

Species Status Assessment

Common Name: Henslow's sparrow

Date Updated: March 2025

Scientific Name: *Centronyx henslowii*

Updated By: E. Simons

Class: Aves

Family: Emberizidae

Species Synopsis *(a short paragraph which describes species taxonomy, distribution, recent trends, and habitat in New York):*

Henslow's sparrow occurs roughly from New York to Minnesota and southward to Kansas in the west and Pennsylvania in the east. This is a grassland bird that prefers tall, dense grassy fields with no woody plants, some standing dead vegetation, and a thick litter layer (Herkert et al. 2002). It is found largely in pastures, both active and inactive (Smith 1988), and tolerates wet conditions (Bull 1974). The largest concentration of Henslow's sparrow occurs in Jefferson County. Other occurrences are scattered in the western part of the state; most of the records from eastern New York disappeared in the past 20 years.

Breeding Bird Survey data for the United States from 1966-2011 show a decline of 0.7% per year. BBS data for New York from 1966-2011 show that Henslow's sparrow populations are decreasing at a rate of approximately 10.5% per year (Sauer et al. 2012). Breeding Bird Atlas data for New York documented an 80% decline in occupancy from 1980-85 to 2000-05 (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

I. Status

a. Current legal protected Status

i. **Federal:** Not Listed **Candidate:** No

ii. **New York:** Threatened

b. Natural Heritage Program

i. **Global:** G4

ii. **New York:** S3B **Tracked by NYNHP?:** Yes

Other Ranks:

NYS 2025 SGCN Status: Species of Greatest Conservation Need

Partners in Flight – Tier I

Species of Northeast Regional Conservation Concern (Therres 1999)

Henslow's sparrow was considered for listing as federally Endangered by the USFWS in 1998, but the petition was rejected due to increasing populations in the core of the range.

Status Discussion:

The Henslow's sparrow is a rare to uncommon and local breeder in New York at lower elevations. Henslow's sparrow is ranked as Vulnerable in New York and as Critically Imperiled in Vermont, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Quebec. It has been extirpated in Connecticut.

II. Abundance and Distribution Trends

Region	Present?	Abundance	Distribution	Time Frame	Listing status	SGCN?
North America	Yes	-	-			-
Northeastern US	Yes	-	-			-
New York	Yes	Declining	Declining			Yes
Connecticut	No	Extirpated	Extirpated		NL	No
Massachusetts	No data	Unknown	Unknown	Only 2 occurrences since 1980	E	Yes
New Jersey	No	Declining	Declining	1981-85 to 1999	E	Yes
Pennsylvania	Yes	Declining	Declining		NL	Yes
Vermont	No	-	-			-
Ontario	Yes	Declining	Declining	1980-85 to 2001-05	E	-
Quebec	Yes	-	-			-

Column options

Present?: Yes; No; Unknown; No data; (blank) or Choose an Item

Abundance and Distribution: Declining; Increasing; Stable; Unknown; Extirpated; N/A; (blank) or Choose an item

SGCN?: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item

Monitoring in New York *(specify any monitoring activities or regular surveys that are conducted in New York):*

New York's Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) monitors grassland birds at eight Grassland Focus Areas in the state. Henslow's sparrow is one of the focal species in point counts that are conducted annually. In 2005, Audubon NY conducted grassland bird surveys within the New York grassland bird focus areas to help identify target species for each focus area. As a follow up to these surveys, in 2006 NYSDEC did targeted surveys for species that were not well represented in the 2005 survey. Henslow's sparrow was one of the primary species targeted during both of these survey efforts.

Trends Discussion *(insert map of North American/regional distribution and status):*



Figure 1. Range of the Henslow's sparrow in North America (Birds of North America Online 2013).

