

Rare Bird Documentation for PORC:

820-02-2003

Species: Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*)

Number: 1

Sex, age, plumage: first winter

Date/time of observation:

Wednesday, 29 October, 2003, approx 13:00

Location:

The bird was seen at Peace Valley Park near Doylestown, Bucks County, PA. It was in the field at the top of the Unami trail.

Observer(s):

Bill Etter

1030 Old Bethlehem Road #2

Perkasie, PA 18944

better@netcarrier.com

215-258-0229

Habitat: The bird was seen along the edges of a grassy field. Goldenrod and Multi-flora Rose were the most prevalent flora in the immediate area. The field contained many small conifers of various species and was bordered by a more mature deciduous woodlot.

Conditions: Viewing conditions were fine. Sky was overcast but bright.

Distance / Optics: The bird was seen at fairly close range (20 yards or so) through 8x24 binoculars.

Description:

The previous evening (28 Oct), a sparrow in this area had tentatively been identified as a Lark Sparrow. Following the rain on the morning of the 29th, I attempted to relocate this bird. I'd searched for about half an hour, focusing my efforts mainly upon a flock of about 30-40 White-throated Sparrows that were in the described area. Field Sparrows were also present. At about 1:00 pm I noticed a clear, high-pitched chip note coming from the wood's edge. The note was repeated consistently every 1-2 seconds and was noticeably different from that of the White-throats and Cardinals in the area. I found the calling bird perched near the top of a large Multi-flora Rose bush. I saw a slender sparrow-like bird with a very bold facial pattern and a dark crown. It was in an alert posture. Switching to binoculars, I got a closer look for the next ten seconds or so. The head pattern was bold and highly contrasting. It was deep brown on pale; no other coloration was visible. The crown was dark brown with a thin lateral stripe barely evident. High contrast continued throughout the face: light supercilium, dark auriculars, light malar stripe, dark throat stripe, and, finally, pale throat. Unlike White-throated or Swamp Sparrow, the light hue of the throat continued clear down through the breast and belly of the bird. Central and low on the breast was the small dark spot characteristic of the species. Overall coloration of the bird was basically drab browns and greys, with no strong wing-bars apparent. There was very limited and faint streaking on the flanks, but this did not extend out onto the pale breast of the bird. Regrettably, the back and tail were not seen well.

Identification: Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), first winter.

Behavior: The bird remained alert and chipped continually while I watched, for up to ten seconds. It eventually tired of looking at me and flew back and away, staying low and disappearing into the weeds along the edge of the woods. The associated flock continued in that direction two and three birds at a time, and all were gone within moments.

Vocalizations: As described above, the bird produced a continual clear, high-pitched, singular chip note that was separable from that of the surrounding White-throated Sparrows. This vocalization was what initially drew my attention to it, and the chipping continued every 1-2 seconds until it flew away.

Supporting evidence: None.

Separation from similar species:

Several other species must be considered while identifying this bird. Chipping Sparrow might be similar, but should not display such dark auriculars and lateral stripes. It also *should* have obvious wing-bars and should *not* have the central breast spot. American Tree Sparrow shares the pale centrally spotted breast, but this bird lacked any trace of red or rufous coloration, among other things (i.e. wing bars, grey cheeks, etc). Presence of bold lateral stripes also seems to eliminate this species. Clay-colored Sparrow might display a similar facial pattern, and is a bird that I have little first-hand experience with. However, as stated, the bird I saw displayed dark, bold lateral throat stripes, quite similar to that of a Song Sparrow, which Clay-colored should not have. The breast was pale, not buffy. Clay-colored should also not display a strong central breast spot.

Several species share a similar (though not so bold) highly contrasting facial pattern, and possibly the central breast spot, but would not be expected to display a completely pale, totally unsmudged or unstreaked breast. Swamp, Lincoln's, Savannah, Song, Vesper and White-throated Sparrow, and even Lark Bunting can all be eliminated for this reason. These various species may also be further eliminated, to one degree or another, by various field marks as described above.

Previous experience: I've had no previous experience with Lark Sparrow.

Certainty of identification: I am confident in my identification of this bird.

References consulted: I consulted The Sibley Guide to Birds, as well as several other prominent North American field guides to solidify my identification of the bird. Furthermore, several internet sources were checked to find photographic reference to sub-adult Lark Sparrows, as well as that of certain similar species.

Date of report: 31 October 2003.

Signature of observer:

Bill Etter
Perkasie, PA

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*)

Date of Sighting: 29 October 2003 to 29 October 2003

Location: PEACE VALLEY PARK

County : BUCKS

Observer(s): Bill Etter

Date of Submission: 2003

Submitted by: Bill Etter

Written Description: Yes

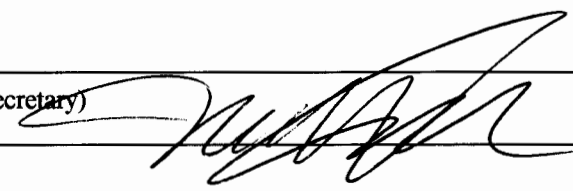
Photo: No

Specimen: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut			X					
D. Heathcote			X					
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer				X				
R. Leberman			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			6	1				
DECISION			X					

Comments: 6/1

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

9/16/04