

UC SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS NATURAL RESERVE

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW



Zane Hiatt

Scientific Name: *Ammodramus savannarum*

Common Name: Grasshopper Sparrow

Global Rarity: Secure

State Rarity: Vulnerable; California

Species of Special Concern

UCSC Rarity: Uncommon/Rare



General Description

The Grasshopper Sparrow is a small prairie bird with a tan/brown body and streaking on their backs and breasts. They often have orange or yellow stripes on their faces or feather edges. They are about 4.4 inches tall and weigh about 0.6 ounces. During the breeding season their distinctive, insect-like song buzzes from grassland habitats, where they are often difficult to locate. They build their nests in tall clumps of grass so they are well hidden. They have 2-4 broods of 3-7 chicks and can live up to 9 years. They mostly eat grasshoppers and other insects, as well as seeds.



Identification

General Description: Small and stocky, with flat heads with a conical bill, rusty spots or light streaking on their backs

Color: Light tan/brown with orange/yellow stripes on their face and wings

Length: 4.3-4.5 inches

Migration and California Distribution

These sparrows make long distance or local migrations from northern United States and southern Canada latitudes to their breeding grounds by mid spring. Their breeding range spans much of the United States, with the exception of the Deep South and Intermountain West and deserts. These birds migrate south in winter to the Deep South, Arizona, and down to Mexico and Central & South America, where some are resident.





UCSC Distribution

The Grasshopper Sparrow is an uncommon breeder in south campus grasslands.

Life history

Habitat: Grasshopper sparrows live in grasslands, prairies, and open pasture, preferring areas with intermediate grass height and areas with clumped vegetation interspersed with bare ground.

Reproduction: They nest on the ground in clumps of tall grass. Their 3" tall and 5" diameter domed nests are made of grass and are built near the base of a grass clump and have an entrance built into the side. They lay a clutch of 3-7 light reddish/brown speckled eggs that are about an inch long. Usually the brood is 3-7 chicks and they may have 2 to 4 broods per year.

Diet: They mostly eat grasshoppers in summer along with beetles, caterpillars, bugs, and spiders. In winter they eat mostly seeds off the ground.

Predators: Raccoons, skunks, Loggerhead Shrikes, and house cats

Research Highlights and Fun Facts

- Grasshopper sparrow songs are comprised of two short notes followed by a high pitched, dry, insect-like trill.
- They can live up to 9 years, which is relatively long for such a small bird.
- Pairs are seasonally monogamous, meaning that they have a pair bond throughout mating season but split up after laying eggs.
- They do not form flocks but particular habitat patches may host several individuals.
- Grazing or prescribed fire is sometimes beneficial to the species.
- Prefer larger habitat areas.



Conservation Status

California Species of Special Concern

Breeding populations of the Grasshopper Sparrow subspecies *perpallidus* have been listed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as a Species of Special Concern due to moderate population declines.



Threats

Statewide

1. Habitat loss from urban or agricultural development
2. Fire suppression causing conversion of grassland to scrub or forest
3. Overgrazing

UCSC campus

1. Conversion of grassland into scrubland/forest habitats
2. Mowing grasslands during the breeding season
3. Off-leash dogs
4. Disturbance from off-trail hikers during the breeding season



Ways you can help

1. Advocate for conservation and management of California grasslands that may support Grasshopper Sparrows
2. Report sightings (or sound recordings) of Grasshopper Sparrows to iNaturalist; on the UCSC campus also report to the Campus Natural Reserve at cnr@ucsc.edu



References and Photo Credits

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