Cistothorus platensis Latham — Sedge wren

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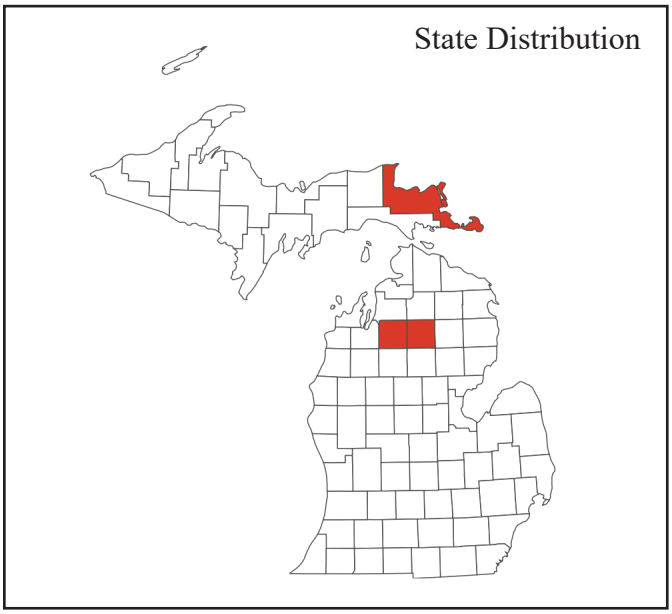

Best Survey Period

Status: State special concern

Global and state rank: G5/S3

Other common name: Short-billed marsh wren

Family: Troglodytidae

Synonyms: *Cistothorus stellaris*

Taxonomy: Recent study of behavioral differences and mitochondrial DNA have split *Cistothorus platensis* into a migratory North American species, *C. stellaris* ("sedge wren"), and the resident species of central Mexico and South America, *C. platensis* ("grass wren"). This abstract is about the North American species but uses the names *C. platensis* and "sedge wren" to remain in agreement with the names used when designating this species as Special Concern in Michigan. This species has also been known by the common name "short-billed marsh wren", but that has fallen out of use to avoid confusion with another North American wren, *C. palustris* ("marsh wren").

Total Range: The sedge wren breeds throughout southern Canada and the northern United States. In Canada, from east-central Alberta east to Quebec, in southern portions of provinces. In the United States, from North Dakota, south to Missouri and east to Michigan, and along northern portions of Ohio, New York and Vermont. Winters in the states along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from New Jersey to northeast Mexico (Herkert et al. 2021).

State Distribution: During the breeding season, the sedge wren ranges throughout Michigan, but is somewhat less common in the northern Lower Peninsula (Johnson 2013).

Recognition: Sedge wrens are a **small wren**, overall **brown** with **streaky** patterns of black, white and gray. **Underparts** fade from **tawny or buff** at the sides to **whitish** on the **belly**. **White streaking on crown** and back. **Shoulders** and **rump** with **black bars**. Male and female plumage identical, with first year birds similar to adults. Like other wrens, this species often holds its tail erect. Sedge wrens are distinguished from other North American wrens by its streaked head and back. The sedge wren is most like the marsh wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), but the marsh wren lacks the streaked crown and barred

Michigan Natural Features Inventory
Phone: (517) 284-6200 Email: mnfi@msu.edu
Website: mnfi.anr.msu.edu

shoulders of the sedge wren. While both species occur in wet or marshy areas, the sedge wren tends to avoid areas with deeper water and cattails which the marsh wren prefers. The sedge wren is also smaller than the marsh wren with a smaller bill, leading to one of its common names: the short-billed marsh wren. (National Geographic Society 1999, Johnson 2013, Herkert et al. 2021)

Best survey time/phenology: Sedge wrens begin to arrive in Michigan in first week of May and depart as late as the end of October. Females arrive a few weeks later than males. Males continue to sing throughout the breeding season. Surveys are best completed through the peak of breeding season between the end of May and the end of July. (Johnson 2013, Herkert 2021, eBird 2025)

