

NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE FLORIDA
GRASSHOPPER SPARROW.

BY WRAY H. NICHOLSON.

Plate XVII.

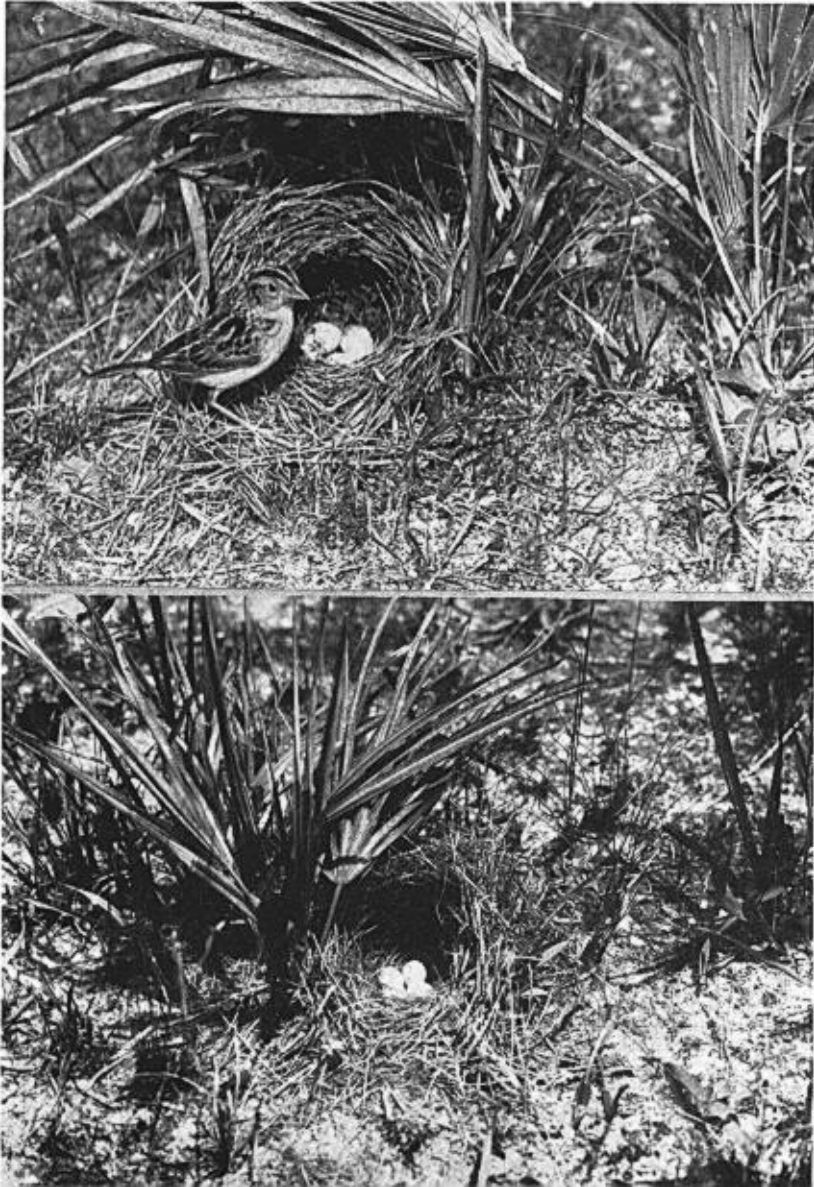
THE Florida Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*) inhabits the Kissimmee Prairie region. So far as known its range begins at a point twenty miles southwest of St. Cloud and extends to Okeechobee City, over one hundred miles. The birds do not breed all over this area but form scattered colonies sometimes thirty miles apart. They no doubt nest farther south but have not yet been reported there.

This interesting Sparrow was first described by Dr. Edgar A. Mearns from a pair taken on the Kissimmee Prairie, seven miles east of Alligator Bluff, in 1902, but until the spring of 1929 ornithologists were unsuccessful in obtaining additional specimens. It is not surprising that the birds were overlooked as they blend so well with their surroundings, while their insect-like voice can scarcely be heard at a distance of one hundred feet on a still day.

