

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners Starting Captive Breeding Program In Race Against Time to Prevent Extinction of Florida Grasshopper Sparrows

Vero Beach, Fla. -- In an effort to prevent extinction of the Florida grasshopper sparrow, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and many partners are establishing a captive breeding program for this species. Many believe that if current population trends continue the species could go extinct in three to five years.

The Rare Species Conservatory Foundation and the Service will be collaborative leaders of this captive breeding effort.

The captive breeding program will consist of trained volunteers and staff from the Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the Department of Environmental Protection going into the field during April, May and June at specified locations looking for eggs in nests. When and if eggs are found, some of them will be collected and taken to the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation in Loxahatchee, Fla. There, they will be placed in incubators, where the hope is hatchlings will emerge in 11-13 days, after which around-the-clock care will be provided to facilitate their survival. Ultimately, the hatchlings will be kept in captivity in the hopes that they will mate and breed.

“Captive breeding is labor intensive and challenging. It is generally done as a last resort and there are no guarantees. But we have to try,” said Larry Williams, the Service’s Florida State Supervisor of Ecological Services. “This is an emergency and the situation for this species is dire. This is literally a race against time.”

“The FWC is working closely with the Service and other partners to prevent the disappearance of the Florida grasshopper sparrow,” said Thomas Eason, Director of the FWC’s Habitat and Species Conservation Division. “The combined efforts of all partners involved offer the best chance to rescue this Florida native bird on the verge of extinction.”

In 2012, monitoring projects at Avon Park Air Force Range, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area produced the lowest sparrow counts on record. The population decline on these public lands is occurring despite intensive management that includes prescribed fire and hardwood control. The 2013 surveys are currently being conducted and the population estimate will be available in June. Information outside of public lands is lacking and no estimate exists on the numbers of birds that may live there.

Because of this perilous situation, the partners implemented a 10-point action plan. The plan’s highlights include implementing urgent needs such as extensive population surveys, conducting a genetic evaluation, looking into the feasibility of captive breeding and propagation studies, and finding financial support. Other immediate actions on three critical sites include continuing habitat restoration, annual monitoring, managing fire ants, and conducting a disease evaluation study.

“The biggest mystery is why these birds are disappearing. These amazing little songbirds are only found here in Florida. They are ours. We’re trying to prevent a unique part of Florida’s landscape from vanishing,” Williams said. “They are named for their call -- a quiet buzz that sounds much like a grasshopper. Males sing only during the nesting season, which just started.”

The Service’s South Florida Ecological Services Office has dedicated the full-time efforts of one of its biologists to saving the Florida grasshopper sparrow. “We have limited resources and people, but along with our partners, we’re fully committed because we do not want to see the Florida grasshopper sparrow go the way of the dusky seaside sparrow, which went extinct in 1987,” Williams said.

The Endangered Species Act lists the Florida grasshopper sparrow as “endangered.” There may be less than 200 remaining. It is non-migratory and limited to the prairie region of south-central Florida. Over 80 percent of historic dry prairie habitat has been lost, and much of the remaining prairie has been degraded by fire suppression, and tree and shrub encroachment.

“Captive breeding has recently become a crucial component in the comprehensive recovery strategy for this endemic subspecies,” said Dr. Paul Reillo, Director of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation. “Such intervention is unprecedented for a tiny North American songbird, and some of the techniques and methodologies are uncharted. We are drawing upon experience from other avian systems and adopting a very broad-minded approach.”

He added, “Sadly, the Florida grasshopper sparrow is facing long odds, with or without a captive-breeding program. But to us, the conservation directive is clear and the time is now-- this little bird deserves every effort.”

The partners on the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Working Group with the Service include representatives from the:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Brevard Zoo
- Archbold Biological Station
- U.S. Air Force (Avon Park Air Force Range)
- University of Florida
- Tall Timbers Research Station & Land Conservancy
- University of Central Florida
- Audubon Florida

- Rutgers University
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Florida Ornithological Society
- White Oak Conservation Center
- Rare Species Conservatory Foundation

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