

Investigating the Status of the Henslow's Sparrow in Southern Illinois

By Natasha Harroff

When thinking about the southern Illinois landscape, a heavily forested area usually comes to mind. However, in recent years, grasslands have also become part of the southern Illinois landscape. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has significantly contributed to the acreage of grasslands in southern Illinois, as well as statewide. The CRP grasslands support numerous bird species, including Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*), Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), the state-endangered Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) and the state-endangered Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*).

Over the last 30 years, the Henslow's Sparrow has experienced widespread population declines, primarily due to the destruction and fragmentation of its grassland breeding habitat. Historically, the Henslow's Sparrow was common in Illinois, probably nesting in prairie habitat throughout the state (Herkert 1991). Today this bird is a local summer resident mainly concentrated in northeastern and southern Illinois.

Loss of Grassland Habitat

The Henslow's Sparrow has suffered extensive loss and fragmentation of its grassland breeding habitat. Following European settlement of North America, prairies have become increasingly rare. Approximately 0.01% of the Illinois prairie remains today. In addition to the loss of prairie habitat, secondary grasslands, such as hayfields and pastures, have also suffered degradation and loss. Increasing fragmentation of these grasslands has also contributed to Henslow's Sparrow declines, in part due to decreased average patch size and increased patch isolation. The Henslow's Sparrow winters along the Gulf Coast, and at this point and time, not much is known about its winter ecology.

The Conservation Reserve Program

The Conservation Reserve Program was established by the 1985 Food Security Act to curtail production of excess commodities and to enhance habitat for fish and wildlife populations. The CRP provides economic incentive to farmers for the placement of highly erodible crop-

land into permanent cover for a contract period of at least 10 years. A majority of the acreage of CRP land in Illinois (344,000 ha) has been reverted to grassland habitat.



Henslow's Sparrow at Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area. Photo taken in June 1992 by Joe B. Milosevich.