Late in May, 1929, Arthur H. Howell and Donald J. Nicholson were fortunate enough to find a small colony about eight miles southwest of Kennansville in Osceola County, and Mr. Howell succeeded in securing nine adults and one young bird. On May 1, 1932, J. C. Howell, Donald J. Nicholson and the writer visited the locality and immediately found a nest of the Sparrow within fifty feet from where we had parked our car. It was situated at the base of a small saw-palmetto under a dead leaf, and was extremely well arched, with such a small entrance that it was almost necessary to get on our hands and knees in order to see the two fresh eggs that it contained. By dragging a long rope we discovered three other nests in course of construction and flushed a bird from near each, but this method was not very successful and we began to search for the nests eventually locating two with four eggs, one with three, and two with incomplete sets.

The area in which the birds were nesting had been burned over some time before and the vegetation was rather short, the main growth consisting of saw-palmetto and dwarf oaks (*Quercus minima*) which grow less than two feet in height. The birds seem to prefer this type of territory rather than the grassy spots. This colony covered an area a mile and a half in length by three quarters of a mile wide. We visited the spot again on May 8 and found several more nests with complete sets of eggs but no young were seen. About half of the nests under construction the week before seemed to have been abandoned.

The Florida Grasshopper Sparrow has a very peculiar song; to me it sounds like *twittle-e-dee* repeated several times in rapid succession with a



NESTS OF FLORIDA GRASSHOPPER SPARROW.

tik-tik-tok-buzzzzzz at the finish. Many times I heard them sing the latter part of this song without the former, but never the former part alone. The latter part has a distinct insect-like sound. When singing, the bird perches on a low dead palmetto leaf or on a dead oak twig several inches above the surrounding vegetation. They do not sing while flying and I do not think that the female sings at all.

On April 23, 1933, we found several nests with slightly incubated eggs and others under construction. On June 4 and 5 a number of nests were located but only four were occupied; one contained three young ready to leave the nest and an infertile egg, two held young a few days old and another four heavily incubated eggs. Another trip on June 19 to 21 found the birds in full breeding activities and proved to our satisfaction that they raise two broods in a season. It would appear that the second set is laid about eight weeks after the first and the incubation period was apparently eleven days. We found no nest with five eggs or young so that four seems to be the normal number.

Some of the birds were unusually tame or else trusted to protective coloration as they were almost invisible as they sat in their well hidden nests. When they did leave they did not fly but ran off dragging the tail and fluttering the wings as if crippled. If followed they would lead the intruder off about twenty feet from the nest and then fly to some nearby palmetto and begin scolding. Several times while examining a nest the bird would run along the ground within eight feet of me scolding with a weak *tik-tik-tik* note. One brooding bird remained standing on the edge of the nest while I approached to within five feet of her and I was able to extend my hand to within ten inches of her before she flew.

On these visits to the colony I had been unsuccessful in obtaining photographs of the birds as they refused to return to the nest while the camera was in position but on May 1, 1935, Hugo H. Schroder and I found a nest with four fresh eggs and secured a number of photographs of the bird.

Many of the nests were under a single dead palmetto leaf without any other vegetation to conceal them; others were under dead drooping palmetto leaves with small dwarf oaks and wire grass growing on all sides, while several others were in thin tussocks of dead wire grass which looked too small to hide a bird much less a nest. The birds always scratch out a slight depression which is then lined with fine wire grass and arched over with grass blades. All of the nests were arched.

Other birds found breeding in the vicinity of the Grasshopper Sparrows were Southern Meadowlark, Pine Woods Sparrow, Florida Bobwhite, Florida Nighthawk and Florida Burrowing Owl. One nest of the Meadowlark was within six feet of a Sparrow's nest.

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