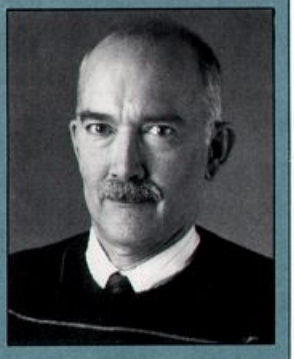
John Farrand, Jr.

MOMENTS IN HISTORY



The Ipswich Sparrow

1872. Now began the heyday of this long-overlooked bird. Once they knew it existed, ornithologists up and down the Atlantic coast began combing the dunes. Within four years, Ipswich Sparrows had been found in New Brunswick, Maine, Connecticut, and New York.

LONG AFTER MOST of the birds of eastern North America had been found and named, the Ipswich Sparrow remained unknown, undiscovered, and undescribed. But it was not unseen. In the written record of the 19th century, this large, pale sparrow of the coastal dunes puts in an occasional shadowy appearance, only to be passed over. It was there all the time, right under the noses of ornithologists.

The earliest of these appearances may be in the pages of Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*. In 1808, when he described the "Savannah Finch," Wilson wrote that "in winter it frequents the sea shores," and that the male was larger and paler than the female. His figure of the female is obviously a Savannah, but when we turn to the male—paler, grayer, more finely marked below, and with almost no yellow in the eyebrow—it is easy to believe that what we are actually looking at is an Ipswich Sparrow. We will never know for sure, because Wilson's specimens disappeared long ago.

The second close encounter came in 1858, when Dr. John Bernard Gilpin, a Canadian historian and naturalist, published a pamphlet on the natural history of Sable Island, about 85 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. After describing the other birds of this remote and fogbound island, Gilpin added: "A little brown sparrow (*Fringilla*) also summered and wintered there."

In July of 1862, an oologist named J. P. Dodd visited Sable Island and collected several sets of eggs, which he identified as those of the Savannah Sparrow. These eggs found their way to the Smithsonian Institution, where years later they were to play an important part in the story of the Ipswich Sparrow.

Finally, on Friday, December 4, 1868, the Ipswich Sparrow abruptly emerged from obscurity. But even then it was misidentified. That day, Charles Johnson Maynard of West Newton, Massachusetts, 24 years old and a self-taught naturalist and taxidermist, was walking over the "Sandhills" at Ipswich searching for Lapland Longspurs. As he passed a marshy depression among the dunes he flushed a sparrow, which quickly dropped back into the beachgrass. Wondering what sparrow would be on the dunes at that season, he tried to flush it again. "After some trouble I started it. It flew wildly as before, when I fired, and was fortunate enough to secure it."

Maynard couldn't identify the bird, but after consulting Audubon's *Birds of America* he decided it must be a Baird's Sparrow, the last species described in the Octavo Edition in 1844. To make sure, Maynard sent the bird to Spencer F. Baird at the Smithsonian, the resting place of the only specimen of Baird's Sparrow, collected near Fort Union in 1843

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during Audubon's trip up the Missouri River.

Back came Professor Baird's authoritative reply. "It differs in color just as clear autumnal birds differ from worn breeding ones,——tints paler, markings more diffused, etc. The stripe along the top of the head is paler, not as fulvous as in the type; but in all essential points it seems to be the same bird."

Maynard promptly wrote a note and submitted it to *The American Naturalist.* "The capture of the Centronyx Bairdii at Ipswich" was published in December, 1869. It was Maynard's first paper, and in it he also wrote a few lines on differences between the sexes of the Painted Turtle. These comments on the turtle were noticed by Charles Darwin, who cited them in *The Descent of Man* in 1871.

In his first publication, numbering exactly 250 words, young Maynard had reported the second specimen of a rare sparrow, added a bird to the Massachusetts list, and attracted the attention of Darwin. His career as a naturalist was off to a good start. Before he died in 1929 at the age of 84 he was to publish many more papers, as well as books not only on birds but on taxidermy, collecting methods, butterflies, seashells, mosses, and natural history for beginners.

In October of 1870, Maynard took two more of these sparrows at Ipswich, and began to have his doubts. So in 1872 he visited the Smithsonian himself and personally compared his birds with Audubon's specimen of Baird's Sparrow. They were not the same after all, and in *The American Naturalist* for October, 1872, he described the bird as a new species, *Passerculus princeps.* He called it the "Large Barren Ground Sparrow," but it quickly came to be known as the Ipswich Sparrow.

