

830A -01-2005

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus nelsoni*) at Bald Knob, Allegheny County, PA, 26-Sep-2005

Observer:

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Facts:

Temperature: 65 F
Wind: calm
Sky: clear with high cirrus, which effectively reflected low sunlight and increased the amount of available light after sunset

Time: 6:50 to 7:20 PM
Equipment: Leica 10x42 BN binoculars
Photos or audio recordings: None
Accompanying observers: None
Documentation date: Various notes compiled by October 26, 2005
Submission date: November 16, 2005

Observation:

While examining a mixed flock of sparrows (Field, Song, one Lincoln's) near a small marshy pond in the Imperial Grasslands just before sunset, I noticed a small buffy sparrow flying towards me and into the grasses to my left. I immediately recognized the flight pattern, size, and shape (especially the impression of a short tail) as different from the rest of the flock, consistent with a sparrow of the genus *Ammodramus*. The buffy coloration instantaneously alerted me that it was not a grasshopper or Henslow's sparrow, which are the expected *Ammodramus* species in this area.

Over the next twenty minutes, I carefully and patiently tracked the bird through the brush, reeds, and grasses around the pond, picking up various details along the way. Fortunately there is not too much suitable habitat close to the pond itself, so it remained possible for one birder to effectively track the bird despite its efforts to hide. By the time I finally got a full, unobstructed view of the bird, I was already convinced of its ID by patching together the clues presented; the ID was confirmed once it finally sat out in the open for 15-20 seconds.

By the time I had this unobstructed view, the sun had set and light was fading fast, but the clear sky and clear air still made for some surprisingly good light which allowed for a satisfying view. Some of the subtle colorations noted earlier as I tracked it were lost in this failing light, but the overall impression of lighter and darker areas (like the cheek patch, described below) were discernable. Shortly after this final encounter, the bird continued to work its way along the grasses, mostly hidden from view. At this point I turned away.

Description:

-- Small predominantly brown and buffy/orange sparrow, smaller than nearby song and field sparrows, and shorter tailed, especially noticeable in flight. Grayish bill, not especially long proportionally.

-- Plumage characteristics:

- Medial crown stripe dark grayish, flanked on either side by thin, dark brown stripes
- Bright orange or buffy supercilium and malar, gray cheeks, gray nape. Thin, dark post-ocular eyeline. There was an orange/buffy area on the side of the face connecting the malar to the supercilium, effectively creating an isolated gray cheek patch, which could be discerned in the unobstructed view
- Buffy throat, upper breast, and flanks, all somewhat duller than the supercilium/malar. Neat thin dark streaks across the upper breast and down the flanks
- Neatly defined white belly, squared off by the buffy coloration of the upper breast and flanks. Belly and vent unmarked.
- Mantle, scapulars, flight feathers, etc. (the "back") generally appeared darker brown, in contrast to the bright buffy oranges described above
- Darker brown or grayish, non descript, short tail

-- Very secretive, remaining well hidden for most of the twenty minutes that I tracked it. At times it was seen to run on the ground through the grasses rather than fly.

-- Displayed a peculiar loopy trajectory when in flight at the point of returning to cover, like it would just suddenly fall out of the air.

Discussion:

The bird was obviously a sparrow; the streaking on the breast eliminates all species of grass-dwelling wrens, such as sedge wren. The flight pattern, proportionally short tail, and ultra-secretive nature serve to eliminate most sparrow species outside of the genus *Ammodramus*.

Plumage characteristics, in the broad strokes, narrow the identification down to Nelson's sharp-tailed, saltmarsh sharp-tailed, and LeConte's. Grasshopper sparrow is eliminated by the dark crown stripe, buffy orange coloration, and the streaked breast; Henslow's and Baird's sparrows are similarly eliminated by the orange coloration and the dark crown stripe; seaside sparrow is eliminated by the overall coloration which was not nearly dark enough for any subspecies of seaside.

LeConte's sparrow can appear orange/buffy similar to the Bald Knob bird, but is eliminated by the gray crown stripe, the unstreaked, even gray nape, and by the strength of the buffy orange coloration on the face. This leaves one of the sharp-tailed complex as the only possibilities.

Saltmarsh sharp-tailed can be eliminated by the neatness of the white belly, which contrasted very well with the streaked buffy orange of the upper breast and flanks, and by the fine nature of the streaks on the breast and flanks. Also, the bill seemed too short compared to the "typical" bill of a saltmarsh sharp-tailed.

Further, I believe the bird can probably be identified as the "interior" race of Nelson's Sharp-tailed sparrow (*A. n. nelsoni*) based on the proportionally shorter bill and the brighter, crisper overall coloration, especially the streaking on the breast. *A. n. subvirgatus* is generally duller and less well defined in the breast/belly area, have less sharply contrasting facial markings, and have proportionally longer bills, although this final characteristic is probably not reliable in the field. However, taken as one characteristic of many all leaning the same way, the bill was consistent

with *nelsoni*. I do not attempt (nor have the expertise) to separate this bird from *A. n. alterus*, which may not even be possible in the field in the fall, however, the probability that this bird was actually of the prairie race *nelsoni*, based on the geographical location where it was found, is compelling.

This is the first record of Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow in Allegheny County, and one of only two or three in southwestern Pennsylvania south of the Glaciated Northwest and west of the Allegheny Front.

Prior experience:

I have seen a few Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrows at Presque Isle State Park in Erie County, as well as on a few occasions in the Midwestern United States, and I have noted a few saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrows on the Atlantic Coast. My experience is not extensive with either species by any means, however, I am quite convinced that the Bald Knob bird was a Nelson's, probably of the interior race *A. n. nelsoni*.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (Ammodramus nelsoni)

Date of Sighting: 26 September 2005 to 26 September 2005

Location: BALD KNOB

County: ALLEGHENY

Observer(s): Geoff Malosh

Date of Submission: 2005

Submitted by: Geoff Malosh

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

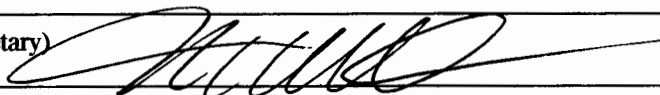
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut T. Johnson			X					
A. Guarente			X					
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley				X				
E. Witmer			X					
J. Heller			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			6	1				
DECISION			X					

Comments: 6/1

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

9/5/05