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## HENSLOW'S SPARROW STATUS IN NEBRASKA



Henslow's Sparrow habitat: Pawnee Prairie WMA, Pawnee County, Nebraska (Photo by Ross Silcock) Inset: Juvenile Henslow's Sparrow (photo Powdermill Avian Research Center, used with permission)

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Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) is a grassland species of considerable conservation concern endemic to southern and eastern North America (Herkert et al. 2002; Reinking 2002). Annual declines of about 7.5% from 1966 - 2000 (Sauer et al. 2001) and the extirpation of breeding birds from large portions of the historic range have led to the sparrow being listed as a species of "Highest Concern" on the Partners in Flight National Watch List (PIFNWL: [http://www.partnersinflight.org/cont\\_plan/PIF3\\_Part2WEB.pdf](http://www.partnersinflight.org/cont_plan/PIF3_Part2WEB.pdf)).

While the Henslow's Sparrow is not listed as federally threatened or endangered, most species on this list are prime candidates for such consideration. The Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan (Schneider et al. 2005) considers the Henslow's Sparrow a "Tier I At-Risk Species".

Henslow's Sparrow is a rare but regular summer resident and breeder in southeast Nebraska (Sharpe et al. 2001). In the United States, the breeding range has apparently expanded northwestward in the last two decades (Herkert et al. 2002; Reinking 2002). Nebraska reports were few prior to 1990 and none were reported in the Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas project 1984-89 (Mollhoff 2001). A set of eggs and a female were said to have been collected in Douglas County prior to 1900 (Bruner et al. 1904), and there are 3 specimens in the University of Nebraska State Museum, all collected near Lincoln 26 Apr-18 May 1899-1920 (Sharpe et al. 2001). The only other published report prior to 1980 was of a singing male at Nine-Mile Prairie, Lancaster Co, 8 Jul 1951; no others were seen and no nesting evidence was found (Baumgarten 1953).

Since the mid-1980s, however, Henslow's Sparrows have been found with regularity in small numbers at several locations in southeastern Nebraska, notably Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Pawnee County, Audubon Spring Creek Prairie in Lancaster County, Boyer Chute NWR in Washington County, University of Nebraska's Allwine Prairie in Douglas County, Hall County sites owned by Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust and The Nature Conservancy, and Pawnee Prairie WMA in Pawnee County (Figure 1).

The first singing male was found on the south side of Burchard Lake in Pawnee County 6 May 1985 (Wright 1985); this bird was photographed and seen by others through 31 May (Sharpe et al 2001). Since 1985, Henslow's Sparrows have been reported from the Burchard Lake area, both within the WMA and on adjacent privately-owned land (Sullivan 2005); Sullivan found 27 singing birds on and around Burchard Lake WMA as well as a nest with 4 eggs on adjacent private land (Sullivan 2005).

In Lancaster County, a singing Henslow's Sparrow was found by Joseph Gubanyi in 1994 at Spring Creek Prairie, an Audubon Society-owned site near Denton (Silcock and Rosche 1994). Since then, a few Henslow's Sparrows have been found there most years, although no breeding activity has been reported (Kevin Poague, pers. comm.).

Beginning in 2000, singing birds were found in a restored prairie at Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge in Washington County (Jerry Toll, pers. comm.).

In Douglas County, 1-2 Henslow's Sparrows have been found at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's 65-hectare (160-acre) Allwine Prairie Preserve in northwest Omaha in 2004 and 2005 (John P. McCarty and L. LaReesa Wolfenbarger, pers. comm.).

Farther west there are records of breeding birds on properties owned by the Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust and The Nature Conservancy in Hall County in the central Platte River Valley. Native grasslands are being restored and managed by rotational grazing and burning at these sites, with grassland bird species monitored at the Trust by Daniel Kim and for The Nature Conservancy by Chris Helzer. Beginning in 2004, Henslow's Sparrows were found on Trust property consisting of tall-grass prairie remnants within a large area of grasslands (Kim 2005). At least one nest was found in 2004 (Kim 2005). In 2006, singing Henslow's Sparrows were present on Trust property in May and dependent juveniles were seen later in the summer; numbers of singing birds increased through August (Dan Kim, pers. comm.). Nearby at the Caveny Tract owned by The Nature Conservancy, there have been multiple sightings 1995-2005 (Chris Helzer, pers. comm.; Kim 2005). Sullivan (2005) found 8 singing birds in the southwest part of Pawnee Prairie WMA and 2 on adjacent private land in 2004. A nest was found at Pawnee Prairie also (Sullivan 2005).

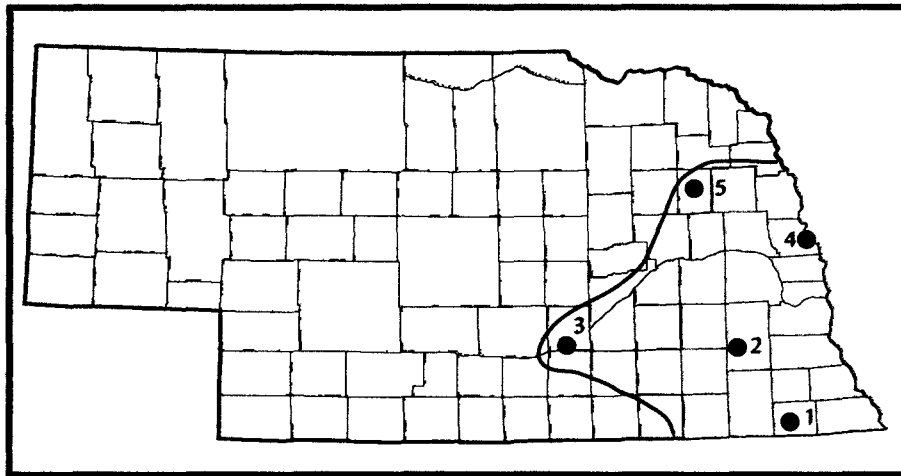


FIGURE 1. Current breeding distribution of the Henslow's Sparrow in Nebraska. Shaded areas right (east) of line represent overall range. Dots are sites where Henslow's Sparrow has been reported since 1990, including 1) Burchard Lake-Pawnee Prairie area, Pawnee County, 2) Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie, 3) Whooping Crane Trust and Nature Conservancy properties, Hall County, 4) Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge, Washington County, and 5) Stanton County CRP tracts (Negus 2005).

There are additional sightings from other locations, although these sites do not consistently support Henslow's Sparrows. Searches by Concordia University professor Joseph Gubanyi and students from 1994-2000 yielded reports from near Bennet in Lancaster County 25 May 1994, at Meadowlark Lake WMA, Seward Co, each year (maximum 2 singing birds) 1997-2000, and at Redtail WMA, Butler

County, 24 June 2000 (Sharpe et al 2001). The westernmost reports are sightings by Chris Helzer (pers. comm.) at The Nature Conservancy's Willa Cather Prairie in Webster County, including 6 singing males there 4 Jun 1999. There are only 4 records for the Rainwater Basin, all in June and July from Clay County, the first in 1999 (J. Jorgensen, pers. obs.).

Whether recent records indicate an increase in numbers and range of Henslow's Sparrows in Nebraska or have resulted from increased searches for this species remains unknown, although, as noted above, this species appears to be expanding its range. The Henslow's Sparrow is a species of considerable conservation concern and may easily go undetected even when present, so there is a clear need to monitor the species status in the state on a regular basis.

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