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A HISTORICAL VIEW OF THE LE CONTE'S SPARROW

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One of the more secretive winter residents of Georgia is the Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*). Perhaps more common than realized, it resides in damp grassy fields and sedge marshes. The Le Conte's Sparrow is a widespread summer resident of Canada, breeding in every province and territory except the Yukon and Maritime provinces (Rising 1996:160). It is found in extreme eastern British Columbia and the Northwest Territories, near Fort Simpson and Yellowknife, but its range covers virtually the entire geographic area of the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, as well as the southern two-thirds of Ontario and central Quebec. In the United States, breeding Le Conte's Sparrows are found in northern and eastern North Dakota, northern Minnesota, northern Wisconsin, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This species migrates through the Midwest to its wintering range – southern Missouri to the Gulf Coast, east to coastal South Carolina, and south to Gainesville, Florida.

The original type specimen of the Le Conte's Sparrow was collected in the "interior of Georgia" (AOU 1957:592) by John Abbot (Rogers-Price 1997:xxxiv-xxxv). "Interior of Georgia" was likely in Burke County, east of Waynesboro, and just north of Brier Creek (Rogers-Price 1997:xxix-xxx). The specimens Abbot collected were sent to Europe, and in 1790, British Ornithologist John Latham described them as the Sharp-tailed Finch (*Fringilla caudacuta*) in *Index Ornithologicus*. Two years earlier, Johann Friedrich Gmelin, Jr. described the Sharp-tailed Oriole (*Oriolus caudacuta*) based on Latham's notes (AOU 1983:709), and it is known today as the Saltmarsh





Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*) (AOU 1957:594).

The Le Conte's Sparrow is so secretive in its habits that for many years after Abbot's drawing, the mere existence of this bird was in doubt. In 1833, Maximilian Alexander Philip, Prince zu Wied-Neuwied, collected a specimen along the Missouri River, but he did not write a description of it until 1858 (Faxon 1896:208). In his description of the sparrow he stated:

“I obtained a single specimen of this northern species near the middle course of the Missouri. The way in which the little bird crept about, just like a mouse, in the grass and under the bushes was remarkable. In fact, several of our party mistook it for a mouse. It was surrounded; yet, though unable to escape, it could not be forced to fly. It slipped quickly from one cover to another, while we all strove to catch it. When this was finally accomplished, I found that the supposed mouse was a little bird unknown to me.”

In 1844, John James Audubon wrote a description of a specimen taken by John Graham Bell from the Missouri River, near Fort Union, North Dakota (AOU 1983:708). Audubon named that specimen Le Conte's Sharp-tailed Bunting (*Emberiza le conteii*) (Terres 1980:588, Mearns and Mearns 1992:273, Rising 1996:161). It was 25 years before this secretive bird was heard from again. Abbot's and Audubon's specimens had been lost, and Maximilian's specimen was in Europe and overlooked. Maximilian's specimen is now in the American Museum of Natural History in New York and may be the only type specimen intact. Finally, in 1869, in Texas, another specimen was collected, by American ornithologist Elliott B. Coues (Faxon 1896). He collected several more specimens in 1873. It was 1878, 90 years after Abbot collected his specimen in Burke County, Georgia, when the bird was recorded again in the South, this time in Alabama.

For 183 years, the type specimen for Le Conte's Sparrow was the one collected by John Abbot in Burke County, Georgia. A type specimen is a specimen from which the original description is made, which, in this case, was written by John Latham in 1790. In



1968, Bertram G. Murray, Jr. published a study of sparrow genera, *Ammodramus*, *Passerherbulus*, and *Ammospiza*. This study included the following sparrow species with their scientific names at that time: Henslow's Sparrow (*Passerherbulus henslowii*), Le Conte's Sparrow (*Passerherbulus caudacutus*), Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammospiza caudacuta*), and Seaside Sparrow (*Ammospiza maritime*). Harrison B. Tordoff and Robert M. Mengel (1951) published a study on spring molts of Le Conte's Sparrows, then Murray's study (Murray 1968) extended the scope to include molt, plumage, and voice. Tordoff and Mengel (1951) and then Murray (1968) came to the same conclusion: "The Le Conte's and Sharp-tailed Sparrows [are] more closely related to each other than either is to any other species" (Murray 1968). Adding even more to the discussion was the discovery in the National Museum of Canada of a specimen collected near James Bay that appeared to be a hybrid Le Conte's X Sharp-tailed Sparrow, bearing a general appearance of a Le Conte's Sparrow but bearing several characters of a Sharp-tailed Sparrow (Byers et al. 1995:258). Murray (1968) gave a detailed description of the specimen, and the conclusion was that it was indeed a hybrid.

Because Le Conte's and Sharp-tailed Sparrows belong to the same genus, they present a challenge to taxonomists. However, when original descriptions were written, each species was placed in different genera but given the same species name. No two species with the same specific epithet can belong to the same genus, and the rules of taxonomy and priority indicate that in situations like this, the specific epithet of the earliest described species will take priority. Therefore, the scientific name of the Le Conte's Sparrow had to be changed. The next available description was the one Audubon wrote in 1844. Therefore, the description of the type specimen collected in Georgia was retired in favor of the description of the specimen collected in North Dakota (Murray 1968, AOU 1973, Choate 1985).

The Le Conte's Sparrow prefers wet grassland habitat, thus, drought conditions may negatively affect its population. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers the sparrow to be a Bird of Conservation Concern, based on Christmas Bird Count data that suggest a decline in wintering populations (National Audubon Society 2008). In Georgia,

the current status of the wintering population is not well known. Although its secretive nature makes its detection difficult, the Le Conte's Sparrow merits additional attention during winter bird counts so its status in Georgia will be known with greater certainty.

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FISH AS FOOD FOR INDIGO BUNTING NESTLINGS

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The Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) is a common songbird that breeds in eastern North America (Payne 1992). They typically nest in fields, edges of woods, roadsides, and railways. Nests are constructed using a variety of plant species and consist of an open cup of soft leaves, coarse grasses, stems, and strips of bark.

Females are the primary food provider to nestlings, but males have been observed feeding nearly fledged young (Sutton 1959; Morgan 1976; Carey and Nolan 1979; Westneat 1988; Payne 1989, 1992). There have not been any detailed studies of nestling food habits. However, a study in Michigan documented females bringing the following items to nestlings: grasshoppers from the ground, smooth green caterpillars from the woodland canopy, dragonflies, spiders, spider egg cases, and berries (Payne 1992).

We used videography as well as researchers' observations to determine nest fates of numerous bird species. During the three years of our study, 17 Indigo Bunting nests were monitored. Of these nests, 13 were monitored with videography. One especially interesting nest with two eggs was found in a cherry tree (*Prunus serotina*) on 27 July 2005. We estimated that incubation began on 29 July, based on recorded hatching and fledging dates. Both eggs hatched on 4 August, at which time the adult female began a regular feeding regime.