









Le Conte's Sparrow
Ammodramus leconteii

829-01-2006

Date of sighting - November 24, 2006

Date of report - December 12, 2006 (from notes made day of observation)

Time of sighting - ~11:15 am - ~4:00 pm

Optics - Nikon 8x42 LX binoculars, Swarovski ATS HD 80 w/ 20-60x

Other observers - I found the bird w/ Cameron Rutt. >20 people saw the bird while I was there, including Glenn Seeholzer, Arlene Koch, Adrian Binns, Devich Farbotnik, Bill Etter, Frank Gill, Sally Conyne, Ken Riker, and others

Location - Pine Run Dam, near Quakertown, Bucks County, PA

Cameron Rutt and I were walking through the wet fields at Pine Run looking for late rails and sparrows. We had already covered most of the fields and had been in the area for >1 hour when we were about to give up. I flushed a sparrow from about five feet in front of me, and it flew low about 20 feet before landing back in the grass. I did not get a good look at it, so I reflushed the bird and it flew >50 feet in front of Cameron and me. We both recognized the bird as an *Ammodramus* sparrow by its low, pulsing flight, short tail, and manner of landing abruptly back in the grass. I noted immediately that the bird looked small and pale. After flushing the bird into taller brush and getting piecemeal views in flight, we began to suspect that the bird was a Le Conte's Sparrow. Finally, I found the bird on the ground and confirmed our suspicions, noting the following characteristics: (from field notes)

- dark drayish nape with light flecking (others later remarked that this looked purplish, but I think that was incorrect and influenced by preconceptions from field guides...) - the nape was definitely not light gray as in a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow
- highly contrasting back, with very pale streaks alternating with darker brown on the mantle and scapulars
- obvious whitish outer webbing to tertials
- coverts and flight feathers brownish with broad pale edging
- face with bright orange supercilium and malar area and gray auriculars and lores
- a small black arrow was present behind the eye above the auriculars, separated from the area by the border between the auriculars and supercilium (no dark line here)
- crown dark brown/ black with obvious white median stripe
- bill small for Ammo. Sparrow
- legs pinkish
- lower breast white, upper breast pale buffy
- thin, dark streaks running down flanks and connecting across upper breast very faintly (suggestive of HY bird as per Pyle et al 1997)
- in flight, obviously very pale tan w/ short tail and lack of paler or contrasting rump (as often seen in Nelson's STS... gave impression of very small size)

Behavior-wise, the bird was very hard to observe because it would run after flushing, pausing briefly under vegetation, often in hard-to-view areas. Occasionally we could see the bird while it was stopped - this is when the best looks were obtained.

After getting good, conclusive views, Cameron and I pulled out of the habitat to give the bird space. After debating what to do regarding contacting people, we decided to call everyone and hope for good behavior regarding respect of habitat, the bird, etc. An hour later, people began trickling in and we looked for the bird again. It was only 30 minutes or so before we reflushed it (having found a Grasshopper Sparrow and a Common Yellowthroat in the interim) and got good looks with others along a small, brushy creek. Others got looks along the creek for the next several hours as the bird skulked in the bushes.

I had no prior experience with this species, but was immediately sure of the identification due to familiarity with the species from pictures and descriptions from books and the internet. I have lots of experience with the other eastern Ammodramus sparrows: Grasshopper, Henslow's, Seaside, N. Sharp-tailed, and S. Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Separation from other Ammodramus sparrows was easy. The combination of very pale sandy overall coloration, white median crown stripe, bright orange/ gray facial pattern, white tertial edging, and bold flank streaking eliminates other species. The nape pattern which was dark grayish was not particularly helpful in identification.

This represents the latest Le Conte's for the state of PA (Brauning and McWilliams). I am positive of the ID because of my experience with the other Ammo. sparrows and the striking nature of this bird.

I did not consult any books before writing field notes of the observation. Before writing this report, I consulted Pyle's Identification Guide to North American Birds Part 1 for ageing criteria (probably HY because of breast streaking, but difficult to age when not in hand). I also looked at the Sibley Guide to Birds.

I did not take any photos (due to skulking nature of the bird... grr), but Adrian Binns (included), Howard Eskin (included), Michael Lyman (included) and Devich Farbotnik got some conclusive images and video to secure this as a Class I record.

Report by Tom Johnson

tbj4@cornell.edu

717.991.5727

Mews Residence Hall

367c Mews Hall

Ithaca, NY 14853

or

24 Meadowood Dr.

Hummelstown, PA 17036

Documentation for the PORC

Species: Le Conte's Sparrow

Name: Cameron Rutt

Address: PO Box 223, Blooming Glen, PA 18911

Email: cr1193@messiah.edu

Phone Number: 215-767-0298

Other Observers: co-found with Tom Johnson; Also seen later by Glen Seeholzer, Devich Farbotnik, Bill Etter, August Mirabella, Judy Mirabella, Butch Lishman, Howard Eskin, Dave Wilton, Rick Wiltraut, Arlene Koch, Ian Baldoch, Ken Rieker, Jason Horn, Sally Conyne, Frank Gill, Geoff Malosh, Sandra Keller, George Franchois, Bill Murphy, Connie Goldman, Chuck Crunkleton, Chuck Bertoud, Joan Renninger, Elaine Ryans, Ron French, Adrian Binns, Devon Bosler, Curt Swartz, Dirk Robinson, Bob Schriebner, Bill Ceim, Leslie Weisman-Cook, Vicky Mahoud, Sam Perloff, Linda Rowan, etc, etc.

