

The Vesper Sparrow is an uncommon breeder and migrant in the Hudson River Valley.

Conservation Status

This bird is considered a Species of Greatest Conservation Need and listed as a Species of Special Concern in New York. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a drastic statewide decline in the past four decades. NYS Breeding Bird Atlas data indicate a reduced distribution in the Hudson River Valley.



Identification

This sparrow is a chunky bird with gray-brown upperparts, a finely streaked breast and an unstreaked pale belly, a notched tail, and white outer tail feathers. It has a white eye-ring, a dark ear patch bordered in white along the lower and rear edges, and chestnut shoulder patches. Its song is sweet and musical, starting with two long clear notes, often downward slurs, followed by shorter flutelike trills, often rising then falling in pitch.

Habitat

This bird is found in dry, open habitats with short, sparse and patchy herbaceous vegetation, some bare ground, and low to moderate shrub or tall forb cover. It occupies a broad range of grassland habitat types, including meadows, old fields, pastures, hayfields, reclaimed surface mines, weedy fence lines, croplands, weedy roadsides, large cemeteries, airfields, and woodland edges with scattered trees and shrubs. Fence posts, shrubs, and small trees are used as singing perches. It requires breeding sites of at least 15 acres, but prefers areas greater than 35 acres. In Maine, abundance of Vesper Sparrows was positively correlated with increasing area and habitat patchiness; Vesper Sparrows reached 50% occurrence at 50-acre grasslands.

Food

Vesper Sparrows find food by walking or running along the ground feeding on grasshoppers, beetles, other invertebrates, and seeds. It forages along fencerows and in weedy areas, and sometimes takes food items from low foliage.

Nesting

The nest is a bulky, loose cup of grasses and rootlets on the ground in a small depression under or at the base of vegetation, including dead stems, grass clumps, forbs, weeds, shrubs, small trees, beside logs and dead branches, and under dead branches. It is sometimes characterized by a “ramp” at the front with the rest of the nest surrounded by vegetation. A pair’s territory size ranges from 1-4 acres.

Threats

- Reforestation of grasslands and pastures.
- Loss of habitat from suburban development.
- Conversion of grasslands and pastures to row crops.
- Nest destruction due to early mowing.
- Although not a huge issue, nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds is a potential concern.
- Predation, especially by snakes, skunks, raccoons, and feral cats.

Management Recommendations

- Promote habitat management or enhancement activities that increase the amount of dry, native grasslands.
- Maintain grassy and open field areas in an early successional state by conducting rotational mowing, prescribed burning or managed grazing.
- Provide elevated song perches, which can be any structure or vegetation higher than the nesting substrate, such as dead herbaceous plants, shrubs, fences, or hay bales.
- Remove woody vegetation along the edges of grassland fragments to discourage predators that may use woody vegetation as travel corridors.
- Avoid disturbance of suitable habitat during the breeding season.

Adapted from Dechant et al. 2003, Jones and Cornely 2002 and Vickery et al. 1994.

For additional information, see the following references:

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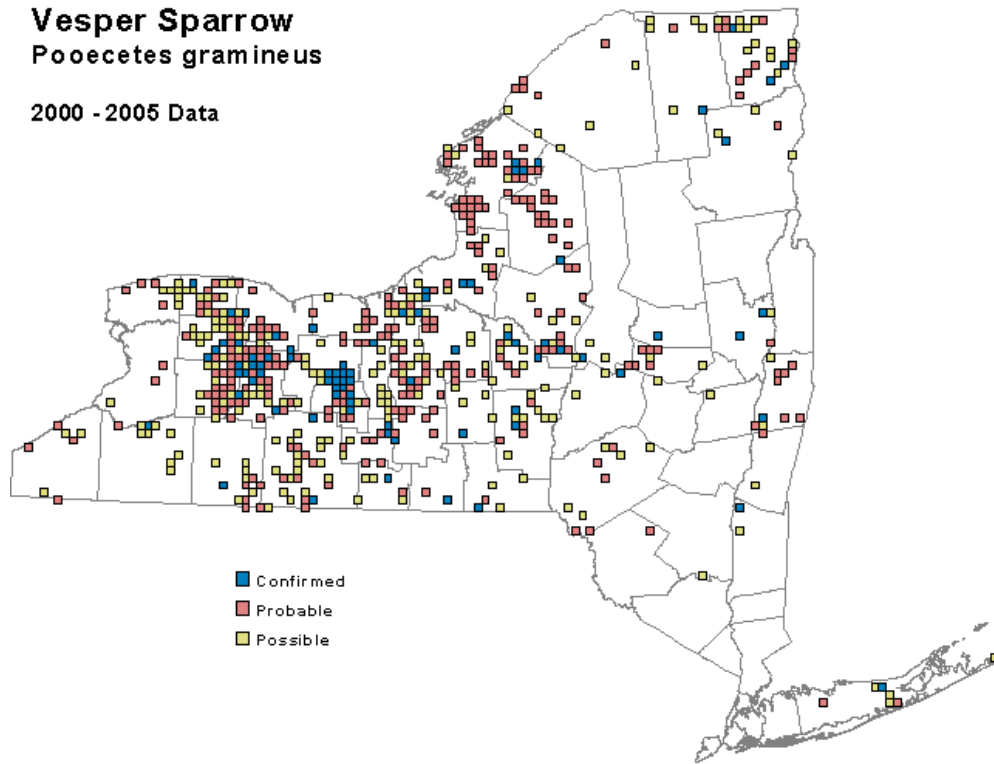
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Vickery, P. D., B. Zuckerberg, A. L. W. Jones, G. ShriveG and Shrubland birds in New England. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report PSW-GTR-191. http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/documents/psw_gtr191/Asilomar/pdfs/1087-1089.pdf

NYS BREEDING BIRD ATLAS COMPARATIVE DATA

Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*

2000 - 2005 Data



Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*

1980 - 1985 Data

