

Henslow's Sparrow *Ammodramus henslowii*



Folk Name: Henslow's Grasshopper Sparrow

Status: Former Migrant and former Breeder

Abundance: Extirpated

Habitat: Low, wet meadows, clearcuts, grass fields

The status and distribution of the Henslow's Sparrow in North America has always been unclear. It is a rare bird known for its "obscure" habits, and as such, it is often overlooked and has been difficult to study. Sidney Hyde published the first detailed paper on the life history of this bird in 1939. He determined it was primarily a breeding bird of Midwestern grasslands but, at that time, a small colony was known to breed in North Carolina near Chapel Hill. This sparrow was also known to migrate through both Carolinas in spring and fall, and it was known to overwinter in coastal South Carolina.

The Henslow's Sparrow requires a very specific set of grassland habitat conditions for successful breeding. This bird is often difficult to find even when appropriate habitat is available. In the last half century, the population of this sparrow, like many other grassland dependent species, has undergone steep, long-term, continent-wide population declines due primarily to habitat loss.

Leverett Loomis documented the first Henslow's Sparrows in the Central Carolina region. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, he collected specimens in Chester County and designated it "a tolerably common migrant... appearing early in the spring and lingering late in autumn." Loomis commented: "It is by far the least distrustful of any of the birds of my acquaintance. If by chance it happens to be in the open space where grass affords no concealment, it will permit the intruder to advance within a very few feet before running away—only taking flight when forced to do so."

Elmer Brown and his mentor E.M. Hoffman reported a Henslow's Sparrow in Rowan County on April 7, 1923. In a letter to C.S. Brimley in 1934, Brown provided a summary of his "quest" to learn to identify this elusive species:

Henslow's Sparrow—Guilford Co. April 5, 1933. This record ended a long quest on my part. You may note that in Mr. E.M. Hoffman's Rowan County list he included this species with a date for the spring of 1921 or 1922. (I don't seem to have the record of exact date.) I was along on that field trip. We saw and heard several of the birds in a wet, grassy bottom, but had no means of collecting. Having had less experience than Mr. Hoffman and never having seen the bird before, I wasn't satisfied with a field identification, and the identity of the bird remained



a question in my mind. However, we heard that abrupt and exceedingly characteristic call so many times that morning. I didn't think I'd ever forget it. Not until 1929 did the species turn up again. Then, in the so-called "open grounds" east of Beaufort, July 31, I ran into the same bird with the same call in wet areas of tall grass. Again I was failed by lack of a weapon. Last spring, in the tall grass by a pond home, the same call smacked me in the ear again. This time I was lucky; collected the bird and had no trouble running it down. Eleven years probably sounds like a long interval over which to make an identification by ear, but in my mind, at least, there is no doubt that the species was the same in all three cases.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Henslow's Sparrow was known to breed in a fairly localized area of the central Piedmont of North Carolina, including Salisbury, Statesville, and Charlotte. Henslow's Sparrow was reported on Christmas Bird Counts held in Chester County from 1936 through 1941, providing evidence that it spent the winter in parts of this region as well.

Elmer Brown reported a spring migrant near Concord in Cabarrus County on April 11, 1940. On May 12, 1940, Charlie Sellers reported a Henslow's Sparrow in Charlotte. In 1941, he found them back in town by 10 May and also noted them as a breeding bird, but he was not able to provide a specific nest record. The following year, Elmer Brown confirmed Henslow's Sparrow was present in the county during breeding season until at least 1 July.

W.G. Templeton shared this account of Henslow's Sparrows he found in Iredell County during World War II: "This sparrow, though rare in this section, can be

heard and seen through June, July, and August, in many swampy meadows. Maurice Stimson and I caught a young Henslow in 1944 on the Brandon place in the outskirts of Statesville. The mother Henslow put up a brave protest. Of course we freed her offspring after careful examination.”

Rhett Chamberlain found Henslow’s Sparrow on several trips to an old field south of Charlotte during the summer of 1945, but he stated “I do not know whether or not it breeds here since I have not yet located a nest.” On April 1, 1946, members of the Mecklenburg Audubon Club reported the first spring arrival of Henslow’s Sparrow, and later they observed that the birds had remained into the summer. Soon after, they obtained evidence of breeding by noting an “adult observed carrying food but no nest found.”

Finally, in 1948 after almost a decade of searching, Rhett Chamberlain succeeded in discovering a nest of this elusive sparrow in Mecklenburg County. The nest contained four young on 18 April and week-old young of a second brood on 17 July. His brother, E.B. Chamberlain, noted in the September 1948 issue of *Audubon Field Notes* that the discovery and confirmation of this nest was important as it extended “the known breeding range of this species southward by some forty miles.”

This bird disappeared from Mecklenburg County about 15 years later. The last sightings were two Henslow’s Sparrows reported on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count conducted on May 6, 1961. The following day, Flo Cobey recorded the last known report of a Henslow’s Sparrow in Mecklenburg County. The bird was seen off Rea Road on May 7, 1961.

A group of seven Henslow’s Sparrows was reported on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on April 28, 1973. Vivian Whitlock reported she chased the birds over a field of weeds and rye stubble until she could confirm her identification. David Wright reported one at Creech’s Pond in York County on October 15, 1983. An experienced birder reported territorial Henslow’s Sparrows present in a field near Cross Keys in Union County, SC, from 1 June through 4 July in 1985. This report was published in *American Birds* and in the *Status and Distribution of the Birds of South Carolina*; however, it was later retracted. Robin Carter and Dennis Forsythe

reported a Henslow’s Sparrow in Laurens County, SC, on February 14, 1988. They noted its “flat head, olive tones and ‘spiky tail.’ ”

A birder reported a male and female Henslow’s Sparrow near the Allen Steam Plant in Gaston County on May 18, 1997. Unfortunately, no details were provided and no photographs were taken to substantiate this report. One Henslow’s Sparrow was reported on the Pee Dee Christmas Bird Count on January 3–4, 1998. This provided another rare report from the winter season.

We have had no reports of Henslow’s Sparrow in the Central Carolinas since the turn of the twenty-first century. However, there have been three reports on the periphery of the region.

Robin Carter reported one Henslow’s Sparrow in the Cassatt Tract of the Sandhills State Forest in Kershaw County on November 24, 2006. Melissa Whitmire reported a Henslow’s Sparrow in Greensboro on November 8, 2013. This bird was well photographed but it disappeared the next day. Rob Van Epps and Kevin Metcalf photographed a Henslow’s Sparrow in the Sandhills Game Lands in Scotland County on January 15, 2017.

Currently, the Henslow’s Sparrow is only known to breed in a few locations within a 12-county region on the eastern coast of North Carolina. The breeding population of Henslow’s Sparrow in North Carolina is designated of “Special Concern” and it is listed as a Federal Species of Special Concern (without official status). The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program considers this small breeding population to be “imperiled.” In 2017, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission held a series of public hearings to discuss proposed listings of wildlife species which is required for them to receive full state protection. The Henslow’s Sparrow was proposed for upgrading from Special Concern to State Endangered status because of very limited suitable breeding habitat and a very small population.

No evidence of breeding was obtained during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas survey. Therefore, Henslow’s Sparrow has been placed on the “Lost” bird list, and no atlas map was prepared for this species.