



814-06-1998

## Rarities Report

**Species:** Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*)

**Date:** Seen first on 19 December, relocated on 24 and 26 December 1998

**Location:** Topton, Berks Co., PA, 1.5 miles northwest of Main St. on West High Street, in agricultural fields.

**Observers:** (19, 24, 26 Dec.) Peter G. Saenger, 1830 Woodside Ave., Alburtis, PA 18011 (610) 682-2401  
crex@early.com

(26 Dec) Dr. Daniel Klem, Jr. Department of Biology, Muhlenberg College, 2400 Chew St., Allentown, PA 18104 (610) 821-3259.

**Weather:** (24th) Temp. 35 F., partly sunny, cloud cover 75 %, dusting of snow on the ground, light (0-5 mph) west wind.

**Time:** 11:30- 11:35 (19 Dec.); 15:30-16:15 (24 Dec.), and 14:10-14:30 (26 Dec.)

**Direction of observation from sun:** On 24 Dec. and 26 Dec., the bird was located to the north/northeast from observation point; the sun was behind/left of the observers.

**Distance:** 15 feet (19 Dec.), 8-20 feet (24 and 26 Dec.)

**Duration of observation:** On 19 Dec. the bird was viewed a couple of times as it feed and flew along a tree line for a total of maybe 45 seconds. On 24 Dec. the bird was in view for approximately 15-20 minutes of the total time. Feeding in grass, perched in full view in a bare shrub and short flights between perch and ground. On 26 Dec. the bird was viewed for 10 minutes of the total time.

**Optics:** Leica 8 x 32 binoculars (19 and 24 Dec.); Leica 8 x 32, Zeiss 10 x 40, and Kowa 20x zoom (26 Dec.).

**Experience with species:** Peter G. Saenger: One other sighting; the Peace Valley Nature Center (Bucks Co.) bird that molted into a hybrid. I have seen winter Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*.) Before going to relocate this bird, I went through Advanced Birding, Ken Kaufman to be sure of the field marks to differentiate between Chipping, Clay-colored, and Brewers Sparrows (*Spizella breweri*).

Dr. Daniel Klem, Jr.: Moderate experience with the species in the mid-west and along the Atlantic Coast.

**Discussion:** A bird believed to be the same as the one seen both 24 and 26 December 1998, was first seen on 19 December during the Lehigh Valley Christmas Bird Count. Peter G. Saenger was the only person to see the bird and though had a good look, due to inexperience with the species, was unsure. Peter succeeded after two trips on 24 Dec. to relocate the bird and confirm the identity. The bird was in a mixed flock of White-crowned (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) and American Tree Sparrows (*Spizella arborea*), along with Northern Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) on the 19th, and on the 24 and 26 Dec., it was with two Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*) in a small patch of weeds at the edge of a field.

**Field marks:** The overall initial impression was of a small, pale sparrow. The most catching field mark on this bird is how well defined and obvious the pale submoustachial stripes are and the cheek patch, which are chestnut-brown, outlined by black on the top, upper nape-side, and lower side, and the next most noticeable marking was the gray nape, which did not extend onto the upper breast.

After close study today (24th): The malar stripes are thin, but readily noticeable. The crown has a light gray median stripe, with fine streaking in the brown crown (no hint of rufous). The lores were pale with no hint of any marking, the breast was clear, off-white, with buff on the upper sides.

When perched facing away, the secondaries appeared to be very dark and the upper half of the outer tail seemed to be pale. The wings were always folded over the rump, so I never had a clear view of the rump, even when the bird was perched in clear sight at 12 feet, nor did any gray (or any noticeable) color show when it flew. I did see the back and lower back area, which was brown. The breast is clear, bill pale yellow and darker on the culmen. The bird was markedly smaller and paler than the Song Sparrows it was next to for comparison. Another striking feature to Dr. Klem, was the distinct contrasting black streaks on a pale back.

### References used:

National Geographic, second edition, used as field reference.

Advanced Birding, Ken Kaufman; went point by point at home and other than not seeing the rump color for sure, all points fit an adult Clay-colored Sparrow.

