

~~817~~ 820-01-1994

DOCUMENTATION FOR TWO-OBSERVER SIGHT RECORD -- P.O.R.C

SPECIES: Lark Sparrow DATE SEEN: 30 April 1994

NO. INDIVIDUALS: 1, possibly 2 TIME SEEN: 10 a.m.

OBSERVERS: Paul and Deborah Hess

LOCATION: Findlay Township. 3 miles west of Imperial,
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

HABITAT -- GENERAL: Beautifully reclaimed strip mine area, perhaps 2+ sq. mi. of steep highwalls, gently sloping hills, nearly flat expanses, interspersed with small and medium-sized ponds and a few (dry) cattail marshes. This site is distinctive for its great variety of grasses, legumes and small shrubs/trees -- more varied than I have seen at other W. Pa. reclamation areas.

-- SPECIFIC: Nearly at the summit of a long, gentle, grassy slope extending from a deep valley to the top of a hill formed by a steep highwall on one side -- an upland site in the relative topography of the area.

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Fairly bright under variable overcast.

WEATHER: Temperature in 50s, with a light breeze. A strong cold front had passed on 4/29 and temporarily stalled on 4/30 to the south across W. Va. between two high-pressure systems.

DISTANCE: 20 feet TIME OF OBSERVATION: About 3 minutes

OPTICS: P. Hess, 12 x 50 binoculars; D. Hess, 7 X 50 binocs.

POSITION OF BIRD RELATIVE TO OBSERVERS: Perched on tip of small tree about 3 feet high. We were slightly downslope, so bird was at or just below eye level. Then it flew straight away from us, for perhaps 50 more feet before disappearing over the hilltop. We saw it entirely in left profile except for full back and tail view as it flew away.

BASIS OF IDENTIFICATION:

1) Plain, dull white breast with large, very prominent, roughly round, central black spot.

2) White outer feathers on dull blackish tail, with the white broadening at the corners and extending very thinly along most of tip.

3) Black, brown and dull white facial pattern like breeding adult's but more subdued, and with a wide eyebrow line that was conspicuously buffy.

4) Song, given twice in three minutes, was a hard-to-describe jumble of short clear notes, rough twills, and churrs. It was vaguely reminiscent of Vesper Sparrow (which we were hearing dozens of times all morning) but longer and lacking Vesper's characteristic two-part opening of paired whistles.

Those characters separate the sparrow from others that might be considered similar. Clear breast with prominent central spot also mark Sage Sparrow and Am. Tree Sparrow, but those are so different in other respects as not to confuse the ID. At our first good look, its general appearance, plumage patterns and colors were instantly notable as completely different from Vesper. So were facial pattern and, in flight, more white in tail than Vesper. Finally, the song was quite separable from Vesper, even with its vague similarity in some notes and phrasings.

OTHER DETAILS:

- Size: about that of Vesper Sparrow (i.e., rather large) or perhaps slightly larger, but appearing a bit less "fat" in breast than Vesper. Evident to P. Hess was tail length longer than Vesper relative to body length, plus a sense of wider and more rounded tail than Vesper as the bird flew away.
- Crown: brown with a median stripe dull white and not very prominent.
- Back: warm medium brown streaked with dull black.
- Wings: same brown with some dull blackish streaking and what appeared to be two thin, barely notable wing bars.
- Tail: dull blackish contrasting with main brownish tone of back, and with characteristic white edges as described.
- Face pattern: distinctive, dull but recognizable version of the bright breeding adult pattern. Below brown of outer crown was a conspicuous buffy eyebrow (almost as notable as on some Sharp-tailed) shading to dull white at lores; large cheek patch of dull brown faintly outlined in blackish; dull white stripe below cheek patch extending to bill; and finally a prominent black mustache line. (One facial mark my notes don't include is a partial ring below eye; either it wasn't visible or we simply missed it.)

- Chin and upper breast: a few short, thin blackish streaks extended down about a quarter-inch from the chin. I can't say whether this was a full necklace or confined to the side area; we were so close that we didn't want to chance moving for a front view. I can find no reference to this detail in any plumage description; it may have been a remnant of first-winter plumage.
- Breast, belly and flanks: unmarked dull white except for prominent blackish central breast spot and short streaks mentioned below chin.
- Bill and legs: nondescript light tan or flesh color, hard to characterize any better.

