

Florida Grasshopper Sparrow

(Ammodramus savannarum floridanus)

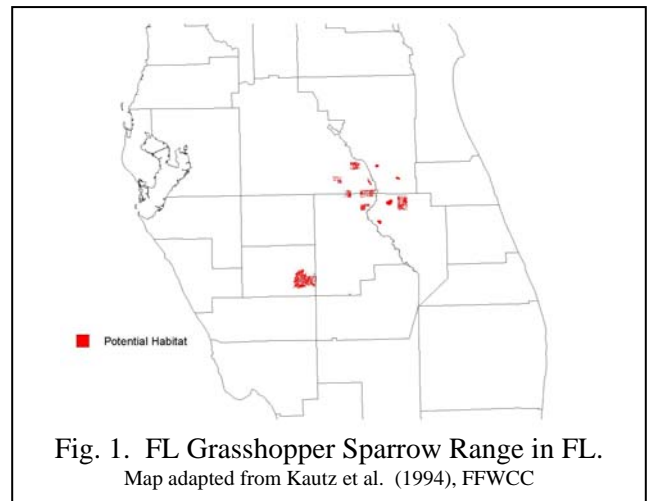
The Florida grasshopper sparrow is listed as an **Endangered** species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC). This sparrow was listed due to population declines resulting from habitat degradation and loss or native range to other land uses. **It is illegal to harass, harm, capture, or kill this bird.**



Florida grasshopper sparrow, photo courtesy of FFWCC

Range

The Florida grasshopper sparrow was originally distributed in the prairie rangeland of south central Florida in Osceola County, Okeechobee County, Hendry County, Glades County, Highlands County, Dade County, Polk County, Collier County and Desoto County. This region has a dry prairie plant community and open areas of bare ground. Known present populations and/or potential habitat can be found in Highlands, Okeechobee, Osceola, Polk, and Desoto Counties (Fig. 1).



Description

- The Florida grasshopper sparrow is a small flat-headed, short-tailed sparrow averaging about 5 inches (12.7 cm) in total length.
- The birds are dark in color above and pale below, with a thick bill.
- It differs from other sparrows of the open fields in having an unstreaked, dingy breast.
- This subspecies is considered non-migratory and will be the only sparrow in the area in mid to late summer.
- Since it spends most of its time down in the grass, and because its song is indistinct and insectlike, this bird is rarely noticed even in areas of occurrence. If help is needed in identification, it is best to seek the help of an experienced birder, at least initially.

Habitat

The habitat of this bird is a basically treeless prairie that is burned frequently and is greater than 120 acres in size. The vegetation includes bunch grasses such as bluestems and wiregrass, with patchy covers of small woody shrubs such as saw palmetto scrub and dwarf oaks. Up to 35 percent of interspersed bare ground is common. Dense vegetation and accumulated litter prevent effective foraging by the sparrow. Food consists primarily of insects, spiders and small seeds.

The Florida grasshopper sparrow nests and forages effectively in areas that are grazed by livestock and have a frequent fire regime. Cessation of such range management activities leads to dense vegetation that becomes unusable land and loss of sparrow habitat. Although some birds have been found in semi-improved pastures that still have some native vegetation, the bird cannot adapt to intensive management where saw palmetto, other native shrubs, and bunch grasses are

removed entirely.

Management and Protection

Property owners in the range of the Florida grasshopper sparrow should be aware of suitable habitat for this species. If suitable habitat is present, seek assistance (during the nesting season) in determining whether the bird is present, and incorporate the following recommendations:

- Use prescribed fire (under authorization from the Florida Division of Forestry) on a 2-year rotation to maintain the prairie community at an early successional stage dominated by grasses and small shrubs (palmetto, waxmyrtle, gallberry, etc.). Burn outside the primary nesting season (April – June); for best results, burn during late July – August to encourage wiregrass seeding. Wiregrass seed is an important food source for wintering grasshopper and other sparrows.
- Use mechanical brush management (e.g., roller chopping, shearing, mowing, etc.) on woody vegetation in small areas (120 to 250 acres). This would be used only where the palmetto or other brush has become too thick or tall -- some areas that have been used by the sparrow have shrubs averaging around 20 percent aerial cover and about 23 inches in height. Ensure that some shrub cover will remain. Conduct mechanical reduction during the period from August through early February.
- Cattle grazing at moderate levels can also be beneficial in maintaining an early successional stage. Avoid heavy grazing pressure during the April-June primary nesting season. Overgrazing may eliminate some plant species and/or limit the amount of cover for nesting.
- Make sure all farm/ranch workers are aware of the protected status of this bird, its nesting season, and the types of nest locations.
- Avoid hydrology changes. Too much water can prevent nesting, while too little can lead to changes in the vegetative makeup of the site.
- Retain native rangeland vegetation – do not plant sod-forming grasses. Remove exotic species if present.

- Avoid construction of new fences or other structures that may provide perches for grasshopper sparrow predators.
- Do not use pesticides that might affect the seeds and insects eaten by the sparrow.

For landowners interested in improving habitat for grasshopper sparrow, several opportunities exist to partner with the USFWS for conservation of this species. The USFWS’ “Safe Harbor” policy now provides regulatory certainty to landowners that voluntarily improve habitat on their property for federally threatened/endangered species.

If in the future, you plan to convert areas of native habitat to more intensive land uses (e.g., rangeland to pasture or crops), contact NRCS for assistance in incorporating conservation practices to protect this endangered species. The NRCS works with the USFWS and FFWCC to ensure that Federal and State-listed species will not be adversely affected by actions planned by landowners. If you do not contact NRCS, please remember that the Florida grasshopper sparrow is a protected species and, as a minimum, the USFWS and the FFWCC should review your proposed actions. They can be contacted at the following offices:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

(address to inserted below by District Conservationist)

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

(address to be inserted below by District Conservationist)

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