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**SPECIES: Clay-colored Sparrow**

**NUMBER/AGE/SEX: Full Adult (past 1st Winter)**

**OBSERVER: Dean Kendall**

**DATE SEEN: 28 Dec., 1998**

**LOCATION: Longswamp Twp, Berks Co.;** in a weedy fencerow next to W. High St., near **Topton** (~1/2 mi. W of downtown, amid open fields)

**CONDITIONS:** Sky fully overcast; light fairly bright, diffuse. Air mild (a little above freezing), nearly still. Observations made facing away from cloud-covered sun, from ~8:45 to ~10:15 am. (for several periods of a few minutes each) at ~20-25 yds. with stock-mounted 20X wide-angle Bushnell scope, braced to the knees (also 7X binos) .

**SITUATION/HABITAT/BEHAVIOR:** Feeding with a mixed flock of sparrows (White-crowned, Tree and Song) on weedseed (mostly lamb's-quarters, and aster or goldenrod) beneath sparse trees of a narrow fencerow between two weed-bare fields (one newly plowed). Visible mostly while perched clinging to the seed-bearing parts of the weeds (with Tree Sparrows doing likewise close by), but at times on the ground (amid White-crowns).

**OVERALL IMPRESSION:** A bright little sparrow of largely pale brown hue with contrastingly dark fine-cut streaking about the head and back.

**SIZE:** Distinctly smaller than the Tree Sparrows feeding close by. Roughly the size of a Chipping Sparrow.

**HEAD/NECK:** Crown narrowly streaked with brown; with prominent (in fully head-on view), moderately broad, whitish median stripe. Supercilium fairly broad, whitish, distinct but not particularly bright. Lores pale, contrasting little if any with supercilium. Cheek patch light brown; sharply bordered along upper edge by dark post-ocular stripe, and along lower edge by prominent dark moustachial stripe. Sub-moustachial stripe broad, bright cream-white, prominent; subtended by narrow but prominent dark malar stripe. Nape a plain medium grey (unstreaked, at least on the sides of the nape which was all I got a look at).

**UNDERPARTS:** Unmarked. Breast, belly and upper flanks an uneven cream-white (as if shadowed with broadish, very faint greyish-dingy longitudinal streaks, somewhat like when a bird has recently taken a bath and the feathers remain slightly damp/disheveled - not that it's at all likely this one had). Throat paler, cleaner-looking. Lower flanks somewhat buffy. Undertail coverts not noted.

**UPPERPARTS:** Back a light, bright yellowish-brown (almost straw-colored in tone, but a bit less pale), with sharply defined dark steaking. Rump (mostly hidden by the wings: the outer edges briefly visible a few times, if barely; the central 3/4 exposed only once, very briefly) appearing buffy/brownish toward the sides (next to the buffy lower flank, with which there seemed little contrast), the central width of it seeming more greyish (the one instant it was visible at all), but a wishy-washy greyish quite unlike the pure medium grey of nape.

**WINGS:** With thin double, whitish wing-bars? (I vaguely remember taking brief mental note of such at the time, but I didn't write it down so now unsure.)

**TAIL:** Moderately long; notched. Color not noted.

**LEGS:** Dull flesh-colored.

**BILL:** Sparrow type/proportion. Detail not noted.

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round One**

Species: Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*)

Date of Sighting: 19 December 1998 to 19 December 1998

Location: TOPTON

County: BERKS

Observer(s): Peter Saenger, Dean Kendall, Daniel Klem

Date of Submission: 1998

Submitted by: Peter Saenger, Dean Kendall, Daniel Klem

WRITTEN DESCRIPTION YES PHOTO YES SPECIMEN NO RECORDING NO

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
D. Couchman	X							
T. Floyd								X
P. Hess	X							
R. Ickes	X							
J. McWilliams	X							
B. Reid				X				<del>X</del>
P. Rodewald	X							
TOTALS	5			1				21
DECISION								

Comments: 6/0/1

Signature (Secretary): *[Handwritten Signature]*

Date: 9/28/00