















829-01-1991

First Verifiable Record of Le Conte's Sparrow,
Ammodramus leconteii, for Pennsylvania

by Robert C. Leberman

In 1991 the fall flight of sparrows and other finches was very heavy at Powdermill Nature Reserve, Carnegie Museum of Natural History's field station, located three miles south of Rector, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. For example, a total of 343 juncos was banded during the season, along with 401 Song, 249 Swamp, 82 Lincoln's, and 312 White-throated sparrows.

On the morning of 20 October one of our volunteers, Bob Shaw, and I were particularly busy processing a wide variety of sparrows. Upon his return to the banding lab, after gathering birds from several mist nets situated in a tangle of willows and dogwoods between two small ponds, Shaw remarked that he had a sparrow he would "have to look up in the book." And, after removing the bird from the gathering bag, I quickly realized that I, too, would have to go to the books! It was apparently an *Ammodramus* sparrow, but far too small, pale-colored, and slender-billed to be one of the "expected" species--Grasshopper (*A. savannarum*) or Henslow's (*A. henslowii*) sparrow. It proved, after careful examination, to be a Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus*

leconteii). This determination was made more difficult by the fact that the bird was still in full, and very worn, juvenal plumage. In general, the first prebasic molt in Le Conte's Sparrow takes place on the breeding grounds, resulting in a plumage which resembles that of adults (Walkinshaw 1968). That some birds may retain their juvenal plumage throughout the fall into late winter, however, has been noted by Tordoff and Mengel (1951) and in Pyle et al. (1987).

The Powdermill bird showed none of the rich coloration that is so distinctive of Le Conte's in its later plumages; it lacked the bright buffy-orange "eyebrow", and only a single spot of chestnut was visible on either side of its nape (an area which becomes strongly streaked with this color in subsequent plumages). The central crown-streak of our bird was a pale buffy-white color with a few very fine dark streaks mixed in. The back was streaked with dark brown feathers that were broadly edged with pale buff, and there was no sign of yellow at the bend of the wing or in the underwing coverts. The Powdermill bird was, in fact, a very close match for a juvenile specimen in the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (CM: 139523) taken at Pelican Lake, Minnesota on 21 August 1949. Among the standard field guides, the PNR bird was closest in appearance to the illustration of a juvenile Le Conte's shown on page 390 of the National Geographic guide (1983).

The wing chord of the Powdermill bird was 50.0mm; its bill measured 9.5mm. The ranges for wing chord and exposed culmen measurements for Le Conte's Sparrow given in Pyle et al. (1987) are 48-56mm and 8.4-11.2mm respectively. The Powdermill bird weighed 11.6g, slightly below the range (12.4-15.2g) given for a small sample from North Dakota and Ontario (Dunning 1984) but "within the standards" of birds from the wintering grounds in Texas (D. Connell in litt.) After processing the sparrow, and calling in my banding colleague Robert S. Mulvihill to lend additional support to our identification, the bird was released wearing USFWS band number 1910-14482; there were, however, no subsequent recaptures or sightings of the bird at the Reserve.

In eliminating other species of *Ammodramus* sparrows during the identification process, the following points were among those considered:

(1) BAIRD'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus bairdii*): This species, in juvenal plumage, has a "scaled" look to the dark back feathers, which appear more streaked after the first prebasic molt; averages larger, with wing chord range of 56-67mm; and has a more stout, conical bill (Pyle et al. 1987).

(2) GRASSHOPPER SPARROW (*A. savannarum*): Back of juvenile shows scalloped pattern, as in Baird's, (Murray 1968); usually has faint yellow at bend of wing becoming brighter with first prebasic molt (Roberts 1955), and shows yellowish underwing coverts (Pyle et al. 1987). The wing chord averages much larger at 56-67mm; bill decidedly longer

and more conical than Le Conte's--exposed culmen range 10.7-12.4mm (Pyle et al. 1987).

(3) HENSLOW'S SPARROW (*A. henslowii*): In juvenile Henslow's the back shows scalloped, not streaked, pattern (Murray 1968); bill is longer and more conical--exposed culmen range 10.2-14.0mm (Pyle et al.)

(4) SHARP-TAILED SPARROW (*A. caudacutus*): This is the species most likely to be confused with Le conte's, but averages larger, with wing chord range 51-61mm (Pyle et al.). Underparts, in juvenal plumage, more richly colored, and "dorsal pattern very similar to comparable aged Le Conte's..., but color of superciliary line, nape and feather edges much richer"; rectrices "with indistinct black shaft-streak grading into olive grey of vane, which in turn pales toward feather edge", while in Le Conte's the shaft streak is sharply demarked and "bordered by rust colored area paling outwardly to pale greyish brown feather edge" (Dickerman 1962). Several voucher rectrices from the Powdermill bird, which clearly show these latter features, were saved and placed on file at Carnegie Museum.

(5) SEASIDE SPARROW (*A. maritimus*): "The juvenile Seaside Sparrow is a darker and more subdued version of the juvenile Sharp-tailed Sparrow" (Murray 1968). Seaside is larger than Le Cont'e, with wing chord at 54-65mm and an exposed culmen range of 11.9-15.0mm (Pyle et al.).

In summary, the PNR bird differed from the above similar species primarily with respect to its small size (both wing and bill), streaked back and pale coloration.

