Species Status Assessment

Common Name: Sedge wren **Date Updated:** March 13, 2025

Scientific Name: *Cistothorus stellaris* **Updated By:** Heidi Kennedy

Class: Aves

Family: Troglodytidae

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

Previously known as the short-billed marsh wren, the sedge wren is an inhabitant of wet meadows, hay fields, grasslands, and marshes. This wren's use of ephemeral habitats drives its tendency to abandon areas as they become too wet or too dry and move to new areas. Within a season, sedge wrens may raise one brood in May and June and then move to a southern or northeastern part of the range to raise a second brood in July and August. This pattern can make detection and monitoring by traditional methods unreliable. Little is known of the life history or demographics of this species.
In the Prairie Pothole region, where sedge wren is most abundant, Breeding Bird Survey data show significant increasing long-term and significant decreasing short-term trends: 3.08% increase per year from 1966 to 2022 and 2.68% decrease per year from 2000 to 2022. Significant declining trends were noted in the Northeast beginning in the 1950s due to destruction of wetlands. In response to this decline, sedge wren is now listed as Endangered in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont. It is listed as Threatened in New York.
In New York, where it is at the far eastern edge of its range, sedge wren was historically a sparse nester, and it remains so today. Since the mid-1980s, sedge wren occupancy in New York has increased by 26% as documented by the second Breeding Bird Atlas, though McGowan (2008) cautions that this species may have been overlooked during the first Atlas. Breeding occurs primarily on the Great Lakes Plain, and a consistently-breeding population appears to be establishing itself in St. Lawrence and Jefferson Counties. As a species far outside of its main range, however, sedge wren can be expected to remain uncommon in New York (McGowan 2008).

I. Status

a. Current legal protected Status

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

ii. **New York:** Threatened

b. Natural Heritage Program

i. **Global:** G5

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

Other Ranks:
-NYS 2025 SGCN Status: High Priority Species of Greatest Conservation Need
-IUCN Red List: Least Concern

Status Discussion:

Sedge wren is a rare to uncommon local breeder and migrant in New York. Sedge wren is ranked as Critically Imperiled in every northeastern state except New York, where it is ranked as Vulnerable. It is ranked as Apparently Secure in Ontario and as Imperiled in Quebec.

II. Abundance and Distribution Trends

Region	Present?	Abundance	Distribution	Time Frame	Listing status	SGCN?
North America	Yes	Declining	Unknown	1966-2022 BBS showed a non-significant incr easing trend of 0.46% annually, but From 2000-2022 there has been a significant decline of 2.28% annually		Choose an item.
Northeastern US	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	2000-2022 BBS showed a non-significant decline of -2.13% annually		Choose an item.
New York	Yes	Unknown	Stable	*2000-2022 BBS showed a non*-significant decline of 2.13 % annually. Between the 1980-1985 and 2000-2005 BBAs it was found in 26% more blocks	Threatened; HPSGCN	Yes
Connecticut	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Rare and sporadic since 1960s	Endangered	Yes
Massachusetts	Yes	Unknown	Increasing	The BBA during 2007-2011 documented this species 6 times	Endangered	Yes

Region	Present?	Abundance	Distribution	Time Frame	Listing status	SGCN?
				compared to 3 in the 1975-1979 BBA. There have been 12 occurrences since 1989		
New Jersey	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	"a very rare breeder"	Endangered	Yes
Pennsylvania	Yes	Stable	Stable	evidence of breeding increased slightly between the first (1982-1989) and second (2004-2008) BBAs. PA 2015-2025 SWAP calls short term (10-year trend) relatively stable	Endangered	Yes
Vermont	Yes	Stable	Stable	1976-81 to 2003-07	Endangered	Yes
Ontario	Yes	Unknown	Increasing	*2000-2022 BBS showed a non*-significant decline of 2.2% annually. Distribution between the two BBAs is relatively stable/increasing slightly (1980-85 to 2000-05)	Not Listed	Choose an item.
Quebec	Yes	Unknown	Stable	*2000-2022 BBS showed a non*-significant decline of 1.52% annually. Distribution between two BBAs stable in numbers	Not Listed	Choose an item.

