall of woody vegetation. Research indicates that sharply contrasting edges have higher nest predation rates than 'feathered' edges.

SOURCES OF TECHNICAL INFORMATION ON: HENSLOW'S SPARROW, GRASSLAND BIRDS AND GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS FOR LANDOWNERS AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGERS

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