

The Henslow's Sparrow in Ontario: A Historical Perspective

by
Richard W. Knapton

Henslow's Sparrows (*Ammodramus henslowii*) were first reported in Ontario in 1898; W.E. Saunders reported seeing and hearing "several" Henslow's Sparrows at two locations—at Jeannette's Creek on the south shore of Lake St. Clair, near Sarnia, Lambton County. In the same year the Reverend C.J. Young reported a nest containing four eggs in a "wet springy place in a meadow under a tuft of grass" near Lansdowne, Leeds County (Macoun and Macoun 1909). McIlwraith (1894) makes no mention of the species in his survey of the birds of Ontario. Therefore I make the assumption (but see below) that the Henslow's Sparrow's first occurrence in the province was in the late 1890s, and in this account I trace changes in its distribution and abundance from the late 1890s to 1980 (see Knapton 1982).

Saunders (1908), writing on the nesting status of the Henslow's Sparrow in Ontario at the turn of the century, considered the species to be reasonably common in the extreme southwest part of the province, particularly at the mouth

of the Thames River where it flows into Lake St. Clair. In this area Swales (1905) had found a colony of ten pairs. This raises the possibility that the species may have occupied the natural tall grass prairies of Essex and Lambton Counties for many years prior to first sightings, and it was simply overlooked owing to its unobtrusive behaviour, particularly its inconspicuous song, a sentiment also expressed by Tozer and Richards (1974) and D.A. Sutherland (1981, pers. comm.).

After these initial reports from Lambton and Essex Counties, first records from other parts of the province indicate a gradual northward and/or eastward pattern of occurrence during the next few decades across southern Ontario. The first records for Middlesex and Elgin Counties were in 1918 (at London) and in 1919 (at Port Stanley), respectively (Dale 1921). Numbers of Henslow's Sparrows in these counties evidently increased over the next few years. Two nests were found at Copenhagen, Elgin County, in 1930 (Ontario Nest Records Scheme, R. James, pers. comm.),

Richard W. Knapton, Dept. of Biological Sciences, Brock University,
St. Catharines, Ontario L2S 3A1

and numbers peaked in the 1930s, prompting W.E. Saunders to class the species as locally fairly common in the London area (letter to J.L. Baillie dated 13 August 1931; Saunders and Dale 1933).

The late 1920s and the decade of the 1930s were banner periods for Henslow's Sparrows elsewhere in southern Ontario. The Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk recorded its first birds in 1930, when Speirs (1933) found four males at Lowbanks and six males there the following year. At Long Point, a colony existed in 1927 between Courtright and Squire's Ridges, and a second colony was present just north of the Provincial Park in the 1930s. (McCracken *et al.* 1980). The regional municipalities of Hamilton-Wentworth, York and Peel also recorded Henslow's Sparrows for the first time in the 1930s, for example, a colony in the Parkdale Avenue area of Hamilton (G. North 1981, pers. comm.; J. Dowall 1981, pers. comm.), a nest found at Cooksville in 1932 (Richardson 1933), and a nest found at Toronto in 1937 (ONRS). The Holland River marsh, Simcoe County, also turned up Henslow's Sparrows in 1937, with at least five males present in late July (Ussher, 1939). Baillie and Harrington (1937), reviewing the status of the species up to the mid-1930s, concluded that Sarnia and Bradford appeared to mark the northern limit of the species in the province at that time (Figure 1).

Since the 1930s, the species has been found considerably north of Baillie and Harrington's limit. Two

singing males were reported from a meadow near Goderich, Huron County, on 4 June 1943 (Clarke 1944). The species was recorded in summer in Simcoe County at Big Cedar Point in 1942, near Barrie in 1945, near Angus and Oro Station in 1949, near Tiny Marsh in 1955, and near Holly in 1960 (Devitt 1967). The species has been found as far north as Manitoulin Island, one in June 1952 (Nicholson 1972). However, because the Henslow's Sparrow is an easily overlooked species, it is possible that such records were due to increasing observer familiarity with the species rather than a northward extension of its breeding range.

In the east, colonies were reported in the 1950s for the first time in Durham (Speirs 1973) and Northumberland (McDonald and John 1974) Counties, in the Kingston area (Quilliam 1973), and in the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton (Lloyd 1951; H. Ouellet 1981, pers. comm.; B. DiLabio 1981, pers. comm.). The first record in Wellington County was at Luther Marsh in 1962, a colony that persisted for ten years reaching a maximum of eight males (Brewer 1977; 1981, pers. comm.). The species was recorded in far eastern Ontario in 1976, with three in summer near Prescott in Leeds and Grenville Counties (Goodwin 1976).