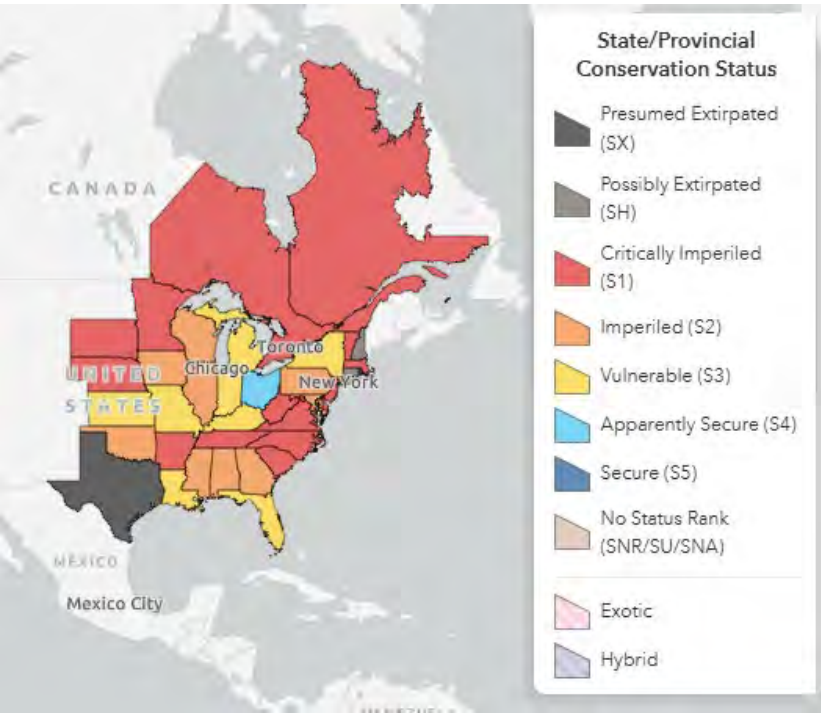


Figure 2. Conservation status of the Henslow's sparrow in North America (NatureServe 2024).

Breeding range map for Henslow's Sparrow

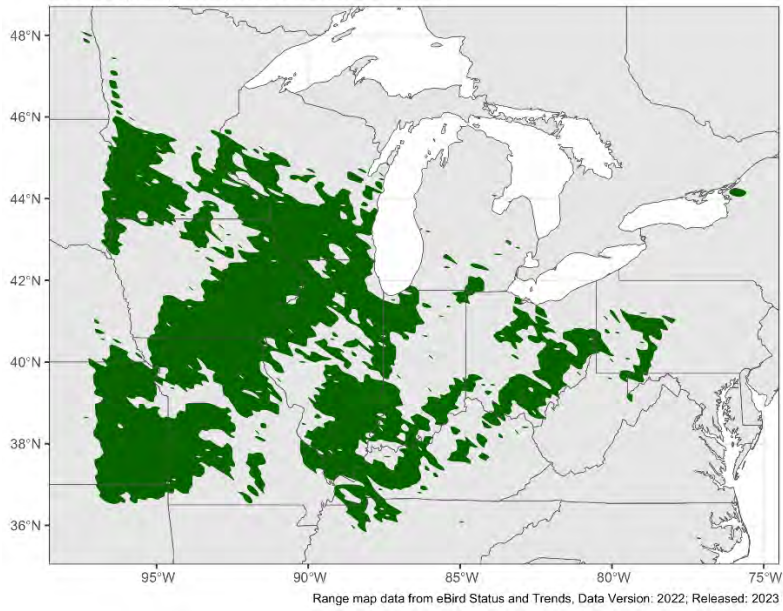


Figure 3. Breeding range of Henslow's sparrow in North America (eBird).

