

## UNCOMMON MASSACHUSETTS SPARROWS

Richard A. Forster, Framingham

Sparrows as a group are unduly neglected by most bird watchers. They are not as easy to observe as waterfowl, shorebirds or gulls and not nearly as colorful to look at as spring warblers. But, for a curious few, they hold a certain attraction. I am much more likely to "check" every sparrow for something odd than scan incessantly through myriads of warblers during a spring wave. With these thoughts in mind, I would like to give you some hints on what some of the unusual sparrows are and when and where to look for them.

Among the numerous Sharp-tailed Sparrows in coastal salt marshes, a few Seaside Sparrows can be found. It is difficult to determine how many Seaside Sparrows breed in the state. The most likely areas to find them breeding are the vast salt marshes; i.e., Nauset, Westport-Dartmouth, Plum Island and perhaps the great marsh at Barnstable. Seaside Sparrows are inconspicuous, and only diligent search in the salt marshes is likely to yield a glimpse of one. During the breeding season they may be most readily found by listening for the song, which sounds quite similar to a Redwinged Blackbird. The Seaside Sparrow's song, however, is usually given at dusk or at night when few observers are afield. In very few instances, and never in Massachusetts, have I heard the song in the daytime.

A good time to observe Seaside Sparrows is in late summer. The area known as Plum Bush near the bridge to Plum Island, as well as the surrounding tidal creeks, are good places to look for them. Nauset Marsh on Cape Cod is another good spot for them. Perhaps the best chance of getting one here is during fall and early winter when an extremely high tide invariably pushes a few to the marshes' edge at Fort Hill, Eastham or below the old Coast Guard building (now Coast Guard Beach). As the winter progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to find one. It is often necessary to get your feet wet to see one.

The Lincoln's Sparrow occurs regularly as a migrant in spring and fall. In my experience, it can be found from 12 May to the end of the month and from early September to the end of October. The chances of seeing one in spring are best at coastal land bird traps such as Plum Island, Nahant, Marblehead Neck and Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. They are inconspicuous, but can usually be found skulking in the shade of yews and other shrubs, especially in the area known as the Dry Dell in Mt. Auburn Cemetery. As the observer approaches, they dart into the shrubbery and reappear only when the observer departs. This behavior is generally the pattern in spring migration.

In the fall, the Lincoln's Sparrow is generally much more widespread than in the spring. Although it can be found in the usual coastal traps, it seems to be commoner inland at this season along streams with brushy edges or in dense thicket areas. From mid-September to mid-October, patient "squeaking" in these areas will usually produce one.

The Grasshopper Sparrow has a spotty breeding distribution in eastern Massachusetts. Rarely reported during spring migration, the Grasshopper Sparrow arrives on its breeding grounds about mid-May. The best area to find it is on Cape Cod and along the south-eastern coastal region. Here, they frequent vast fields with short junipers or young pines, which they use as singing perches.

The Grasshopper Sparrow is a remarkably regular fall migrant occurring from late September to late October. I have an unusual concentration of observations around October 20. During the fall, it is found in weedy fields and in the short grass next to roadsides. At this season, it is found inland as well as in coastal areas. There have been a number of recent winter records on Cape Cod.

The Henslow's Sparrow is one of the rarest and least known sparrows in Massachusetts. It is virtually unknown as a migrant, especially in spring. The only way one could possibly find one is to go to a known breeding area. Last year they were present at the Worcester Airport. This is the only breeding area I have heard of in eastern Massachusetts for the last decade. The Henslow's Sparrow has a history of showing up at a breeding site, remaining for a few years and then leaving, even though the habitat appears to remain unchanged.

A species which seems to have increased markedly in recent years is the Lark Sparrow. This sparrow has rather specific migratory habits, being rarely reported away from the coast and almost never seen in spring. Its period of occurrence in the fall is prolonged, with reports spanning the period from late July to early November. However, the most likely period to find one is from late August to mid-September, with chances decreasing through October. It prefers sandy areas along the coast, frequently in the vicinity of buildings. Salisbury, Plum Island and the Outer Cape are the best areas to search for Lark Sparrows.

Occasionally, immature Lark Sparrows are observed which retain a significant amount of the juvenal plumage. These birds have a brown, rather than chestnut, ear patch, varying amounts of streaking on the chest and along the sides of the breast, and overall, resemble a Vesper Sparrow. The most diagnostic characteristic of these immature birds is a rounded white-tipped tail, which will separate it from the Vesper Sparrow.

When searching along the coast for the Lark Sparrow, keep an eye open for the Clay-colored Sparrow. Both species prefer sandy areas with or without short grass. Although there is a handful of spring records, the Clay-color is principally a fall visitant in the state. Mid-September to late October is the time to look for this sparrow along the coast. Although there are few inland records, the number of recent wintering birds from inland areas indicates that it may be more regular inland in migration than supposed. It prefers weedy fields similar to that of the Field Sparrow. Undetected wintering birds may be the source of singing birds recorded in the spring.

A note of caution is advised when identifying a Clay-colored Sparrow. They bear a striking similarity to immature Chipping Sparrows, but are paler on the back, buffier on the chest and the facial markings are more clear-cut. In my experience, they are usually not found in flocks of Chipping Sparrows.

A bird which has recently been added to the State list and which has received much attention of late is the LeConte's Sparrow. I have no concrete proof, but would suspect the latter part of September and October as the months to look for it. It would probably occur coastally in damp or wet fields.

As with the Clay-colored Sparrow, this is a species which should be identified with extreme caution. The Grasshopper Sparrow resembles the LeConte's but generally lacks the bold but fine streaks on the sides and, in adult birds, the intense ochre color behind the eye. Inland races of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow migrate through Massachusetts in the fall. They can be confused with LeConte's, but they lack the pale crown stripe and have a darker back. To emphasize the caution warning, I note that a bird was reported as a LeConte's and photographed this last fall, only to reveal itself as a Grasshopper Sparrow.

I would also like to include two species which are not sparrows but share a close affinity with them - the Lark Bunting and the Dickcissel. Records of the Lark Bunting have increased tremendously in recent years, which could be tied in with a range extension of the species on the plains. The time to look for this bird is during the month of September, especially early September, with October records being much less frequent. As is invariably the case with many western stragglers, they prefer sandy patches along the coast. In fact, I have always seen them within sight of the ocean.

The Lark Bunting is larger than most sparrows and bears a superficial resemblance to a Purple Finch. It has a large, conical, bluish bill. The white wing patch is usually conspicuous when the bird is sitting. In flight, the Lark Bunting shows conspicuous white wing patches as well as white outer tail feathers.

The last of the discussion is the Dickcissel. Like most western species, this bird is seldom reported in the spring. In the fall, it is a widespread migrant both inland and coastally. Early stragglers appear in mid-August, but it is not until mid-September through October that the bulk of the migrants passes through. Dickcissels can be found inland in weedy fields and field edges, while along the coast they can be found almost anywhere. Dickcissels often linger until early winter, and a few spend the entire winter at bird feeders.

These hints may give you a better idea of when and where to find the more unusual sparrows. Good luck in your quest!