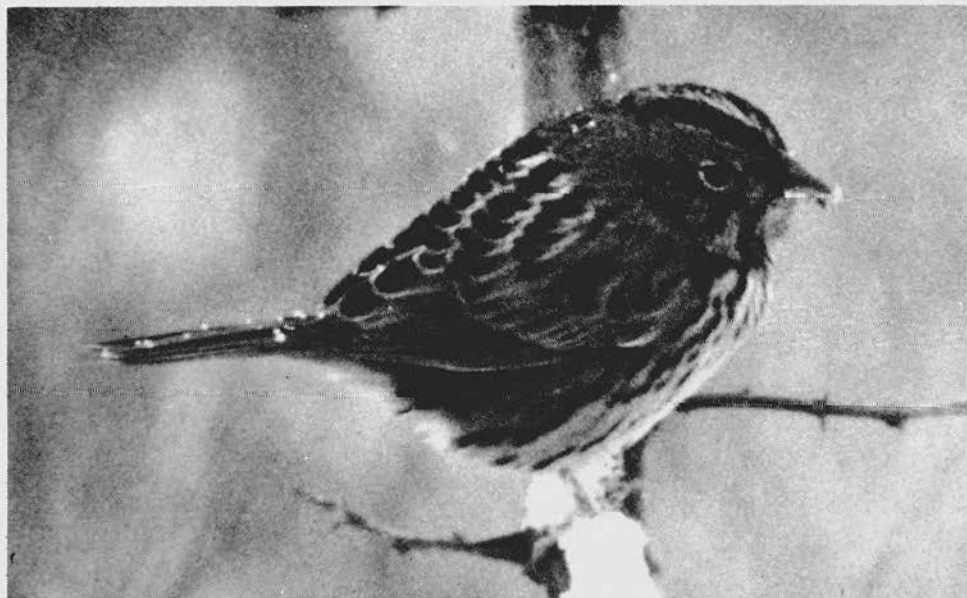


A WINTER RECORD OF HENSLOW'S SPARROW IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Nicholas Komar, Newton

The turn of the year is a time when many serious and casual birders join together to participate in the local Christmas Count. In the mind of every participant is the desire to find some rare bird, the proverbial needle in a haystack. On the Greater Boston Christmas Bird Count, December 19, 1982, three birders, Alf Wilson, Ned Mueller, and the author, were rewarded with a "dream" bird in the south Newton sector. The bird was a Henslow's Sparrow, *Ammodramus henslowii*, the first winter record for Massachusetts in over forty years. We found it in Brookline, yards from the Newton border, in a large weedy field adjacent to the Brookline Recycling Center. Typical of its behavior, this tiny sparrow did not make its presence known until Alf Wilson very nearly stepped on it, at which time it fluttered only about ten feet and landed again in the four-foot weeds. Fortunately, a few inches of snow provided a good background for viewing this highly camouflaged bird, and the three of us obtained excellent views of the sparrow. We observed the bird for about an hour while it perched in a bare sapling for minutes at a time only twenty feet away. It also spent much time underneath a fallen log at the western end of the field near the edge of frozen Lost Pond. While it rested underneath this suspended log, protected from the snow, we approached to within about five feet before we realized it was there. Alf Wilson commented that we probably could have caught the bird barehanded without much difficulty.



Henslow's Sparrow

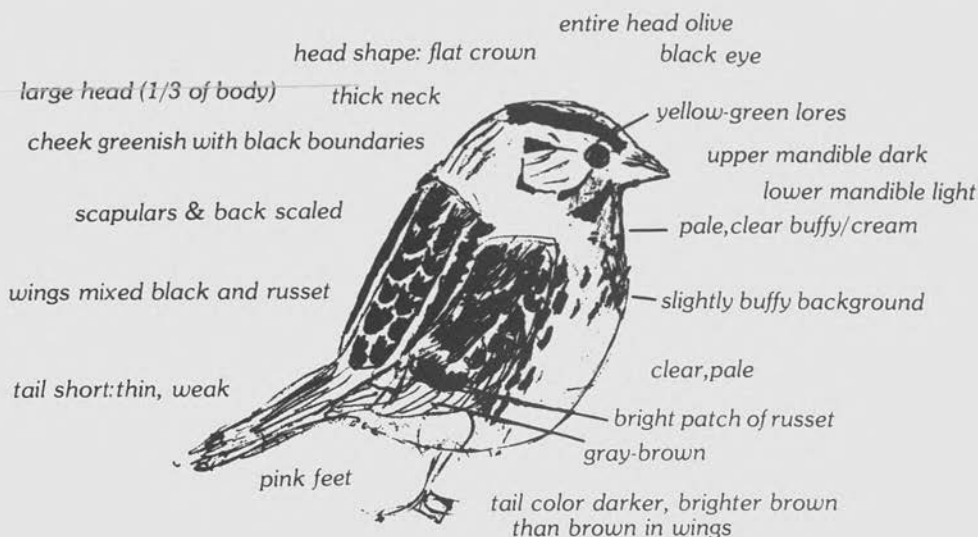
*Photo by Dorothy R. Arvidson
December 1982
Brookline, Massachusetts*

Immediately after this lengthy encounter with our new friend, the Henslow's Sparrow (last observed the day of the January 15, 1983 snowstorm), we collaborated on what we had seen, jotted down the field marks, and made a rough sketch.