Year-round range map for Henslow's Sparrow

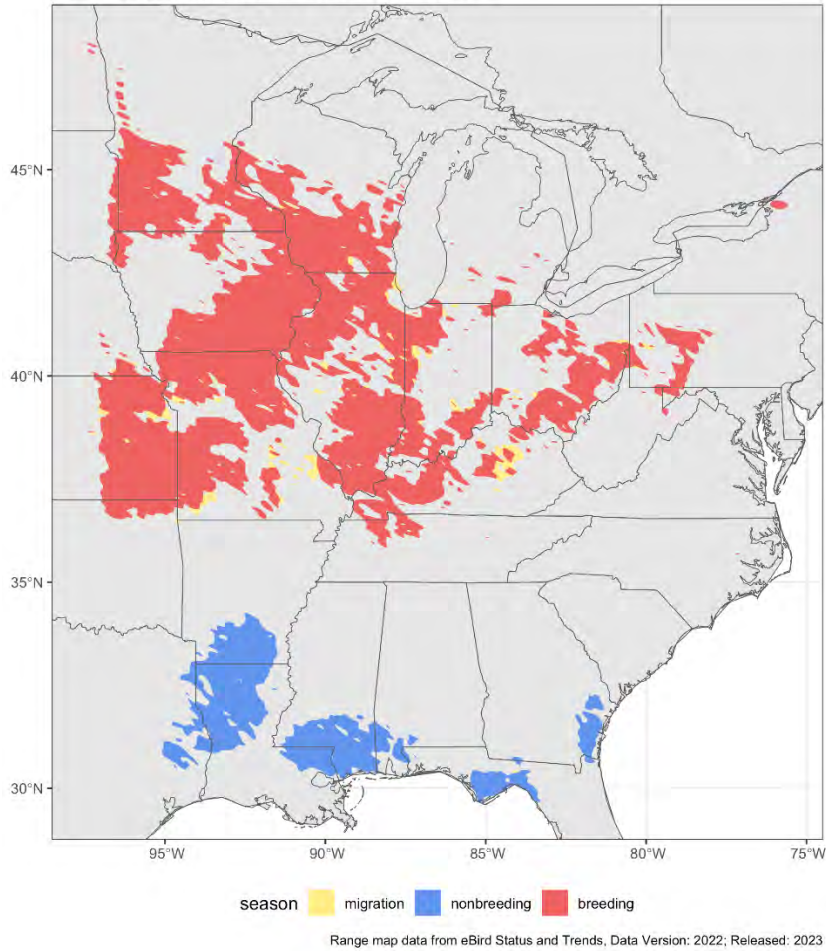


Figure 4. Year-round range of Henslow's sparrow (eBird).

Henslow's Sparrow state-level breeding trends 2012-2022

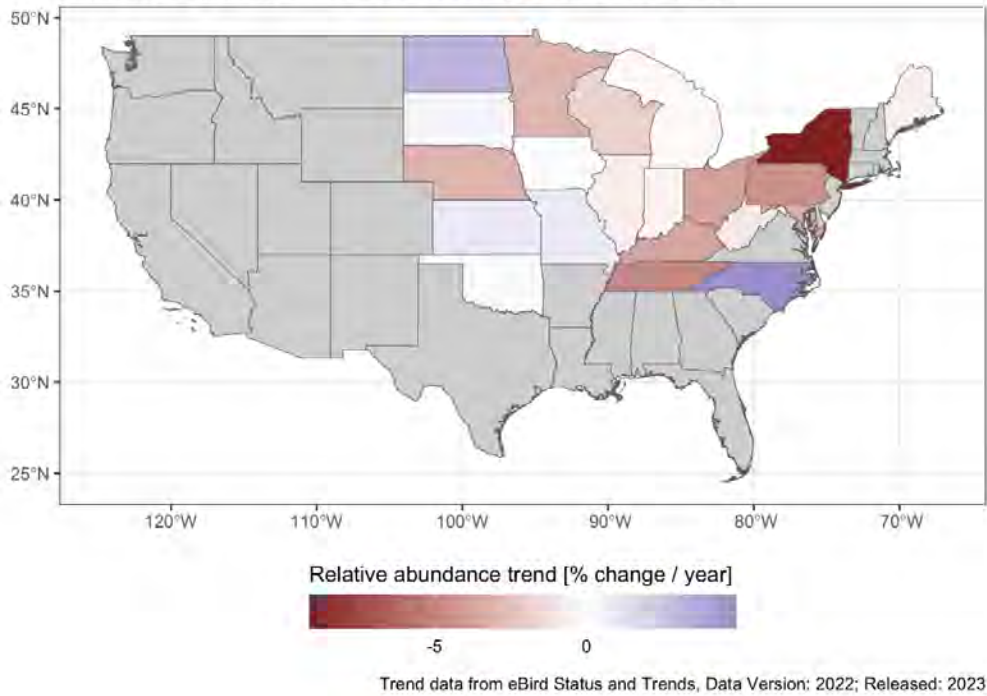


Figure 5. Breeding trends, by state, of Henslow's sparrow (eBird).