Location: Pine Run Dam, Bucks County. This is located off of Sandy Ridge Road, on a small dead end road called Iron Hill Road. Pine Run Dam is located in close proximity to Doyelstown and Peace Valley County Park. Interestingly, this location has turned up a lengthening list of goodies over the past few years: Yellow Rail, Black Rail, Sedge Wrens, and multiple Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows among others.

Date and Length of time observed: November 24-27, 2006. I saw the bird on four separate occasions during the first two days of its stay. The bird was often in the birders' vicinity for a much greater amount of time than it was actually visible. Therefore it is challenging to estimate the total amount of time observed. I would guess that cumulatively, I had the bird in view through my binoculars for about 10 minutes. Tom Johnson and I first located the bird at approximately 11:15 AM on November 24, 2006, and continued to flush it multiple times before we obtained a satisfactory view for identification. It wasn't relocated again until around 2:00 PM for another round of viewing and finally, at 3:30 PM it showed up once more for a few crowd pleasing views (some at eye-level!). I then saw the bird again on November 25 around 11:00 AM.

Optics: The bird was seen through my Swarovski 8.5 by 42 EL binoculars. I was able to be within approximately 10-15 feet of the bird at times which made for some exquisite views despite the secretive nature of the bird and its concealing habitat.

Habitat and Behavior: The bird's habitat was a bit tough to analyze due to the fact that it was only after the bird was disturbed that we were able to view the bird (and in a different habitat). Tom and I originally flushed the bird from a wet "field" of short, green grasses (6"-12") interspersed with patches of sedges and various other grasses. This appeared to be the typical Le Conte's Sparrow habitat and was, in my opinion, the area where it probably favored (?), if it, not the birders, had the choice. After the bird was flushed from this short, wet field it flew into a waist high field of dead vegetation that included foxtail grass, common mullein, goldenrod, etc. The field was fairly sparse due to the dead, dry nature of the plants. It was this habitat where the bird was rediscovered on November 25, 2006 and the habitat where it was almost exclusively viewed that day and to the best of my understanding on subsequent days. Unfortunately, after a group of people gathered on November 24, the bird flushed out of this waist high field and ended up in some thick tangles bordering a small stream. Here the bird remained until nightfall, to the best of my knowledge. This thick vegetation included multiflora rose, silky dogwood, short oak trees, and a willow among other brush.

The bird flushed fairly readily upon approach while it was in the two field habitats and would land upon the ground. Typically, flights were short but a couple flights were fairly long

appeared heavy (although the literature notes that it is slimmer billed than Grasshopper Sparrow). The pictures, however, do not seem to reveal a heavy bill. Overall the bill was pink with a black ridge on the culmen. The legs were also pink.

Similar Species:

"Sharp-tailed Sparrow" – This was the most likely candidate for confusion but easily separated by a few simple field marks. The most striking features of our bird in comparison to a "Sharp-tailed" were its bright white median crown stripe vs. clean gray crown, streaked gray nape vs. clean gray nape, and straw colored tertial edges (in addition to the much bolder back streaking) vs. relatively unmarked tertials.

Grasshopper Sparrow – While Grasshopper Sparrows have a white median crown stripe, our bird's heavily streaked flanks, streaked breast, pale tertials, and longitudinal straw colored mantle streaks in addition to other facial features distinguish the bird from GRSP. A GRSP was also present on November 24th in the same general habitat.

Henslow's Sparrow – Henslow's Sparrows contain the distinctive white scaling on the mantle as our bird also showed, but there weren't too many more similarities. The bright yellow-buff face, breast, and flanks, pale tertial edging, gray auriculars, gray nape, and white median crown stripe eliminate this species.

*All other sparrows should be eliminated by the bright yellow-buff coloration. With the addition of the white median crown stripe and streaked underparts, Le Conte's Sparrow is the only bird that fits these criteria.

Note: Devich Farbotnik was able to obtain some video footage and photographs of the Le Conte's Sparrow while both Adrian Binns, Howard Eskin, and others snapped off a few photographs of the bird. I believe that most, if not all, of those who attempted to see the bird on the 24th and 25th were fortunate enough to see it. Attached were a couple of photos that Howard Eskin took on November 25, 2006.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: LeConte's Sparrow Ammodramus leconteii

Date of Sighting: 24 November 2006 to 27 November 2006

Location: PINE RUN

County : BUCKS

Observer(s): Cameron Rutt, Tom Johnson m.obs

Date of Submission: 2006

Submitted by: Cameron Rutt, H. Eskin, T. Johnson, D. Farbotnik, A. Binns, *MIKE LYMAN*

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

Specimen: No

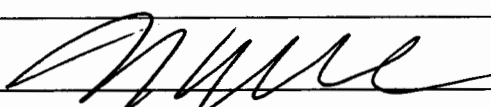
Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut	X							
A. Guarente	X							
T. Johnson	X							
J. Stanley								
E. Witmer	X							
J. Heller	X							
G. Malosh	X							
TOTALS	6							
DECISION	X							

Comments:

6/0

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

7/30/07