Region	Present?	Abundance	Distribution	Time Frame	Listing status	SGCN?
				(1984-89 to 2010-14)		

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):*

From 2013 through 2021 NYSDEC conducted point counts within managed grassland habitat primarily at Wildlife Management Areas and NYS Grassland Landowner Incentive Program sites. The goals of these surveys were to determine which species were using managed lands, assess the success of management activities, and develop grassland bird Best Management Practices. Starting in 2022, the focus of the NYSDEC point counts has shifted to a more diverse set of sites, including more private land sites, in an effort to update the Natural Heritage Database. Prior to this, in 2005, Audubon NY conducted grassland bird surveys within the NYS 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. Sedge wren is one of the primary species targeted during all of these survey efforts.

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

Breeding Bird Survey data for North America show a non-significant increasing trend of 0.46% per year for 1966-2022 and a significant decreasing trend of 2.28% per year for 2000-2022. Trends in the Prairie Pothole region, where sedge wrens are most abundant, showed an increasing trend of 3.08% per year for 1966-2022, but a significantly decreasing trend of 2.68% per year for 2000-2022. BBS data in New York and the Northeast are too sparse for Meaningful analysis. Since the 1950s, Christmas bird counts and Breeding Bird Survey data have revealed alarming declines of sedge wren in the Northeast, the result of filling and dredging of wetland habitats, and the spread of invasive *Phragmites*.

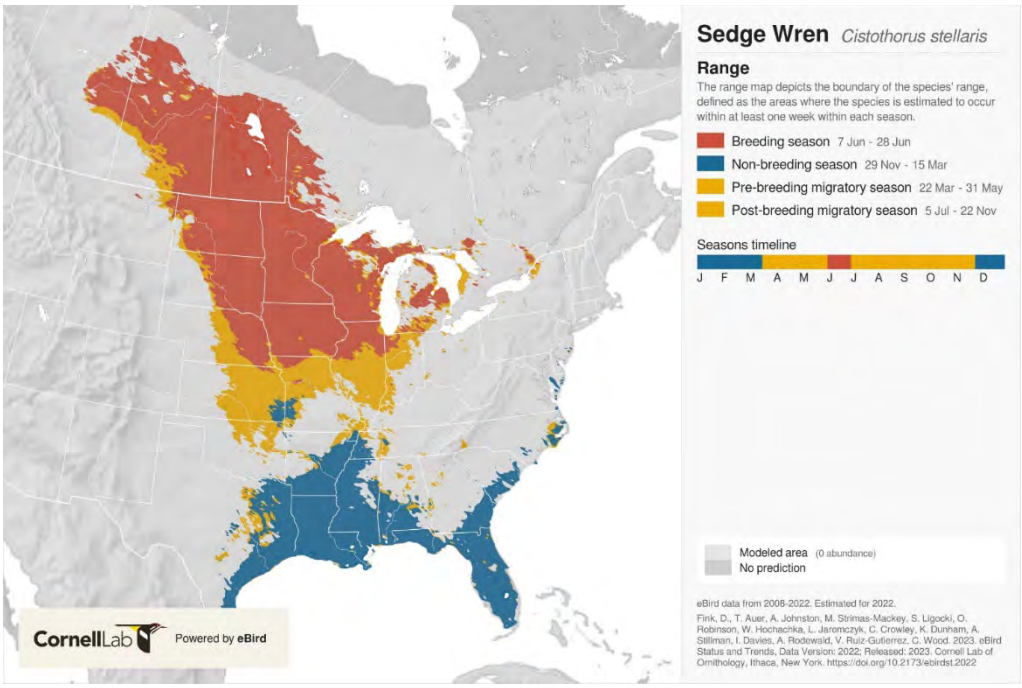

Figure 1. Sedge Wren distribution (ebird 2022)

Figure 2. Breeding range of Sedge Wren in North America (eBird).

