

Savannah Sparrow, *Passerculus sandwichensis*

Status:

State: Threatened

Federal: Not listed

Identification

The savannah sparrow is a small drab sparrow that is brown above and white below with brown streaking on the breast and sides. The back, nape, and crown are also patterned with variable amounts of dark brown streaking. There is a beige wing bar and the tail is short, brown, and notched. The head is brown with an obscure white crown stripe, a dark brown malar



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(mustache) stripe, yellow lores (between the eyes and the bill) and eyeline, and a white throat. The legs and feet are pink and the bill is a light pinkish-horn color. The sexes are similar in plumage. Juveniles resemble adults, but are buff colored with more streaking.

The savannah sparrow closely resembles the song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). However, the song sparrow lacks yellow lores, has a longer, rounded tail, and its streaking forms a distinctive spot on the upper breast. The Ipswich sparrow (*P. sandwichensis princeps*), a race of savannah sparrow that breeds on Sable Island, Nova Scotia and winters along the Atlantic Coast, is larger and paler than the typical eastern race of savannah sparrow (*P. sandwichensis savanna*).

The song of the savannah sparrow consists of two to three chips followed by two buzzy trills. The insect-like melody is represented as, tsit tsit tsit, tsee tsaay. The call is a mild tsip.

Habitat

Indigenous to open habitats, the savannah sparrow nests in hay and alfalfa fields, fallow fields, grasslands, upland meadows, airports, pastures, and vegetated landfills. The species also formerly nested within salt marsh edges and coastal grasslands in New Jersey. Suitable tracks must provide a mix of short and tall grasses, a thick litter layer, dense ground vegetation, and scattered shrubs, saplings, or forbs. Because savannah sparrows are relatively tolerant of vegetative succession, they may occupy fields of varied ages, including those containing early woody growth. During the nonbreeding season, savannah sparrows inhabit coastal dunes, drier portions of salt marshes, roadside edges, agricultural and fallow fields, pastures, airports, vegetated landfills, and golf courses.

Status and Conservation

At the southern edge of its breeding range, the savannah sparrow has been a traditionally local and uncommon breeding species in the Garden State. Historically, the clearing of forests for farmland and the filling of coastal marshes provided habitat for breeding savannah sparrows. As agriculture began to decline in the Northeast, farms were developed or left idle, slowly growing into forests. In areas where farming continued, agricultural practices shifted, resulting in large monocultures and earlier and more frequent mowing of hayfields. Wetlands protection regulations prohibited the filling of coastal marshes, resulting in an inland shift in the distribution of savannah sparrows.

With the decline in traditional agriculture, breeding populations of savannah sparrows also began to fall. From 1966 to 1999, the number of savannah sparrows detected on Breeding Bird Survey routes declined in the Northeast and throughout the United States (Sauer et al. 2000). Likewise, Christmas Bird Counts revealed a significant decrease in wintering savannah sparrows from 1959 to 1988 (Sauer et al. 1996). Due to population declines and habitat loss, the savannah sparrow was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers this species to be “demonstrably secure globally,” yet “imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992).

From 1981 to 1982, the breeding population of savannah sparrows in New Jersey was estimated at 45 to 50 pairs (Wander 1981, 1982). In the late 1990s, the New Jersey Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed nesting savannah sparrows in 21 blocks and located probable pairs in an additional 29 blocks (Walsh et al. 1999).