

Bulletin of the Essex County Ornithological Club, 1920

NOTES ON THE IPSWICH SPARROW

(*Passerculus princeps Mayn*)

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In response to an invitation of the editors of the Bulletin of the Essex County Ornithological Club to give an account of my experiences with the Ipswich Sparrow, I have written the following notes:

On December 4, 1868, I was walking over the Ipswich sand-dunes in search of birds. At that date this section was even more desolate than it is at the present time for the depressions among the sand-hills, now largely covered with low bushes and other trees, were without vegetation of any kind. I had been looking especially for Lapland Longspurs, but my search was unsuccessful, and as it was getting near sundown I was making my way back to the Woodbury house (which stood near the southwest corner of the sandy area) where I had been staying for a few days. I had come to some low dunes near the Essex River, where beach-grass was growing in abundance, when a sparrow started out of it quite near me. It darted rapidly away, but alighted in the grass a few rods from where I stood. Somewhat surprised to see a sparrow at this late date, so far north and in such a bleak place, I approached the grass patch in which it was hiding. After some trouble I again started it. It rose wildly as before, but this time, being ready, I took a snap shot and secured it.

As soon as I saw that I had a species that was new to me I instantly went in search of more. After a time I succeeded in starting another, but this one rose too far for a successful shot and I did not get it. It continued to fly until I lost sight of it in the distance.

Although I was fairly familiar with our native sparrows at that time, I was, of course, unable to identify my new capture. When I took it to Cambridge and showed it to Mr. J. A. Allen, then in charge of the birds of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, and he also failed to place it, I became convinced that I had a new species. By his advice, I forbore to describe it as such, until I had sent it to Prof. S. F. Baird, at Washington. Rather to my disappointment he returned it with a letter saying that he had concluded that it was undoubtedly Baird's Sparrow, (*Emberiza bairdis Audubon.*) The Smithsonian Institute possessed the only specimen of this (then very rare) bird in existence. This was one of the original lot collected by Audubon on the banks of the Yellowstone River, July 26, 1843, and by him given to Prof. Baird.

Although I was at heart scarcely satisfied with this decision, I could do no better than defer to the opinion of so eminent an ornithologist, and so printed an account of its capture, calling it Baird's Sparrow, in the first edition of my *Naturalist's Guide*, published in 1870, p. 113. It is, however, rather significant that I should have given the following opinion as a conclusion to that article. "I think it more probable that the

birds which occur at Ipswich are winter visitors from the north, than that they are stragglers from so great a distance as Nebraska” p. 117.

Although I, and others, searched the Ipswich dunes diligently during the next two years for more examples of this bird, I did not find another until October 14, 1871, when I took one more, and another the next day, October 15. Both of these were females.

These specimens confirmed my belief that I had obtained a new species, and I sent them to Prof. Baird, begging him to compare them with his sparrow. This he did and wrote that he thought I was right in my opinion that the birds were new, but added that he would like to have me come to Washington and make the comparison myself. This I did in returning from a trip to Florida the following spring. As a result I described the species as *Passerculus princeps* in *The American Naturalist* of October 1872, p. 637.

Sometime in 1873 Mr. Harold Herrick sent to me for identification two Ipswich Sparrows, which had been collected on Long Island, New York. Then a few other specimens continued to be taken at Ipswich, but it was not until April 4, 1874, that I saw the bird in full spring dress. Then I shot a fine male which was perched in a tree about a mile from the beach.. This bird is the one figured on plate XXV of the second edition of my *Birds of Eastern North America*, 1896. The type, a male in autumnal plumage, is now in the New England collection of the Boston Society of Natural History.

From 1871 on, the Ipswich Sparrow occurred in ever increasing numbers, reaching its maximum abundance in the eighties. After this it appears to have become less numerous.

My earliest record for the occurrence of the Ipswich Sparrow in fall is October 12, 1912, when I saw two on Plum Island. The latest in spring is May 11, 1918, when I found a male in full spring dress, also on Plum Island. Since all notes of the observations of this species in Ipswich and elsewhere that have been made by myself and members of my classes in Ipswich and elsewhere for the last twelve years, have been published in *Records of Walks and Talks with Nature*, I will not repeat them here. One record, however, which does not appear in that publication, I will give: –On November 19, 1900, I shot a female Ipswich Sparrow that came in from sea in company with a Snow Bunting and alighted on the beach at New River Inlet, North Carolina. This specimen is in the collection of Mr. John E. Thayer. Another rather remarkable observation is, where two were noted on Virginia Beach, Virginia, April 4, 1909, by myself and members of my class.

After a rather careful study of this interesting sparrow for over fifty years, it is quite natural that I should have come to some conclusions regarding it. These conclusions are briefly stated below.

It appears to me that all the known facts regarding the Ipswich Sparrow indicate that it is comparatively a recently evolved species. At a time in the not distant past some hardy Savanna Sparrows found their way to Sable Island, which we now know,

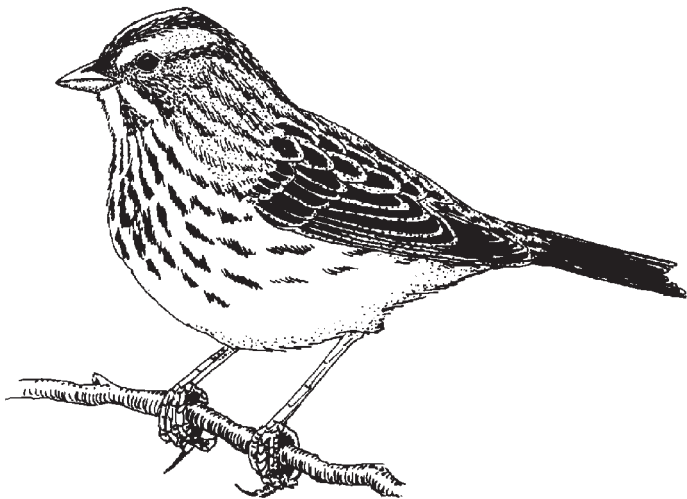
through the efforts of Dr. Jonathan Dwight and others, is in all probability the sole breeding ground of the Ipswich Sparrow. These hardy Savannas, finding a suitable home on this island, not only for summer, but also for winter, remained there. Here on this wind swept tract of sand, the law of the survival of the fittest produced an even stronger, larger race than the hardy individuals from which it originated, and, as we find in many species of birds, became protectively colored.

At first, as above stated, these Sable Island Sparrows, excepting as mere stragglers, never left their island home. But, at length came a time, possibly after a season of unusual productiveness among them, or possibly when the beach grass produced a more meager crop than the normal, that the food supply was not sufficient to adequately meet the wants of all of the Sparrows.

Then the old migrating habit, dormant perhaps, for centuries, but never lost, asserted itself and some of the birds left the island in search of food. How long this migrating habit had been established before I got the type of the Ipswich Sparrow is, of course, difficult to determine, but I believe from a careful study of the progressive appearance of the species along one coast, not long. In short, I feel that those Ipswich Sparrows which I got in 1868 and 1871 were among the earlier immigrants.

In closing I want to suggest that it would be exceedingly interesting and instructive if a good observer could be established on Sable Island to note whether the food supply varied, and if it did, what effect this variation had upon the number of Ipswich Sparrows which remained there over winter. If such variations occurred they could be compared with the fluctuations of the numbers of these Sparrows which came to us in winter and some valuable results obtained.

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SAVANNAH SPARROW BY GEORGE C. WEST