There are two earlier published records of Le Conte's Sparrow from Pennsylvania, but neither can be fully documented. The first, my own, is of a bird seen near Meadville, Crawford County, by Mary N. Leberman and me on 23 August 1959 (Poole 1964). Although I was confident of the identification at the time, considering the very early date, this record can now (as then) only be considered hypothetical. The first New England record of Le Conte's Sparrow, however, was a bird netted at Manomet, Massachusetts in 1971 on the rather early date of 4 September (Terres 1980). The second published record for Pennsylvania is of a sparrow closely observed on 20 October 1974 by members of the Black River Audubon Society at Presque Isle State Park (Kibbe 1975, Stull et al. 1985). Since this record cannot be fully documented either, it, too, must be considered hypothetical. The Powdermill bird, then, represents the first verifiable occurrence of Le Conte's Sparrow in the state. Nearby to Pennsylvania, however, a Le Conte's Sparrow was seen at Beech Bottom Swamp, Brooke County, West Virginia on 8 September 1936, and what was probably the same bird was collected on 19 September of that year (Sutton 1937); the locality is just seven or eight miles west of the Pennsylvania state line. Among other nearby records, a specimen was collected near

Ithaca, New York on 11 October 1897 (Bull 1974), and one was reported at Long Point, Ontario [across Lake Erie from Presque Isle, PA] on 11 October 1989 (Weir 1990).

The principal breeding range of Le Conte's Sparrow is in the moist grasslands and marsh edges of central North America, with a few birds nesting locally to southeastern Ontario and, more rarely, to south-central Quebec (AOU 1983). Root (1988) maps the species' primary winter range as the southeastern part of the Great Plains, with some birds wintering as far east as Florida and Georgia. Although the Le Conte's Sparrow is known to nest to the north and winter directly to the south of Pennsylvania, its migration is primarily to our west through the Mississippi Valley. However, Todd (1963) and others have speculated that the birds nesting in eastern Canada might account for the scattering of records of the species from the northeastern United States--perhaps including the Powdermill bird reported on here.

I thank R. S. Mulvihill for critically reading the first draft of this manuscript, and D. S. Wood, Associate Curator of Birds, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, for the loan of appropriate study-skins.

Literature Cited

American Ornithologists' Union. 1983. Check-list of North American birds, 6th edition. Allen Press, Lawrence, KA.

- Bull, J. 1974. Birds of New York state. Doubleday /
Natural History Press, Garden City, NY.
- Dickerman, R. W. 1962. Identification of the juvenal
plumage of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus*
caudacuta nelsoni). Bird-Banding 33: 202-204.
- Dunning, J. B. Jr. 1984. Body weights of 686 species of
North American birds. Western Bird Banding
Association, monograph no. 1, Eldon Publishing, Cave
Creek, AZ.
- Kibbe, D. P. 1975. Fall migration, 1974, Western New York
and northwestern Pennsylvania region. American Birds
29: 53-57.
- Murray, B. G., Jr. 1968. The relationships of sparrows in
the genera *Ammodramus*, *Passerherbulus*, and *Ammodramus*
with a description of a hybrid Le Conte's X Sharp-
tailed sparrow. Auk 85: 586-593.
- National Geographic Society. 1983. Field guide to the
birds of North America. National Geographic Society,
Washington, D. C.
- Poole, E. L. 1964. Pennsylvania birds. Livingston
Publishing Company, Narberth, PA.
- Pyle, P., S. N. G. Howell, R. P. Yunick and D. F. DeSante.
1987. Identification guide to North American
passerines. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA.
- Roberts, T. S. 1955. A Manual for the identification of
the birds of Minnesota and neighboring states.
University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

- Root, T. 1988. Atlas of wintering North American birds. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- Stull, J., J. A. Stull and G. M. McWilliams. 1985. Birds of Erie County Pennsylvania. Allegheny Press, Elgin, PA.
- Sutton, G. M. 1937. Notes from Brooke County, West Virginia. Cardinal 4: 117-118.
- Terres, J. K. 1980. The Audubon Society encyclopedia of North American birds. A. A. Knopf, NY.
- Todd, W. E. C. 1963. Birds of the Labrador Peninsula and adjacent areas. University of Toronto Press, Canada.
- Tordoff, H. B. and R. M. Mengel. 1951. The occurrence and possible significance of a spring molt in Leconte's Sparrow. Auk 68: 519-522.
- Walkinshaw, L. H. 1968. *Passerherbulus caudacutus* (Latham), Le Conte's Sparrow, p. 765-776. In O. L. Austin, Jr. (ed.), Life histories of North American cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, towhees, finches, sparrows, and allies, vol. 2. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.
- Weir, R. D. 1990. Fall migration, 1989, Ontario region. American Birds 44: 81-87.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: **Le Conte's Sparrow**

Date of Sighting: **20 October 1991 to 20 October 1991**

Observer(s): **Robert Leberman**

Date of Submission: **1992 Westmargland**

Submitted by: **Robert Leberman**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater	X						
B. Haas	X						
F. Haas	X						
R. Ickes	X						
G. McWilliams	X						
S. Santner	X						
J. Skinner	X						
TOTALS	7						
DECISION	X						

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

Bm Haas

Date:

2-27-93