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Conserving South Carolina's At-Risk Species: *Species facing threats to their survival*

MacGillivray's seaside sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus macgillivrayi*)



MacGillivray's seaside sparrow /
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Description

The MacGillivray's seaside sparrow is a large dark sparrow of coastal marshes, olive-gray to olive-brown in coloration, with a long bill and sharp, pointed tail. Upper parts are dark grayish; birds have a noticeable yellow streak in front of the eye. White throat is bordered by dark whisker streaks and white to buffy jawline; yellow at bend of wing less noticeable. Breeding season in South Carolina is May-June.

Range

In South Carolina, the species occupies a very narrow strip of salt and brackish

marsh along the Outer Coastal Plain. Rangewide, the species occurs from Dare County, North Carolina south to Duval and Nassau Counties in Florida.

Habitat

MacGillivray's seaside sparrows are found exclusively in salt and brackish marshes consisting of cord grasses (*Spartina* spp.), true rushes (*Juncus* spp.), and bulrushes (*Scirpus* spp.). In order to avoid extreme tidal fluctuations, seaside sparrows move up estuaries to nest. Significant numbers occur in black needle-rush (*Juncus roemerianus*) marshes at the Tom Yawkey Wildlife Center, Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, and other areas featuring extensive coastal marsh. Breeding has also been documented as far inland as Berkeley County.

Status

The MacGillivray's seaside sparrow is designated as a high priority landbird by South Carolina Partners in Flight (PIF) and the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture's—South Atlantic Migratory Bird Initiative (SAMBI) but is not currently protected by the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) was petitioned in April 2010 to list the species and published a 90-day finding in September 2011 indicating that listing may be warranted. The Service will be making a 12-month finding on the species by September 2018.

Threats

Past threats to seaside sparrow populations were salt marsh ditching for mosquito control and pesticide spraying. Altered water regimes allow for the encroachment of undesirable vegetation in higher sections of salt marshes, degrading seaside sparrow habitat. Current and future chal-

lenges to the species consist of impacts from coastal development and loss of habitat due to sea level rise. Studies modeling habitat change due to accelerating sea level rise consistently predict substantial loss of salt marsh habitats. Population losses due to coastal storm events have been documented. Nest predation is also an important consideration as its intensity is often related to changes in water levels.

Management/Protection Needs

Actions needed to manage and protect existing populations of MacGillivray's seaside sparrow consist of: maintaining current regulations/statutes protecting tidal wetlands; restoration of ditched and altered marshes (where possible); predator control; supporting survey efforts; education.

References

- Post, W. and S.A. Gauthreaux. 1989. Status and distribution of South Carolina birds. Contributions from the Charleston Museum 18. 83 pp.
- Post, William, and J. S. Greenlaw. 2009. Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/127>

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources—State Wildlife Action Plan: 2010-2015.

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