

# News Release

## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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### **First Captive-Bred Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Chicks Hatched**

*Among North America's Most Endangered Birds*

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- Conservation history was made May 9 when the first captive-bred Florida grasshopper sparrow chicks hatched at the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF) in Loxahatchee, Fla.--a major breakthrough for one of North America's most endangered birds.

"This bird is teetering on the brink of extinction. There are probably less than 150 left. We're working with our partners--including the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)--to save it. This is a huge milestone in those ongoing efforts," said Larry Williams, State Ecological Services Supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"This is truly a collaborative effort with the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Working Group and other partners. Kudos to Dr. Paul Reillo and his team at RSCF for the outstanding work they're doing on this captive-breeding program that the Service is funding," said Williams. "Also to be congratulated are Mary Peterson and Sandra Sneckenberger, the Service's lead biologists on this recovery effort, and Dr. Erin Ragheb, FWC's research scientist who coordinates and leads all of the field work."

Ragheb said, "This is one of many important steps for the recovery of the Florida grasshopper sparrow. We hope that FWC's demographic and nest predator field research will continue to provide valuable recommendations on how to protect the remaining wild birds as the captive program develops. Knowing that Florida grasshopper sparrows are capable of hatching young in captivity is an encouraging step forward."

A State of the Birds grant awarded to the Service's South Florida Ecological Services Office in 2013 funded preliminary work necessary to initiate a captive-propagation program for this critically endangered sparrow. In 2015, this species was brought into captivity for the first time. Five nestlings from two different clutches and two independent juvenile birds were collected from the wild and taken to RSCF.

"We had two situations where a monitored nest was predicted to fail (one from flooding and one from the loss of the brooding female). Both of those clutches were collected and brought to RSCF, where they were successfully hand-reared to independence," said Peterson. "Because of concern of starting a captive-breeding program with strictly naïve

birds, and because we believed that hand-reared birds would benefit from a 'tutor' bird, we also brought in two independent parent-reared, juvenile birds.”

Pairs were established in April 2016 when birds began exhibiting breeding behaviors. Although the first nest attempt by one of the females was unsuccessful, a second brooding female began hatching a clutch of four eggs on May 9, 2016. As of May 11, the female appears to be properly caring for and feeding her four nestlings. If things continue to go well, the chicks will leave the nest and start trying to fly about nine days after they hatched. They should be fully independent about three weeks after they hatched.

Williams acknowledges that the Service and its partners implemented captive breeding because this is an extremely urgent situation. “This captive-breeding program might buy us time to unravel the compounding factors causing the sparrows to decline so rapidly. We seem to have good habitat that's not being used. That makes us think the population levels may have dropped so low that they've lost the power to recover,” he said. “Below certain population thresholds there can be combinations of predation, disease, genetic inbreeding, and gaps in social behaviors that make it difficult for a species to rebound.”

This promising news in the captive-breeding efforts is welcome, particularly considering preliminary numbers for the 2016 season are looking very bleak. Biologists are expecting a steep decline from the previous two years' low, but somewhat stable, counts.

“This breakthrough is great news because the Florida grasshopper sparrow couldn't be more vulnerable,” said Sneckenberger. “Unfortunately, last week's storms flooded most of the wild birds' first nest attempts of the season. That brought the need for this captive-breeding program into even sharper focus. The four hatchlings are hopeful signs that bode well for producing options for recovery.”

Next week, the working group--made up of members from the Service, FWC, RSCF, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Archbold Biological Station, Avon Park Air Force Range, the University of Maryland- Baltimore County, White Oak Conservation Center and Tall Timbers Research Station--is scheduled to discuss a collection strategy for the 2016 season.

Timberline Fisheries is supplying all the insects being fed to the birds and Dyson, Inc. provided the fans being used to keep the sparrow breeding facilities cool.

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