

# THE BIRDWATCHER'S DIARY

by Aden A. Troyer, RR 1 Box 575, Mifflintown, PA 17059

The October day dawned clear and cool with bright blue skies, no winds, and almost perfect fall day. The sun felt rather good as it rose over the pine woods across from our home that morning. It was one of those days that was perfect for taking a walk to admire the beautiful foliage, the many fall flowers, check for deer and wild turkey sign and of course keep a list of the different birds seen that day.

The first bird for the day was the common crow. They are usually the first birds to call well before sunup. The next bird surprised me. It was an immature Sharp Shinned Hawk, (It had probably roosted in son David's pine woods last night.) flying only three or four feet above the ground across our yard and garden, barely clearing the fences as it dove into a narrow, brushy strip of woods just below our property, probably looking for an early break-

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fast. They prey on small birds, sparrows, finches, and sometimes larger songbirds, which were just beginning to stir around.

I picked up a lot of common birds around the house before our breakfast that morning, such as Blue Jay, Northern Mockingbird, Robin, Carolina Wren, American Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, White-Breasted Nuthatch, Eastern Phoebe, also a Belted Kingfisher flying along our small stream, an American Kestrel sitting on a wire, Killdeer, Flicker, Eastern Bluebirds, and a Yellow-Rumped Warbler feeding on small insects on one of our locust trees. Several Cedar Waxwings were feeding on small blue berries growing on some vines along a fence row, White-Crowned Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, and several Song Sparrows were at our feeding station. By the time our breakfast was ready the tally was 28 species.

After the dishes were done my wife decided to join me on the hike.

We soon had Turkey Vultures soaring on a thermal, a Red-Tailed Hawk and a Cooper's Hawk passing through. At the corner of son David's woods we picked up Blue-Headed Vireo, Field Sparrow, Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, Black-Capped Chickadee, and several woodpeckers.

About 200 yards from our property and only about 30 feet from the paved road in our neighbor's pasture there's a small wetland area with dense weeds, reeds and a small stand of cattails.

When we got about to the center of the cattail patch, I noticed a small bird moving in the reeds. I told my wife it may be a Swamp Sparrow. The bird had disappeared into the cattails before we ever got our binoculars on it.

After waiting a while I decided to use a call known as "pishing." Birders often use several versions of this "noise" known as pishing. It's usually done by hissing through clenched teeth. It's an alarm call for most songbirds and because birds as a rule are curious, they usually respond by at least showing themselves, sometimes only for a short time, but usually long enough to get a look at some of the field marks needed to identify the species.

This bird in the reeds immediately hopped up on a reed, a small sparrow with a yellow or gold face, black and white stripes on its head, a short tail, and white belly with more stripes on its sides. I knew I'd never seen this bird before. I told my wife to get the field guide while I kept the bird in my binoculars. Quietly I said, "It must be a Nelson's Sharp-Tailed Sparrow," which are seen several times each year in Pennsylvania. By this time my wife had

the right page, got the bird in her glasses again and said, "No, Dad, it's not a Nelson's. They don't have stripes on their heads. It's got to be this one," pointing to the LeConte's Sparrow.

This bird cooperated very well for us. It actually flew out to the road, picked up an insect from the pavement no more than 20 feet from where we were standing, then flew back into the cattails again. Wow! What a treat to get a life bird only 200 yards from home.

We decided to get son David to verify our find as we still couldn't quite believe our eyes. After he agreed with our call we continued on our hike.

Our neighbor had several cows in this field and when we returned from our walk they were right in the cattails where we had seen the bird and it was nowhere to be seen. Thinking, well so much for that, those cows probably scared the bird into the next county.

After supper our other son Leroy and I walked to the marsh again just to double check. The cows were long gone and sure enough the bird was still there.

I knew there were only a handful of sightings ever in this state of LeConte's Sparrow, so decided to call two of our birding friends. The next morning at daybreak there were two vehicles in our parking lot looking for directions. As we pulled off the road next to the cattails and before everybody was out of the cars, the bird flew to within 20 feet of us, hopped on a blade of grass and sang for us. Friend Duane said, "You know it's not supposed to be this easy," getting a laugh from everybody.

During the warm part of the day the bird was only seen briefly. That evening just before sundown there were approximately 15 people looking for the bird when it finally hopped out of the weeds and preened for about 10 minutes, giving all a good look. The bird stayed until the following day and disappeared.

The LeConte's Sparrow nests in the states of Minnesota, North and South Dakota, eastern Montana, north into the Canadian prairie provinces, and winters in the southeastern States.

This bird didn't seem to be bothered by humans at all, but is naturally a very shy secretive bird, hiding in its natural habitat of marshy grasses and reeds. Its flight is a jerky somewhat awkward one and the song is a very high-pitched insect-like buzz or chip. The unusual yellow markings on its face and the stripes on the head really get your attention because no other sparrow in our area even closely resembles it. You never know what may turn up, so keep looking and listening.

PENNSYLVANIA ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE  
210 Welcome Ave. Norwood, PA 19074

8 February 2001

Aden A. Troyer  
RR 1 Box 575  
Mifflintown, PA 17059

Dear Aden,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the LeConte's Sparrow at Oakland Mills on 1 October 1998.

The essay was a pleasure to read, but after careful review the committee regrets that it cannot accept this record. A majority of members felt that your identification did not conclusively eliminate Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. One comment in your essay is not correct, and it troubled us: "They [meaning Nelson's] don't have stripes on their heads." Sharp-taileds do indeed have stripes on the crown, an eye stripe, and a stripe running downward from the eye stripe behind the side of the face (the "ear").

The committee emphasizes that non-acceptance does not mean that the bird was not the species reported, but rather that the committee believes the documentation submitted does not support the identification with certainty.

We hope that this will not discourage you from submitting documentation on any rarities you may find in the future.

Finally, the committee apologizes for the unacceptably long delay before all members were able to vote on the record. Circumstances beyond our control caused the problem, and we believe that we are back on a timely track.

Sincerely,

For the Committee:  
Paul Hess, Chairman

P.S. Beginning this year observers will receive postcards acknowledging that the committee has received their documentation. In addition, whereas observers formerly were notified only when reports were not accepted (in disappointing or irritating letters like this one), they will now receive cards announcing that their records *have* been accepted.

Record #829-01-1998

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round One**

Species: LeConte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*)

Date of Sighting: 1 October 1998 to 1 October 1998

Location: OAKLAND MILLS

County: JUNIATA

Observer(s): Aden Troyer

Date of Submission: 1998

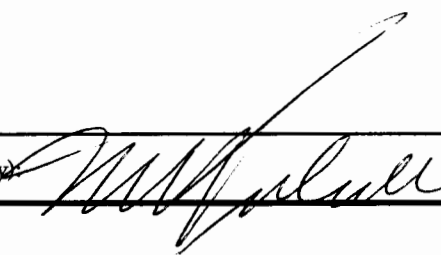
Submitted by: Aden Troyer

WRITTEN DESCRIPTION YES PHOTO NO 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			1	2	3			1 <del>X</del>
DECISION					X			

Comments: 11/5/1

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

9/28/00