Henslow's Sparrow

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Photo credits: *Patricia L. Nelson*

Scientific Name *Ammodramus henslowii* (Audubon, 1829)

Family Name Emberizidae
Buntings, American Sparrows and Relatives

Did you know?
John James Audubon named the Henslow's Sparrow in honor of his good friend John Stevens Henslow, a professor of botany at Cambridge and teacher of Charles Darwin.

Summary

Protection Threatened in New York State, protected federally.

This level of state protection means: A native species likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future in New York (includes any species listed as federally Threatened by the United States). It is illegal to take, import, transport, possess, or sell an animal listed as Th

Rarity G4, S3B

A global rarity rank of G4 means: Apparently secure globally, though it may be quite rare in parts of its range, especially at the periphery.
A state rarity rank of S3B means: Typically 21 to 100 breeding occurrences or limited breeding acreage in New York State.

Conservation Status in New York

There is evidence of a significant decline across the species' range and there has been a loss of grassland habitats in New York State in recent years. Breeding Bird Survey data show a possible decline of 18.7% per year between 1980 and 2006 in New York (Sauer et al. 2007). When comparing data from the first and second breeding bird atlases, an 80% decrease is noted with Henslow's sparrows reported in 348 blocks (Andrle and Carroll 1988) and 70 blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008), respectively. McGowan and Corwin (2008) describe this decline as "the largest proportional decline in any formerly common

species in the Atlas."

Short-term Trends

As with most grassland birds in the last few decades, Henslow's Sparrow populations have been significantly declining. Analyzed Breeding Bird Survey data from New York showed that the population may have declined by as much as 18.7% per year between 1980 and 2006 (Sauer et al. 2007). During the first Breeding Bird Atlas (1980-1985), Henslow's Sparrows were found in 348 blocks. Two-hundred thirteen of those blocks were reported with probable or confirmed breeding (Andrle and Carroll 1988). The second Breeding Bird Atlas reported 70 blocks with Henslow's Sparrows. Probable or confirmed breeding was reported in 57 of those blocks (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Areas in New York where Henslow's Sparrows are persisting rely on human disturbances to maintain the grassland habitat. For example, farming practices and military practices at the Fort Drum Military Reservation have maintained the grassland habitat in Jefferson County. However, there are areas where Henslow's Sparrows are no longer found, indicating possible habitat changes range wide (McGowan and Corwin 2008). Even with the recent declines, it is possible that Henslow's Sparrows are more abundant and widespread in New York now than they were in the early 1900s (Levine 1998).

Long-term Trends

Henslow's Sparrows were first documented in New York in 1844 on Long Island. It is not known if Henslow's Sparrows were found in New York prior to European settlement but, there were probably areas with suitable habitat such as wet meadows (Levine 1998). After European settlement, the landscape of New York began to change with forests being logged and cleared for farming. In the early 1900s, they were considered a local breeder that was uncommon or rare in the state. Between the 1920s and 1940s Henslow's Sparrow populations appeared to be increasing as they were reported from many new locations. Then, as early as the 1950s, reports became less frequent and they were no longer found on the south shore of Long Island (Andrle and Carroll 1988). Analysis of Breeding Bird Survey data from 1966-2006 for New York show that Henslow's Sparrow populations appear to be decreasing at a rate of approximately 12.1% per year (Sauer et al. 2007). This species is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act implements various treaties and conventions between the U. S. and Canada, Japan, Mexico and the former Soviet Union for the protection of migratory birds. Under this Act, taking, killing, or possessing migratory birds, including nests or eggs, is unlawful unless specifically permitted by other regulations.

Conservation and Management

Threats

The most significant threat to Henslow's Sparrows is the loss of suitable grassland habitat. Economic factors have affected the viability of farms in New York. Many farmers have intensified their farming practices, converted hayfields to row crops, or abandoned farming altogether (Andrle and Carroll 1988, Post 2004, McGowan and Corwin 2008). Remaining hayfields are often mowed earlier and more frequently to increase production. As a result, the mortality rate of young in those fields is high and sometimes adults are killed during mowing. As farms are abandoned they are lost to development or the land reverts to shrublands and forests. Grasslands are becoming more scattered and isolated, reducing

connectivity (Post 2004). Wetland loss is also a threat because this species often nests in nearby damp or wet meadows. As wetlands are drained for development any associated wet meadows are also lost (Andrle and Carroll 1988).

