

# Grasshopper Sparrow, *Ammodramus savannarum*

**Status:**

*State:* Threatened

*Federal:* Not listed

## Identification

A small, secretive songbird, the grasshopper sparrow is more often heard than seen as its insect-like melody emits from dense grasses. Its song consists of one to two chips followed by a buzzy trill reminiscent of a grasshopper. This sparrow also sings a series of buzzy notes.



The grasshopper sparrow has a stocky body that is brown above with buff streaking. On adults, the breast and sides are solid buff and the belly is white. The buff breast and sides of juveniles are marked with dark brown vertical streaking. Grasshopper sparrows have flat heads with relatively large bills. The crown is dark brown with light central stripes atop the head and behind the eye. The lores (between the eyes and the bill) are orange or golden. The tail is short and brown.

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## Habitat

Grasshopper sparrows breed in grassland, upland meadow, pasture, hayfield, and old field habitats. Nesting grasshopper sparrows may occur on agricultural lands and airports where such habitats occur. Although grasshopper sparrows may use small grasslands, open areas of over 40 hectares (100 acres) are favored. Optimal habitat for these sparrows contains short- to medium-height bunch grasses interspersed with patches of bare ground, a shallow litter layer, scattered forbs, and few shrubs. Clumped grasses, such as poverty grass (*Danthonia spicata*) and broom-sedge (*Andropogon virginicus*), provide cover and foraging areas and are consequently favored over sod or matting grasses. In addition, orchardgrass (*Dactylis glomerata*), alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*), red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), lespedeza (*Lespedeza* spp.), and dewberry (*Rubus* spp.) provide sparrow habitat. Shrubs, fence posts, and tall forbs are used as song perches. However, habitats may become unsuitable for nesting grasshopper sparrows if shrub cover becomes too dense. Consequently, the presence and density of grasshopper sparrows at breeding sites varies annually due to habitat changes. Habitat use during the nonbreeding season is similar, although less restrictive, to that of the breeding season, as these sparrows may inhabit thickets, weedy lawns, vegetated landfills, fence rows, open fields, or grasslands.

## **Status and Conservation**

In the eastern United States, the historic distribution of grasshopper sparrows was restricted to natural grasslands created by fires or flooding. However, the boom in agriculture during the late 1800s and early 1900s enabled this species to spread its range and increase in numbers, making it a fairly common breeder in New Jersey. By the 1950s and 1960s, expanding development of open areas, coupled with dwindling acreage of land devoted to farming or pasture, led to decreases in grasshopper sparrow populations. Continued declines in the northeast were noted in the 1970s and 1980s, when the species was considered locally distributed and uncommon. The number of grasshopper sparrows detected on Breeding Bird Survey routes in New Jersey, the eastern United States, and throughout the country declined from 1966 to 1999 (Sauer et al. 2000).

As the result of population declines and severe habitat loss, the grasshopper sparrow was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers this species to be “apparently secure globally,” yet “imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992). Currently, grasshopper sparrows occur in small, localized, and unstable populations in the Northeast. Consequently, other nearby states have listed this species as endangered (Maine, Connecticut), threatened (Massachusetts, Rhode Island), or of special concern (New York). In New Jersey, the survival of grasshopper sparrows is critically linked with management practices for grassland birds on airports, agricultural lands, and pastures.