



Sensitive Species of the Santa Ana Watershed Series



Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*)

A. r. canescens is one of five subspecies of Rufous-crowned Sparrow that occur in the United States. It is a medium-sized sparrow ranging 13-15 cm and weighing 15-23 grams. This subspecies is a permanent, non-migratory resident of coastal southern California, and adults remain on their territories throughout the year (Collins 1999). Males and females are similar in coloration, with a rusty crown, whitish throat, thin rufous eyeline, and distinct whitish eye ring (Stokes and Stokes 1996).

Habitat

The Rufous-crowned Sparrow exhibits a distinct preference for rocky hillsides and steep slopes in open grass and coastal sage scrub in areas ranging from roughly 200-4,500 feet in elevation. They also thrive in areas that have recently been burned, and sometimes remain in these grassy, successional habitats for a number of years. In general, pairs nest on the ground in rock hollows or under clumps of grass or low brush (Collins 1999).

Status and Distribution

The southern California subspecies of Rufous-crowned Sparrow is listed as a California Department of Fish and Game species of special concern as well as a federal species of concern. In addition, it has been listed on the Audubon Society California Watch List (Dudek and Associates 2002). Historically, four of the subspecies of Rufous-crowned Sparrow bred in coastal California from Mendocino County south through northwestern Baja California Norte (Thorngate and Parsons 2005). Fifty years ago the range and distribution of *A. r. canescens* was thought to be limited to a narrow band of coastal sage scrub and chaparral from Santa Barbara south to the northwestern corner of Baja California (Grinnell and Miller 1944). More recent distribution information in southern California indicates a range from San Luis Obispo County south through San Diego County (Kimball and Dunn 1981).

In Riverside County, the majority of reported occurrences have been in the southwestern corner and central portion of the county. Some key population areas lie along the Interstate 15 corridor south to Temecula (Lake Skinner area) and north to the Badlands (Dudek and Associates 2002). Sightings by SAWA biologists in Riverside County have occurred in San Timoteo Canyon, Sycamore Canyon, Temescal Canyon (at the 3M plant), and a pair at Mt. Rubidoux in the city of Riverside. Rufous-crowned Sparrows have also been detected at Cottonwood Canyon in Lake Elsinore (Peter Beck, pers. comm.).

Threats

The largest threat to the Rufous-crowned Sparrow in southern California is habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation. Populations are becoming increasingly isolated due to urbanization and agricultural development in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, and San Bernardino counties. Over the last one hundred years fire suppression has also led to loss of habitat, as Rufous-crowned Sparrows prefer more open scrub areas as opposed to dense tracts of scrub or chaparral (Collins 1999).

Rufous-crowned Sparrows are rare hosts of Brown-headed Cowbirds, possibly because cowbirds are uncommon in the dry scrub habitat preferred by the sparrows during the breeding season. There have been no documented cases of brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds in southern California, however data on nesting success is lacking for this species (Collins 1999).

Research and Management Needs

There is still a great deal to be learned about the Rufous-crowned Sparrow. Information regarding demography, breeding, and behavior is necessary to understand the biology and ecology of this species. Further research is essential for assessing population trends, as well as for the development of conservation plans that facilitate preservation of coastal scrub and chaparral habitat.

Who to contact

Allyson Beckman is a field biologist for the Santa Ana Watershed Association (SAWA), and can be reached at (951) 538-1037.

Photo credit

Photo by Peter LaTourrette. Retrieved from <http://national.zoo.si.edu>

References

Beck, Peter. Personal communication. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Carlsbad, CA. 2006.

Collins, P.W. 1999. Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps*). In *The Birds North America*, No. 472 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

Dudek and Associates, Inc. 2002. Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP)-Draft. Encinitas, California. Vol. 1, Sec. 2.

Garrett, K. and J. Dunn. 1981. *Birds of Southern California: Status and Distribution*. Los Angeles Audubon Society, Los Angeles, CA.

Grinnell J. and A.H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. *Pac. Coast Avifauna*. 27: 1 – 610.

Stokes, Donald W. and L. Q. Stokes. 1996. *Field Guide to Birds: Western Region*. Little, Brown and Company, Boston. 519 pages.

Thorngate, N. and M. Parsons. 2005. Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps*). In *The Coastal Scrub and Chaparral Bird Conservation Plan: a strategy for protecting and managing coastal scrub and chaparral habitats and associated birds in California*. California Partners in Flight. <http://www.prbo.org/calpif/html/docs/scrub.html>

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.