

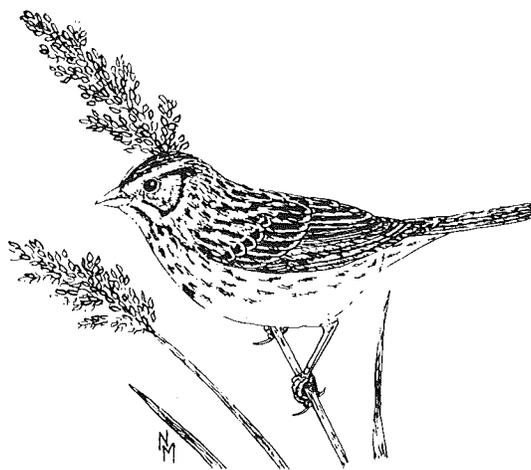
Savannah Sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis

The Savannah Sparrow inhabits an array of open areas characterized by grassy vegetation, and ranging from upland tundra to temperate zone salt marshes. Within this broad variety of habitats and climates, Savannah Sparrows exhibit an equally broad array of morphological and plumage variations; as a result, 16 geographic races have been described by traditional taxonomists (AOU 1957). In Vermont, Savannah Sparrows occur in open, grassy areas, and favor hayfields and meadows in particular. The species avoids most areas having even a scattering of shrubs. Wiens (1969) found that Savannah Sparrows selected habitat similar to those of the Eastern Meadowlark and the Grasshopper Sparrow, preferring areas where cover and litter depth were of intermediate density. In later studies, Wiens (1973) found that Savannah Sparrows selected areas with greater litter depth, a higher percentage of grass cover, and lower densities of forbs than did Grasshopper Sparrows.

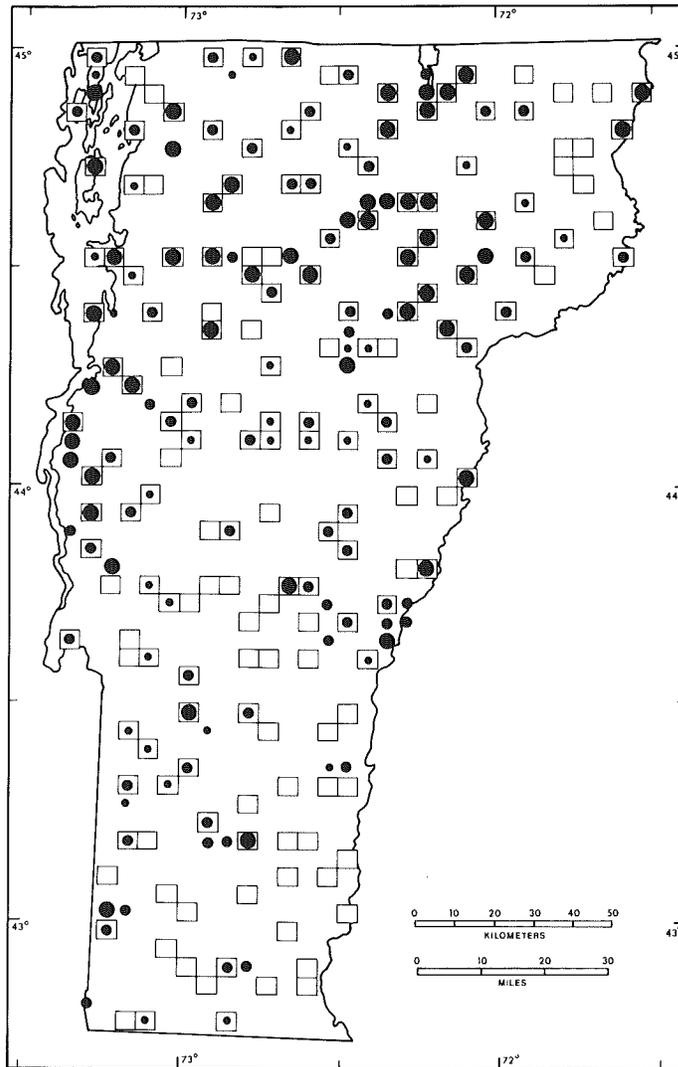
Savannah Sparrows are most easily detected by voice at dawn and dusk. The species tends to be a crepuscular singer, and the weak, insectlike song carries farther when there is less competition from other sounds. The pattern of the song is similar to that of the more familiar Song Sparrow: two high-pitched introductory notes, followed by a pair of descending trills. Once pairs are formed, the nest is hidden on the ground and is extremely difficult to find. During the Atlas Project, adults carrying food led to 52% of all confirmations of breeding in Vermont. Nestlings usually depart from the nest before they can fly, and are relatively easy to detect at that stage; recently fledged young accounted for 28% of Vermont nesting confirmations.

This species is among the earlier migrants returning to Vermont in the spring. Individuals may be seen during the first week of April, and some occasionally return during late March. Territories are established in late



April and May. Occasionally, when favorable habitat is limited, the species nests in concentrations (Bent 1968). The first nests are probably constructed in early May. Nests are placed in a natural or artificial hollow under a protecting dome of vegetation, and are constructed of coarse grasses and mosses, with the central cup lined with hair, finer grasses, or rootlets (Harrison 1978). Egg dates are nonexistent for Vermont, but dates for surrounding states and provinces indicate a range from mid May to late July (Dixon 1978; Bull 1974). The eggs number from 3 to 6 per clutch; Dixon (1978) found an average of 4 eggs for 284 nests studied at Kent Island, New Brunswick. The Savannah Sparrow is double-brooded, and often will undertake a third nest if an earlier attempt is disrupted. The incubation period was reported by Dixon (1978) to average 12 days. The nestling period lasts 9 days (Welsh 1975; Dixon 1978). Five fledgling dates for Vermont range from June 27 to July 16. Savannah Sparrows are late fall migrants, generally not departing until mid to late October; in mild years, some may be seen into early winter. In the east, Savannah Sparrows winter along the Atlantic coast from central Nova Scotia south to Central America (AOU 1983).

Atlas Project workers found the Savannah Sparrow to be common in the North Central region and northwestern Vermont and



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 113 (63%)

Possible breeding: 28 (25% of total)
 Probable breeding: 46 (41% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 39 (34% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	27	87	24
Green Mountains	30	55	27
North Central	18	95	16
Northeast Highlands	7	44	6
East Central	14	74	12
Taconic Mountains	11	69	10
Eastern Foothills	6	25	5

present locally in the Taconic Mountains, but apparently absent from much of south central and southeastern Vermont. In 1907, Davenport considered it common, "abundant in the hill country," in Windham and Bennington counties. The second obvious gap in the Savannah Sparrow's distribution is the central Northeast Highlands, where the species has been excluded by the lack of grassland habitat. In all probability, there has been a significant decrease in the species' abundance in much of Vermont since the 1800s.

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