

OBSERVATION OF CLAY-COLORED SPARROW IN AN UNUSUAL PLUMAGE

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The recent plethora of "super" field guides would appear adequate to cover every plumage variation a birder is likely to encounter in the field. The standard field guides of the past decade or two, Peterson and Robbins, have both been revised and expanded. In addition, two ambitious field guides have also been published. The National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America and the three-volume Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding cover a much broader spectrum of plumages that are likely to be encountered, especially in species which take more than a year to attain adult plumage. Also, both guides contain identification sections that seemingly address every plumage nuance that can conclusively separate two very similar species.

A case in point is the separation of fall Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) from immature Clay-colored Sparrow (*S. pallida*). The Clay-colored Sparrow occurs as a rare but regular migrant in Massachusetts with the majority of reports occurring in the latter part of September and October. The increasing frequency of spring sightings suggests that the breeding population may be extending eastward from central Canada and may soon breed in western New York. In our state the majority, if not all, of fall observations of Clay-colored Sparrow involve immature birds. Identification of these is usually simplified, for they often are found in the company of flocks of Chipping Sparrows, the species with which they are most likely to be confused. When direct comparison is possible, a careful observer can distinguish the two species.

The immature Chipping Sparrow is quite dissimilar to the adult. It has a dark crown with a noticeable light median stripe (not described in the National Geographic Society field guide), a dusky cheek patch, and an ill-defined dark malar stripe. However, most adult Chipping Sparrows undergo a post-breeding molt and appear very similar to immatures although red-capped adults are occasionally encountered in the fall. In this plumage, the Clay-colored Sparrow is most readily identified by its white chin and underparts (grayish-white in Chipping), obvious buffy breast band, and extensive gray nuchal (neck) collar, which extends to the sides of the neck. The cheek patch is well-defined with dark borders above and below. The dorsal coloration is strikingly different, being a pale sandy coloration in the Clay-colored as opposed to a reddish-brown in the Chipping. One of the most diagnostic field marks, difficult to see when birds are feeding or at rest, is the coloration of the upper-tail coverts (rump). In the Chipping, these are dark gray, providing a sharp contrast between the back and tail. In Clay-colored Sparrows, the uppertail coverts are light grayish buff and lack the obvious contrast between back and tail present in *S. passerina*. Unfortunately, this characteristic is most obvious in flight and is difficult to determine unless the observer is consciously looking for the distinction.

I have had the good fortune to observe Clay-colored Sparrows on their breeding grounds in Manitoba, on fall migration in Arizona, on the wintering ground in Mexico, and as a rare migrant in Massachusetts and the Northeast. From these observations I have formulated impressions,

not field marks, that serve to distinguish the two species. Experience has shown that subjective impressions can be as germane to identification as visual field marks. My impressions are that relative to the Chipping Sparrow, the Clay-colored Sparrow is shorter in length, longer-tailed, and has a slimmer build. These observations are subjective at best and are generally not a topic of field identification in the standard field guides. However, Thomas S. Roberts' A Manual for the Identification of the Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States, a guide primarily designed to aid bird-banders in identifying hand-held birds, provides pertinent information in this regard. On average, the Clay-colored is shorter in length with a range of 5.0 to 5.5 inches as opposed to 5.0 to 5.85 inches for the Chipping; the tail of the Clay-colored is 2.3 to 2.75 inches versus 2.2 to 2.6 inches for Chipping; and the average weight for the Clay-colored Sparrow is 0.38 ounce and 0.5 ounce for Chipping Sparrow. Based on these data, the impression that Clay-colored is shorter, proportionately (and actually) longer-tailed, and slimmer is borne out. A final impression, again not to be considered a definitive field mark, is that the bill coloration of the Clay-colored is pinkish with a limited area of dusky markings on the upper mandible while that of the Chipping is a dusky yellow with more extensive dark coloration on the upper mandible (cf. Master Guide to Birding, Vol. III).

In addition to the foregoing, which is standard fare in field guides, there is one more plumage to consider. All sparrows have a juvenal, or post-fledging, plumage that is extremely transitory in nature. Many of the sparrows and their relatives (e.g., towhees) exhibit a juvenal plumage that is heavily streaked below. The duration of the plumage is about one month and occurs at a time (mid-summer) when vocalizations and bird activity as well as birder activity are at a low ebb - so these plumages are infrequently seen. However, on rare occasions, this plumage (or condition) persists longer, either as a result of a late summer hatch due to an unsuccessful earlier nesting effort or a biological malfunction resulting in arrested (or delayed) molt. Such situations are uncommon but, nonetheless, do occur and are considerations that cannot be dismissed.

Enough is enough! Now to the bird in question. On October 7, 1984, I observed a juvenal-plumaged sparrow of the genus *Spizella* at the sub-headquarters area (formerly the warden's pen) at the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island. This individual was in loose association with a small flock of Chipping Sparrows (*S. passerina*). When initially viewed, the bird was alone in the binocular field and was feeding on an open sand/gravel area with a few scattered weeds, thus affording good views from about thirty-five feet. The sparrow was small and slim in build, had a pale median stripe, and a dusky cheek patch. The underparts were whitish with rather fine streaking concentrated on the breast and along the sides of the underparts. The pattern of the streaking was similar to, but not as heavy and extensive as, the streaking on a juvenile Chipping Sparrow. The upperparts were sandy or buff in coloration, but the obvious gray hindneck characteristic of Clay-colored Sparrow was not evident, perhaps being masked by the remains of the juvenal plumage. After about two minutes observation I alerted some nearby birders that there was a Clay-colored Sparrow in front of me. As they approached, the sparrow flushed a short distance and alighted in the

company of several Chipping Sparrows. At this time the smaller size and slimmer build were evident, and the pale coloration compared with the reddish-brown coloration of the Chippies was marked. In flight, the rump of the bird in question was grayish-buff and showed little or no contrast with the back and tail. Each of the Chippies in flight showed a distinct contrast between the dark gray rump and rich brown back and dark tail. Additionally, another observer and I noted the pinkish coloration of the bill. Based on these observations, my conclusion was that the bird was a Clay-colored Sparrow that had retained some of the juvenal plumage.

Close observation of the Chipping Sparrow flocks in October will frequently disclose some individuals with streaked underparts indicative of juvenal birds. Although one of the major new field guides (The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, Vol. 3) specifically states that the juvenal plumage of the Clay-colored Sparrow is molted before the species migrates, any careful student of birds will note that there are many exceptions to the quoted "rules." This observation is apparently the first Massachusetts record of a Clay-colored Sparrow exhibiting this plumage variation, and if the general pattern of eastward range expansion for the species continues, there is reason to expect that similar sightings will occur in the future.

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