

## Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Migrant, Winter Resident

**Abundance:** Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Short grass fields, pastures, airports, weedy fields

The Savannah Sparrow is a regular visitor to the Carolina Piedmont between September and May. It is a small and inconspicuous sparrow that can be found in small flocks foraging in a variety of field habitats. They are most common in short-grass fields with bare ground, an abundance of scattered seeds, and some overhead vegetative cover. Their primary food item consumed here is plant seed, especially grass seed which comprises 97% of their diet. The rest is insects and spiders.

Studies of the diet of the Savannah Sparrow conducted in the Carolina Piedmont have shown a marked preference for crabgrass seed. Feeding activity continues all day long, but is greatest in the morning and late afternoon. By the end of each day, these sparrows have usually succeeded in filling their crop.

In 1908, the Savannah Sparrow was praised as one of our country's vital birds for its part in helping to destroy the devastating cotton boll weevil. Wintering Savannah Sparrows fed heavily on boll weevils which was the vital season for control of this serious crop pest as death of the weevil in winter prevented its ability to reproduce in the early summer.



*Savannah Sparrow. (Jeff Lemons)*



This sparrow is most common in our region during spring and fall migration. It is uncommon to fairly common resident throughout the winter. Our earliest date of arrival on file is 13 September, and our latest date of departure is 26 May. We have no acceptable records from this region in the months of June, July, or August. Our peak one-day count is 242 birds tallied on the Anson CBC in 2003.

In 1879, Leverett Loomis designated the Savannah Sparrow abundant in winter, but noted it was "most abundant during its migrations" in Chester County. William McIlwaine recorded a flock of Savannah Sparrows in Charlotte on March 25, 1929. His last sighting that season was one bird seen on 18 April. In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson recorded general arrival and departure dates for Savannah Sparrow of 1 October to 2 May. This sparrow has been reported on almost every Christmas Bird Count and every Spring Bird Count conducted in this region.

The Savannah Sparrow breeds throughout the northern United States and Canada and in the Appalachian Mountains. This species slowly expanded its breeding range southward in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980, they were found nesting in Virginia about 20 miles from the North Carolina border. Harry LeGrand documented singing males on territory at three sites near Sparta, NC, in June 1983, providing the first evidence of possible breeding in the state. Today, this sparrow is believed to nest in three or four mountain counties in North Carolina. It does not breed in South Carolina.