

Hatchlings give hope for endangered songbird's survival

May 13 2016, by Joann Adkins



The Florida Grasshopper Sparrow is one of the world's most endangered birds. This month, one of the first females of the species to be reared in captivity welcomed four tiny hatchlings. Scientists are calling it a historic moment in an effort to save the species. Credit: Florida International University

The first captive-bred Florida Grasshopper Sparrow hatched this week

under the care of researchers with Florida International University's Tropical Conservation Institute.

One of the world's most endangered birds, the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow resides exclusively in Central Florida. At last count, less than 100 males remain in the wild and the number of elusive females is unknown. In 2015, [seven sparrows were put in the care of TCI researchers](#)—the first to ever be reared in a captive setting. TCI is a collaboration with the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation in Loxahatchee, Fla., where the sparrows are currently residing.

"The first captive breeding of the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow sparks hope for this critically endangered endemic from Central Florida's prairie," said TCI Director Paul Reillo, who is also the founding president of Rare Species. "With wild populations declining, our first priority is to prevent extinction—which, sadly, was the fate of the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow's close relative, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow, 30 years ago. This first captive clutch is exciting and humbling, providing an intimate window into the sparrow's secretive world. It also reminds us that recovery will take many years, concerted, coordinated effort, and substantial funding."

In total, four chicks hatched this week, with the first making its debut at 7:30 a.m., May 9.

The chicks were a pleasant surprise for Reillo. When it came to nesting, he expected several false starts because of the small number of birds currently residing with TCI. Between three males and four females, a successful nesting required a pair of unrelated birds that would get along well enough to mate and successfully hatch chicks. The odds were long. But two birds started showing interest in each other in early spring and the female laid her first egg April 26.



Three of the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow chicks hatched May 9 and the fourth made its debut the following day. They are the first hatchlings of this species bred in captivity. Credit: Florida International University

The chicks are estimated to weigh less than 2 grams. Currently, the mother is taking care of the young, with the father showing little interest. While males typically participate in the feeding in the wild, researchers say it is not unusual for the male to not participate in captive settings. Fortunately for the new residents, TCI researchers and Rare Species staff are working around the clock to ensure the mother and chicks are fed and properly pampered. The chicks are expected to fledge from their nest next week.

"We are delighted to see nestlings so soon, with only a handful of sparrows in captivity—a remarkable feat considering the parents are barely 1-year-old," Reillo said.

While the chicks give scientists a reason to celebrate, Reillo points out much uncertainty remains. After all, four [chicks](#) is a long way from recovery for a species on the brink of extinction.

Conservationists agonized for years over how to stop the plunge in the tiny songbird's population, occurring for reasons still unknown. In a desperate attempt to save the species, officials from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gave approval last year to take a small number into captivity. Currently, the now-11 residing in Loxahatchee are the only ones living under the care of researchers in captivity.

"The first captive Florida Grasshopper Sparrow breeding illuminates why captive breeding can be an essential conservation tool," Reillo said. "We can prevent extinctions, buy time to develop recovery options, and discover fresh solutions to problems. This is a vital part of a comprehensive species-recovery program."

Aside from the biological challenges of breeding such a delicate species in captivity, another challenge is funding. Researchers are relying on a series of grants to cover the nearly \$120,000 in annual costs to sustain the [captive breeding](#) program for the birds. TCI also has received a donation of cooling fans from [Dyson](#) and feeding supplies from [Timberline Fisheries](#). But as Reillo points out, the financial cost is minor when compared to the cost of losing an entire species to extinction.

Provided by Florida International University

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