

Sedge wren, *Cistothorus platensis*

Status: *State:* Endangered *Federal:* Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern

Identification

Formerly known as the “short-billed marsh wren,” the sedge wren is a small brown songbird with dark brown vertical streaking on the crown and back. The wings, rump, and tail are brown with dark horizontal barring. The underparts and undertail coverts are buffy. The bill is short, thin, and slightly decurved, and there is an inconspicuous pale eye stripe. Sexes are similar in plumage, although males are slightly larger than females. Juveniles resemble adults, but are



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darker above, buffier below, and have less conspicuous streaking on the head. Like other wrens, the tail is short and often held upwards. The diminutive sedge wren is extremely secretive and is often heard rather than seen. The insect-like song consists of three introductory notes, “tchip, tchip, tchip,” followed by a trill, “tchu, tchu, tchu.” The call note is a “tchip” or “chick.”

Habitat

Wet meadows, freshwater marshes, bogs, and the drier portions of salt or brackish coastal marshes are home to sedge wrens throughout the year. Along the Delaware Bay shore, sedge wrens may be found in high marsh containing salt-meadow grass (*Spartina patens*), spike grass (*Distichlis spicata*), and marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*). Unlike its relative, the marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), the sedge wren avoids cattail (*Typha* spp.) marshes. Rather, sedge wrens favor marshes containing sedges, grasses, rushes, scattered shrubs, and other emergent vegetation.

Sedge wrens typically exhibit low fidelity to breeding sites each year, possibly due to changes in water levels or vegetative structure and composition. Because they are sensitive to hydrology, sedge wrens may avoid nesting in areas that are too wet or too dry. Likewise, they may abandon sites if shrubby growth dominates due to vegetative succession.

Status and Conservation

In the early 1900s, the sedge wren was a locally distributed and uncommon, although perhaps largely overlooked, breeding species in New Jersey. Since the 1950s, Christmas bird counts and breeding bird surveys have revealed alarming declines of this

species in the Northeast. The draining and filling of wetlands, ditching of salt marshes, and spread of phragmites (Phragmites australis) have resulted in severe habitat loss and sedge wren population declines. Wet sedge or grass meadows, the habitat types required by sedge wrens, are among the most frequently destroyed wetlands in the United States.

Due to severe population declines and rapid habitat loss, the sedge wren was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. The National Audubon Society included the sedge wren on its Blue List of Imperiled Species in 1979 and 1981. By the early 1980s, it was not known if any breeding sedge wrens remained in New Jersey. Due to its dire situation, the sedge wren was reclassified as an endangered species in New Jersey in 1984. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the sedge wren to be “demonstrably secure globally,” yet “imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1998). The sedge wren has been listed as a Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since 1992.

Currently, the sedge wren is a very rare breeding species in New Jersey despite the presence of apparently suitable habitat. Because this species occurs in small, isolated populations, it may take a long time for it to recover from precariously low levels. Sedge wrens have suffered severe declines throughout much of the northeastern United States and are consequently listed as endangered (Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut), threatened (Vermont, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia), or of special concern (New York).