Thus, the pattern of occurrence of the Henslow's Sparrow in Ontario is a gradual north and east one since the turn of the century (the nest record at Lansdowne, Leeds County, in 1898 appears to be somewhat of

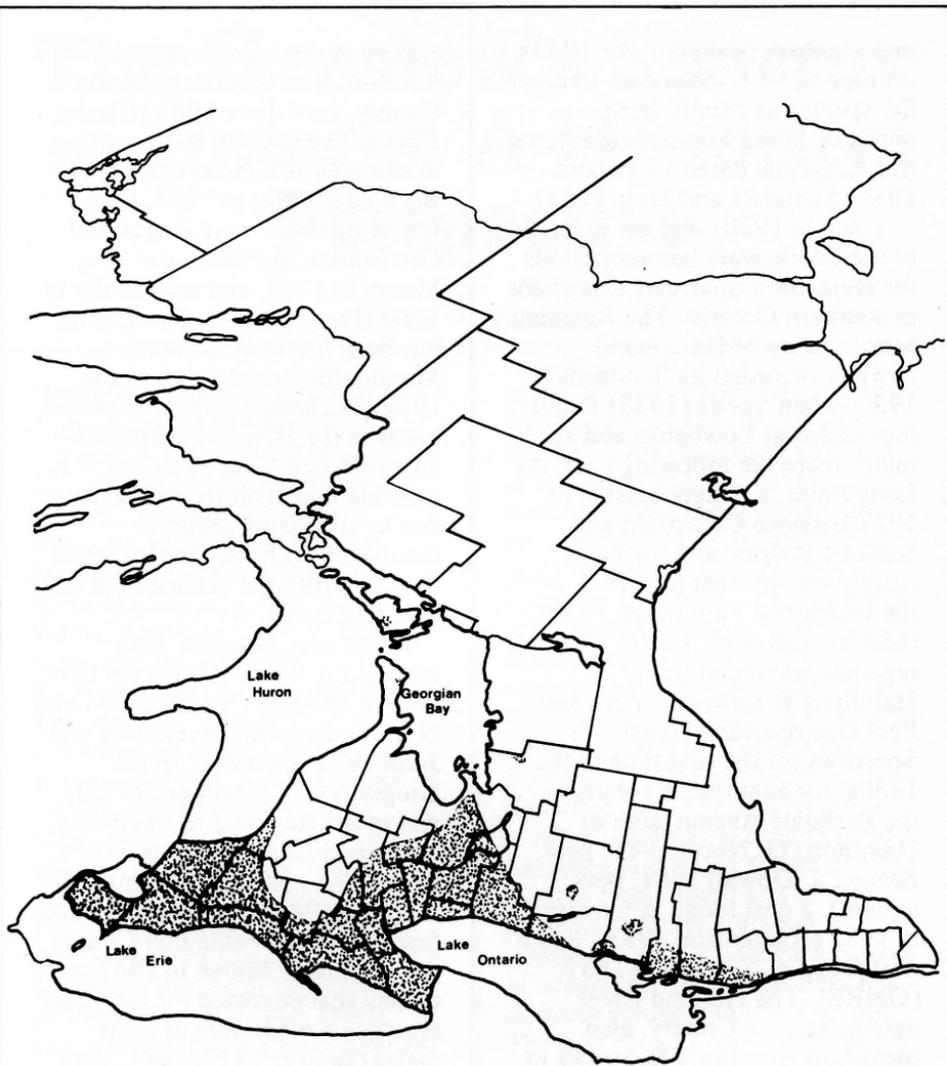


Figure 1. Breeding distribution of the Henslow's Sparrow in Ontario, late 1800's to 1980.

an anomaly, particularly since the next eastern Ontario record, at Kingston, was in 1950). This range expansion has resulted in the species occurring as far north as

Ottawa, Lake Simcoe, Georgian Bay and Manitoulin Island (James *et al.* 1976). However, it has never been recorded as occupying all areas in this region at any one

time. It now appears to be absent or very rare in large areas of Ontario: for example, the intensively cultivated southwest, a region which certainly had far more suitable habitat (e.g. abandoned grassy farmland left undisturbed for many years) earlier this century. There are no colonies greater than ten males currently known in Ontario, although some fairly large colonies have occurred in the last ten years or so, for example at Tiny Marsh (C.J. MacFayden 1981, pers. comm.) and at Barrie (C.G. Harris 1981, pers. comm.). Superficially suitable habitat still occurs across southern Ontario but is evidently unoccupied at present; for example, Henslow's Sparrows were found at only two of 155 survey stops in areas of suitable habitat in southern Ontario during the breeding season of 1983 (Risley 1983). Furthermore, the Henslow's Sparrow is now of sporadic occurrence in areas in which it was formerly classed as "locally fairly common" (e.g. Middlesex County, Haldimand-Norfolk R.M.), or "uncommon, very local summer resident" (e.g. York and Peel R.M.s, Goodwin 1979). The whys and wherefores of population fluctuations, or perhaps more accurately the long term gradual but consistent population decline in the Henslow's Sparrow throughout its range, are very poorly understood, and the species remains somewhat of an enigma among our provincial avifauna.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following

