## SAVANNAH SPARROW Donald Shephard

Savannah Sparrow Photo Ron LeValley
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From meadows to marshland, and from temperate coastlines to tundra, the Savannah Sparrow forages throughout much of North America, preferring open habitats ranging from grassy coastal dunes, to farmland, to sub-alpine meadows. They inhabit relatively small patches of grassland, and will even use disturbed and weedy areas in the open. You may spot them in grassy areas around towns and at the edges of irrigated fields, especially alfalfa.

You will find them in grassland locally at MacKerricher State Park, Point Cabrillo, Mendocino Headlands and Point Arena Lighthouse among many other areas. This songbird varies widely across its range, with sixteen or more recognized subspecies.

The name does not derive from its grassland habitat, but from Savannah, Georgia, where collectors first described this bird. You will most likely see this small, grayish-brown passerine running into grassy cover. Savannah Sparrows are able runners; once discovered, they drop into the grass and dart away. If one perches to sing, you will notice streaking on its back, breast and flanks; a yellowish eyebrow stripe (supercilium) ; brown cheeks and white throat. The flight feathers are blackish-brown. Pink legs and feet help identify this bird. The lower part of the bill shows horn color and the upper part dark grey.

In its open country habitat, Vesper (rare) and Song Sparrows most resemble the Savannah Sparrow but the latter is paler and more slender. You will distinguish it by its yellowish supercilium, white central crown stripe and short forked tail. When flushed, the Savannah Sparrow tends to fly fairly high to its next perch whereas Song Sparrows fly low and pump their tails, Vesper Sparrows often show considerable white in the tail.

The male sings to defend his territory and attract a mate. Polygyny is common in some populations, but many are monogamous. If both members of a pair survive, they are likely to re-pair in the following year. The female builds the nest on the ground, usually in a depression and well hidden in thick grass or under matted-down plants. Overhanging vegetation may act as a tunnel, giving a side entrance to the open cup nest made of coarse grass and lined with finer grass. The female incubates the 4 to 5 eggs for 10 to 13 days. Both parents help brood and feed the

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young, which leave the nest at 10 to 12 days of age. The fledglings can run short distances, but can't fly well for another week or so. The parents continue to feed and tend the young until they are about three weeks old. Second broods occur in the south, but not the north, of the range.

The parents subsist most of the time on seeds, but eat insects in the breeding season and feed them to the young. Coastal populations also eat some small crustaceans and mollusks.

The Savannah Sparrow breeds in Alaska, Canada, northern, two-thirds of the United States. The Pacific breeders are resident, but other populations are migratory, wintering from the southern United States across Central America and the Caribbean to northern South America. We receive an influx of non-breeding birds in winter. It is a very rare vagrant to western Europe.

Small winter flocks forage on the ground. Savannah Sparrows walk when foraging, and often run or hop. They are less shy than many other open-country sparrows, singing from weeds and fence-wires in full view, and also singing from the ground. The male performs a flight display during the breeding season, flying slowly over the tips of the grass with his tail raised and his feet dangling down. The commonly heard, distinctive song consists of a trill preceded by a series of short notes.

Birds return each spring to the area where they were hatched, and this philopatry results in great regional variation within the population. It is possible that the many recognized subspecies will be grouped into three species in the future.

The adaptable Savannah Sparrow is abundant and widespread and has probably benefited from early 20th Century human activity. However, urban sprawl and reversion of small farms to forests in the northeastern United States may account for population declines seen in that area. In the western United States, increased intensity of agriculture and continued forest clearing have probably contributed to the increases that continue to be seen. Breeding Bird Survey results show a small, not statistically significant increase in numbers of Savannah Sparrows.

Savannah Sparrow nest Photo Linda Pivicek.

Recent DNA work indicates the Ipswich Sparrow is a subspecies of Savannah Sparrow whereas the southwestern subspecies should be recognized as distinct species, the Large-billed Sparrow. Should you need a formal introduction as you sit in the hopeful sunshine eating your sandwich lunch, ornithologists call the Savannah Sparrow, Passerculus sandwichensis. Whatever its name and genealogy, the Savannah Sparrow's cheery song will brighten your day.