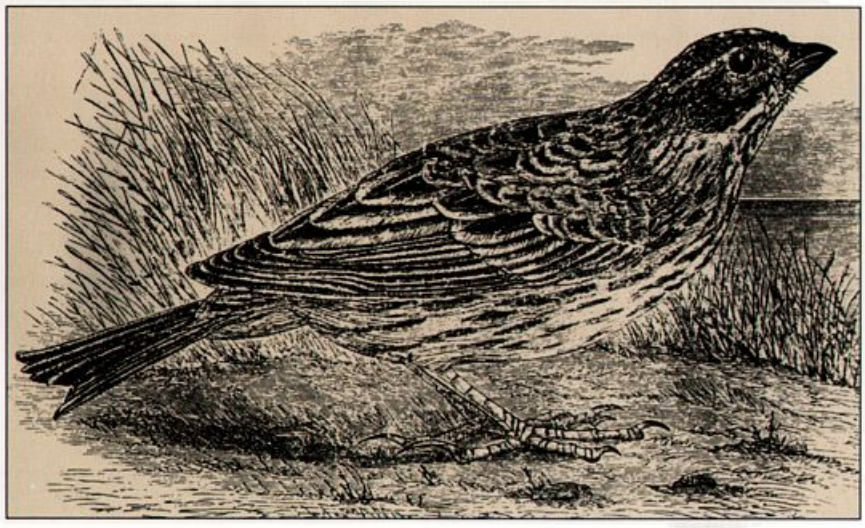
A little more than a century after Maynard had discovered it, the Ipswich lost its standing as a species and in compensation received a pair of quotation marks.

Now began the heyday of this long-overlooked bird. Once they knew it existed, ornithologists up and down the Atlantic coast began combing the dunes. Within four years, Ipswich Sparrows had been found in New Brunswick, Maine, Connecticut, and New York. By the early 1880s the birds were considered "among the common autumnal migrants of southern Maine" and were "relegated to the commonplace" on Long Island. Nova Scotia, Rhode Island, Delaware, Virginia, and Georgia were shortly added to the list. By this time the Smithsonian had more than three dozen specimens, including one donated by Maynard.

The question now on everyone's mind was where the Ipswich Sparrow nested. Where did it go when it left the dunes in April? In 1884 Robert Ridgway, looking through the collections at the Smithsonian, discovered the eggs taken 22 years before by J. P. Dodd on Sable Island, Nova Scotia. Dodd had thought they were the eggs of the Savannah Sparrow, but they seemed too large. Could Sable Island be where the Ipswich Sparrow nested? Ridgway published a short note in the July issue of *The Auk* that same year, suggesting that someone look into the matter.

When the July *Auk* reached Locust Grove in the Adirondacks, Dr. C. Hart Merriam read Ridgway's note with great interest. Merriam, who had collected Connecticut's first Ipswich Sparrow while he was a student at Yale, immediately wrote to a missionary on Sable Island, asking him to send one of the sparrows that nested there. The bird arrived within weeks. In the October *Auk,* Merriam reported that it was indeed an Ipswich.

While this seemed to solve the mystery, not everyone was completely satisfied. In May of 1894, Jonathan Dwight, M.D., paid a visit to Sable Island, where he collected five sets of eggs and many specimens of the island's only breeding passerine, known to the Sable Islanders as



The first definite illustration of an Ipswich Sparrow, a drawing by E.L. Weeks published in 1870 by Charles Maynard when he still thought the bird was a Baird's Sparrow.

"Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow [*Passerculus sandwichensis princeps*], Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge, Rhode Island. Photograph/ Geoff LeBaron.

the "Gray Bird," and took extensive notes on its habits, song, breeding, and food. More specimens were sent to him after he returned to New York in June.

The following year Dwight published a lengthy monograph entitled "The Ipswich Sparrow" in the *Memoirs of the Nuttall Ornithological Club.* Writing of the secrets Sable Island had held for so long, he said: "Now at last it has yielded them up, and the home life of the Ipswich Sparrow, its unknown song, its undiscovered nest and eggs, its undescribed fledgling plumage, are no longer matters of conjecture."

But trouble was brewing. As early as 1879, William A. Jefferies, writing in the *Bulletin of Nuttall Ornithological Club,* had suggested that the Ipswich Sparrow and the Savannah Sparrow were not separate species. In 1882, Elliott Coues called the bird the "Ipswich Savanna Sparrow." The idea that the Maynard's bird was not a good species began to gain ground.

By the 20th century, the Ipswich Sparrow's status as a species was widely doubted. In 1939, James Lee Peters and Ludlow Griscom, operating out of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, wrote an exhaustive treatment of the Savannah Sparrow and its allies, and concluded that the Ipswich was only a subspecies of the Savannah. It was given the rank of a full species in 1957 in the Fifth Edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list of North American Birds,* but in 1970 Raymond A. Paynter, Jr., likewise working at Harvard, also reduced the Ipswich Sparrow to a subspecies in Peters' *Check-list of Birds of the World.*

The bird was still treated here and there as a full species, but the official ax finally fell in April, 1973, when the committee preparing the Sixth Edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list* announced that the Ipswich Sparrow would henceforth be treated as a subspecies of the Savannah. A little more than a century after Maynard had discovered it, the Ipswich lost its standing as a species and in compensation received a pair of quotation marks.

Despite its disappearance from most field cards, we still trudge through the beachgrass in winter hoping to kick up an "Ipswich Sparrow." Sometimes we are lucky enough to come upon an "Ipswich" and a typical Savannah together. When we find these two birds side by side, one pale and the other dark, we may well be looking at something Alexander Wilson saw, and misunderstood, on the coast of New Jersey 182 years ago. ■

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