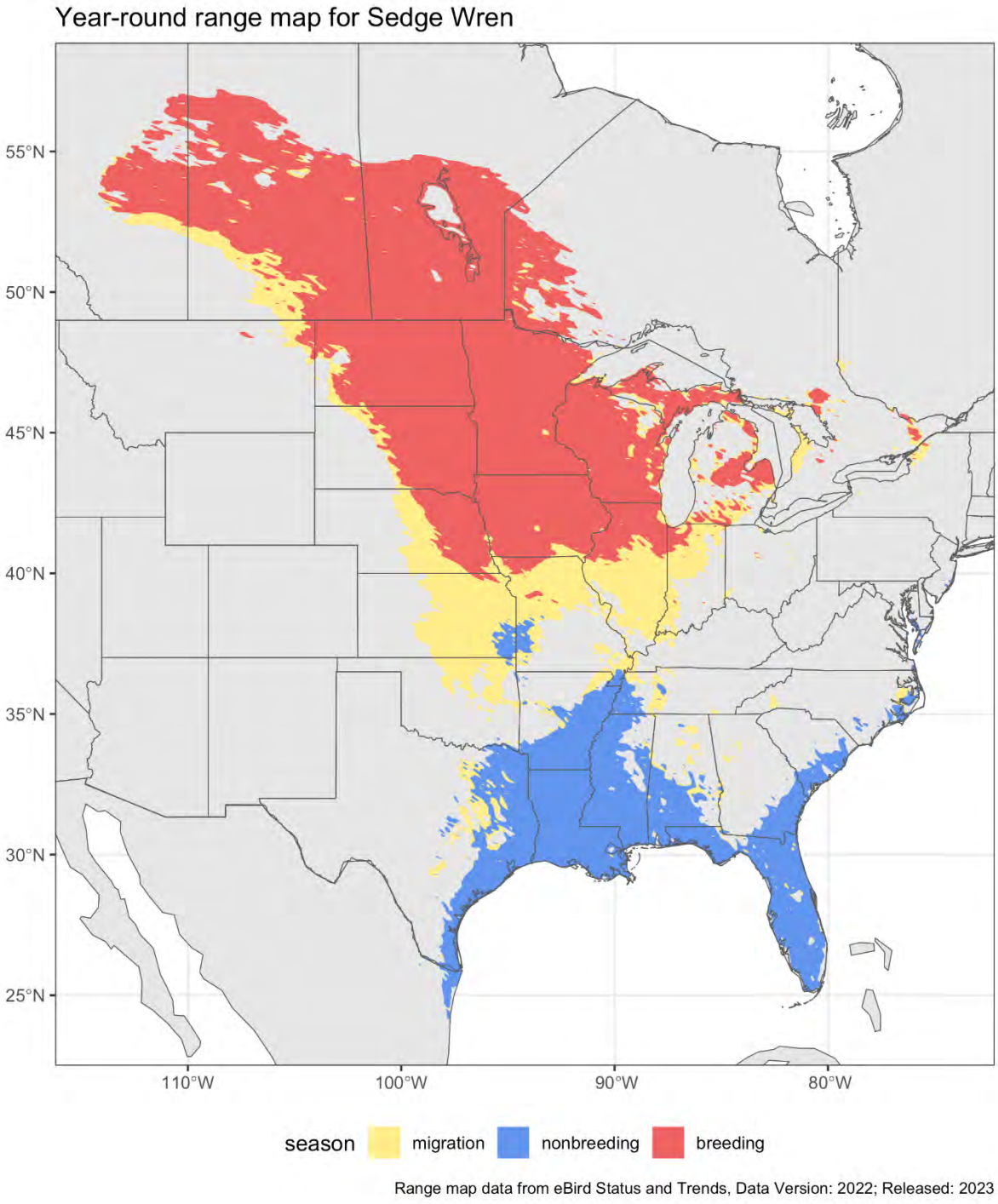

Figure 3. Year-round range of sedge wren (eBird).

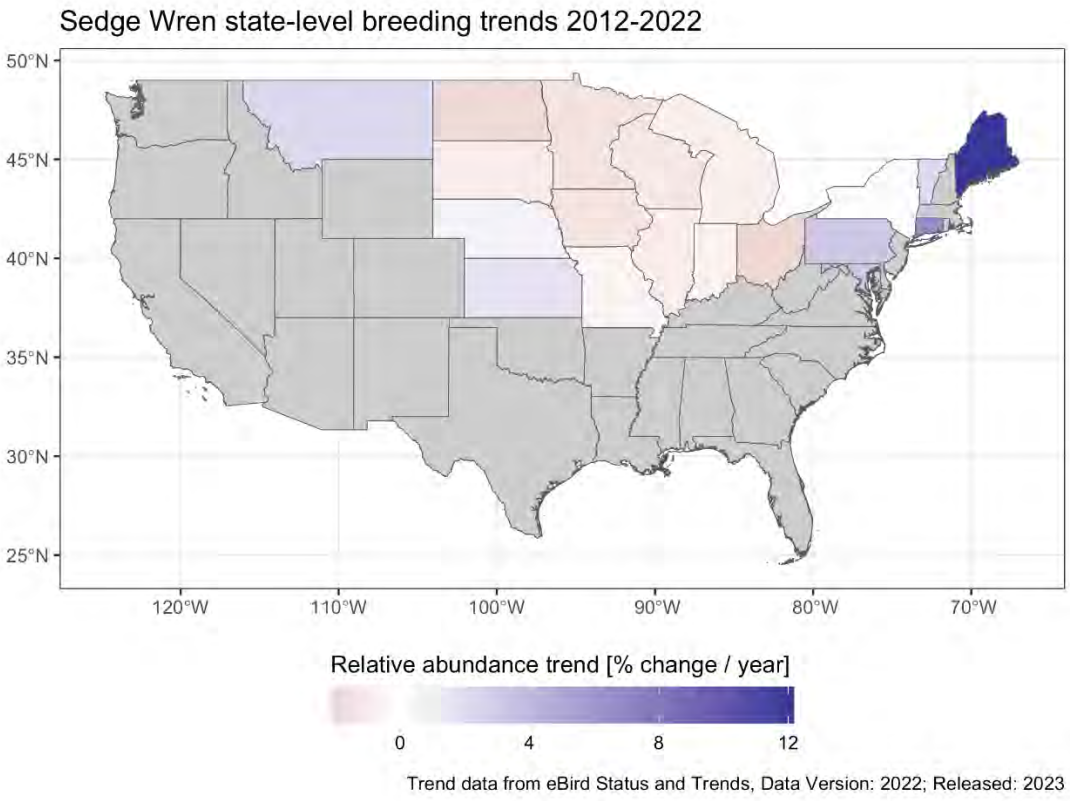

Figure 4. Breeding trends, by state, of sedge wren (eBird).

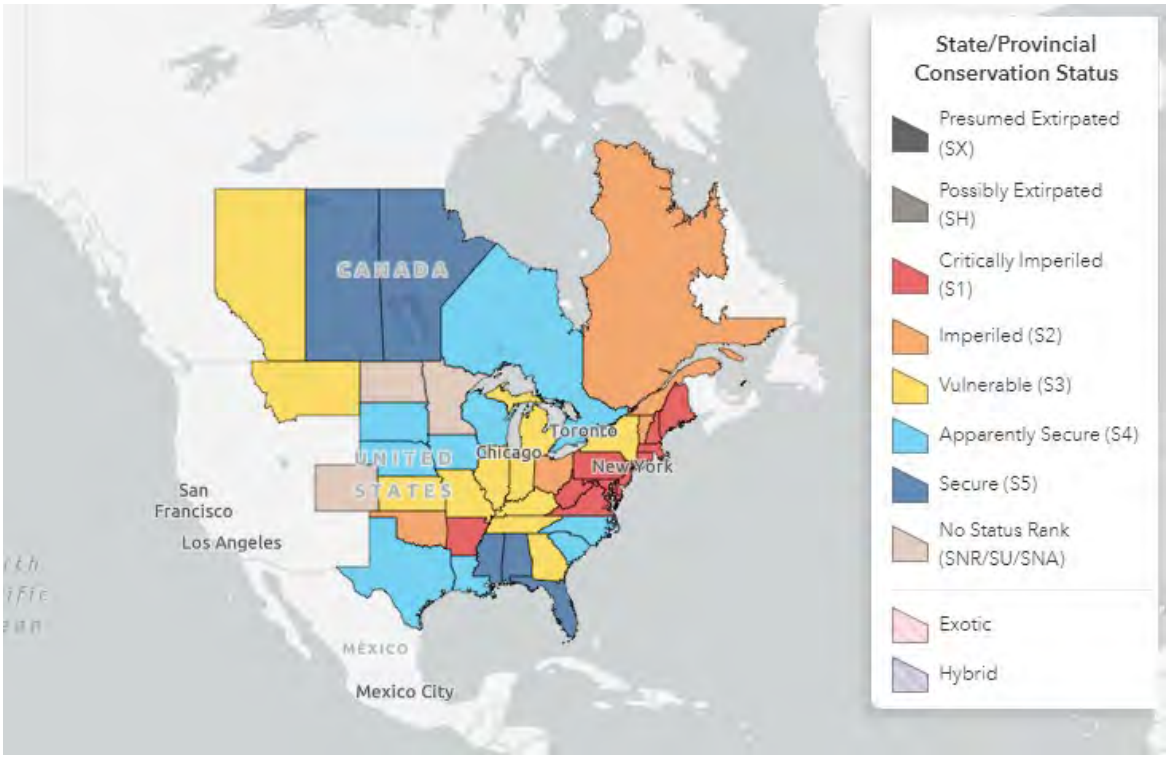

Figure 5. Conservation Status of Sedge Wren in North America (NatureServe 2023)

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

Sedge wren is a sparse and rare breeder in New York. It often breeds late in the season, apparently after breeding in the upper Midwestern United States and adjacent Canada. Records from the second Breeding Bird Atlas came from both early and late in the breeding season, however, suggesting that New York may have both first- and second-brood sedge wrens (McGowan 2008).

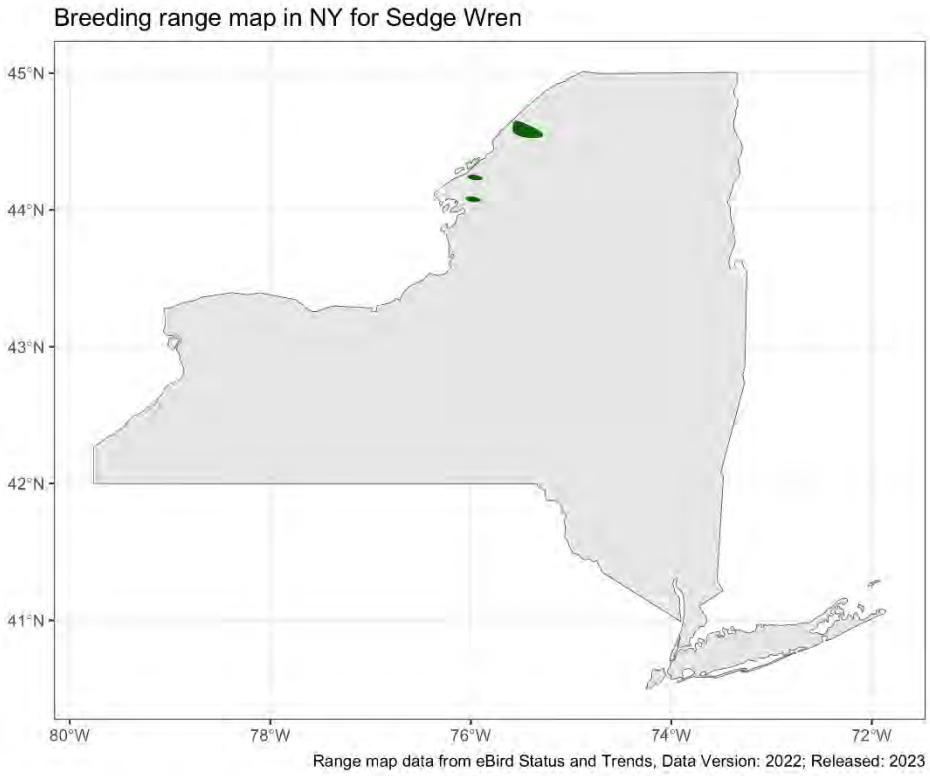

Figure 6. New York breeding range of sedge wren (eBird).

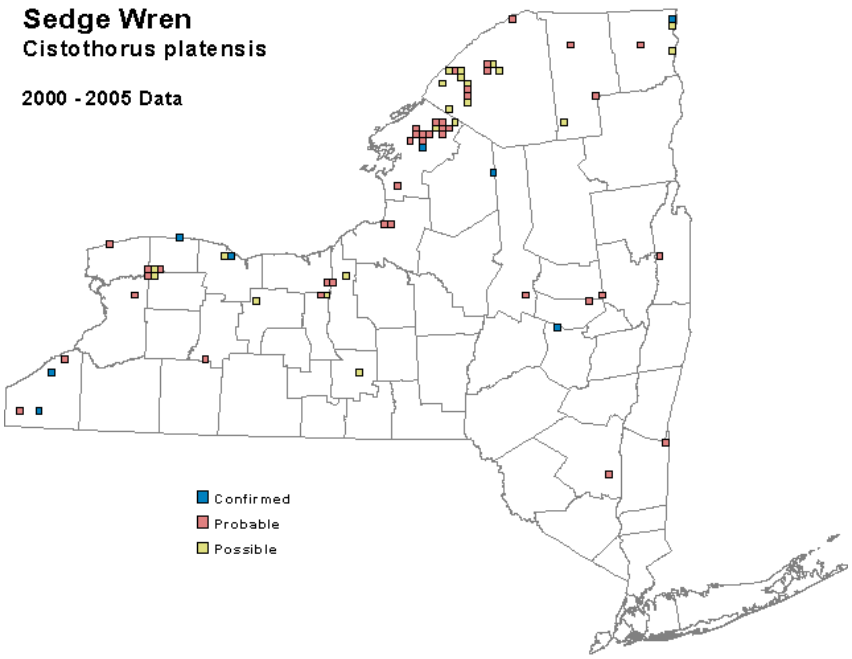

Figure 7. Sedge wren occurrence in New York State during the second Breeding Bird Atlas (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

