

VIVA ZAPATA!

#2 THE ZAPATA SPARROW



The Zapata Sparrow, *Torreornis inexpectata*, is endemic to Cuba and classified as “Endangered” since there are less than a thousand individuals left. There are three sub-species found in different parts of the island only one of which, *T. i. inexpectata*, is found in the Zapata Swamp. This has led to suggestions that the English name be changed to Cuban Sparrow.

All three sub-species are similar, but are found in very different habitats. The nominate race is found in the flooded saw-grass of the Zapata Swamp, *T. i. sigmani* in the thorn scrub and cacti of Guantánamo province and *T. i. varonai* in the dry forest and coastal vegetation of Cayo Coco. The diet reflects the different habitats with Zapata birds feeding on the eggs of *Pomacea* snails as well as lizards and seeds and Guantánamo birds also feeding on cactus fruits.

The Zapata Sparrow is a medium-sized grey and yellow bird measuring about 16.5 centimetres (6.5”) in length, it is grey and yellow overall with a dark reddish-brown crown and olive-grey upperparts.

The species was discovered by the Spanish zoologist Fermín Zanón Cervera in March 1927 and formally described by American herpetologist Thomas Barbour and his compatriot, ornithologist, James Lee Peters, later that year. Barbour had been accompanied by Cervera on a previous visits to Cuba, and on hearing of some strange birds to be found in the Zapata area, he sent the Spaniard on a series of field trips into the region, which eventually led to the discovery of the sparrow.

Zapata Sparrows are usually found in pairs or groups of three, but are occasionally encountered in larger groups of ten to twelve.

They are thought to breed between March and June, with the nest usually built in a tussock.

The song is described as a "metallic high-pitched trill at intervals tziii-tzziii -tzziii ... and a quiet tic-tic-tic". In the dry season the Zapata population feeds on seeds and flowers primarily, as well as, insects, spiders, snails and their eggs. In the wet season they have been observed eating small lizards.

Typical threats are wildfires in the dry season, wetland drainage and destruction of habitat due to agriculture and tourism.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia