

UC SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS NATURAL RESERVE

# BRYANT'S SAVANNAH SPARROW



**Dajung Chung**

**Scientific Name:** *Passerculus sandwichensis* subsp. *alaudinus*

**Common Name:** Bryant's Savannah Sparrow

**Global Rarity:** Imperiled to Vulnerable

**State listing:** Secure

**UCSC Rarity:** Rare

## General Description

One of 17 subspecies, four of which can be found in California, the Bryant's Savannah Sparrow is endemic to coastal northern California. This small, brown sparrow can be found in coastal salt marshes and open grasslands making their loud and buzzy, insect-like song. Males sing this song from the ground or perched low on a grass clump or shrub and are often difficult to see. The three-part song begins with a few rapid notes followed by a high-pitched, insect-like buzz, with a lower-pitched, rapid trill at the end. Due to their physical similarities, studying the different Savannah Sparrow subspecies can be difficult.

## Identification

**Plumage:** Streaked brown with central breast spot, yellow to whitish eyebrow

**Size:** Small (5.5")

**Shape:** Short tail, small head



## Geographic Range

The Bryant's Savannah Sparrow is one of four subspecies found in California. This subspecies can be found along the coast south of Humboldt Bay to Morro Bay with peak abundance in the San Francisco Bay Area. The adjacent map shows the range of all subspecies in California.



## UCSC Distribution

The Bryant's Savannah Sparrow, breeds in a lower campus grassland and may use this area year-round.



## Life history

**Habitat:** Coastal salt marshes and open grasslands; requires low tidally influenced habitats, adjacent rural areas, moist grasslands within and just above the fog belt, or, infrequently, drier grasslands.

**Reproduction:** Open-cup nests in dense cover on the ground in grass clumps or under matted grass or weeds.

**Behavior:** Sings from ground or slightly elevated perch such as a grass clump or low shrub.

**Diet:** Primarily eats a variety of arthropod prey during the breeding season and seeds and fruit in the winter, though arthropods are eaten in the winter if available.

## Research Highlights and Fun Facts

- The Savannah Sparrow's name sounds like a nod to its fondness for grassy areas, but this species was actually named by famed nineteenth century ornithologist Alexander Wilson for a specimen collected in Savannah, Georgia.
- In many parts of the species' range, especially in coastal areas and islands, Savannah Sparrows tend very strongly to return each year to the area where they hatched. This tendency, called natal philopatry, is the driving force for the differentiation of numerous Savannah Sparrow subspecies.



**Conservation Status**  
**CA Species of Special**  
**Concern; Vulnerable**



**Threats**

**Statewide:**

1. Habitat loss degradation from development and agriculture  
“This sparrow’s habitat likely suffered disproportionately during salt marsh conversion in the San Francisco Bay system because of its tendency to use the higher portions of marshes, the areas easiest for humans to develop” (Shuford and Gardali, *eds.* 2008)
2. Increased fragmentation and isolation of occupied areas

**UCSC campus:**

1. Development
2. Lack of habitat management to create more suitable habitat



**Ways you can help**

**In your community:**

1. Research: the influx of subspecies during non breeding season and the difficulty separating them makes the study of its winter ecology and habitat use difficult
2. Submit your observations to eBird
3. Advocate for coastal prairie protection

## References and Photo Credits

Cornell Lab of Ornithology. (n.d.). All About Birds. Savannah Sparrow. Retrieved from [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Savannah\\_Sparrow/](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Savannah_Sparrow/) on 29 December 2021.

Shuford, W. D., and T. Gardali, editors. 2008. California Bird Species of Special Concern: A ranked assessment of species, subspecies, and distinct populations of birds of immediate conservation concern in California. Studies of Western Birds 1. Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo, California, and California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento.

Wheelwright, N. and J. Rising. 2020. Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*). Retrieved February 18, 2021, from <https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/savspa/cur/introduction>

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