

Henslow's sparrow, *Ammodramus henslowii*

Status:

State: Endangered

Federal: Not listed

Identification

Within a wet sedge meadow, a sparrow briefly perches atop a clump of grass, only to quickly disappear within the lush ground cover. A secretive species, the Henslow's sparrow will often run on the ground, concealed by vegetation, rather than fly. The song of this sparrow is a two-noted, buzzy "tse-lick" or "tse-zik," accented on the second syllable.



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The Henslow's sparrow has a large, flat head with a heavy, pale gray bill. The head is a distinctive olive-green color with dark brown crown, short dark lateral throat stripe (or malar stripe), and white eye ring. The wings are chestnut brown, the breast is buffy with black streaks, and the belly is white. The chestnut brown tail is short and appears rounded in flight. The sexes are alike in plumage. Juvenile Henslow's sparrows resemble adults but are duller overall, lack a malar stripe, and have little, if any, streaking below.

Habitat

Open fallow and grassy fields, sedge meadows, and pastures are home to breeding and migrating Henslow's sparrows. Henslow's sparrows prefer lush habitats containing high, dense herbaceous vegetation and a thick layer of ground litter. Such habitats are dominated by grasses, sedges, forbs, or clover and contain little or no woody vegetation and few scattered shrubs. Unmowed agricultural fields or ungrazed pastures are preferred for their thick cover. Henslow's sparrows are tolerant of a variety of moisture regimes and thus will occupy both wet and dry habitats. Large open areas are preferred; fields of 10 to 100 hectares (25 to 250 acres) may be needed to support breeding populations (Samson 1980).

Historically, Henslow's sparrows nested in coastal dunes and wet fallow fields situated between salt marshes and upland fields along the Delaware Bay and Atlantic coasts. Cranberry bogs in southern New Jersey also served as nesting habitats during the late 1800s.

Status and Conservation

In the early 1800s, John James Audubon noted that the Henslow's sparrow was abundant in New Jersey. In addition, numerous pairs were documented throughout the Garden State in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Rising 1996). After the mid-1950s, Henslow's sparrow populations began to decline and continued to drop throughout the

1970s and 1980s. Declines were noted survey-wide on Christmas Bird Counts from 1959 to 1988 (Sauer et al. 1996). The Breeding Bird Survey detected annual decreases in Henslow's sparrows from 1966 to 1999 both in the Northeast and throughout the United States, with the greatest declines occurring after 1980 (Sauer et al. 2001). Habitat loss may be partially attributed to the decline, although Henslow's sparrows remain absent from numerous traditional locales where apparently suitable habitat still exists.

Because of population declines and restricted habitat requirements, the Henslow's sparrow was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. With fears that the Henslow's sparrow may have been extirpated in the state, its status was changed to endangered in 1984. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers this species to be "apparently secure globally," yet "critically imperiled in New Jersey because of extreme rarity" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1998). Declines of the Henslow's sparrow have occurred throughout its range, particularly in the East, where it is listed as threatened (Maryland, Virginia), endangered (New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts), or of special concern (Connecticut, New York).