

Request for Reports of Color-Banded Vesper Sparrows

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Central Valley birders can help with field observations to clarify the current winter range and habitat use by the rare and declining subspecies, the Oregon Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus affinis*).

The Oregon Vesper Sparrow is one the most imperiled birds in North America. Historically, it was a fairly common breeding bird in grassland and savanna habitats from northwestern California to southwestern British Columbia. Breeding populations in British Columbia and California, however, have been extirpated, and the breeding range has contracted in western Washington and Oregon. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a statistically significant declining population trend of about 5% per year. The overall population is now estimated to be under 3,000 birds, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reviewing this subspecies for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The wintering range for Oregon Vesper Sparrow has also contracted (Erickson 2008). Historically this bird wintered along the edges of California's Central Valley, as well as coastal areas of southern and Baja California (Figure 1). Wintering populations are no longer found in Baja California and some other parts of the southern winter range, and the status in parts of the Central Valley is uncertain.

Suggested causes for decline in the breeding area have included loss of grassland habitat, changes in agricultural mowing practices, trampling by livestock, pesticides, and predation by mammals associated with human habitation (Altman 2003). Loss and fragmentation of grassland habitat in the wintering range has occurred due to development and vineyard conversion, especially in southern California (Erickson 2008).

Assessing the winter status of Oregon Vesper Sparrow has been difficult because two other Vesper Sparrow subspecies can also occur in California in winter. The subspecies that nests east of the Pacific crest, Great Basin Vesper Sparrow (*P.g. confinis*), is very similar to, and cannot be separated reliably from, the Oregon Vesper Sparrow in the field. The Eastern nominate subspecies (*P.g. gramineus*) may also occur as a winter vagrant. Fortunately, many Oregon Vesper Sparrows have now been marked with colored bands, so

these birds can be identified with confidence in the field. One was recently found in Yolo County near Rumsey (thanks to Holly Coates for this report). We hope that more can be found if local birders are watching for them.

