

Winter 2013

Saltmarsh Sparrow

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Recommended Citation

Bull, Milan G., "Saltmarsh Sparrow" (2013). *Wrack Lines*. 94.
<http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/wracklines/94>

Saltmarsh Sparrow

(Ammodramus caudacutus)

by Milan G. Bull

This small, secretive sparrow is a denizen of our coastal salt marshes where it runs about among the reeds and grasses with the celerity of a mouse and only flies when close pressed.

The Saltmarsh Sparrow is nonterritorial and promiscuous, and only females provide parental care. The male's short, soft, gasping song is given infrequently during the breeding season from May through August. After mating, the female constructs a cup-like nest of grass stems and blades, lined with finer grasses and sometimes built up on the sides to form a partial covering. The nest is attached to grass stems, six to fifteen centimeters above the ground. The female carries out all parental care, incubating the clutch of three to five eggs for 11 to 12 days, and subsequently providing food for the chicks. The Saltmarsh Sparrow is one of the few bird species that has evolved to live only in salt marshes where it is found in salt-tolerant grasses such as cordgrass, blackgrass and saltmeadow grass in a narrow region along the Atlantic east coast from Maine to North Carolina in the warm months and south to Florida in the winter.

This buffy, ochre-toned sparrow with orange cheeks has adapted to nesting in tidal grasses where it places its nest above the highest water level, or completes its nesting cycle between the monthly flood tides. It will often renest if the first attempt is flooded out.

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Photography by Paul Fusco



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Photography by Paul Fusco



Although it will make short flights, the Saltmarsh Sparrow is most commonly encountered walking, running and hopping along the ground as it forages amongst the dense stands of saltmarsh vegetation for insects, spiders, marine invertebrates and seeds.

Due to its restricted habitat of salt marshes, this sparrow is highly sensitive to sea level rise resulting from climate change and may be the next bird species to disappear if the current rate of sea level rise continues and our coastal salt marshes are threatened. The Saltmarsh Sparrow is currently listed by the Connecticut Endangered Species Act as a Species of Special Concern. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Red List (IUCN) lists this sparrow as “Vulnerable.”