

Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*)

Description: Smaller sparrow similar to Chipping sparrow. Rusty cap, pink bill, faint whitish eye-ring, pale rusty eyeline. Plain face gives it an “innocent” expression. Looks long tailed for its size. Call is a series of soft, plaintive notes, all on the same pitch, accelerating to a trill at the end.

Trend: Declining - Conservation Tipping Point Yellow Alert

Habitat: Found at all seasons in brushy overgrown fields, second growth, woodland edges, hedgerows in open country. Sometimes found around brushy edges of marshes. Does not usually live in wide-open grassy fields unless they contain scattered shrubs. Males tend to sing from obvious perches such as fence lines and the tops of small trees. At other times of year, pay attention to flocks of sparrows in such habitats, looking for smaller, warm-colored birds foraging near the ground—bearing in mind that such flocks may contain multiple species of sparrows.

They’ll breed in fields that were recently burned or cultivated as long as there are some trees or other perches available but will abandon such settings as thickets of trees grow back. Shy around human habitation, Field Sparrows avoid breeding near where people live. In winter, look for them in settings like their summer habitats: abandoned fields and pastures, forest edges, and fencerows. In migration they’ll occasionally turn up in suburban yards.

Ways You can help with Conservation: Field sparrows are declining due to loss of shrub meadow habitat, predation, declining insect (food) populations, and cowbird parasitism *Keeping cats indoors and reducing feral cat populations will help with conservation of all ground nesting species.* Field Sparrows often breed more than once a season. They build a new nest each time, building them higher and higher off the ground as the season progresses. Early spring nests are often on the ground, where they’re less visible. As leaves and groundcovers grow the birds build their nests in bushes and trees, where they’re safer from snakes and other predators.



Photo by Tom Driscoll



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If you own or manage a large tract of land, consider managing it as grassland or meadow. Field sparrows eat mainly grass seeds in winter, then switch to a blend of seeds and insect prey as the weather warms. Their small bills limit them to small seeds. In recent decades, development has likely permanently reduced Field Sparrow breeding habitat, which can best be maintained by protecting some woody vegetation in fields undergoing succession, and by thinning shrubs and saplings in forested habitat to maintain openings.

Field Sparrows are vulnerable to parasitism by Brown-Headed Cowbirds, which lay their eggs in the sparrows’ nests. Brown-headed cowbirds are a native species that

have been displaced from their natural, bison-following ways in midwestern prairies. Unfortunately, field sparrows have not yet adapted strategies to identify and remove cowbird eggs.