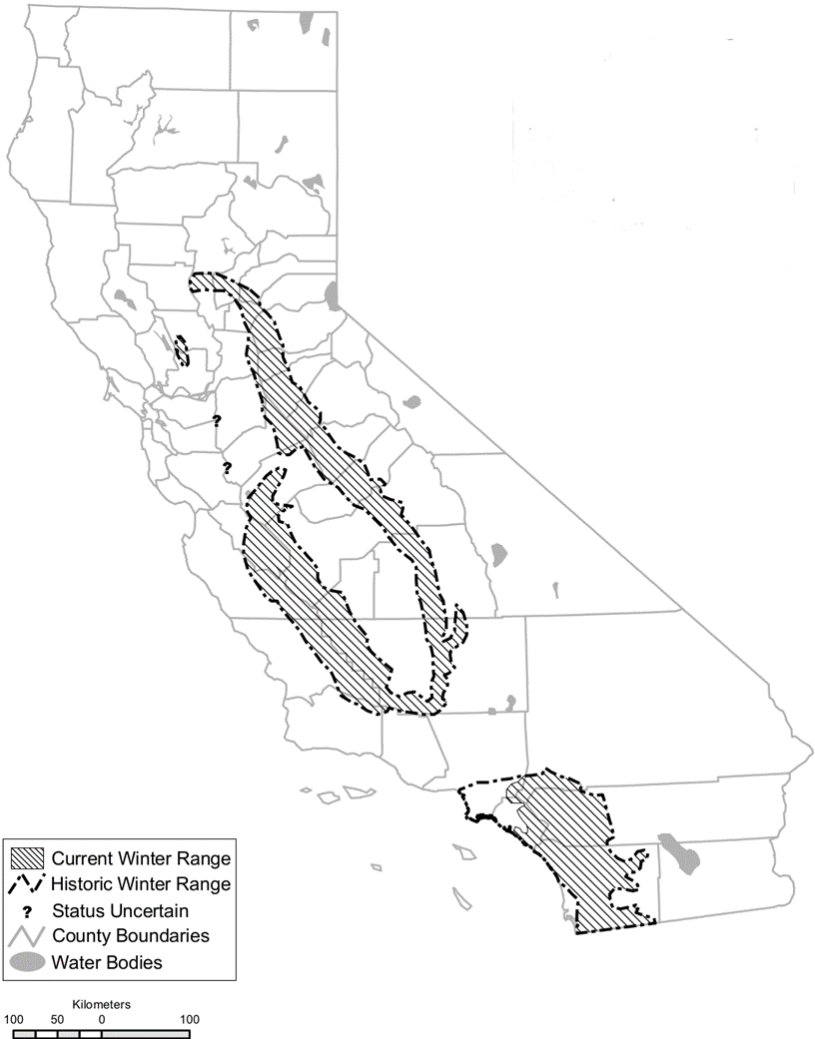


Figure 1. Historic (ca. 1944) and current (as of 2008) winter range of the Oregon Vesper Sparrow in California, from Erickson (2008).

COLOR-BANDING IN OREGON AND WASHINGTON

A range-wide effort to determine factors that might be limiting breeding populations was initiated in Oregon and Washington in 2016 by the American Bird Conservancy, the Center for Natural Lands Management, and Klamath Bird Observatory. Approximately 500 birds have been banded with a combination of metal and colored plastic bands.

Each bird has been marked with four bands: a standard metal band (aluminum) and one plastic color band on one leg (usually the bird's right leg), and two-color bands on the other leg. The band colors that have been used are red, yellow, orange, dark blue, light blue, black, purple (mauve), brown, green, gray, and white (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Band colors used for Oregon Vesper Sparrows, 2016-2018. White (not shown here) has also been used.

WHAT TO REPORT

If you see a color-banded Vesper Sparrow please note the date and location, and the band combinations on each leg. Please make clear which color band is on top on each leg. For example, the bird shown in the photo in Figure 3 would be reported as:

- Right leg: top band yellow; bottom band metal
- Left leg: top band yellow; bottom band: purple/mauve

Even partial information is useful, for example, if you were just able to see the colors on one leg.

Some of the band colors can be difficult to tell apart depending on light conditions. For example, light blue and metal bands can both look close to white in bright sun, and orange can look close to red when in shade (as in Figure 4). In field situations when the bird is seen in several different positions, usually the true colors become apparent, but in a single brief view, it may be difficult to be sure. Also, the colors of the plastic bands may gradually fade over time with exposure to sunlight. So, if what you see doesn't quite line up with the list of colors, please just try to describe what you see, and indicate any uncertainty. Photos can be very helpful to make sure of the band colors.

WHERE TO SEND REPORTS

Please send reports either to Bob Altman (baltman@abcbirds.org) or Joel Geier (joel.geier@peak.org), so we can add this to the project database and notify the partners in this project. We'll let you know where and when the bird was banded, and what else we know of its life story.



Figure 3. Banded Oregon Vesper Sparrow with a yellow over metal band on right leg and a yellow over mauve band on left leg. This bird was banded as a nestling near Corvallis, Oregon on 4 June 2018. It is seen here in fresh first-fall plumage on 15 August 2018.

Photo by Matt Lee



Figure 4. Banded Oregon Vesper Sparrow with an orange plastic band over a metal band on right leg, and light blue plastic band over a mauve (purple) plastic band on left leg. Note that the orange looks nearly red, because that leg is in the bird's shadow. This demonstrates how apparent color of bands in the field may very depending on lighting. This bird was banded as a juvenile near Corvallis, Oregon on 28 July 2018. It is seen in fresh fall plumage on 15 August 2018.

Photo by Matt Lee

LITERATURE CITED

Altman, B. 2003. Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*. Pp. 543-545 in *Birds of Oregon: A General Reference* (D.B. Marshall, M.G. Hunter, and A.L. Contreras, eds). Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, OR

Erickson, R.A., 2008, Oregon Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus affinis*). In Shuford, W.D., and T. Gardali, editors. 2008. *In California Bird Species of Special Concern: A ranked assessment of species, subspecies, and distinct populations of birds of immediate conservation concern in California*. *Studies of Western Birds* 1:377–381. Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo, California, and California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento.