

FIRST CONFIRMED NESTING OF CLAY-COLORED SPARROW
(*Spizella pallida*) IN NEW ENGLAND

by Lysle Brinker and Peter D. Vickery

Introduction

In the past twenty-five years, Clay-colored Sparrows (*Spizella pallida*) have been expanding their breeding range eastward from the upper Midwest and prairie provinces of Canada (Rising 1996), recently reaching southwestern Quebec (Godfrey 1986) and western New York, and rarely east to the Hudson River valley (Andrle and Carroll 1988). Interestingly, territorial Clay-colored Sparrows have been found in at least sixteen localities between 1984-89, just north of Vermont and New Hampshire in southern Quebec; breeding has been confirmed near Sherbrooke, less than 50 km from Vermont and New Hampshire (Gauthier and Aubrey 1996). Here, we report the first confirmed nesting of Clay-colored Sparrows in New England, a southeasterly extension of approximately 260 km from this species' previously known eastern limit near Sherbrooke, Quebec (Gauthier and Aubrey 1996).

Clay-colored Sparrows have been rare-to-uncommon fall and rare spring migrants in New England since at least the early 1970s (Finch 1975, Veit and Petersen 1993). In the past twenty-five years, there have been a number of summer records from New England and the Canadian Maritimes involving singing male Clay-colored Sparrows that have established territories for a period of time, usually several weeks (Table 1). Breeding season records of individuals (most of them singing males) remaining in one location for at least two or three

weeks have become nearly annual in the last decade. Since 1987, the Kennebunk Plains, a 240 hectare sandplain grassland in York County, Maine, has been the most consistent locality for summering birds; at least six individuals have been recorded over four different summers (Table 1).

Table 1. Records of Clay-colored Sparrows known to have remained at a single location for more than two weeks during June and/or July in New England and the Canadian Maritimes, 1970 - 1996.

LOCATION	SEX	YEAR	REFERENCE
Seabrook, NH	1 male	1971	D. Abbott, pers. comm.
Brentwood, NH	1 male	1974	Finch 1975b
Lincoln, ME	1 male	1978	Vickery 1978
Plymouth, NH	1 male	1981	Vickery 1981
Happy Valley, Labrador	1 male	1982	Tingley 1982
Freeport, ME	1 male	1982	Tingley 1982
Black Brook, NB	1-2 males	1984	Tingley 1984
Ayer, MA	1 pair	1988	Veit and Petersen 1993
Woodstock, VT	1 male	1988	Petersen 1988
Kennebunk, ME	1 male	1987	<i>Maine Bird Notes</i> 1987
Kennebunk, ME	3 males	1989	<i>Maine Bird Notes</i> 1989
Kennebunk, ME	1 female	1991	<i>Maine Bird Notes</i> 1992
Kennebunk, ME	1 male	1992	<i>Maine Bird Notes</i> 1993
Grand Digue, NB	1 male	1990	MacTavish 1990
Grand Digue, NB	1 male	1991	MacTavish 1991
Aldouane, NB	1 male	1991	MacTavish 1991
Pokiok, NB	1 male	1992	MacTavish 1992
Medfield, MA	1 male	1990	<i>Bird Observer</i> 18:246
Plymouth, MA	1 male	1990	<i>Bird Observer</i> 18:309
Plymouth, MA	1 male	1993	<i>Bird Observer</i> 21:289
Plymouth, MA	1 male	1994	<i>Bird Observer</i> 22:277
Bangor, ME	1 not sexed	1993	J. Despres, pers. comm.
Dresden Mills, ME	1 not sexed	1993	J. Despres, pers. comm.
Orford, NH	1 male	1993	D. Abbott, pers. comm.
Cutler, ME	1 male	1995	J. Despres, pers. comm.
Bridport, VT	1 male	1995	Petersen 1995
Wells, ME	1 male	1996	L. Brinker, pers. obs.
Lee, NH	1 male	1996	S. Mirick, pers. comm.

Nesting in Arundel, Maine

On June 9, 1996, a single male Clay-colored Sparrow was heard singing its distinctive buzzy song in a small shrubby field in Arundel, ME (43°28'N, 70°34'W), about 9 km north of the Kennebunk Plains. After the initial observation, the site was revisited periodically, and it was apparent that the male was on territory. On June 23, a second Clay-colored Sparrow, presumed to be a female, was observed associating with the male. At this point the male sang less frequently, but one or two birds were still observed for the next eight days. During this period both birds were seen flying into a low meadowsweet (*Spirea latifolia*) thicket, and nesting was suspected. On July 6, Brinker observed adults carrying food and found the nest with three young, estimated to be one day old, in the same thicket. On July 10, three nestlings were observed, and photographs of the nest and young were taken. The nest was revisited on July 14, when three young were still present. On July 16, the nest was empty, suggesting that the young had fledged on the 15th or 16th of July. On July 20, both adults were seen feeding at least two short-tailed fledglings. Adults and fledglings were last observed on August 3, 1996.

Site description

The Clay-colored Sparrows were found nesting in a small (less than 3 hectares), nondescript, shrubby field with low (less than 4 m) scattered trees and shrubs. Common trees and shrubs included: white pine (*Pinus strobus*), gray birch (*Betula populifolia*), alder (*Alnus sp.*), pin cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*), meadowsweet (*Spirea latifolia*), and red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*). The nest was located in a continuous meadowsweet thicket bordering a wet area formed by a small stream.

The Arundel nest was typical of those described for Clay-colored Sparrows (Harrison 1978). The nest was approximately 65 cm above the ground and was barely visible from above as meadowsweet growth extended another 10-30 cm above the rim. It was a cup-shaped structure made of loosely woven grasses and plant stems, lined with finer grasses and a few pine needles. In general, it was not as compact and tightly woven as a typical Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) nest. There was no evidence of animal hair. The exterior measured 8 cm wide by 7 cm deep, and the interior measured 5 cm wide by 3 cm deep.

Other species of birds on territory in and around this field included: Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*), Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*), Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*), Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*), Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), and American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*).

Discussion

Nesting of Clay-colored Sparrows in New England has been anticipated for the last ten years, and two birds (presumably a pair) in Ayer, Massachusetts, in 1988, appeared to be defending a territory for several weeks, though breeding was never confirmed (Veit and Petersen 1993). Yet, despite increasingly frequent summer records, the likelihood that a male and female will simultaneously settle at the same locality is very small, as the records from Kennebunk, ME attest (Table 1). Thus, the serendipitous discovery of Clay-colored Sparrows breeding in a small field in Arundel seemed especially improbable because there was nothing distinctive about this site and it was not a site that was frequented by birders. Unlike the large grassland and shrubland sites in New England, most of which have ongoing avian research and frequent observation, the breeding site at Arundel was a small, shrubby field, similar to literally thousands of other small fields in Maine and throughout New England. Given that Clay-colored Sparrows are not area-sensitive and will occupy small sites of suitable habitat, unlike grassland bird species such as Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) and Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) (Vickery et al 1994), it seems likely that this species will nest at other localities in Maine and New England in the future.

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