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# MEMO

**To:** Richard Zembal  
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**From:** Daniel S. Cooper

**Date:** May 14, 2015

**Re:** Rapid-assessment survey of nesting Belding's Savannah Sparrow at Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, Los Angeles County

## Background/Methods

In early spring 2015 I was asked to conduct a population census of the Belding's Savannah Sparrow at the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve (BWER) in Playa del Rey, Los Angeles County, California.

I conducted the survey on the morning of May 13, 2015 (7:45-10:25 AM). The temperature was 61F at the start of the survey, and 68F at the end, with overcast skies and little/no wind.

As no survey protocol exists for estimating a breeding population of Belding's Savannah Sparrow, I simply employed a transect count, walking in a "broad zig-zag" pattern through likely habitat (pickleweed-dominated saltmarsh). I conducted quarterly all-bird surveys of the entire BEWR from 2009-2012, and am familiar with the areas where this taxon occurs here during the spring, and have found that the best way to accurately estimate pairs in this area is to move quickly, trying to flush as many pairs from their actual territories, and avoiding confusion as birds start scattering and chasing each other, making long flights out to other territories (often, only a subset of the breeding males present are singing during any single visit, so point counts and other audial surveys have obvious limitations). I noted general locations of singing birds and pairs in a field notebook.

I began parked at the gas field gate along the north side of Culver Blvd., roughly 1/4-mi. east of Playa del Rey. From here I roughly encircled the entire main saltpan of the reserve, first heading west to the eastern (of two) tidal channels that cuts north-south through the middle of "Area B", and returning east along the northern edge of the saltpan, continuing along the

levee road until the pickleweed marsh transitioned to “upland”/weedy vegetation, and then south to my car at Culver (“Northeast” area).

I then drove west to Playa del Rey and walked through the western portion of Area B (“Audubon”/Dune Restoration area), heading north to the levee along Ballona Creek, and returning south through the Dune restoration (“Northwest” area).

I then parked in two locations along Culver Blvd., checking pickleweed habitat on either side of the Gas Company Rd. that runs south from the intersection of Culver Blvd./Jefferson Blvd. (most birds occur north of Culver, but this area has had territorial birds in the past). I call the area west of the Gas Co. Rd. “Southwest”, and the area east, toward Ballona Freshwater Marsh, “Southeast”.

## Summary of observations

I have divided my results by “subarea”, as described above:

### Northeast (north of Culver/main saltpan east of eastern tidal channel)

26 pr, 3 singing males, 1 silent individual; birds were roughly evenly split between northern and southern edge of the main saltpan. One singing male (and one silent individual) was east of the main saltpan, near a smaller saltpan.

### Northwest (north of Culver/main saltpan west of eastern tidal channel)

21 pr; birds were roughly divided between the western portion of the saltmarsh (against the dunes) and the “island” of saltmarsh between the two main tidal channels.

### Southwest (south of Culver/west of Gas Co. Rd.)

One singing bird; possible calling bird (very faint) nearby; likely a single pair.

### Southeast (south of Culver/east of Gas Co. Rd.)

One pair: one chipping bird (male); flew off with second bird (female); possible juvenile flushed (short tail, very dark, adult BSSP nearby).

**Total estimate: 48 observed pairs, plus 5 likely pairs (= singing males).**

**Note:** I realize this is an extremely high estimate, but I’m confident it represents a true depiction of the species’ abundance here. I was careful not to double-count birds that flushed ahead of me, and tried to err on the side of under-counting. I also did not cover the same areas twice (i.e., “figure-eight”), but walked rapidly in a roughly linear path. Several possible explanations would account for the high total; one is that I have an access letter granting me to visit all portions of the marsh, including the interior areas where birds would not be visible/audible from public/semi-public areas like the Ballona Creek bikepath, or the overlook west of the saltpan. Also, there has been a dramatic increase in tidal flow through the area that supports Belding’s savannah sparrows, owing to repaired floodgates. The saltpan is now partially flooded year-round, both by tidal flow from the eastern channel, and apparently by sub-irrigation (water forced up) during high tides. So, what had been a dry, dusty saltpan is now damp over most of its surface yearround, and often flooded through winter and spring. This change is also evident south of Culver Blvd., where extensive pickleweed marsh has developed across what had been weedy/fallow fields. Thus, it is probably not unreasonable to find that the population has increased 50-100% over time.