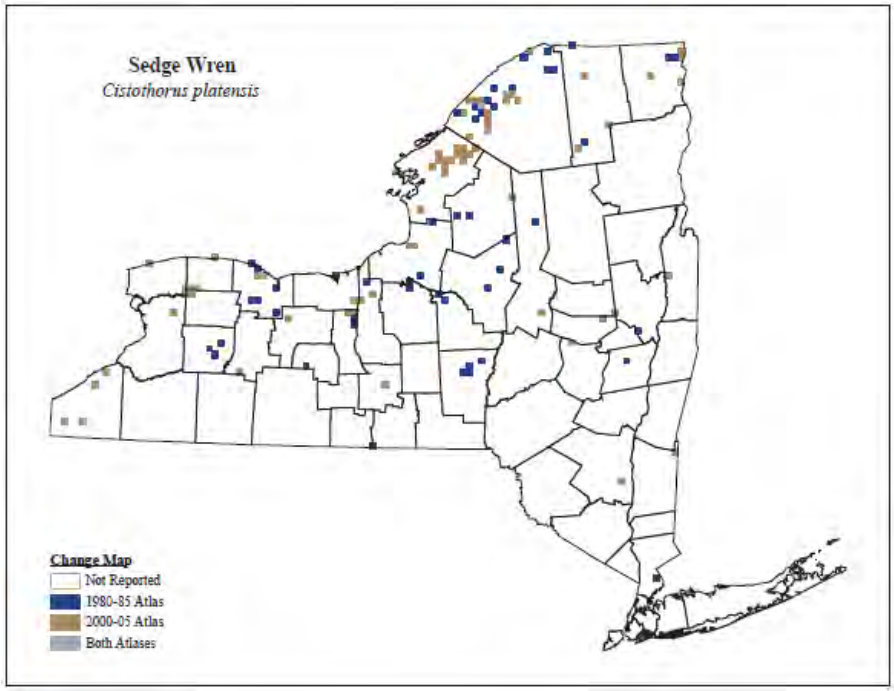

Figure 8. Change in sedge wren occurrence in New York State between the first Breeding Bird Atlas and the second Breeding Bird Atlas (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

