



**Common Name:** HENSLOW'S SPARROW

**Scientific Name:** *Ammodramus henslowii* Audubon

**Other Commonly Used Names:** None

**Previously Used Names:** *Emberiza henslowii*, *Coturniculus henslowi*, *Passerherbulus henslowi*

**Family:** Emberizidae

**Rarity Ranks:** G4/S2

**State Legal Status:** Rare

**Federal Legal Status:** Not listed

**Federal Wetland Status:** N/A

**Description:** This sparrow has an olive green head with distinct white eye-ring, chestnut brown back, and whitish throat, breast, and abdomen. There is a yellowish supra-loral spot and two broad black stripes that run on top of the head. These stripes are solid from the base of the bill to

the back of the head then turn to streaking from the back of the head down to the nape. There are a few thin black streaks on the side of the head and two thin malar (mustache) stripes. Feathers on the back are chestnut with black centers and a contrasting white fringe on the edge. The tail feathers are chestnut to brown in color and the tips are very pointed. The rump feathers have black centers. There is some dark streaking on the upper chest and flanks. Plumage is similar between males and females and does not vary substantially between the breeding and non-breeding seasons.

**Similar Species:** The grasshopper sparrow can look somewhat similar to the Henslow's sparrow, but it has a buff and gray face (not olive like the Henslow's), buffy throat, and more buff color on the flanks and lacks the dark face stripes and the dark streaking on the upper breast and flanks. Le Conte's sparrow also looks similar to the Henslow's sparrow, but its face is ochre or yellow-buff as are its flanks. Its back is brown not chestnut and it lacks the two dark mustache stripes of the Henslow's sparrow.

**Habitat:** Breeding habitats include tallgrass prairie, lowland prairie, marshes, meadows and weedy pastures in the western part of its range and coastal marshes, swamps, dry fields, low wet meadows, weedy hayfields and pastures, clear-cut pocosins, and similar sites in the eastern part of the breeding range. Generally, sites are characterized by tall, dense grasses and forbs, a well-developed litter layer, standing dead vegetation, and little or no woody vegetation. In winter this species uses open, boggy pinewoods, pitcher plant bogs, power line rights-of-way with dense grassy groundcover and little woody vegetation, and similar areas. Sites with moist soils or with areas of damp or moist soils seem to be preferred.

**Diet:** Mostly insects during the breeding season, particularly grasshoppers and beetles; probably also some grass and forb seeds. In winter mostly grass seeds, but also seeds of sedges, smartweed, and ragweed, some fruit, and invertebrates including insect, spiders, and snails.

**Life History:** The nesting season usually begins in late April when the female constructs a small cup nest out of dead grass. It is normally built on top of a layer of litter several centimeters thick in a dense clump of grass. Construction takes about 4-6 days after which 2-5 eggs are laid. Eggs are incubated for about 10-12 days before they hatch and young usually fledge at 9-10 days post-hatching. In fall, most birds leave the breeding site by October arriving at wintering areas in late October or November. This species is very difficult to see during winter due to its skulking behavior where it most often runs through and under dense grass rather than fly. Birds may start to leave wintering areas in early March and most are gone before the end of April. Limited banding studies indicate that there is probably little year-to-year fidelity to breeding or wintering sites.

**Survey Recommendations:** One of the best techniques used to survey this species is to have two people drag a weighted rope through the grass along a transect. When a bird is flushed it will usually fly a short distance and then drop back into the grass. By noting its position it can be surrounded by several people and flushed into a mist net that is quickly erected close to the bird. The bird can then be examined, banded, and released. A similar technique using the weighted rope, but no mist net, could be used to flush individuals along a transect to get an index of the number of individuals at a given site. One caveat is that other species such as grasshopper

sparrows also inhabit portions of some sites and are difficult to separate from Henslow's sparrows in flight. Also, this technique likely only flushes a small percentage of the birds actually at the site, so it can only be used effectively to generate an index, not an estimate, of the actual number of birds at the site.

**Range:** This bird breeds throughout much of the central and eastern Midwest, along the very northern fringe of the Southeast, in much of New York and Pennsylvania, and southwestern Ontario, Canada. Isolated breeding populations occur in New Jersey and North Carolina and very scattered and local breeding may occur in several states in the Northeast. Wintering birds occur in the Southeast Coastal Plain from North Carolina to eastern Texas and portions of the Lower Mississippi River Valley.

