

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

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## Seaside Sparrow      *Ammodramus maritimus*

Throughout most of its range, from Massachusetts to southern Texas, the Seaside Sparrow is an inhabitant of the salt marsh the vast expanses of halophytic grasses or rushes that grow in intertidal habitats along the coast. This is true of 3 of the 4 subspecies that breed in Florida.

**Habitat.** Seaside sparrows nest in clumps of *Spartina* or fallen *Juncus*, from 30 to 91 cm (1 to 3 ft) above the ground. The grass nests may be simple, open cups constructed deep in the vegetation or more intricately domed structures in less dense vegetation, often with blades of living grass pulled down from above to form a canopy.

Seaside Sparrows feed on insects, spiders, crustaceans, and seeds, mostly gleaned from the marsh floor.

In Everglades National Park, the Cape Sable Sparrow (*A. m. mirabilis*) breeds in the extensive muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia filipes*) marshes where its nests may be constructed very close to the ground (Werner 1975). In coastal areas, high spring tides in May or June sometimes wipe out early breeding efforts. Usually 3, rarely 4, whitish eggs, speckled with brown or reddish brown, are laid. Incubation takes 12 or 13 days, and the young fledge at about 9 to 10 days of age. Usually 2, rarely 3, broods are reared.

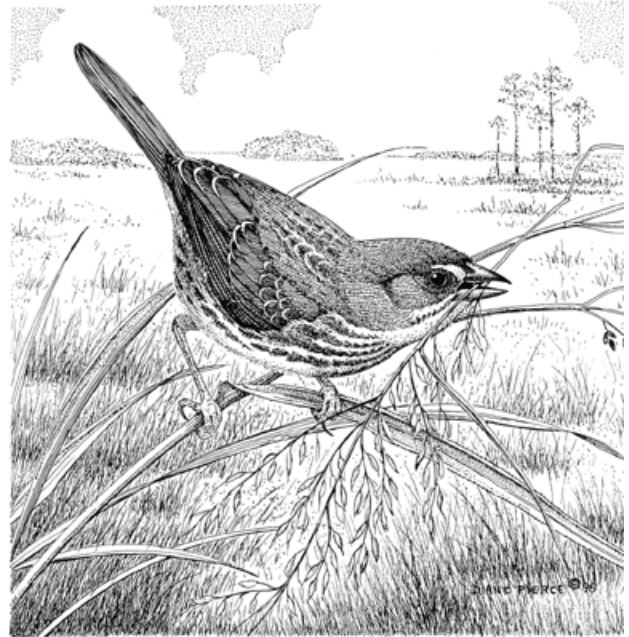


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**Seasonal Occurrence.** Most races of this species are thought to be sedentary, but the northern race, *A. m. maritimus*, is regularly seen in Florida during the winter (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

**Status.** The Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow, which today chiefly breeds in freshwater marshes of Everglades National Park, was originally discovered in the extensive *Spartina bakeri* marshes, a brackish habitat, on Cape Sable, the southern tip of Florida. This endangered population, so designated by both the state and federal governments, was estimated to number several thousand individuals in the early 1980s. Inasmuch as the marsh ecosystems in the park remain stressed by years of poor management of water resources north of the park, the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow remains endangered.

On the northeast coast, the Seaside Sparrow breeding in the salt marshes of Duval and Nassau Counties is MacGillivray's Seaside Sparrow (*A. m. macgillivrayi*) whose range extends northward into the Carolinas. Former the Florida segment of this population, arbitrarily named *A. m. pelonotus*, nested south to New Smyrna Beach. However, northward migration of mangroves, beginning in the 1920s, displaced the marsh grass, and by the mid-1970s no Seaside Sparrows were found breeding south of the St. Johns River in Duval County.

On the Gulf coast, Scott's Seaside Sparrow (*A. m. peninsulae*) breeds from Port Richey in Pasco County north through Apalachee Bay and in the marshes of St. George and St. Vincent Islands. This population was considered to consist of 2 races *peninsulae* from Dixie County south and *juncicolus* to the north. However, more recent evidence suggests that there is no reason to make this distinction.

A thorough search of the salt marshes in Bay County in the early 1980s failed to find any breeding Seaside Sparrows, although suitable habitat seemed to be sufficient, especially in East Bay. During the Atlas project a

"probable" breeding was reported in this bay. A population of 50 to 65 pairs of Seaside Sparrows breeds in the marshes of Hogtown Bayou in Choctawhatchee Bay (Kale 1983). The plumage of these birds appears intermediate between that of *peninsulae* (= *juncicolus*) to the east and that of *A. m. fisheri*, the Louisiana Seaside Sparrow, to the west. Seaside Sparrows that breed on the Avalon peninsula, which divides Escambia and East bays in Santa Rosa County, are the easternmost population of the Louisiana Seaside Sparrow, whose range extends westward to the central Texas coast. A few dozen pairs nest in the marshes near Mulat just north of Interstate 10 on the east side of Escambia Bay, and about 100 pairs nest in marshes along the southeast side of the Avalon peninsula in East Bay, with an unknown number of birds probably nesting in the marshes along the east side of Blackwater Bay.

A fifth race, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow (*A. m. nigrescens*) formerly inhabiting the marshes of Merritt Island and the St. Johns River east of Cocoa and Titusville in Brevard County, went extinct in 1980. Marsh destruction, caused by impounding of Seaside Sparrow habitat for mosquito control on Merritt Island, and a combination of other factors over drainage, canal and road construction, and extensive wildfires in the St. Johns valley destroy this subspecies.

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Sponsored by Celia V. Scudder

# Seaside Sparrow

