

## LE CONTE'S SPARROW IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

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The LeConte's Sparrow (*Ammospiza leconteii*) nests throughout most of the central portions of southern Canada into the north central United States (Godfrey 1966). In the fall the species moves southward to winter in the southeastern United States (American Ornithologists' Union 1957). Records from the western United States are few indeed, thus all occurrences there are worthy of note.

On 27 October 1974 a party including Richard Stallcup, Jon Dunn, Philip Unitt, the author and others discovered a LeConte's Sparrow in tall grass growing in a wet area of the golf course at Furnace Creek Ranch, Death Valley National Monument, California. The following day two LeConte's Sparrows were together in the same area, and one of these remained to 1 November. Since suitable habitat was restricted, it was easy to study these birds and be assured that the identifications were correct.

The two birds appeared identical, being small and short tailed. Much of the face and breast was a rich orange-buff, and a broad whitish stripe extended from the forehead back over the crown to the nape. The back and wings appeared fairly dark, being a mixture of rich dark browns and rust, but pale buff edgings were present on some of the feathers forming conspicuous stripes down the back. Many migrants were taking advantage of this desert oasis at this time (a total of 86 species of birds seen 26-28 October), including a variety of sparrows. At one time on the 27th it was possible to compare a LeConte's Sparrow directly with a Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), a Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*), a Clay-colored Sparrow (*S. pallida*), a Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*) and a Swamp Sparrow (*M. georgiana*), while a Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) was nearby. By 1 November at least eight other experienced observers had seen these LeConte's Sparrows, and all agreed on the identification.

This is the third time the LeConte's Sparrow has been found in California, although there have been cases of Grasshopper Sparrows being reported as *leconteii*. The first LeConte's Sparrow was an immature male collected by T. J. Lewis on Southeast Farallon Island on 13 October 1970 (Chandik et al. 1971). The specimen (California Academy of Sciences No. 68505) possessed a trace of fat, testes measuring 1 x 1 mm and a skull about one-half ossified; the fresh carcass weighed 10.7 g and was not in molt except for the regrowth of some feathers on the right side of the crown. The second *leconteii* was one photographed at Point Pinos in Pacific Grove, Monterey County, on 19 October 1974 (Stallcup et al. 1975).

The LeConte's Sparrow normally stays well to the east of the Rocky Mountains. It has been recorded twice in Colorado on the west side of the Rockies (Bailey and Niedrach 1965): a specimen, no longer extant, collected at Breckenridge, Summit County, on 24 October 1886 and a specimen from near Gunnison, Gunnison County, on 6 May 1952. In extreme eastern New Mexico it has been found wintering irregularly in the vicinity of Roswell, Chaves County, and one was seen at San Ildefonso, Santa Fe County, on 24 November 1963 (Hubbard 1970). Four sightings are reported from Big Bend National Park and vicinity in extreme west Texas (Wauer 1973): two on 10 March 1963, one on 29 August 1966, two on 29 October 1966 and one on 3 January 1972. However, extreme dates listed for Texas are 4 October and 20 May (Oberholser and Kincaid 1974), strongly suggesting the August sighting to be in error.

## NOTES

Farther to the west a bird was collected at Coeur d'Alene, Kootenai County, Idaho, on 28 September 1896 (Burleigh 1972). One was taken near Provo, Utah County, Utah, on 24 December 1927 (Cottam 1941), three more were seen near Provo on 10 March 1928 (Woodbury et al. 1949) and another was reported seen at Moab Slough, Grand County, Utah, on 19 April 1966 (Scott 1966). One hit a window in Kennewick, Benton County, Washington, on 29 May 1964 (LaFave 1965).

It is clear there are but a limited number of records for LeConte's Sparrows in the western United States; however, this is a secretive species that skulks in the grasses and can easily be overlooked. The first record of *leconteii* for New Mexico involved 20 to 30 individuals (Montgomery 1953), suggesting a normal wintering population. Observers should therefore be on the alert for this species in the fall and winter, but must treat all sightings with caution since similarity to the Grasshopper Sparrow has resulted in misidentifications.

I wish to thank Dr. Laurence C. Binford for supplying the information on the California specimen of *leconteii*, and Terence R. Wahl for guiding me to the reference for the Washington record.

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