

## Bachman's Sparrow *Peucaea aestivalis*



**Folk Name:** Pine-woods Sparrow

**Status:** Former breeder (extirpated)

**Abundance:** Very Rare

**Habitat:** Overgrown fields with scattered saplings, pine woods

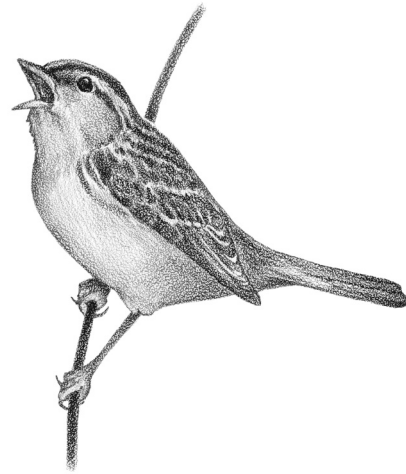
The Bachman's Sparrow is a rare permanent resident in both Carolinas. It is a characteristic bird of our historic Longleaf Pine–Wiregrass forest that once spread widely across the southeastern Coastal Plain. The population of these birds declined as this vast forest was logged. Today, it is a “spotty” breeding resident of open pine woods in the Sandhills and the Coastal Plain.

Most remaining breeding areas are publicly-owned habitat that is periodically maintained by low-intensity prescribed burns. This sparrow spends most of its time foraging on the ground in the dense cover of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. It is regularly described as being a “secretive” and “elusive” bird. It nests on the ground as well. During breeding season the male will find a high perch and sing a song described as “an unusually loud and varied song of delightful sweetness.”

At one time, the breeding range of the Bachman's Sparrow extended into the Carolina Piedmont and breeding was confirmed in the Central Carolinas. In this region it was found nesting in old fields and young clearcuts. It appears that the Bachman's Sparrow is now extirpated as a breeding bird throughout the majority of this former range.

According to *The South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas*, as of the turn of the twenty-first century, scattered breeding birds were still being found in “young clearcuts and other openings that feature bunched grasses” in our South Carolina Piedmont counties. However, there have been no recent reports from these counties. A breeding population is still present in open pine woods in the Carolina Sandhills NWR and the Sandhills State Forest, both of which are in Chesterfield County. Bachman's Sparrow is also a resident bird in the Sandhills Game Lands in Richmond County, NC. All of these lands are publicly owned and protected, and the breeding habitat there is actively maintained by prescribed fire.

The Bachman's Sparrow was first confirmed in this region by Leverett Loomis who collected a specimen in Chester County on May 3, 1890. This specimen is available for examination at the American Museum of Natural History. William McIlwaine recorded Bachman's Sparrow present in Charlotte on April 13, 1931. His report to the U.S. Biological Survey indicated this sparrow was breeding around Charlotte at the time.



In 1940, a collecting expedition led by Watson Perrygo collected a specimen 7 miles northwest of Lancaster on 19 September and a specimen 5 miles northeast of Rock Hill in York County on 20 September. Charlie Sellers recorded a Bachman's Sparrow in Charlotte on April 27, 1941, and he noted it as a “rare” breeder there. A pair of Bachman's Sparrows was counted on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count held on December 31, 1944. This pair was chosen as the highlight of the Christmas counts for the entire state that year. This discovery provided evidence that the species also wintered in Charlotte at the time.

In the 1940s, Rhett Chamberlain published several accounts of Bachman's Sparrow breeding in Charlotte. “I believe Bachman's Sparrow breeds commonly enough in this section but it is not often recorded because it is difficult to flush. I have looked for nests during the past three years and succeeded in finding this one in 1944 only through the expedient of showing some youngster's what to look for.”

On June 4, 1944, he found:

The nest, made entirely of grass, was placed at the base of a small clump of broom grass, and opened to the north. There were four white eggs. ... On June 7, I photographed the nest and a general view of the locality. I used a mirror to illuminate the eggs. A visit at 6:00 p.m. on June 12, showed the eggs not yet hatched. On June 13, I returned to the nest and found that all four of the eggs had hatched. On June 17, I took a picture of the young, or two of them, since the other two were missing. At six o'clock on the evening of the 18th, the nest was empty. As these last two were only five days old, it seems likely that none of the brood survived.

This nest was located on the edge of a sandy field opening “at the foot of small pines.”

In 1947, Chamberlain again found a Bachman’s Sparrow nest (19 May) and recorded details of its nesting. He also photographed the incubating bird and published the photo and a detailed written account in the January 1948 issue of *The Chat*. This particular nest was much more exposed than the first, and by the following day, predators had eaten the eggs.

The Bachman’s Sparrow was reported on some of the first Spring Bird Counts conducted in Stanly County on April 30, 1955 (three birds), and April 28, 1956 (one bird). As habitat changed and wild fires were suppressed during the last half of the twentieth century, the Bachman’s Sparrow disappeared entirely from Mecklenburg and Stanly counties and much of the Carolina Piedmont. In the 1944 and 1965 editions of the Mecklenburg County checklists, Elizabeth Clarkson lists this sparrow as an “uncommon summer resident.” In 1970, she changed the designation to “formerly uncommon summer resident. ... No recent records.”

In 1984, Breeding Bird Surveys conducted in Lancaster–Kershaw, Lee–Kershaw, and Fairfield–Chester counties each reported singing Bachman’s Sparrows. In 1985, Robin Carter reported finding Bachman’s Sparrow on territory in South Carolina in Union, Chester, and Saluda counties. In 1986, Carter again found Bachman’s Sparrows breeding in Chester County. He found a late bird singing in a clearcut in Fairfield County on September 10, 1988. He reported three singing males near Bullock Creek in York County on June 4, 1989, and another near Lockhart (west of York) on the same day. Tim Kalbach reported a singing bird in Union County, SC, on May 23, 1993. Alan Rose reported a pair near Thickety Creek Lake in Cherokee County on May 13, 1995. Many of these birds were observed foraging in clear cuts. These are the last known reports of the Bachman’s Sparrow in these counties.

No evidence of breeding was obtained during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas study. Therefore, Bachman’s Sparrow has been placed on the “Lost” bird list, and no atlas map was prepared for this species.

The Bachman’s Sparrow is listed on the Red Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a “species with extremely high vulnerability” to extinction. It is in need of immediate and significant conservation action.



*Bachman’s Sparrow nest in Charlotte in May 1947. The Chat photo: Rhett Chamberlain.*