

Grasshopper sparrow

Ammodramus savannarum

By Heather Harris

Montana's many grassland passerine (songbird) species are beautiful to see, marvelous to watch, and wondrous to hear. Unfortunately, sometimes they are not considered worth a second glance and often get dismissed as "LBJs" ("little brown jobs").

It's true these birds are small and hard to tell apart. *The Sibley Guide to Birds* describes one sparrow species as having a "relatively plain face" and says it is "brown and tan with light streaking, but isn't as streaky as other sparrows and has an unstreaked buffy breast." That's not too helpful for most people. I can understand why these seemingly plain-looking species often are disregarded when compared with brightly colored bluebirds or melodic meadowlarks.

But grassland passerines are unique species with subtle but gorgeous markings, unique songs, and other traits. One of my favorites is the grasshopper sparrow.

IDENTIFICATION

Grasshopper sparrows are small birds that regularly flutter their wings while perched on grass stalks or barbed-wire fencing.

A grasshopper sparrow appears brown and indistinguishable from most other field sparrows. But closer examination reveals intricate patterns of rufous spots along its back and wings. It has a large, flat-crowned head, a short tail, and a larger bill than many similar-looking species. The relatively plain face is set off with a white eye ring and often is marked with small patches of yellow on the "lore" (the area between the eye and bill).

HABITAT

Grasshopper sparrows live throughout Montana in open grasslands, prairies, hayfields,

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and pastures. These small birds stay close to the ground and often walk or run rather than fly. Their stealthiness and nondescript plumage allow them to disappear into the prairie while they forage on the ground, unnoticed by predators.

Grasshopper sparrows fly south each October to winter in grasslands of the southern United States, Mexico, and western Central America.

VOICE

Because grasshopper sparrows breed in Montana, their mating calls can help with identification. They typically arrive here in late April and begin making their insectlike song: *tik tuk tikeeeeeez*. The high-pitched buzz resembles that of a grasshopper, which accounts for the sparrow's name. To hear the call, do an online search for "grasshopper sparrow song." Once you learn its distinct call, the species becomes easy to identify.

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Ammodramus is from a Greek word meaning "sand runner," perhaps referring to the amount of time the various sparrow species in this genus spend hopping around on the ground. *Savannarum* is Latin for "grassland."

FOOD

Grasshopper sparrows mainly eat grasshoppers, beetles, caterpillars, and spiders. They are preyed upon by loggerhead shrikes, bull snakes, foxes, and various prairie raptors.

REPRODUCTION

Grasshopper sparrows nest on the ground in a small bowl of dry grass lined with finer grass, rootlets, and animal hair. The nest sits hidden at the base of a large clump of grass in a slight depression on the prairie. To further reduce unwanted attention from predators,



ators, the sparrows walk to and from their nest a short distance before taking flight.

Females incubate four or five creamy white eggs with reddish-brown spots for 11 to 12 days. Once the eggs hatch, both adults tend the nestlings. They capture insects for themselves and their young by first immobilizing each bug with a pinch behind its head and then vigorously shaking the legs off.

The young typically leave the nest nine days after hatching, before they can fly well. They depend on their superbly camouflaged plumage to blend into surroundings and escape predators' eyes.

Each year, grasshopper sparrows raise up to three clutches of eggs, running from May through July.

CONSERVATION

The grasshopper sparrow is common in Montana grasslands and other intact short-grass prairies across the United States. But the continent-wide population is declining because of the loss and fragmentation of the bird's grassland habitat as it is converted to crop land, highways, and housing. According to the North American Breeding Bird Survey, the population declined by roughly 2.5 percent per year between 1966 and 2015. 🐾