

# Savannah Sparrow

*Passerculus sandwichensis*

The family *Emberizidae* encompasses a variety of widespread species, including sparrows, juncos, towhees, longspurs and Emberizid buntings. Sparrows are generally small, brown-bodied birds with streaked backs and conical bills for eating seeds. They feed on or near the ground but each species has its own habitat preferences. The word "sparrow" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon for "flutterer," in reference to their active flight. Sparrows may be difficult to identify as most species display a variety of immature, regional and/or seasonal plumages. Head and breast patterns, along with song and habitat are the most helpful in their identification. Savannah Sparrows are so named for the town of Savannah, GA, where the type specimen was collected.

The Savannah Sparrow is found in variety of grassy habitats, including meadows, tundra, marshes and bogs. They are rather gregarious and frequently occur in small flocks. Although these plucky little sparrows typically run or hop along the ground, they may perch conspicuously in bushes when disturbed. If flushed, these birds may fly away a short distance only to return momentarily to their place on the ground. When on the nest, however, they tend to be secretive. Identification of these sparrows by plumage may be difficult, as there are many seasonal and regional (subspecific) variants. Arctic races appear to be darker, with the head and upperparts streaked in brown and light gray. While the underparts are white, the sides and breast are streaked in brown. The sexes of this species closely resemble one another. At 14cm, these birds display a slight crest, pointed wings and a notched tail (although the tail is square during flight). Characteristic traits include a yellow or whitish eyebrow, a pale median crown stripe and a brown cheek-patch. Look for their unique bounding and buoyant flight to identify this grass sparrow on the fly!

The song of the Savannah Sparrow begins with 2-3 chip notes, followed by two buzzy trills, "ti, ti, ti, tseeeeeee, tisoooo." Their distinctive flight call is a thin "stip."

The female builds the cup-shaped nests in excavated or natural depressions flush with the ground or in grassy tussocks. Well concealed by overhanging vegetation, the nest is constructed of coarse grasses and lined with fine materials. The clutch consists of 2-6, 20mm pale greenish blue to off-white eggs, marked and occasionally wreathed in brown. For 10-13 days, both parents incubate the clutch but the female does about 85% of the sitting. After hatching, both parents rear the young birds that fledge in another 7-14 days. Female Savannah Sparrows are known to perform distraction displays to protect the nests. Flying low with shallow wing beats, the female feigns injury by spreading her wings and tail.

Savannah Sparrows consume primarily insects, snails, spiders and other arthropods throughout the summer. In winter and during migration, their diet

shifts to mostly grass seeds. They forage by gleaning food from the ground as they walk along the forest floor.

Fairly common, the Savannah Sparrow occurs in small, loose winter aggregations south throughout Mexico to Honduras and also in the Bahamas, Cuba and their associated islands. Some are year-round residents of the salt marshes in southern California. In summer, these sparrows roost in small, compact groups on the ground in short grasses. Their breeding range encompasses mainland Alaska and Canada and Vancouver Island, and stretches across most of the northern United States, dipping south into parts of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Georgia, Virginia and West Virginia.