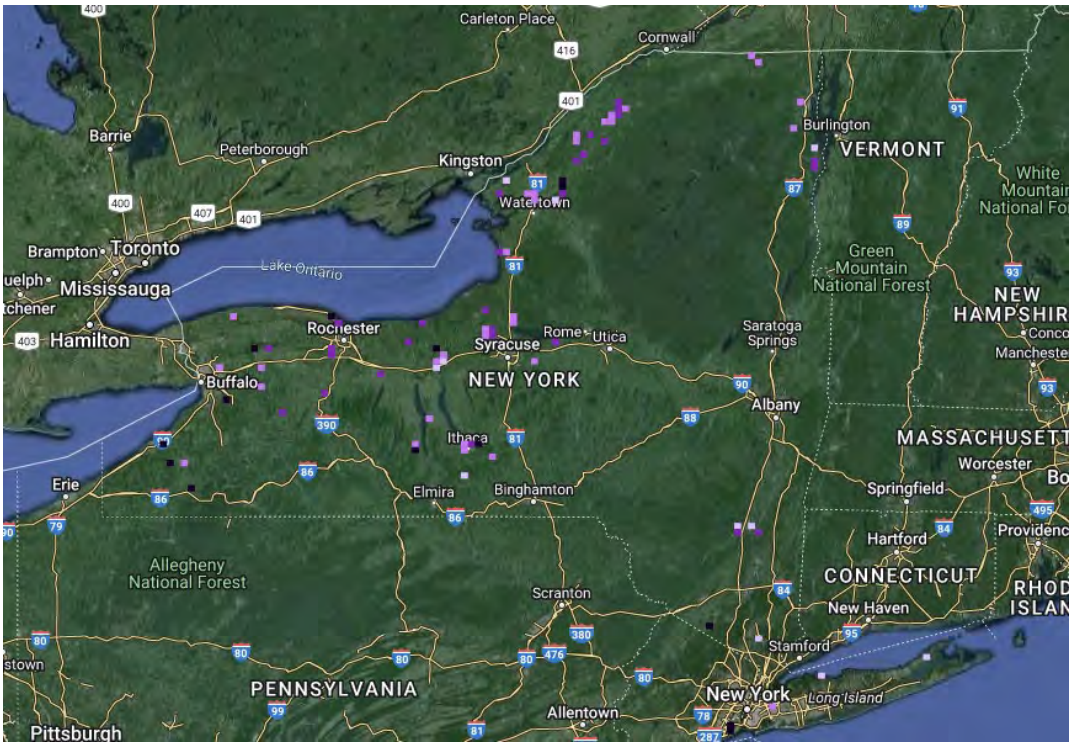

Figure 9. Records of Sedge Wren in New York (NYS BBA III Map, 2023)

Details of historic and current occurrence:

The first Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) (1980-85) documented occupancy in 57 blocks, 1% of the survey blocks statewide (Andrle and Carroll 1988). The second BBA (2000-05) documented occupancy in 72 blocks, 1% of the survey blocks statewide (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, sedge wren has been documented in 38 priority blocks, 2.3% of all priority blocks statewide during the third BBA (NY BBA III Overview, 2024).

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):*

1. Old Field Managed Grasslands

2. Wet meadow/Shrub Swamp
3. Pasture/Hay
4. Open Alkaline Peatlands
5. Open Acidic Peatlands

Habitat or Community Type Trend in New York

Habitat Specialist?	Indicator Species?	Habitat/ Community Trend	Time frame of Decline/Increase
Yes	No	Declining	

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:

Sedge wrens breed in a variety of wetlands with dense tall sedges and grasses, avoiding areas with standing water and cattails. Such areas include wet meadows, hayfields, marshes, upland edges of ponds, and sphagnum bogs. In the Northeast where breeding occurs later in the summer than in the Prairie Pothole region, sedge wrens use permanently wet marshes with tussocks (Bagg and Eliot 1937). Surveys done by NYSDEC have found sedge wrens nesting in a variety of managed grasslands.

V. Species Demographic, and Life History:

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

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):*

Sedge wrens are nomadic, breeding in the Prairie Pothole region in May and June and then moving to southern and northeastern areas of its range before breeding again in July and August. Site tenacity is low due to the nature of their wet meadow habitat, which is subject to periods of drying. Multiple broods may be raised each year, possibly in different areas of the range as birds move to take advantage of changing habitat conditions.

Breeding is thought to occur in the first year after fledging as in other wrens. Causes of mortality are poorly known (Herkert et al. 2001). Harvesting of hay and rice is known to destroy nests (King 1883, Roberts 1932, Meanley 1952, Frawley 1989) and may also kill some adults. Other sources of nest loss include predation, heavy rains, trampling by grazing cattle, and nest destruction by other sedge wrens (Walkinshaw 1935, Crawford 1977, Picman and Picman 1980, Burns 1982). Identity of nest predators is poorly known. Adults are known to experience fatal collisions with towers and buildings.

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

Sedge wren declines have been attributed to loss of habitat from filling of wetlands for conversion to agriculture and ditching for mosquito control. About 1.9 million ha of palustrine emergent wetlands, which include wet meadows important to nesting sedge wrens, were lost in U.S. between mid-1950s and mid-1970s (Tiner 1984, Herkert et al. 2009). Wetlands preferred by sedge wrens, such as sedge/grass meadows with moist or saturated soils, are the most easily drained and filled and have been the type of wetland most frequently destroyed by agriculture and urbanization (Tiner 1984). Wetlands with *Phragmites* are avoided by sedge wren, so this invasive species has also been a cause of habitat loss and degradation. Fatal collisions with towers and buildings have been documented for sedge wren (Taylor et al. 1983).

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).

In an assessment of vulnerability to predicted climate change conducted by the New York Natural Heritage Program, sedge wren was identified as a second-priority species whose sensitivity should be assessed in the future (Schlesinger et al. 2011).

In NY, large-scale development of wind and solar farms is also resulting in significant loss of grasslands and other open habitat types.

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. (habitat loss)	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. (intensification/changes in agriculture)	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
3. Energy Production & Mining	3.3 Renewable Energy	3.3.4 Solar 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.	Choose an item.
8. Invasive & Other Problematic Species	8.1 Invasive Non-Native Plants & Animals	8.1.1 Terrestrial animals (cats)	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	8.1.2 Terrestrial plants	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 sedge wren.