Habitat: Sedge wrens inhabit wet, herbaceous meadows, grasslands, and vegetation along the margins of marshes and lakes (Grand et al. 2020, Herkert et al. 2021). They display a preference for areas with abundant standing dead vegetation, and tall herbaceous plants, in areas not dominated by cattails (Grant et al. 2010, Elliott and Johnson 2017, Herkert et al. 2021). They are more likely to use areas with less woody vegetation and prefer forbs over grasses (Elliott and Johnson 2017, Hawkinson et al. 2024). While using wet and flooded meadows, the sedge wren is less likely to be found in areas with higher water levels or more sparse vegetation (Gnass Giese et al. 2018, Herkert et al. 2021). Sedge wren habitat in the non-breeding range is like habitat in the breeding range, but in winter sedge wrens may also inhabit brackish marshes and drier meadows (Herkert et al. 2021).

Biology: Sedge wrens arrive in Michigan in the breeding season between the end of April and the beginning of June, and females tend to arrive later than males (Johnson 2013). Females are sometimes double-brooded, reproducing a second time later in the season with either the same or a different male (Burns 1982). Males defend distinct territories, but in larger patches of meadows they congregate into loose colonies (Walkinshaw 1935).

Males select nest sites and build multiple nests within their territory (Burns 1982). The nests are interwoven globular structures about 6 inches across, made of dried sedges and grasses with an entrance on the side (Baichich and Harrison 1997, Herkert et al. 2021). Females then complete one of these nests, lining it with fine grass, hair and feathers (Baicich and Harrison 1997).

Sedge wrens lay 2-8 eggs, though usually 6 or 7, and the female is the sole incubator. Eggs hatch after approximately 13 days, at which point the altricial young are fed primarily by the female. Young fledge 12-14 days after hatching. (Baicich and Harrison 1997, Herkert et al. 2021). Fledglings continue to be fed by their parents for some period before becoming independent (Walkinshaw 1935). Females may have second broods later in the season which are, on average, smaller than earlier or first broods (Burns 1982).

Sedge wrens are insectivorous, but specifics of diet composition are currently unknown (Herkert et al. 2021). Observations of food items brought back to young include moths, spiders, grasshoppers, mosquitoes, flies, and true bugs (Walkinshaw 1935).

Conservation/management: Habitat loss from wetland draining is a major threat to sedge wren populations (Herkert et al. 2021). Protection of existing sedge meadows is critical, as degradation to these habitats is difficult to reverse (Herkert et al. 2021). Protection of a wetland gradient will ensure nesting habitat will be available in both wet and dry years (Shaffer et al. 2021).

Regular disturbances, such as grazing, mowing, or burning, are important in reducing woody encroachment and maintaining habitat suitability (Shaffer et al. 2021). However, disturbances should be avoided during the nesting season, to avoid nest failure and juvenile mortality (Johnson 2013). Sedge wrens benefit from the removal of trees from grasslands, as this reduces edge effects, though care must be taken to maintain a variety of habitats to ensure continued avian diversity (Tack

et al. 2017). A mosaic of disturbed and undisturbed areas is ideal to provide both nesting and foraging habitat (Shaffer et al. 2021).

Research needs: Recent sedge wren population trends are uncertain, in part due to weather conditions altering nest site suitability between years (Johnson 2013). While it is established that sedge wrens have low site fidelity, patterns in movement between and within seasons are not fully understood (Herkert et al. 2021). Little is known about demography, dispersal, and causes of mortality (Herkert et al. 2021).

Related abstracts: Northern wet meadow, southern wet meadow, Great Lakes marsh, wet prairie, prairie fen, American bittern, least bittern, wood turtle, northern blue butterfly, Richardson's sedge, prairie Indian-plantain, marsh grass-of-parnassus, dwarf bilberry, sweet coltsfoot

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Abstract citation

Ng, A. M. B., and A. P. Kortenhoven. 2025. Species Abstract for *Cistothorus platensis* (sedge wren). Michigan Natural Features Inventory, Lansing, Michigan, USA.

Funding for this project was through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' State Wildlife Grant T-9-T in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Conservation Investment.