

## Field Sparrow *Spizella pusilla*



**Folk Name:** Ground Sparrow, Bush Sparrow  
**Status:** Resident  
**Abundance:** Fairly Common to Common  
**Habitat:** Oldfields, wood margins, hedgerows, thickets

The Field Sparrow is the iconic sparrow of abandoned fields and overgrown pastures across the rural South. It was once one of the most common birds distributed throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Today, it is still a fairly common to common resident bird, but Breeding Bird Survey data indicate populations in both Carolinas have been declining for several decades. Loss of habitat, habitat fragmentation, and changes in agricultural practices may be the primary causes. The Field Sparrow nests in “shrub-scrub” habitat along woodland borders, hedgerows, weedy meadows, and in early successional fields scattered throughout the region.

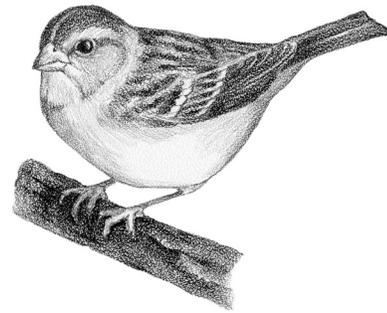
This sparrow is distinctive. It is pale overall, has a rufous crown, has a gray face and rump, and it lacks streaks on its buff-red breast and belly. It has a complete white eye-ring, a pink bill, and pink legs. It has comparatively short wings with two white wing bars and a long tail. It forages on the ground in small flocks in search of seeds and insects. Crabgrass seeds are a favorite during the winter.

The Field Sparrow’s clear song is an easy one for new birders to learn to recognize. The male finds an open perch in the top of a bush and sings a series of three sweet-sounding clear whistles that rapidly accelerate into a trill. It has been described as a “half-sad but wholly satisfying...See-o—see-o-to-to-me-me-me.”

The Field Sparrow is a resident bird that breeds throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Counts of more than 300 or 400 birds were common on Christmas Bird Counts in the region in the 1970s. Today, volunteers struggle to tally more than 100 on Christmas counts. Our highest



Field Sparrow. (Will Stuart)



tally from a Spring Bird Count is 66 birds.

William McIlwaine shared some excellent details of the breeding of the Field Sparrow in Charlotte. On June 29, 1926, he wrote:

I found a field sparrow’s nest. A frail little structure, mostly of grasses, placed 1 ft. up in a tangle of “cow itch.” Three little ovate eggs, white marked irregularly, especially at the larger end with brown. ...Further on in the same field I found the field sparrow nest I had seen several weeks ago [now] abandoned. But 30 or 40 ft. away I found a nest placed much as the first with one egg.

About two weeks later there were still eggs in two of the field sparrow nests, and the nest with one egg now had four. By 13 July, both of the nests were empty, but McIlwaine “found a young field sparrow, and heard another somewhere in the grass. This little fellow could just lift his himself off the ground. He cried very piteously when my boy caught him. This little bird had a decidedly bluish tinge on his wings.” Two years later, on April 9, 1928, McIlwaine wrote: “sparrows are pairing; and oh, how the field sparrows are singing in the meadow behind Frank Harkey’s on Sharon Road. Soon, very soon, you will be able to find their nests tucked away under the blackberry leaves or hidden in tufts of grass.” A month later (15 May) he found a nest with “four newly hatched naked babies...with wide-open mouths.”

While courtship and mate selection can begin as early as late March, breeding activity can continue into late August. On August 2, 1944, John Trott located two Field Sparrow nests in New London. One nest had three young, and one had three eggs. David Wray, curator at the North Carolina State Museum, found a late nesting Field Sparrow at Hackey Nursery while he was visiting Charlotte on August 18, 1944. The nest was built about 2 feet up in a small cherry laurel tree and was made of fine grass and lined with hair. It contained three eggs. A

year later, Rhett Chamberlain also found a late nest: “On August 12, I found within the city limits of Charlotte, a nest with two half grown Field Sparrows, which is a late breeding record.”

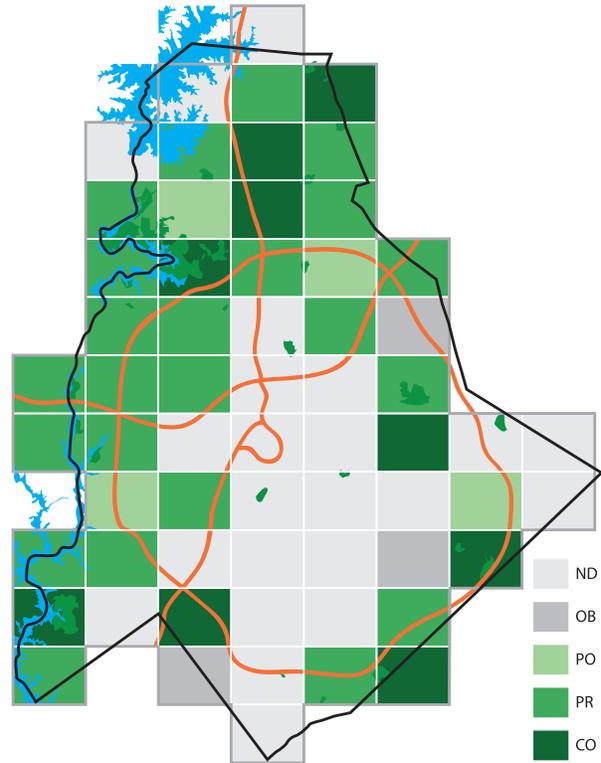
In 2001, staff from MCPRD implemented a nest success study to learn more about the perils faced by birds nesting in local fields. A total of 50 Field Sparrow nests were monitored during four different nesting seasons. One-half (50%) of these nests were depredated, 18% of

the nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, and only 32% of the nests successfully fledged any young.

In 2007, the National Audubon Society warned that the Field Sparrow is “a common species” that is in serious decline, with more than 70% of its population lost nationally in the past 40 years. In 2014, the North American Bird Conservation Initiative warned that the population of the Field Sparrow is rapidly declining throughout its range.



*Field Sparrow eggs and week-old nestlings. (MCPRD staff)*



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**

*Widespread (PR/23, CO/9)*