The western subspecies is much paler than the eastern (Ken Parkes, pers. comm.), but no judgment can be made which this bird was. Ted Floyd (pers. comm.) says he has often seen Lark Sparrows of this relatively dull facial appearance. It may be either an adult or a second-year bird in partial pre-alternate molt (Bob Mulvihill, pers. comm.). The account in "Bent" stresses the buffy superciliary stripe of first winter plumage, and says adult winter plumage resembles first winter plumage with slightly more intense colors. Roberts' *Manual for the Identification of the Birds of Minnesota* says young in first fall and winter plumage "become practically like the browner and duller winter adults." The usual reference, Pyle et al., is unclear.

DISCUSSION:

For more than an hour we had been exploring this remarkable grassland discovered by Ted Floyd, watching an array of Savannah, Henslow's, Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows plus Horned Larks, Bobolinks and E. Meadowlarks. As we walked up a gentle slope, a sparrow flew to the top of a small tree right in front of us. Glancing at the white tail edges I passed it off as just another Vesper, but D. Hess took a good look and instantly said it didn't look like a Vesper to her. Her quick perception gave us time for a long look, and the distinctions struck me in this order: breast spot, brown tone of back and wings, face pattern with prominent buffy eyebrow and cheek patch, white tail edges around the tip visible even in profile view, and finally the song.

After several minutes the bird flew, displaying the white much better in its slightly spread tail, and disappeared over the hilltop. A few minutes later, P. Hess briefly saw a Lark Sparrow in same plumage a short distance downslope from the original spot. This was opposite from the direction the initial bird flew, raising the prospect of a second bird.

After that, we couldn't flush or relocate any Lark Sparrow. Next morning three good birders, M. Fialkovich, J. Hoffmann and J. Valimont, also searched unsuccessfully.

Risky as such characterizations are, we should note how "comfortable" the bird's behavior seemed to be. Leisurely perching in song leads to speculation whether this might have been a bird returning to its home area to seek a mate. The site, never birded until this year, is not far from many historical sightings including a nesting record (see below). Another possible scenario: a migrant returning to the Plains was pushed northeastward around one of the strong, stormy low pressure systems moving across the Midwest in recent weeks.

OBSERVER EXPERIENCE:

P. Hess has seen Lark Sparrow three times previously, long ago: two consecutive summers in the early 1960s in c. Ohio where it was rare, and once in sw. Michigan in the late 1950s. I did not keep good notes at the time, but I seem to recall those birds had brightly plumaged faces unlike this rather dull version. Lark Sparrow was a lifer for D. Hess.

STATUS:

Lark Sparrow has always been a rare visitor and even rarer breeder in Pennsylvania.

Todd (*Birds of Western Pennsylvania*) lists 16 records in W. Pa. from 1893 to 1937, in Allegheny, Beaver, Bedford, Crawford, Greene and Huntingdon counties. These include 3 nesting records: Greene Co. 1893, Allegheny Co. 1897, and Huntingdon Co. 1931.

R.C. Leberman's files for *A Field List of the Birds of W. Pa. and Adjacent Regions* lists 10 additional W. Pa. records from 1960 to 1984 in Butler, Crawford, Erie, Franklin and Warren counties. None of these were nesting records.

This is the eighth Allegheny County record and first since 1923. All seven previous records, 1897-1923, were in the county's southwest quadrant like the present bird: the lone nesting record at Bridgeville 12 mi. SE of this site; five records at Sewickley-Leetsdale-Fair Oaks 12 mi. NE, and one at Allegheny (North Side) 17 mi. E. In addition, one Beaver County record of Todd's was 13 mi. N.

(Descriptive portion was written 2 May 1994 from detailed notes made immediately after the observation on 30 April.)

Paul D. Hess Deborah T. Hess

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*)

Date of Sighting: 30 April 1994 to 30 April 1994

Location: FINDLAY TWP

County: ALLEGHENY

Observer(s): Paul & Deborah Hess

Date of Submission: 1994

Submitted by: Paul & Deborah Hess

Written Description: YES Photo: NO Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
N. Pulcinella		X						
E. Kwater			X					
R. Ickes			X					
G. McWilliams			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
J. Skinner			X					
TOTALS		1	6					
DECISION			X					

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

F C Haas

Date:

9-25-94