

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW

Ammodramus savannarum pratensis



Photo: John Reaume

AT A GLANCE



Uncommon and declining across Ontario. 72% population decrease from 1970 to 2019. Conservation status: **Special concern**



During the nesting season, eats mostly insects, including grasshoppers and other agricultural pests. Eats mostly seeds on wintering grounds.



Nests on the ground in pastures, hayfields, and other grasslands. A secretive bird that forages mostly on the ground.



Look for:

- A small brown bird with:
 - short tail
 - no streaking on breast
 - large beak and flat head
- Males and females look alike



Listen for:

- Males sing a quiet, buzzy, insect-like song: "tsick, tsick, tsurrrrrrr"

SUBSPECIES & POPULATION SIZE

There are 12 subspecies of grasshopper sparrow across the Americas. Population declines are occurring throughout most of its range. Two migratory subspecies breed in Canada. The eastern grasshopper sparrow (*A. s. pratensis*) nests in southern Ontario, with a small number of breeding individuals in southern Québec. These birds likely winter in the southeastern USA, Caribbean, or Central America. There are ~25,000 breeding pairs in Ontario. About 10% of the breeding range of this subspecies is in Canada, with the remainder in the eastern USA.

BREEDING BIOLOGY

- Typically monogamous
- Territorial. Territories usually ~1 hectare, sometimes overlapping, and often clustered
- Requires medium to large patches of grassland
- Nests are built on the ground, often domed with a partial roof
- Clutch size usually 4 – 5 eggs
- Females build nests and incubate eggs
- Males and females feed young
- Pairs typically attempt to raise 2 broods in a nesting season. They renest repeatedly after nest failure.

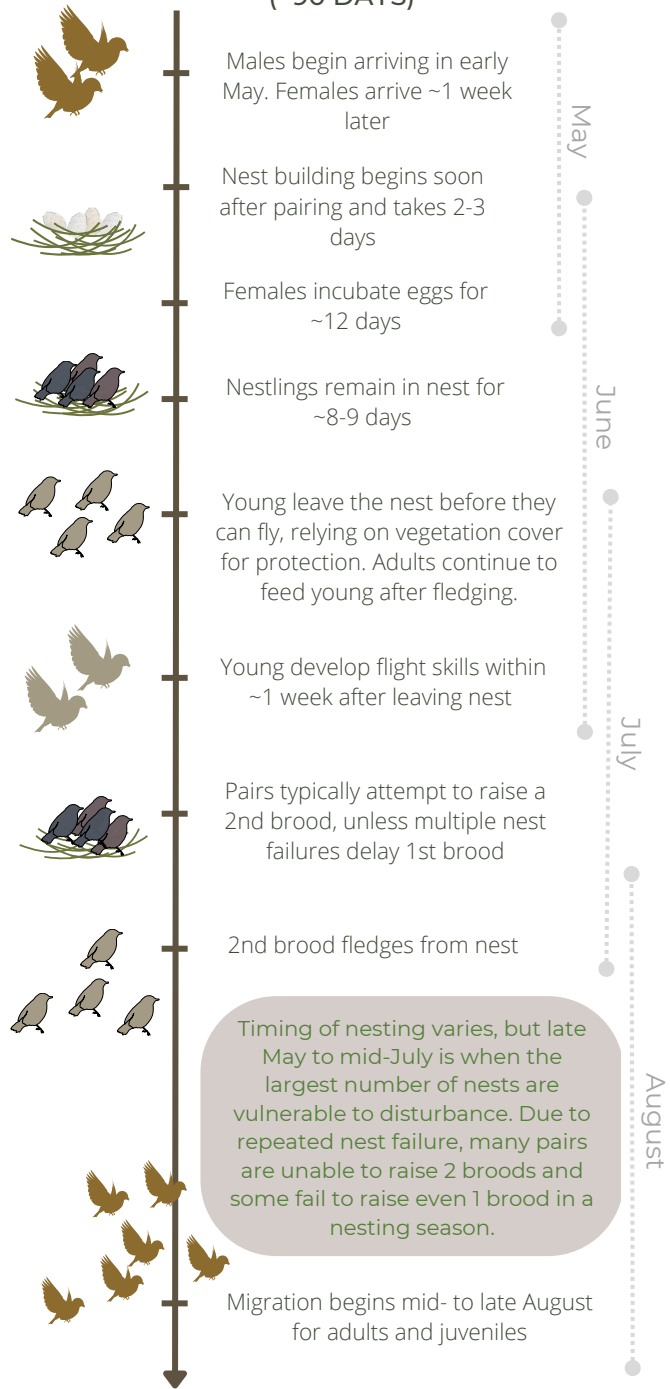
NESTING HABITAT: AGRICULTURAL GRASSLANDS

Grasshopper sparrows nest exclusively in grasslands. They are typically found in grasslands with sparse to moderately dense vegetation, well-drained or poor soil, small patches of bare ground, and few shrubs. They frequently nest in the same fields as Savannah sparrows and sometimes with bobolinks and eastern meadowlarks, although habitat requirements differ. In Ontario, the majority of existing grassland is agricultural, linking the fate of this species to the amount and management of hayfields and pastures.



See grasshopper sparrow abundance and trends: <https://science.ebird.org/en/status-and-trends/species/graspa/abundance-map>

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW NESTING TIMELINE (~90 DAYS)



THREATS

Habitat loss

- Conversion of hayfields and pastures to annual row crops, loss to development, and conversion to other land uses has resulted in significant loss of nesting habitat in Ontario.

Habitat fragmentation

Changes in agricultural practices

- Earlier and more frequent mowing of hayfields and intensive grazing of pastures increases nest failure (nests and young are crushed, trampled, exposed). Agricultural grasslands mowed before late June or grazed intensively throughout the nesting season create circumstances where habitat appears suitable in spring, but birds have little chance of nesting successfully.

Nest predation is common. Predators include mammals and snakes.

From 2011 to 2019, the area of grassland in southern Ontario decreased by ~18%.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Provide habitat

- Grasshopper sparrows need grasslands!
 - Maintain existing grassland
 - Plant new grassland
 - Support grass-based farming

Minimize disturbance during peak nesting season

- In pastures:
 - Avoid or minimize grazing in June and early July
 - Lengthen rest periods to at least 42 days
- In hayfields:
 - Delay mowing and other management until at least early July
 - Delay mowing of field interiors, where most nests are located
- In non-agricultural grasslands:
 - Delay management until late summer

These actions will also benefit other grassland bird species at risk!

FIND OUT MORE:

www.beco-birds.org
www.grasslandbirds.ca



Grasshopper sparrow nest with eggs



5-day-old nestlings



Fledgling, just out of the nest

Photos: Zoé Lebrun-Southcott

References:

1. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). 2013. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the grasshopper sparrow *pratensis* subspecies *Ammodramus saviannarum pratensis* in Canada. Ottawa, Canada.
2. Smith, A. C., M-A. R. Hudson, V. I. Aponte, and C. M. Francis. 2020. North American Breeding Bird Survey-Canadian Trends Website. Data version 2019. Environment and Climate Change Canada, Gatineau, Canada.
3. Vickers, P. D. 2020. Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus saviannarum*) version 1.0. In Birds of the World (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, USA.

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