

830-01-1991

Species: Sharp-tailed Sparrow

Reporter: Steven J Santner
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Date: Oct 6, 1991 (written up Nov 6, 1991 from notes made at the scene)

Location: Grassy islands just south of Haldeman Is, Lancaster County, located in the Susquehanna River near the town of Bainbridge

Habitat: Low grass- and sedge-covered islands with few bushes. Almost all vegetation is less than three feet high

Sighting conditions: Various, best conditions involved birds perched at 20 feet and seen through binoculars for 5-10 minutes

Other observers: Eric Witmer, Jerry Book and Tom Garner on 10/6/91. Also seen by Nick Pulcinella the following weekend.

These islands had produced three Sharp-tailed Sparrows when last checked two years before. Therefore, despite difficulties involved in getting to and traveling among these islands (slippery rocks, fast moving water and occasional deep water holes), Eric Jerry and Tom decided to revisit these islands. I had not been here before but was looking forward to the trip. A cold front moved through the night of Oct 5, raising hopes still further. On reaching the first islet (only about 40 feet across) we found a Dunlin and a Pectoral Sandpiper but nothing else. Quick coverage of a mostly tree-covered island netted a Marsh Wren and some White-rumped Sandpipers which flew up from what appeared to be the largest island in the group. This island, the next to be visited, was 200-300 feet across and was actually about one-third water. Soon after landing, a Virginia Rail was flushed, followed by an American Bittern. Soon thereafter we had our first Sharp-tailed Sparrow. This bird was seen briefly by Eric and Tom and was then lost as it flew to the next island. It was not seen well but orange in the face was noted. We continued to work the island, occasionally flushing Marsh Wrens, Scares and other sparrows, mostly Swamp.

When we reached the northeast section of the island we finally located a sitting Sharp-tailed Sparrow. In fact we found two, which soon became three! These sat for 5-10 minutes, long enough for Eric to decide to get his camera, run (carefully) back to the boat and return, and even to take one or two shots which unfortunately did not turn out. However, excellent looks at the birds were had by all. These three birds had dark crowns, orange

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superciliary stripe and upper breast, gray cheek patch and upper back, some fine streaking on the breast (the amount varied from bird to bird) and prominent white streaks on a dark back. These birds appeared to be dark as sparrows do when perched but appeared much lighter in flight, especially when compared to the very common Swamp Sparrow. The prominent white streaking on top and the fine streaking underneath suggest that these birds were the prairie race nelsoni, as have been all others of this species seen here well enough to be identified to subspecies.

After a while, the birds finally flew off. When we moved in, a fourth bird flew out which, although not seen well, appeared to be of this species as well. Shortly thereafter, Tom, Jerry and Eric worked there way out to the northeastern tip while I worked back more towards the center of the island. Soon I found several sparrows in a low bush. Two perched momentarily on top and showed orange in the face. Two others flushed quickly and were pale in flight as the other Sharp-taileds had appeared. Four in one bush and only one of the original birds had flown in this direction. This meant the total was now at least 7-8 birds! I walked back to the others to tell them of my good fortune and learned that they had flush 8 birds, some seen well, some not so well, but all believed to be Sharp-taileds!! We then figured we had seen an absolute minimum of 12 birds, 19 if the original bird had not returned to the island. After moving to the next island, we found 1-2 more Sharp-taileds, as well as more Marsh Wrens and the bittern. Other islands were visited that morning but not more sparrows were found. It is difficult to know exactly how many Sharp-tailed Sparrows were on these islands that morning but there were at least 10, and probably closer to 20 in all. Also seen that day were 1-2 Virginia Rails, 3 Scaups, an American Bittern, about 5 Marsh Wrens, a Peregrine, many Ospreys, Common Snipe and Water Pipit.

Elimination of similar species: Le Conte's Sparrow is the most similar. There are only two reported sight records (8/23/59 in Crawford Co and 10/20/74 in Erie Co, Wood-1979) but all birds seen well were checked for this species. Unfortunately, none had the central crown stripe or the chestnut streaks on the nape that the Le Conte's has. Savannah Sparrow is normally a much more common bird in this habitat than Sharp-tailed and is similar in actions but is not very similar in plumage. It is often yellowish, but never orange and gray in the head, nor does it have white streaks on the back. Only one Savannah was seen all day, suggesting that few, if any, of the poorly seen Sharp-taileds were actually this species.

Experience with this and similar species: Sharp-tailed Sparrow:

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20+ years with the coastal race, the prairie race was seen once before by me on the Conejehela Flats 2-3 years before. the others have seen somewhat more nelsoni, as there have been 5-6 records on the flats over the past 4-5 years. I have never seen a Le Conte's Sparrow and have seen Savannah Sparrows often during over 30 years of birding.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: **Sharp-tailed Sparrow**

Date of Sighting: **6 October 1991 to 6 October 1991**

Observer(s): **Steve Santner**

Date of Submission: **1992 Lancaster**

Submitted by: **Steve Santner**

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	Abstain						
J. Skinner			X				
TOTALS			7				
DECISION			X				

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

B. M. Haas

Date:

2-27-93