

## Making a good home for the Grasshopper Sparrows

The Grasshopper Sparrow is a small, inconspicuous bird, known for its buzzy, grasshopper-like song. It is most noticeable when males perch on top of small shrubs or wildflower stalks in the spring and early summer, singing their high-pitched songs. Grasshopper Sparrows once thrived in the extensive native grasslands of California, but unfortunately they are increasingly rare, and are now listed as a California Species of Special Concern.

There are a variety of ways landowners can manage or create habitat on their land that will help this special bird hold on in California, and most of these strategies are compatible with ongoing agricultural land use. Also, because Grasshopper Sparrows are particularly sensitive to how grasslands are managed, creating habitat for this species will benefit many other grassland birds, which are among the fastest declining groups of birds in North America.

### Grasshopper Sparrow life history

Grasshopper Sparrows are little studied and understood throughout California, but research suggests that they require breeding sites of at least 30 acres and prefer greater than 100 acres. In addition to size, grassland structure (composition and height of plants) impacts the suitability of breeding habitat. Nesting areas are primarily dry upland sites, composed of native bunch grasses and annual grasses, minimal litter cover, patches of bare ground, scattered forbs and/or short shrubs. Fence posts, rocks, and shrubs are often used as song perches. Bare ground is important for adult birds and young to run and escape predators and to search for insects. Grasshopper sparrows favor a variety of management applications, such as periodic burning and grazing, to reduce density and build up of thatch, while still providing cover to conceal nests. Their breeding season generally occurs early April to mid July.



Grasshopper Sparrows need large swaths of native grassland to survive.  
*(photo by Greg Smith)*

### Loss of grasslands puts them at risk

Grasshopper Sparrows breed across most coastal counties into the central valley foothills and coastal ranges. Along the coast, they are most widely distributed in the San Francisco Bay and central coast. In the Central Valley, they are still found in some parts of the Sacramento Valley and the northern end of the San Joaquin Valley, but have been extirpated from the Tulare Basin.

The biggest reason for the decline of the Grasshopper Sparrow is loss of native grassland habitat. Agricultural and urban developments have reduced grasslands in California, and many of the remaining grassland patches are too small and dispersed for the birds, or no longer have suitable habitat structure for Grasshopper Sparrows. Conversion of native grasslands to other crops or European annual grasses, early-summer mowing, and intensive grazing have all reduced the amount of good habitat for this species.

# Help Grasshopper Sparrows on your land

## Help the Grasshopper Sparrow and help many others

Because Grasshopper Sparrows require relatively large contiguous grasslands, often with a component of native grasses still intact, providing space for these birds also provides habitat to a host of other birds, mammals, and insects throughout the year. And many of these other species are also becoming rare alongside the Grasshopper Sparrow as California loses its native grasslands. For example, bird species benefitting from Grasshopper Sparrow management include: nesting Western Meadowlarks; White-tailed Kites, and American Kestrels foraging for insects; Golden Eagles and Ferruginous Hawks hunting for small mammals during the winter; Short-eared Owls roosting in the long grasses; and burrowing animals, such as badgers and Burrowing Owls. By adjusting their practices, landowners can help stabilize these bird and wildlife populations so that they do not drop to the point where they become endangered.

## Landowners can help

### Protect and Restore Your Grasslands

- Protect your grasslands through a conservation easement that financially compensates you for giving up development rights on all or a portion of your property.
- Plant native bunch grasses rather than sod-forming grasses on well-drained or sandy soils with a mixture of scattered forbs and shrubs.

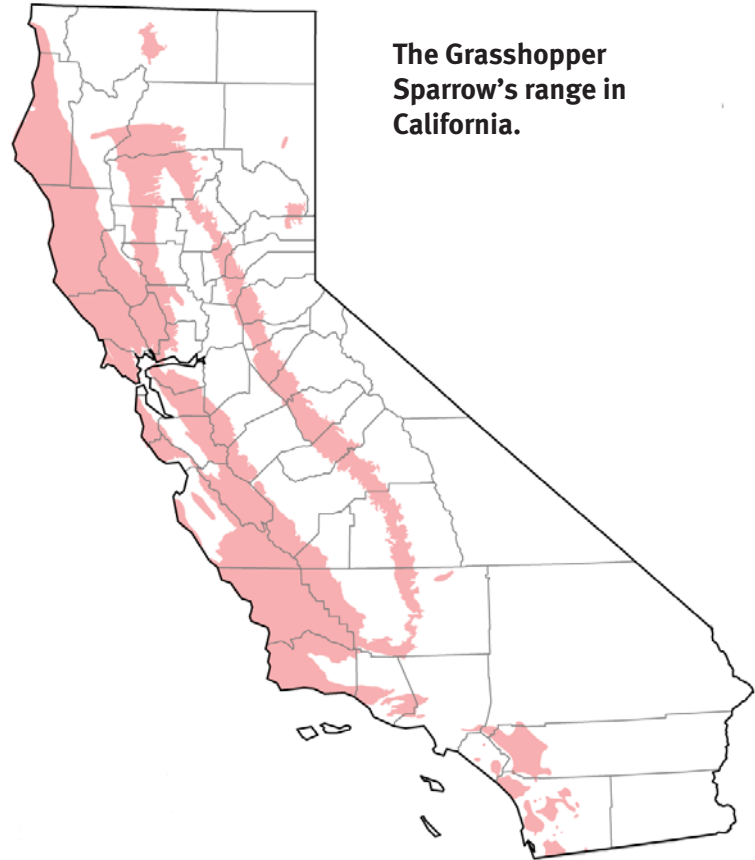
### Manage your grasslands to benefit grassland birds

- Implement light to moderate grazing to maintain short (12-18") and bunched vegetation.
- Minimize grazing during the breeding season (early April – mid July).
- Develop a prescribed burning plan and burn no more frequently than every 4-5 years. Burning can increase the habitat value by reducing build up of thatch that can inhibit nesting.
- Mow fields outside the breeding season.
- Minimize ground disturbance to native grassland; disturbance may encourage growth of non-native weeds.
- Keep large tracts of grassland intact with minimal wind breaks and interruptions with different habitat types.

## Help us better understand where Grasshopper Sparrows occur and what they need

- Partner with Audubon or local volunteers to survey your land and local grasslands to find out where Grasshopper Sparrows are and what other bird species are using them.

- Help us track where birds are and how this changes over time by entering your observations of Grasshopper Sparrows and other species in [www.ebird.org/california](http://www.ebird.org/california).



**The Grasshopper Sparrow's range in California.**

Source: California Department of Fish and Game