people who replied to my requests for information, who suggested references on Henslow's Sparrows, and who offered opinions on the historical and present status of Henslow's Sparrows in their areas (apologies for omissions): Dave Brewer, Mike Cadman, Craig Campbell, Geoff Carpentier, Bob Curry, Arn Dawe, Bruce DiLabio, Jim Dowall, Dave Fidler, Clive Goodwin, Chris Harris, Dave Hussell, Ross James, Bill Jarman, Harry Kerr, Cliff MacFayden, Doug McRae, George North, Mike Oldham, Henri Ouellet, Martin Parker, Peter Peach, Paul Pratt, Bill Pratt, Helen Quilliam, Alf Rider, Chris Risley, Doug Sadler, Ron Scovell, Roy Smith, Murray Speirs, Terry Sprague, Don Sutherland, Ron Tozer, Wayne Weber, Ron Weir, Chip and Linda Weseloh, Peter Whelan, Paul Wiper. Their help is gratefully acknowledged. Alan Wormington and Chris Risley made helpful comments on earlier drafts. Part of this work was completed under the supervision of the Wildlife Branch, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, with a special thanks to Irene Bowman, Nongame Program Coordinator.

Literature Cited

- Baillie, J.L. and C.J. Harrington.* 1937. Distribution of breeding birds in Ontario. *Trans. Roy. Can. Inst.* 21:150-285.
- Brewer, A.D.* 1977. The birds of Wellington County. *Spec. Publ., Guelph Field Nat. Club, Guelph.*
- Clarke, C.H.D.* 1944. Gleanings from the natural history of Huron

County, Ontario. *Can. Field-Nat.* 58: 82-84.

Dale, E.M.S. 1921. Starling and Henslow's Sparrow in Ontario. *Bird Lore* 23: 198-199.

Devitt, O.E. 1967. The birds of Simcoe County. Brereton Field Naturalists Club, Barrie.

Goodwin, C.E. 1976. Ontario Region. *Am. Birds* 30: 802-804.

Goodwin, C.E. 1979. A bird finding guide to the Toronto region. Toronto Field Naturalists, Toronto.

James, R.D., P.L. McLaren and J.C. Barlow. 1976. Annotated checklist of the birds of Ontario. *Life Sciences Misc. Publ.*, R.O.M., Toronto.

Knapton, R.W. 1982. The Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) in Canada: a status report. Unpublished Report, Nongame Program, Wildlife Branch, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Toronto. 78pp.

Lloyd, H. 1951. Recent Ottawa district bird records. *Can. Field-Nat.* 65: 46.

Macoun, J. and J.M. Macoun. 1909. Catalogue of Canadian birds. Dept. of Mines, Ottawa.

McCracken, J., M. Bradstreet and G. Holroyd. 1980. The breeding birds of Long Point, Lake Erie. L.P.B.O. Publ., Port Rowan, Ont.

McDonald, E. and E.R. John. 1974. Birds of the Port Hope & Cobourg area. Willow Beach Field Naturalists, Port Hope.

McIlwraith, T. 1894. The birds of Ontario. W. Briggs, Toronto.

Nicholson, J.C. 1972. The birds of Manitoulin Island—a species accounts summary. Sudbury, Ontario.

Quilliam, H.R. 1973. History of the birds of Kingston, Ontario. Kingston Field Naturalists, Kingston.

Richardson, H. 1933. Further notes on the Henslow's Sparrow at Toronto. *Can. Field-Nat.* 47: 58.

Risley, C.J. 1983. Results of a survey for Henslow's Sparrows in Ontario in 1983. Unpublished Report, Wildlife Branch, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Toronto, 8pp.

Saunders, W.E. 1908. Nesting of Henslow's Sparrow in Ontario. *Ottawa Nat.* 22: 115-117.

Saunders, W.E. and E.M.S. Dale. 1933. History and list of birds of Middlesex County, Ontario. *Trans. Roy. Can. Inst.* 19: 161-248.

Speirs, J.M. 1933. Some notes on the Henslow's Sparrow. *Can. Field-Nat.* 47: 35.

Speirs, J.M. 1973. Birds of Ontario County. Fed. Ont. Naturalists, Toronto.

Swales, B.H. 1905. Henslow's Sparrow in St. Clair County, Michigan. *Auk* 22: 83-84.

Tozer, R. and J.M. Richards. 1974. Birds of the Oshawa-Lake Scugog region, Ontario, Alger Press, Oshawa.

Ussher, R.D. 1939. Additional notes on the fauna of King township, York County, Ontario. *Can. Field-Nat.* 53: 101-110.