

INLAND RECORD OF SEASIDE SPARROW

by Richard Walton, Concord

On September 5, 1981, the writer observed an immature Seaside Sparrow (Ammodramos maritima) at the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Concord. The bird remained at the Meadows (on the west end of the main dike) until at least September 7, where it was closely observed and photographed by several individuals. Because of this species' normally restricted habitat, I was prompted to review the literature and publish this note.

The Seaside Sparrow is a bird of the coastal salt marshes. Its status as a breeding bird in Massachusetts has been confirmed at Allen's Pond, Barnstable, Monomoy, and the Parker River marshes. The species' affinity for and restriction to this particular habitat has been noted by various authors. G. E. Woolfenden (1968) in his description in Bent states: "Confined as it is to the salt marshes of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of North America, the seaside sparrow is by far the most maritime in distribution of all our land birds." (p. 820)

J. Bull (1964) describes the Seaside Sparrow as "confined to the coast (and) casual away from its saline environment." Extralimital records reported by Bull are as follows: "Cruickshank (1942) knew of a single observation at Van Cortland Park in late April, and Carleton (1958) listed only three sight reports from Central Park and one from Prospect Park, all in May.... Fisher collected one at the mouth of the Croton River, N.Y., Oct. 2, 1885, specimen in M.C.Z. collection, the farthest inland report known for our area" (Bull, 1964).

Woolfenden's (1968) study of a colony of Seaside Sparrows in New Jersey led him to conclude that the "population is essentially migratory." This is most likely the case for a majority of the Massachusetts birds. Manomet Bird Observatory banding data attest to the spring and fall movement of this species - seven spring records (4/29 - 6/9) and eight fall records (8/13 - 9/30).

There are, however, many state records for wintering Seaside Sparrows. Griscom and Snyder (1955) published reports of this species "wintering regularly at Barnstable" as early as 1898. Contemporary records establish a fairly regular pattern of winter residency - American Birds, Christmas Bird Counts: Cape Cod - 1980 (4), Newburyport - 1979 (3), Cape Cod - 1977 (1), 1976 (11), and 1975 (8).

The weather pattern of the period preceding the Concord sighting is significant. During the first five days of September the wind direction was east and northeast, averaging at least ten miles per hour. Fog was recorded on the first through fourth with a trace of precipitation on

the second and third. This pattern seems conducive to dislocation from the coast, inland. Independent observations indicating a major migratory movement on the night of September 3-4 raise the possibility that this sparrow may have arrived at the Great Meadows on the fourth. A heavy audio-count was made during this time period in the Newbury vicinity, and a tower kill in Needham yielded a count of 87 birds on the morning of September 4.

The immature Seaside Sparrow at the Meadows was an overall dusky brown with a grayer ground color to the chest and belly. No contrast was evident between the upper tail feathers, rump, and back. The flanks, chest, and cheek areas displayed fine streaking with a pectoral line of demarcation. The malar region showed the characteristic, strong jaw line. No yellow was apparent at either the bend of the wings or at the lores. The latter area was, however, distinctively buff-gray. The legs seemed long relative to overall body size, and the bill was elongate and somewhat conical.

This individual spent a good deal of time walking on the dike while foraging, with success, for insects (larvae?). During the first day of observation, I approached to within three feet of the bird on several occasions. By the third day (September 7) the sparrow was much less approachable and would make short flights (20 - 40 feet) back into the cover of Cattail (Typha latifolia) and Buttonbush (Cephalanthus occidentalis).

Although the occurrence of Seaside Sparrow at this inland location is unusual, the time of year and concurrent weather pattern provide at least a partial explanation for this record.

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