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4000 Central Florida Blvd.
Orlando, Florida 32816

November 6, 2012

Cynthia K. Dohner
Regional Director
Southeast Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1875 Century Boulevard Northeast
Suite 400
Atlanta, GA 30345

Re: Initiating captive breeding of the endangered Florida Grasshopper Sparrow

Dear Ms. Dohner:

We write to encourage the USFWS to initiate captive breeding of the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*, "*floridanus*") as quickly as possible. As you are aware, this endemic bird is restricted to the dry prairie ecosystem of central Florida. Of the three remaining populations on public land, one is functionally extirpated and the other two have declined to record lows. If present population trends continue, extinction is possible in a few years.

The USFWS has a long and admirable record in *floridanus* protection, including large amounts of research and management funding, supporting the proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge, and even joining Audubon in a successful legal action to protect sparrow habitat on the Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary[1]. Despite the efforts of the USFWS, the state, Audubon, Archbold Biological Station, university researchers, and others, the exact cause(s) of the declines are uncertain and are unlikely to be determined before *floridanus* disappears. Therefore, captive breeding appears to be the only way to ensure survival of individuals until the problems are identified and addressed.

There is reason for hope. Large tracts of suitable habitat for re-introduction exist on the three conservation properties mentioned above, and other suitable properties might be included in the Headwaters Refuge and existing large conservation easements in the region. Ample resources are available for cooperation between the three different entities that manage sparrow habitat, the Department of Defense, Florida Park Service, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

We understand that captive breeding of *floridanus* carries significant risks and in response, the USFWS has initiated a captive program with a surrogate subspecies (*A. s. pratenis*). Yet, because the two live at different latitudes, in different habitats and ambient conditions, and one has migratory patterns while the other does not, information gained on *pratensis* husbandry may have limited if any application to *floridanus*. In light of population levels possibly below 200 individuals and very rapid recent declines of *floridanus*, we conclude that the risk of delay exceeds the risk of mistakes in learning to breed *floridanus*

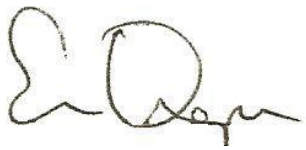
[1] National Audubon Society v. 101 Ranch, Inc. Haynes Williams, Tiger Cattle Company, Michael Powell, Steve Powell. United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida. Case 98-14144-CIV-Moore. 1998.

in captivity. We urge the USFWS to begin planning for the removal of eggs or chicks from nests this coming spring (2013), lest we lose another season.

Captive breeding is a very significant commitment, not to be undertaken lightly. We consider this the most endangered bird in the continental United States and worthy of extra efforts, especially considering the large investment in conservation lands already made.

You also have our commitment to aid the recovery of this unique American bird. Thank you for your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,



Eric Draper
Executive Director, Audubon Florida

Reed F. Noss, Ph.D.
Professor, University of Central Florida
Former Chair, Grasshopper Sparrow Working Group

Reed Bowman, Ph.D.
Program Director, Avian Ecology, Archbold Biological Station

Cc: Nick Wiley, Executive Director, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Leopoldo Miranda-Castro, Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services, USFWS
Larry Williams, South Florida Ecological Services Field Supervisor, USFWS