Conservation Strategies and Management Practices

Identify public lands with Henslow's Sparrow populations where management may be more easily implemented. Develop education and outreach programs in areas where Henslow's Sparrows persist that are aimed at grassland management and preservation. Implementing a program in New York similar to the Conservation Reserve Program, would likely be beneficial to Henslow's Sparrow populations.

Research Needs

The effects of certain farming practices on breeding populations should be evaluated. For instance, it would be beneficial to determine how different mowing frequencies and how different intensities of grazing affect Henslow's Sparrow populations. It would also be beneficial to know how mowing versus prescribed burning affects populations.

Habitat

The Henslow's Sparrow is a grassland species, preferring tall, dense, grassy fields without woody vegetation. Wet grasslands are also used. Peterson (1983) found them in large, ungrazed fields with a variety of moisture regimes and without woody invasion. They were often found on hilltops. Bull (1974) described their habitat preference in New York as "grassy fields and meadows with scattered bushes and herbaceous plants, both in wet and dry situations." They can tolerate lightly to moderately grazed pastures (NatureServe 2005).

Associated Ecological Communities

Pastureland
Agricultural land permanently maintained (or recently abandoned) as a pasture area for livestock.

Successional Old Field
A meadow dominated by forbs and grasses that occurs on sites that have been cleared and plowed (for farming or development), and then abandoned or only occasionally mowed.

Other Probable Associated Communities

Hempstead Plains grassland
Maritime grassland
Sedge meadow

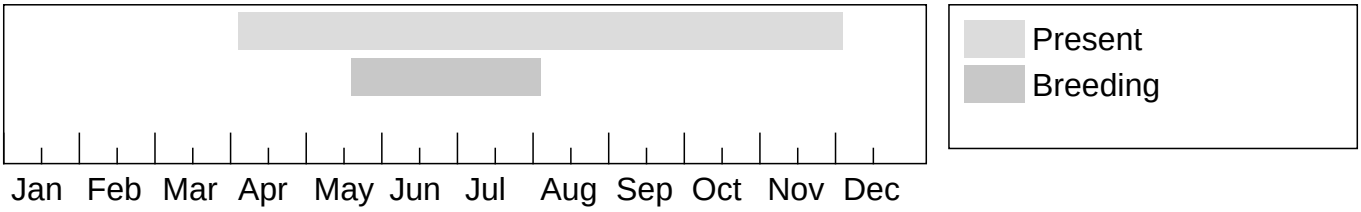
Identification Comments

Identifying Characteristics

Henslow's Sparrows can be identified by the large, flat head, large gray bill, and short tail. Wings are reddish. The head, nape, and most of the central crown are olive-colored. Sexes are similar, but can be determined in hand during the breeding season by the cloacal protuberance in males and brood patch in females. Henslow's Sparrows fly low and jerkily with a twisting motion of the tail. Juveniles are clay-colored above and their head and back are streaked with black. They are a faint yellow below with traces of buff on the throat and chin. Typically, the sides of the throat are unstreaked, but streaking can be found on some individuals. Nests are found on or near the ground and can be either open or dome-shaped. When nests are built off the ground, they are attached to grasses or forbs. Nests are loosely woven with dead grass and lined with finer grasses and hair. Vocalizations are described as a short, quiet "see-lick" or a hiccupping "tsi-lick." Calls can sometimes be heard on quiet summer nights. Henslow's sparrows are shy and secretive. Typically, they are heard rather than seen. Therefore, it is important to be able to identify this species by its song, especially for census and survey work.

The Best Time to See

Henslow's Sparrows are most often observed or heard during the peak of their breeding season between mid-June and mid-July. They are more likely to be heard rather than seen. Sometimes they are heard calling on quiet summer nights.



The time of year you would expect to find Henslow's Sparrow in New York.

Similar Species

Grasshopper Sparrow(Ammodramus savannarum): Young Henslow's Sparrows practically lack breast streaks thus the similar appearance to adult Grasshopper Sparrows.

Taxonomy

Kingdom Animalia
└ **Phylum** Craniata
└ **Class** Birds (Aves)
└ **Order** Perching Birds (Passeriformes)
└ **Family** Emberizidae (Buntings, American Sparrows and Relatives)

Additional Resources

Links

Google Images
http://images.google.com/images?q=AMMODRAMUS+HENSLOWII

NatureServe Explorer
http://natureserve.org/explorer/servlet/NatureServe?searchName=AMMODRAMUS+HENSLOWII

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