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:

The sedge wren 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.

Sedge wren is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act 1918. The Freshwater Wetlands Act provides protection for wetlands greater than 12.4 acres in size under Article 24 of the NYS Conservation Law (as of 2028 this will be 7.4 acres). Sedge wrens may use smaller wet meadow areas, especially if associated with other open habitat, and some areas that are cut for hay or lightly grazed despite being somewhat wet—and thus suitable for sedge wren—were likely not mapped as wetlands. With new wetland regulations in NY, smaller wetlands of unusual importance will also be regulated.

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 and wintering birds. Techniques may include seeding, mowing, burning, invasive species control, and removal of trees and shrubs. Typically, land should be managed for a minimum of 5 years to begin showing benefits for grassland birds. These BMPs formed the basis for specific 5-year Site Management Plans for landowners who were selected to receive technical and financial assistance through the LIP program which is no long active (NYSDEC 2013). BMPs are also used to guide management of grasslands on NYSDEC WMAs. Currently, DEC is working on developing species specific BMPs for the rarest species, including sedge wren. These would help guide habitat managed on DEC lands as well mitigation projects and development of work in concentration centers (see below).

Creation of dense nesting cover as a result of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan has helped establish sedge wren colonies in previously unoccupied areas at the northern edge of its range in Alberta (Prescott and Murphy 1999).

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).

The NYSDEC Strategy for Grassland Bird Habitat Management and Conservation 2022-2027 outlines methods for implementing priority actions for creating, managing, and maintaining grassland bird habitat within New York State. This includes the designation of Grassland bird Concentration areas. The goal of grassland bird concentration centers across the state is to increase the amount of grassland habitat (particularly the amount of grassland managed using best management practices for grassland birds) within more focused areas that have existing populations of rare species.

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.

Another research question that should be addressed is the impact of energy projects, such as large scale solar, on this species. The success of mitigation efforts should also be addressed.

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

Action Category	Action	Description
C.6 Design and Plan Conservation	C.6.5.0.0 Conservation planning	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.7.1.3.0 Create, amend, or influence regulation	
C.7 Legislative and Regulatory Framework or Tools	C.7.2.1.0 Create or amend policies	
C.9 Education and Training	C.9.2.0.0 Training and individual skill development	Training

Table 2. Recommended conservation actions for sedge wren.

The Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (NYSDEC 2005) includes recommendations for the following actions for grassland birds.

Easement acquisition:

____ Identify ownership of grasslands in core focus areas, and focus Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) funding for use in conserving the most important privately-owned grasslands in the state, and distribute $400,000 per year from LIP to conserve priority grasslands.

Habitat management:

____ Develop habitat management guidelines and action plans for priority focus grassland bird species.

Habitat research:

____ Evaluate the effects of specific farming and management practices, such as: timing of mowing, intensity of grazing, frequency of mowing, mowing versus haying versus prescribed fire, and width of buffer strips on productivity of grassland birds.

Other acquisition:

____ Incorporate priority grassland focus areas into the NYS Open Space Plan.

Other action:

____ Work with public land managers, including NRCS, USFWS, DEC and others, to better direct funding and other resources to the highest priority areas and projects for grassland habitat management. The ability to focus funding sources in core priority grasslands will be key. If the funding sources from National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) cannot be adequately focused in priority areas, then this will cripple the ability to conserve the most critical grassland areas and will result in continued declines in grassland birds even within these focus areas.

____ Develop an outreach program to educate the public and land managers on the need for, and wildlife benefits, of grasslands. Also provide technical guidance on what and how to benefit grassland species. Outreach to private landowners will be a key first step to educate the public about the importance of their lands to grassland birds. So much of this habitat exists on private lands that their cooperation will be the ultimate deciding factor on whether species declines can

be halted. Their cooperation at the level needed for meaningful change will probably hinge on some form of subsidies.

Population monitoring:

____ Develop and implement supplemental monitoring programs for grassland bird species that are not adequately sampled by BBS to determine precise population trends and evaluate effectiveness of conservation efforts. Use long term trend data to determine effectiveness of grassland conservation efforts.

____ Complete inventory of potential grassland habitat for species present, distribution, and relative abundance of priority species.

Statewide management plan:

____ Complete a comprehensive Grassland Bird Conservation Plan that coordinates research, management, and conservation efforts to more effectively conserve NY's grassland birds. Identify priority species and delineate priority focus areas for conservation and management.

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