

Grasshopper Sparrow *Ammodramus savannarum*

During the breeding season, this nondescript grassland bird can be found across most of the continental United States. However, the Florida subspecies (*A. s. floridanus*) is isolated during the breeding season from the Eastern race (*A. s. pratensis*) by more than 500 km (300 miles). The Eastern race is migratory and winters in Florida. Compared to the Eastern race, the Florida form is dorsally darker and ventrally paler and nonmigratory.

Habitat. Florida Grasshopper Sparrows occur in the dry prairies of the Kissimmee River Basin and west of Lake Okeechobee, occupying treeless sites that range from thick, low saw palmetto prairies to grass pastures with a sparse or patchy cover of palmetto (Delany et al. 1985). Frequent fires maintain the vegetation in a structurally simple, early successional stage needed by the sparrow.

During the breeding season the diet consists of insects and spiders (69%) and seeds (31%) (Howell 1932).

The species is monogamous, and both sexes care for the young. Nonparental attendants, "helpers," have been reported (Kaspari and O'Leary 1988). Florida Grasshopper Sparrow nests are located on the ground at the base of saw palmetto or clumps of grass (Nicholson 1936). The domed nests are constructed of dried grasses and are difficult to locate. The female incubates 3 to 5 eggs for 1 or 12 days and broods the young for 6 to 8 days. Two broods may be raised per year. The eggs are white and speckled with reddish-brown (Sprunt 1954). Grasshopper Sparrows are easily overlooked during surveys, usually heard before seen. The male's song is weak and insect-like, consisting of 2 or 3 introductory notes followed by longer, higher-pitched "buzz." Singing occurs throughout the day but is more frequent from sunrise to 9 AM and for about 15 minutes before sunset.

Seasonal Occurrence. The Florida Grasshopper Sparrow is a nonmigratory race endemic to the south-central prairie region of the state. Egg dates range from 21 March to 22 June (McNair 1986). The peak of fall migration of other Grasshopper Sparrows extends from mid-October through late November; spring migrants are seen in March and April.

Status. Early reports (Howell 1932, Nicholson 1936) implied a relatively large and widespread population of Florida Grasshopper Sparrows. Breeding records of Grasshopper Sparrows, whose subspecific status was not reported, are reported from outside the known range of *floridanus* (Howell 1932). Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) also list a July 1968 record of *floridanus* from Everglades National Park in Dade County. A 1984 status survey resulted in only 182 sparrows found at 9 sites (Delany and Cox 1986). Because of its restricted distribution, loss of habitat, and decline in numbers, the Florida subspecies is listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] (Wood 1991). Based on singing male surveys from 1989-1993, 212 male Florida Grasshopper Sparrows are known from 7 sites. Six of the 9 sites identified by Delany and Cox (1986) were abandoned (Delany and Linda 1994).

Confirmed breeding locations indicated on the Atlas map are within the historic range of the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. Possible locations in Baker and Lake counties were revisited several times during the breeding season and no Grasshopper Sparrows were found. Observations in these counties may have been late migrants. Other possible locations in south Florida, however, warrant further investigation. Florida Grasshopper Sparrow breeding locations not indicated on the Atlas map were found 11 km (7 miles) southeast of Basinger (Okeechobee County) and 24 km (15 miles) southeast of Arcadia (Desoto County) (Delany 1996).

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