

Tiny endangered songbirds given second chance at survival

22 September 2015, by Joann C. Adkins



The above sparrows are among seven currently in the care of FIU scientists. Photo credit: FIU Tropical Conservation Institute

Seven Florida grasshopper sparrows, among the world's most endangered birds, have been given a second chance at survival in the care of researchers working to save threatened species across the planet.

The team is part of the FIU Tropical Conservation Institute (TCI), a newly launched partnership between Florida International University and the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF). Less than 100 male Florida grasshopper [sparrows](#) are accounted for in Central Florida, their only known habitat. Five of the seven sparrows were taken as tiny chicks from nests likely to fail and hand-reared from five days of age. The other two were parent-reared, and all are youngsters from this year's summer breeding season. These seven tiny songbirds are the first of their kind to be raised in a captive setting.

"The plight of these sparrows is, unfortunately, a common theme throughout the tropics and subtropics," said conservationist and TCI Co-

Director Paul Reillo, who is also RSCF's founding president. "The Tropical Conservation Institute is designed to address the critical issues driving wildlife to extinction and declines in biodiversity-rich ecosystems. These little sparrows, and all the species fighting for survival on this changing planet, are why we're here."

In addition to the sparrows, ambitious conservation projects are currently under way for the East African bongo antelope, reef sharks, a variety of parrots, small Amazonian primates and many others. The philosophy is simple — protect and recover flagship species— which helps ecosystems and helps other species and people that live within those ecosystems.

TCI brings together conservation leaders, practitioners, students and researchers to benefit threatened species. Some of the work focuses on captive-breeding programs, but the end goal is field-based conservation of wild populations and habitats. Just as important, TCI's team of researchers are preparing the next generation—one that will carry the charge of stewarding a natural world shredded by increasing human demand.

Today, their focus is on the Florida grasshopper sparrows.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with state agencies and scientists, has developed a captive-rearing protocol for the grasshopper sparrow, but it's too soon to predict the odds of success. Currently, the seven under the care of TCI scientists are keeping pace with their counterparts in the wild—chirping, flying, eating and exhibiting lots of energy.

"The TCI was established with one overarching goal — the survival of [threatened species](#), such as the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow, and their habitats," said TCI Co-Director Mike Maunder, who also serves as associate dean of FIU's College of

Arts & Sciences. "As scientists, we are seizing the opportunity to observe and learn more about this elusive species. We will be able to apply what we learn to other species and to guide our teaching and research here at FIU."

FIU's geographic expertise in [conservation](#) extends from South Florida to the Caribbean, Central and South America, Africa, the Pacific and Asia. These regions comprise the top global biodiversity hotspots, meaning areas of exceptional [species](#) richness facing extraordinary threats.

Provided by Florida International University

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