III. New York Rarity (provide map, numbers, and percent of state occupied)

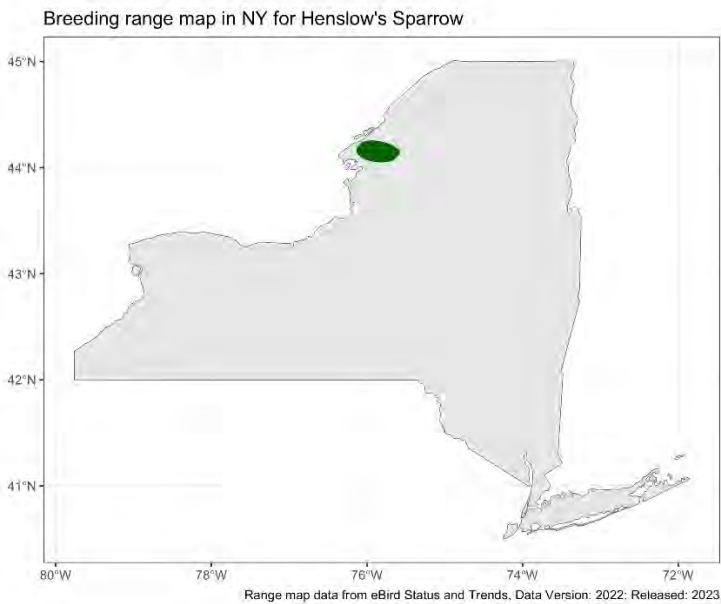


Figure 6. New York breeding range of Henslow's Sparrow (eBird).

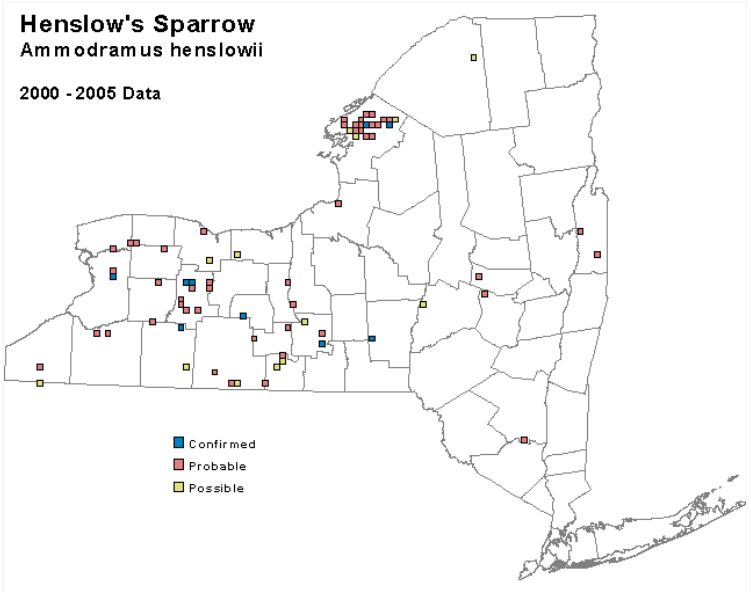


Figure 7. Henslow’s sparrow occurrence in New York State during the second Breeding Bird Atlas (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

Details of historic and current occurrence:

The first Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) (1980-85) documented occupancy in 348 blocks, 7% of the survey blocks statewide (Andrle and Carroll 1988). The second BBA (2000-05) documented occupancy in 70 blocks, 1% of the survey blocks statewide, a decline of 6% since the first atlas (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

The third BBA (2020-25) is currently underway and utilizes a different number and layout of survey blocks across New York, making direct comparison with the first two Atlases difficult. There were 5,333 blocks in the first and second BBAs, and there are 5,710 blocks in the current BBA, of which 1,815 are considered priority blocks. To date, Henslow’s sparrow has been documented in 3 priority blocks, <1% of all priority blocks statewide during the third BBA (NY BBA III Overview, 2023).

New York’s Contribution to Species North American Range:

Percent of North American Range in NY	Classification of NY Range	Distance to core population, if not in NY
1-25%	Peripheral	

Column options
Percent of North American Range in NY: 100% (endemic); 76-99%; 51-75%; 26-50%; 1-25%; 0%; Choose an item
Classification of NY Range: Core; Peripheral; Disjunct; (blank) or Choose an item

IV. Primary Habitat or Community Type (from NY crosswalk of NE Aquatic, Marine, or Terrestrial Habitat Classification Systems):

- a. Pasture/Hay
- b. Old Field Managed Grasslands

c. Wet Meadow/ Shrub Swamp

Habitat or Community Type Trend in New York

Habitat Specialist?	Indicator Species?	Habitat/Community Trend	Time frame of Decline/Increase
Yes	No	Declining	Since mid-1960s

Column options

Habitat Specialist and Indicator Species: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item

Habitat/Community Trend: Declining; Stable; Increasing; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item

Habitat Discussion:

The Henslow's sparrow is a grassland species, preferring tall, dense, grassy fields with little woody vegetation; wet grasslands are also used (NYNHP 2011). Peterson (1983) found them in large, ungrazed fields with a variety of moisture regimes and without woody invasion. They were often found on hilltops. Bull (1974) described their habitat preference in New York as "grassy fields and meadows with scattered bushes and herbaceous plants, both in wet and dry situations."

