

Field Sparrow

Spizella pusilla

The Field Sparrow inhabits primarily overgrown and abandoned fields with scattered shrubs and saplings. Shrubs are used for foraging early in the nesting cycle and as late-season nest sites; open expanses of grass are used for early season nest sites and for foraging later in the summer (Best 1977). Old pastures with a large array of thorny plants are particularly well-suited to the Field Sparrow's nesting needs. Best (1977) postulated that nest sites are important in the selection of habitat. Evans's (1978) research supports this theory, as he found that when junipers were used as nesting substrates nesting success improved significantly.

The Field Sparrow is unobtrusive, the classic "little brown bird," and its far-carrying songs add to the background noise of a rural setting. Overgrown pastureland must be surveyed to locate nesting pairs. The song, one of the best clues to the bird's presence, is an accelerating series of mellow, whistled notes delivered in a descending cadence. Songs are usually given from a reasonably high perch. Singing tends to be most vigorous early in the breeding season; in late June, July, and August males sing only during the morning hours, and even then infrequently.

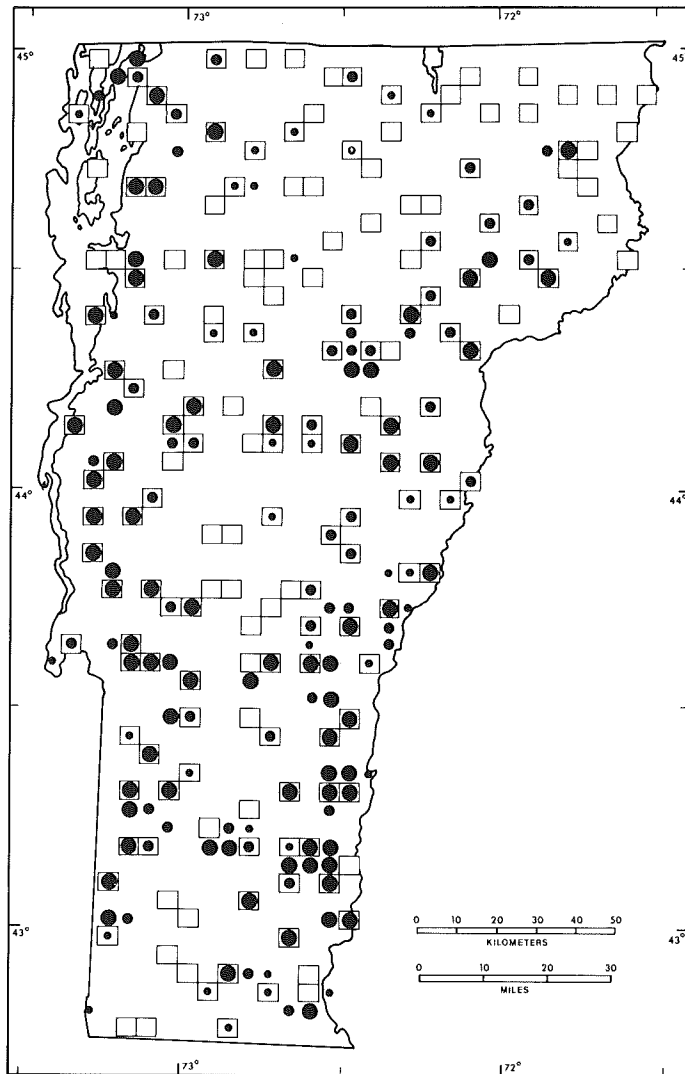
Pairs of Field Sparrows are generally double-brooded; for this reason, the breeding season is quite long, extending from mid May to early August. Early nests are placed on or near the ground, usually in a thick clump of dead grass stems and litter. Second nests are generally placed higher, sometimes as high as 1.2 m (4 ft) off the ground, in shrubs and saplings. The nest is constructed of grass and weed stems and lined with hair, fine grass, and rootlets. Because they are frequently placed in thorny vegetation and females sit tightly on them when brooding, nests are often difficult to find; nonetheless, 25% of the Atlas Project confirmations of breeding were records of active nests. More frequently, confirmation was obtained by locating adults carrying food for nest-



lings (41%) or locating recently fledged young (16%).

Field Sparrows are hardy birds, arriving in Vermont during the first week of April and, on occasion, in late March. Males arrive first and establish their territories; females return 1 to 3 weeks later. The birds commence nesting in May. Egg dates for five clutches in Vermont range from June 5 to July 14. Females with fully developed brood patches have been banded as early as May 20 (VINS banding data), evidencing an early May start to egg laying. Nestling data are lacking for Vermont. In New York State, young have been reported in the nest from late May to early August (Bull 1974). Dependent young have been reported in Vermont from June 18 to August 2. Field Sparrows depart for their southeastern U.S. wintering grounds in September, with autumnal movement peaking in October. The few individuals that attempt to overwinter rarely succeed.

Field Sparrows are often common in suitable brushy fields in southern and western Vermont. They have probably declined somewhat as young hardwood forests have invaded the farms abandoned 20 to 30 years ago. Vermont is at the northern periphery of the species' range. This distribution limit is apparent even in the warm and heavily agricultural Champlain Lowlands, where the species was found in just 55% of the 18



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 112 (63%)

Possible breeding: 24 (21.5% of total)

Probable breeding: 33 (29.5% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 55 (49.0% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	22	71	20
Green Mountains	23	43	21
North Central	9	47	8
Northeast Highlands	5	31	4
East Central	16	84	14
Taconic Mountains	16	100	14
Eastern Foothills	21	87	19

priority blocks from Burlington north; it was distributed in 92% of the 13 Atlas Project blocks south of that city. The species is less common in the Northeast Highlands and North Central region, where it was located in just 31% and 47% of the blocks, respectively, and in the Green Mountains, where it appeared in 43% of the priority blocks. The reasons for these distributional limits are unclear; they may have to do with climatic factors, although there appears to be no correlation between the species' distribution and regional parameters for temperature and precipitation.

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