

Grasshopper Sparrow *Ammodramus savannarum*



Folk Name: Yellow-winged Sparrow

Status: Breeder and Winter Visitor

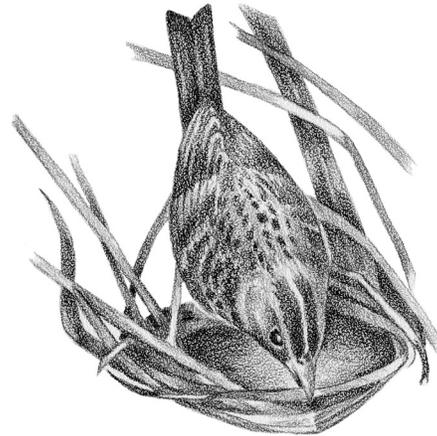
Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Open grassy fields during breeding

The Grasshopper Sparrow is often described as “inconspicuous” and “secretive.” Averaging just 5 inches in length, it is our smallest breeding sparrow, and it is one of our smallest sparrows seen during the winter months as well. Its song is distinctive, sounding more like the buzz of a grasshopper than like the sweet musical songs of many other sparrows. It is known for its chunky body, combination of unstreaked breast and short tail, large flat head, and general buffy yellow-brown appearance. It was once called the “Yellow-winged” Sparrow because of the yellowish feathers at the bend of its wing.

The Grasshopper Sparrow has been documented in this region every month of the year. It is most often seen during breeding season, and most breeding birds move further south for the winter. Nevertheless, a few birds occasionally linger here during the winter months. Breeding numbers have declined throughout the region since the 1960s. This sparrow is a ground nesting bird of open grasslands. As such, this species has been faced with a dramatic loss of breeding habitat as open lands have been developed at a rapid rate.

On May 13, 1927, while out on a bird walk through Charlotte, William McIlwaine made an important discovery. He wrote: “Midday is a very unsatisfactory time to fool with birds. They are not in sight. They are off after water and shade, or, it may be in some cases, dust baths.” Then suddenly his entire day brightened as he “stumbled across” a Grasshopper Sparrow nest. He wrote: “This is one of the prettiest nests I have ever found. A deep cup in a depression in the field arched over with grass. Four little



eggs, white spotted with brown.” Later, McIlwaine kept his eyes open for this bird. On April 4, 1928, he wrote: “And the little grasshopper sparrow will [soon] be coming from the South to establish its home in some little dent in our open fields.” He reported Grasshopper Sparrows returning to Charlotte for the breeding season on April 22, 1929, on May 6, 1930, and one “first seen” on April 13, 1931.

John Trott found a Grasshopper Sparrow nest with five eggs in it in a dry field in New London on May 17, 1944. Trott wrote an article for *The Chat* in 1947 describing three years of nesting observations of this bird in Stanly County. “From information gained with three years of observation I plan to observe more and hope to contribute to the knowledge of the life history of this insignificant but interesting member of the sparrow family.”

Rhett Chamberlain conducted a breeding season study of nesting Grasshopper Sparrows in southeastern Charlotte during the spring and summer of 1945. He



Grasshopper Sparrow with grasshopper. (John Scavetto)



Grasshopper Sparrow nest. (MCPRD staff)

provided excellent breeding details with photographs of nests. Chamberlain used a rearview mirror taken from a car to reflect light into the nest so he could get a usable photograph of the eggs. He wrote:

This year, Grasshopper Sparrows were first noticed within the city limits of Charlotte on April 1st. By April 12th several pairs had settled in an old field on high ground in the southeastern part of the city. I failed to find nests, but from May 21 to the middle of June I saw a great number of adults carrying food to nesting places. On May 26th I caught a fledgling that was being fed and took it home for observation over night. Early the next morning I returned it and saw an adult go to it. After mid-June most of the sparrows had left this particular area.