V. Species Demographic, and Life History:

Breeder in NY?	Non-breeder in NY?	Migratory Only?	Summer Resident?	Winter Resident?	Anadromous/Catadromous?
Yes	-	-	Yes	-	-

Column options

First 5 fields: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item

Anadromous/Catadromous: Anadromous; Catadromous; (blank) or Choose an item

Species Demographics and Life History Discussion *(include information about species life span, reproductive longevity, reproductive capacity, age to maturity, and ability to disperse and colonize):*

No data is available on either annual or lifetime reproductive success of Henslow's sparrows. Reports of apparent nest success (= number of nests that fledge at least one young/total number of nests found) range from 19% ($n = 16$ nests; T. McCoy unpubl., cited in Burhans 2001) to 54.5% ($n = 11$; Robins 1971). Henslow's sparrows are thought to be capable of raising at least two broods/year based on length of breeding season (Herkert et al. 2002).

Also, little information is available on lifespan and survivorship: Only ten banded individuals were recaptured in later studies (Burhans 2001). Of these, six were recaptured one year following banding; two were recaptured in the same year; and two were recaptured two years after banding (data from Bird Banding Laboratory 1933–1999, K. Klimkiewicz pers. comm., cited in Burhans 2001).

VI. Threats (from NY 2015 SWAP or newly described):

Threat Level 1	Threat Level 2	Threat Level 3	Spatial Extent	Severity	Immediacy	Trend	Certainty
1. Residential and Commercial	1.1 Housing & Urban Areas	-	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
2. Agriculture & Aquaculture	2.1 Annual & Perennial Non-Timber Crops	-	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
3. Energy Production & Mining	3.1 Oil & Gas Drilling	-	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
3. Energy Production & Mining	3.3 Renewable Energy	3.3.2 Wind farms	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
4. Transportation & Service Corridors	4.1 Roads & Railroads	-	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
7. Natural System Modifications	7.3 Other Ecosystem Modifications	7.3.2 Vegetation succession	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
8. Invasive & Other Problematic Species	8.1 Invasive Non-Native Plants & Animals	-	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
8. Invasive & Other Problematic Species	8.2 Problematic Native Plants & Animals	-	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
9. Pollution	9.3 Agricultural & Forestry Effluents	9.3.3 Herbicides & pesticides	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.

Table 1. Threats to Henslow's sparrow.

Land-use changes are a significant threat to grassland bird populations on regional and continental scales. From 1940 to 1986 in 18 northeastern states, the area in hay fields declined from 12.6 to 7.1 million ha. During the same period, hay fields planted to alfalfa and alfalfa mixtures, a vegetation type not typically used by many species of grassland birds, increased from 20% to 60% (Bollinger and Gavin 1992).

Since the mid-1940s, the eastward expansion of grassland birds has reversed in northeastern U.S. and southern Ontario as agricultural lands have been abandoned, reverting to deciduous forest (Robbins et al. 1986, Hussell 1987). Sibley (1988) noted that declines had resulted from the replacement of grain crops by corn and alfalfa, despite the use of corn fields for breeding noted by other authors.

Declines in some areas have been attributed to decrease in hayfield area, earlier and more frequent hay-cropping, and shift from timothy and clover to alfalfa; earlier, agricultural practices that converted wooded land to open land resulted in an increase in range (Bollinger et al. 1990, Bollinger and Gavin 1992). In New York, primary disturbance to nesting is hay-cropping; 100% of nests with eggs and young nestlings affected by mowing were abandoned or destroyed, but proportion of young lost declined with age of nestlings (Bollinger et al. 1990). A threat to the grasslands in New York is a failure to address the viability of dairy farming, especially smaller family farms (NYSDEC 2005). Fire-dependent pine barren type communities also support grassland species. Fire suppression can make them less suitable.

