

Pooecetes gramineus affinis

English name coastal vesper sparrow

Scientific name *Pooecetes gramineus affinis*

Other English names Oregon vesper sparrow; vesper sparrow *affinis* subspecies

Other scientific names none

Risk status

BC: critically imperilled (S1B); red-listed

Canada: unranked (N?B)

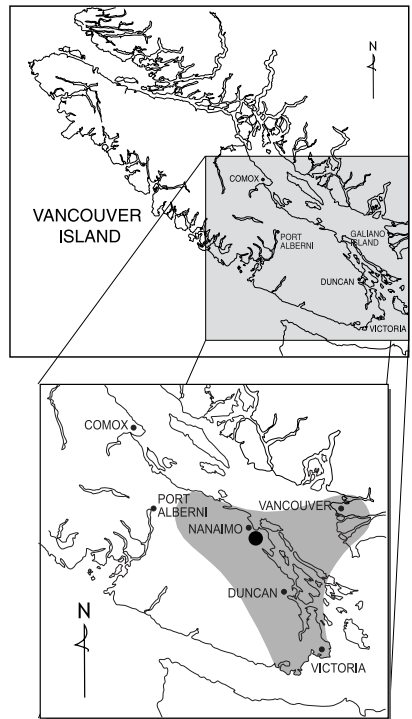
Global: vulnerable (G5T3)

Elsewhere: Oregon – imperilled (S2B, S2N); Washington – imperilled/vulnerable (S2S3B, S2N)

Range/Known distribution

Coastal vesper sparrows breed at low elevations from southeastern Vancouver Island south through Washington and Oregon to northwestern California. In Washington, populations are much reduced from historic levels and the subspecies is a candidate for endangered species listing due to the threat of extirpation. In Canada, the coastal vesper sparrow only occurs in extreme southwestern British Columbia. The subspecies historically bred on southeast Vancouver Island from the Englishman River estuary to Mill Bay. Breeding also occurred at a few sites in the lower Fraser River Valley until the 1960s. Current distribution is restricted to a single site near Nanaimo. A 2002 inventory found only five nesting pairs of coastal vesper sparrows remaining in British Columbia.

Coastal vesper sparrows that breed in British Columbia are migratory and probably winter in California.



Distribution of *Pooecetes gramineus affinis*

● breeding site

● approximate former breeding distribution

Poocetes gramineus affinis

Field Description

6". Reminiscent of a greyish song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) with a **white eye-ring**. Breast is finely streaked, but **without central spot**. **Chestnut shoulder patches** and **white outer tail feathers** are evident when bird is in flight. Shoulder patches are sometimes visible while bird is perched. Tail is notched, bill and legs are pale.

Males can be sighted singing from high perches on their territories. Birds mainly forage while hopping along the ground, but also hover to take insects from higher vegetation. Diet consists of invertebrates and the seeds of grasses and forbs. On Vancouver Island, birds have been observed eating dandelion seeds as well as gleaning insects from low-growing foliage.

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

Look for the chestnut shoulder patches and white eye-ring. The coastal vesper sparrow spends more time on the ground than other sparrows and often runs for dozens of metres before taking flight.



Suzanne Beaulieu

Poocetes gramineus affinis

Pooecetes gramineus affinis

Life history

Breeding birds arrive on Vancouver Island in April. The nest, situated on the ground and concealed by low-growing vegetation, is constructed by the female and consists of a cup of grasses, rootlets, and similar materials. The female is primarily responsible for incubation, although both sexes feed the young. Nestlings fledge after about 10 days and are tended by the parents for up to a month after fledging. The male will take over maintaining the first brood if a second clutch is laid. Site fidelity appears to be high; the remnant population on Vancouver Island has continued breeding at the same site for several years. It is not known whether juveniles exhibit similar fidelity to their natal site. As foraging occurs almost entirely within breeding territories, territory size is probably related to availability of food.

Habitat

Coastal vesper sparrows are birds of dry, open grasslands. Suitable habitat in the Georgia Depression would formerly have been maintained through natural events such as fire and erosion, and the subsequent creation of open areas with low and patchy grasses or other herbaceous vegetation. Breeding vesper sparrows require non-uniform habitat structure to provide a combination of exposed singing perches, escape and nest cover, and open foraging areas; uniformly structured grassy areas such as pastures and hayfields appear to be avoided. On Vancouver Island, coastal vesper sparrows use Scotch broom* (*Cytisus scoparius*) for singing perches and escape cover. Habitat structure appears to be more important than plant species composition, and large habitat patches seem to be preferred over smaller ones.

Coastal vesper sparrows breeding on Vancouver Island co-occur with the red-listed streaked horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris strigata*). At Fort Lewis, Washington, these two species share similar habitats with nesting western bluebirds (*Sialia mexicana*), another species at risk.

Pooecetes gramineus affinis

Why the species is at risk

Suitable habitat for many grassland species is declining due to urbanisation and the conversion of natural habitats to agricultural areas, particularly in areas such as southeast Vancouver Island and the lower Fraser River Valley, where human population growth rates are among the highest in the country. Changes in natural disturbance regimes (e.g., fire suppression) have also led to loss and degradation of previously open native habitats. In rural areas, depredation by cats and intensive agricultural practices such as mowing, mechanical harvesting, and tilling are common threats to many ground-nesting birds. Use of pesticides during the breeding season may contribute to decreased availability of the insect foods required for the rearing of young birds.

What you can do to help this species

Management practices should be tailored to the needs of the species and its habitat. Potential management tools will depend on the specific circumstances and may require experimentation prior to implementation. **Before taking any action, expert advice should be obtained, and no action taken without it. Please refer to the introductory section of this manual.**

To ensure persistence of this subspecies in British Columbia, it will be critical to undertake habitat management activities for the province's only known breeding population. Stewardship of this site may enhance breeding success and lead to local population expansion, so potential habitat nearby should also be located and enhanced where possible. Other sites with apparently suitable habitat on southeast Vancouver Island should be surveyed, and treated in a similar manner if new breeding populations are located. Specific stewardship activities include restricting intensive agricultural activities (e.g., mowing, application of pesticides) during the breeding season, and engaging in judicious control of invasive shrubs such as Scotch broom.* Such control programmes should take care to maintain structural habitat features such as singing perches, nesting and escape cover, and open foraging areas.

References

Beauchesne, S.M. 2002. Coastal Vesper Sparrow stewardship account for the Garry oak ecosystems of southwestern British Columbia. Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team. Victoria, British Columbia.

For further information, contact the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, or see the web site at: www.goert.ca.

Photograph reprinted with permission of Suzanne Beauchesne.

© 2003

*Refers to non-native species.