

# Is keeping rare sparrows fat and happy key to their survival?



A Rare Species Conservatory Foundation employee tends to seven Florida grasshopper sparrows kept in an enclosure inside a shipping container. (Rare Species Conservatory Foundation / Rare Species Conservatory Foundation)



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Orlando Sentinel

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Biologists hope organic meals and fresh bedding encourage rare sparrows to breed early and often.

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**LOXAHATCHEE** — A group of Central Florida residents has gone south for organic meals, bedding freshened often and virtually never a cloudy day.

"When you are an endangered species, you deserve every break," said Paul Reillo, director of Rare Species Conservatory Foundation, which locals in Palm Beach County liken to Jurassic Park.

The pampered Central Floridians are grasshopper sparrows taken as chicks during this year's nesting season from treeless prairies south of Orlando.

With about 100 known males left in those prairies, and females too secretive to reliably observe, the four females and three males taken to the conservatory are insurance if Florida grasshopper sparrows in the wild can't recover.

It's not just a theoretical possibility. Central Florida already is infamous for extinction of another bird, the dusky seaside sparrow of Orange and Brevard counties.

Rearing a population of the sparrows in captivity will be an adventure never done before. The most senior of the group is 5 months old, and Reillo hopes family instincts kick in next spring.



A trio of young Florida grasshopper sparrows is among seven of the birds taken as chicks from nests in Central Florida for breeding at Rare Species Conservatory Foundation. The bird is

"Nothing here is captive breeding yet," he said. "So far it's captive, but there's no breeding."

When Reillo remarked that endangered species deserve every break, he was standing at an enclosure of golden-headed lion tamarins, a striking monkey from Brazil.

Nearby were other species of monkeys, including the thumb-sized pygmy marmoset, the world's smallest

highly endangered. (Rare Species  
Conservatory Foundation / Rare Species  
Conservatory Foundation)

monkey, and a variety of spectacular parrots from South  
America.

They've all landed on the list of wildlife in serious  
trouble.

The mission of the conservatory, which recently partnered with Florida International University to create Tropical Conservation Institute, is to restock severely depleted populations of wildlife.



A young Florida grasshopper sparrow is one of seven taken as chicks from nests in Central Florida for breeding at Rare Species Conservatory Foundation. The bird is highly endangered. (Rare Species Conservatory Foundation / Rare Species Conservatory Foundation)

A bit farther away is a tract of dense, wetland forest, a refuge for East African bongos, a sculpturesque antelope that can grow larger than a horse and sports fearsome horns.

All of the conservatory's animals are endangered and, beastly or cute, share the characteristic of being "flagship" species of their native settings.

Even the Florida grasshopper sparrow, a tiny, drab animal compared with its conservatory neighbors, is a flagship species in Florida prairie carpeted with grasses, shrubs and palmetto.

But unlike many other sparrows, Florida grasshopper sparrows aren't often seen even by biologists searching for them, and relatively little is known about their plight.

State and federal wildlife officials had debated intensely in recent years over whether to

capture chicks and young birds for captive breeding.

The alternative would be to hold off on that option and pin hopes on solving the mystery of why the population of sparrows has plummeted.

As it turned out, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the seven birds were in harm's way, either from flooding or nest abandonment.

One was found in Osceola County's 50,000-acre Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, and the others were on private lands in Okeechobee County.

The federal wildlife agency so far has paid Rare Species Conservatory Foundation about \$65,000 to prepare for captive breeding and take in the seven birds. Whether more birds are brought to the conservatory next year depends on this year's population survey, which preliminarily is showing little change in numbers.

Also to be considered are results from a test at Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area in which fencing was erected to keep predators away from sparrow nests on the ground.

If that technique shows promise for increasing sparrow numbers, then the Fish and Wildlife Service may back off next year from collecting more wild birds for captive breeding, said agency biologist Ashleigh Blackford in Vero Beach.

As it stands, the ratio of four females and three males at Rare Species Conservatory Foundation is ideal for breeding, Reillo said.

Their home is a steel shipping container anchored to the ground as a robust storm shelter.

An array of lights typically used in reptile aquariums replicates the spectrum of ultraviolet in sunlight, while a fan and misting equipment control climate.

The sparrows' diet of formula, seeds and crickets was devised with advice of veterinarians, songbird rehabilitators and biologists.

Reillo said the overriding strategy is to pamper and safeguard the birds to a high degree, hoping the sparrows breed early and often when the season arrives next year.

Whether that's the right approach isn't entirely certain; it may be that competition for

food, mates and nesting places in the wild is a primary driver of successful breeding.

"But fat and happy seems to be a good place to start," Reillo said.

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