The bird was small, four or five inches in length, with a short tail, thick neck, and a large, obtuse head. The entire head appeared olive-green. The crown was marked by two thick black stripes extending back from the bill above the equally thick olive superciliary line. Between the black stripes was a narrower olive median line which approached a yellowish color on the forehead. This color was also present in the lores above each eye. The eyes were dark with thin white eye rings. A thin black line extended back from each eye, broadening toward the nape in a triangular fashion. This line formed the upper border of the auricular (ear patch) which was also olive but with faint undefined markings. Two other black markings formed borders of the auricular, one of which was parallel to the prominent black malar stripe (whisker). The area between this and the malar stripe was a deep buff, matching the color of the throat. The bill was thick and conical with a dark upper mandible and a flesh-colored lower mandible. The nape was a thick band of olive sharply demarcated from a brown back. Extending from the base of the nape to the striped crown was a set of five or six very narrow black lines.

The underparts were lightly streaked on the breast, a light buff in color. The belly was clear white, and the buffy sides and flanks were heavily streaked. The tarsi (legs) were pink.

The upperparts were generally mottled black and brown. The wings consisted mostly of dull brown feathers with lighter



Field Sketch of Henslow's Sparrow

Sketch by Nick Komar
December 19, 1982

edges especially noticeable on the coverts and the secondary feathers. There was a small bright rufous patch at the base of the tertials, which were black, and the primaries were a dull gray-brown. The back feathers were arranged in five distinct columns which appeared scaled due to black feathers with white edges. The medium-short and thin tail was rufous.

As the plumage of this bird resembled an adult Henslow's in all respects except for the buffy throat (typically white in an adult) and the yellowish highlights on the head (generally darker green in the adult), I would guess that this individual was a hatching-year bird. (Other observers described the nape and head as "very bright" or "mustard color" rather than green, and Dwight (1900) describes the pileum and nape of a first winter bird as yellowish olive-buff.) Indeed, the vast majority of vagrants are immature birds.

As a breeder, the Henslow's Sparrow is rare and very local, ranging across the northern United States from Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri east to New England, Maryland, and Virginia. However, in recent years the Henslow's Sparrow has withdrawn from its breeding range in New England. Its winter range is the deep South from Florida and Georgia west to Louisiana and east Texas. In eastern Massachusetts, the Henslow's Sparrow is a very rare migrant. Since 1975, only four fall migrants (September 14 - October 19) and two birds in spring (May 16 and 18) have been noted in Bird Observer field records. Prior to 1975, Henslow's Sparrows were known to breed at the Worcester Airport in Leicester where as many as five birds were noted during the summer of 1973. However, 1974 was the last year they bred there or anywhere else in Massachusetts. In that year as many as four birds were heard singing in Newburyport. Henslow's Sparrow is little known in western Massachusetts where the only record since 1971 was an individual singing in Windsor July 19, 1980.

Henslow's Sparrow has seldom been recorded in winter in the north. The Brookline bird (December 19 - January 15) constitutes only the second winter record, and the first confirmed by photographs, for Massachusetts. The first was an "extraordinary late straggler" (Bailey) reported at a feeder in West Bridgewater on February 29, 1940. In addition to this record, Hill (1965) reported "several unconfirmed sight records in January and February." Surprisingly, a second Henslow's appeared this winter at the Wayland dump during the Concord Christmas Count on January 1, 1983. Other winter records in the northeast worth mentioning are November 6 in Massachusetts (Bailey, Bent, Hill), November 27 in New York (Bull, 1964), December 2 in New Jersey (American Birds 1981, 35(May): 285), and a report of Henslow's at a feeder on Long Island, New York from December 26, 1963 - January 14, 1964 (Bull, 1974), a stay very similar to that of our Brookline bird.

The lack of winter records could be in part due to the difficulty of observing a species of such a retiring nature. Our Henslow's' mouselike behavior was especially notable later in December when the snow had melted. At this time, the bird

was practically impossible to find, for it could run under the grasses and hide in tussocks which were not available to it earlier because of snow cover. So, a word to the wise and eager birder: keep your eyes to the ground next winter and you may be rewarded with a rare sparrow.

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