On August 11th, in an abandoned field about fifteen miles south of Charlotte, and within three or four miles of the South Carolina line, I located another nesting place of Grasshopper Sparrows. Two nests were found, one containing three eggs, the other four. On August 12th, there was no change in those nests but two more were found, one empty, and one with three young birds and one egg. These young appeared to be about two days old. Three of these nests were in an area less than 30 feet across. The nest with young was several hundred feet away. On the 17th, the nest which had three eggs on the 11th, now contained three young. Photographs were taken on the 19th. These findings show that at least two broods of young are raised each year by Grasshopper Sparrows in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

The Mecklenburg Audubon Club reported the following dates for Grasshopper Sparrow during the summer of 1946: “First seen on April 1st. Adults were repeatedly observed carrying food but no nests were located until August 25th, when one abandoned nest of this season, and one nest with three young were found. Both of these were located 12 miles south of Charlotte. The young were estimated to be four days old.”

H. Lee Jones had “the find of the day” on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count held on December 29, 1973. He flushed a Grasshopper Sparrow from a plowed field about a mile southeast of Wither’s Bridge on the Catawba River. This species was counted on CBCs in Iredell County in 1985, 1986, 1989, and 2005; in Gaston County in 1984 and 1995; in Cleveland County in 1995 and 2006; in Anson County in 1998, 2003, and 2005; in York County in 1987; and in Mecklenburg County in 1987, 2003, and 2013.

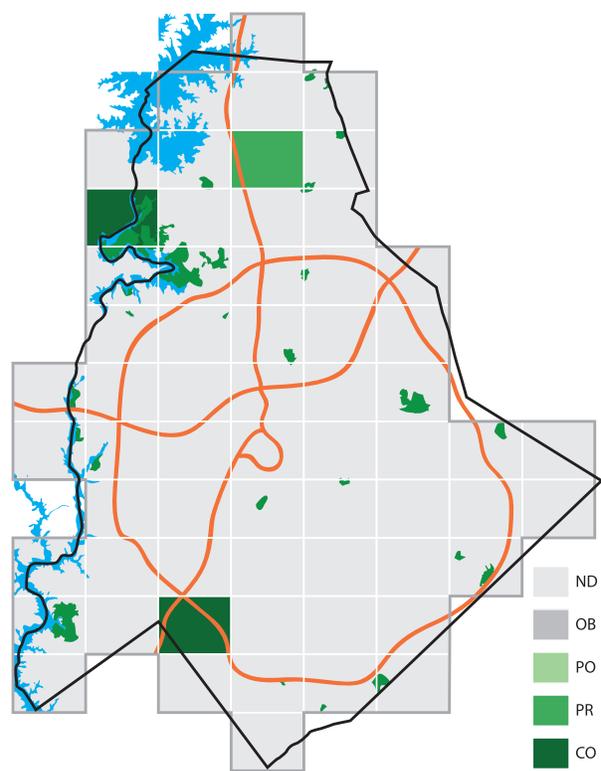
In the spring of 1985, Robin Carter reported a “remarkable” 30 Grasshopper Sparrows on territory in a field near Cross Keys in Union County, SC. Data from *The South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas* published in 2003 indicate breeding throughout the upper Piedmont in

grassy habitat that is “both ‘thick and thin’— interspersed with patches of bare ground.” Singing males were reported “perched on utility lines and other elevated singing perches.”

Matt Janson reported a singing Grasshopper Sparrow at Rural Hill hayfields beside Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge, on May 7, 2017. A tiny breeding group has continued to struggle to survive at this location for more than 20 years despite lots of changes in the management activities at this Mecklenburg County farm.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Grasshopper Sparrow is rapidly declining throughout its range. The loss has been estimated at over 70% of the continental population over a 40-year period. The Grasshopper Sparrow has been placed on the North Carolina “Watch List” as its breeding population in the state is in serious decline and loss of its breeding habitat, especially in urban and suburban areas, is a serious concern. The Grasshopper Sparrow is currently found as a local (scarce) breeder in appropriate habitat in all counties of the Central Carolina region.

Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in five or fewer survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as an “imperiled” breeding bird that is especially vulnerable to extirpation due to loss of habitat.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Very Local (PR/1, CO/2)