A study led by a Canadian toxicologist identified acutely toxic pesticides as the most likely leading cause of the widespread decline in grassland bird numbers in the United States. The 23-year assessment, which looked at five other causes of grassland bird decline besides lethal pesticide risk, including change in cropped pasture such as hay or alfalfa production, farming intensity or the proportion of agricultural land that is actively cropped, herbicide use, overall insecticide use, and change in permanent pasture and rangeland, concluded that lethal pesticides were nearly four times more likely to be associated with population declines than the next most likely contributor, changes in cropped pasture (Mineau and Whiteside 2013).

Henslow's sparrow was classified as "presumed stable" to predicted climate change in an assessment of vulnerability conducted by the New York Natural Heritage Program (Schlesinger et al. 2011).

Are there regulatory mechanisms that protect the species or its habitat in New York?

Yes: x

No:

Unknown:

If yes, describe mechanism and whether adequate to protect species/habitat:

Henslow's sparrow is listed as a threatened species in New York and is protected by Environmental Conservation Law (ECL) section 11-0535 and the New York Code of Rules and Regulations (6 NYCRR Part 182). A permit is required for any proposed project that may result in a take of a species listed as Threatened or Endangered, including, but not limited to, actions that may kill or harm individual animals or result in the adverse modification, degradation or destruction of habitat occupied by the listed species.

Henslow's sparrow is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. The Freshwater Wetlands Act provides protection for wetlands greater than 12.4 acres in size under Article 24 of the NYS Conservation Law.

Describe knowledge of management/conservation actions that are needed for recovery/conservation, or to eliminate, minimize, or compensate for the identified threats:

The NYSDEC's Best Management Practices (BMPs) for grassland birds should be used to guide habitat management on grassland habitat or habitat to be converted into grassland. The management goal of these BMPs is to maintain the open, grassy conditions necessary for successful breeding by grassland birds and to avoid disturbance to nesting birds. Techniques may include seeding, mowing, and removal of trees and shrubs including invasive species. Typically, land should be managed for a minimum of 5 years to begin showing benefits for grassland birds. These BMPs form the basis for specific 5-year Site Management Plans for landowners selected to receive technical and financial assistance through LIP (NYSDEC 2013).

The publication, *A Plan for Conserving Grassland Birds in New York* (Morgan and Burger 2008), identifies focus areas for coordinating grassland bird conservation efforts. Because grassland birds are sensitive to landscape-level factors and funding for conservation activities is limited, the best opportunity for achieving success is to concentrate efforts within regions of the state that support key residual populations of grassland birds. Suitable landcover classification datasets are needed to incorporate habitat availability into the delineation process.

Because the vast majority of remaining grassland habitat is privately owned, private lands incentive programs and educational programs should be a major component of the conservation effort. Protection of existing habitat for threatened and endangered species through enforcement of regulations pertaining to the taking of habitat is also a critical component of the conservation effort for these species (Morgan and Burger 2008).

Morgan and Burger (2008) recommend that further research is needed:

1. Methods and data for modeling distributions and abundance of grassland landcover across the landscape.
2. Impacts of management on productivity of grassland birds, to amplify existing information on grassland bird abundances associated with management.
3. Potential benefits of native grass species as grassland habitat in contrast with demonstrated benefit of non-native cool season grasses.

Conservation actions following IUCN taxonomy are categorized in the table below.

Action Category	Action	Description
A.1 Direct Habitat Management	A.1.0.0.0 Direct habitat management	Site/Area management
A.1 Direct Habitat Management	A.1.1.0.0 Manage plants, animals, fungi, or bacteria	Invasive/Problematic species control
B.3 Outreach	B.3.1.4.0 Public outreach and information	Awareness & Communications
C.6 Design and Plan Conservation	C.6.5.0.0 Conservation planning	-Site/Area protection -Resource/Habitat Protection
C.6 Design and Plan Conservation	C.6.5.1.3 Develop a conservation, management, or restoration plan for protected private lands	Habitat/Natural process restoration
C.7 Legislative and Regulatory Framework or Tools	C.7.1.0.0 Create, amend, or influence legislation, regulation, or codes	Policies and Regulations
C.9 Education and Training	C.9.2.0.0 Training and individual skill development	Training

Table 2. Recommended conservation actions for Henslow's sparrow.

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