**Threats:** Historically, Henslow's sparrow has lost much of its breeding habitat and probably much of its wintering habitat as well. The tallgrass prairie, its historic stronghold, has all but been wiped out and the wet meadows and other native grasslands have suffered similarly. More frequent mowing of hayfields, shorter crop rotations, and conversion of suitable habitats to row crops has significantly decreased the amount of suitable human-made habitat. On its winter grounds dense stocking of pines, lack of prescribed fire, draining of pitcher plant bogs and other wetlands, and unfavorable changes in power line maintenance procedures all reduce the dense grassy groundcover this bird prefers and leads to further population declines. A very new threat is the conversion of grassland breeding habitat that was in the Conservation Reserve Program to corn production due to an increased demand for biofuel production.

**Georgia Conservation Status:** Paulk's Pasture WMA, Mayhaw WMA, Birdsong Nature Center (Thomas County). There are likely other sites on conservation lands, but that is unknown at this time.

**Conservation and Management Recommendations:** Habitat loss on the breeding and wintering grounds is the most significant factor affecting Henslow's sparrow populations. Most of its prairie habitat has been lost to agriculture, particularly during the late 1800s and early 1900s when it was plowed under so crops could be grown. Only about 10 percent of the open pine forests, savannas, and other suitable native grasslands in the Southeast remain and these were its main wintering habitats. Fortunately, in some instances this species has adapted to using agricultural and silvicultural lands that provide the dense grassy groundcover it needs. Hayfields and pastures can serve as breeding sites and power line corridors often offer suitable habitat for wintering birds; however, despite its ability to adapt to human-generated habitats Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that populations declined by 8.1 percent annually from 1966-2007, likely in response to continued loss and alteration of habitat. In Georgia, wintering habitat can be maintained in pine forests by thinning and regularly burning sites with suitable soil conditions. There are thousands of miles of power line corridors in the southern portion of the state and many of these could be mowed, burned, herbicided, or otherwise managed to encourage a dense grassy groundlayer suitable for wintering birds. At present, the best site for this bird in the state is a power line corridor. Restoration of natural sites such as pitcher plant bogs and wet savannas should be encouraged on state, federal, and private lands whenever possible. Research should be initiated as soon as possible to determine appropriate prescriptions for burning, particularly fire

return intervals, as well as appropriate techniques for mowing, use of herbicides, and other methods to maintain habitat in power line corridors and similar sites.

**Selected References:**

Burleigh, T. D. 1958. Georgia Birds. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. 746pp.

Herkert, J. R., P. D. Vickery, and D. E. Kroodsmas. 2002. Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*). In A. Poole and F. Gill, eds., The Birds of North America, no. 672. The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.

Hyde, A. S. 1939. The life history of Henslow's Sparrow . *Passerherbulus henslowi* (Audubon). University of Michigan Miscellaneous Publication, Ann Arbor.

McNair, D. B. 1998. Henslow's Sparrow and Sedge Wren response to a dormant-season prescribed burn in a pine savanna. Florida Field Naturalist 26:46-47.

Plentovich, S., N. R. Holler, and G. E. Hill. 1999. Habitat requirements of Henslow's Sparrows wintering in silvacultural lands of the Gulf Coastal Plain. Auk 116:109-115.

Plentovich, S. M., N. R. Holler, and G. E. Hill. 1998. Site fidelity of wintering Henslow's Sparrows. Journal of Field Ornithology 69:486-490.

Robins, J. D. 1971. A study of Henslow's Sparrow in Michigan. Wilson Bulletin 83:39-48.

Sauer, J. R., J. E. Hines, and J. Fallon. 2009. The North American Breeding Bird Survey, Results and Analysis, 1966–2007. Version 4.14.2009. U.S. Geological Survey, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Md. <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/bbs.html>

Zimmerman, J. L. 1988. Breeding season habitat selection by the Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) in Kansas. Wilson Bulletin 100:17-24.

**Author of Species Account:** Todd M. Schneider

**Date Compiled or Updated:**

T. Schneider, July 2010: original account

K. Owers, July 2010: updated status and ranks, added picture