

1998-152

ACCEPTED (6-1)

BAIRD'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus bairdii*)

rec'd 4-23 ✓

DATE/TIME:

April 17, 1998. Approximately 0800-0805 hours.

Submitted by DAN SVINGEN

LOCATION:

Comanche National Grassland, Pasture 1B (T34S, R45W, Sec. 34, SESESE), Baca County, Colorado. Approximately 6 miles southeast of Campo, CO.

OBSERVER/OPTICS:

Dan Svingen. 60x zoom Kowa Spotting Scope, 8x42 binos.

DESCRIPTION DETAILS:

As I was driving down a two-track road, I noticed (with naked eye at yards or so), a large, short-tailed "mouse" running down one of the tracks. As I got a little closer, I realized it was a sparrow, and immediately thought "Baird's", as this jizz is well known for the species (and a behavior I have witnessed many times). The bird flew off to the side, starting its' flight just a few inches above the grass, climbing to about 5 feet by flight's end. When the bird was 40 yards away, it completed a tight downward, and backward turn (making a hook-shaped flight path), dropping quickly to the ground. This behavior too seemed suggestive of Baird's (see interesting discussion on sparrow flight patterns in "IDFrontiers" archive from Jan. 1997). (I recognize that several sparrow species show similar "mouse"-like behavior and hooked flight paths).

Using the truck as a blind, I drove to the bird's landing spot and soon got a quick look at the sparrow as it peeked above the Blue Grama and Galleta. Over the next 3 minutes or so, I got several quick looks at the bird (mostly of its back and head), including one brief look through the scope. The rest of the observations were with binos. I scrawled field notes, then typed them into this format at home 12 hours later. No guides were consulted until I typed in my description, then several sources used to supplement the discussion section.

WEATHER/LIGHT:

Partly cloudy, 5 m.p.h. wind, approximately 60 degrees fahrenheit. Sun at back or off-to-side. Color discretion judged very good. When exact color not determined, it was due to brief looks, not lighting.

DISTANCE:

Distance between observer and bird varied between 10 and 40 yards, most of observation at about 15 yards.

NUMBER/AGE/SEX OF BIRD:

1, unknown age (one source suggests first-spring birds may still be in juvenile plumage!?),

unknown gender.

OBSERVER EXPERIENCE:

I grew up in North Dakota and have had several opportunities to study Baird's Sparrows. The most detailed looks I've taken were in June 1994 in central ND. While scouting, and then leading a bird tour, I had several long (several minutes) looks in the scope at singing, sitting, and preening Baird's at close proximity. I have also seen the species in MT.

HABITAT:

Small ridge with mid-height (1' tall) grasses with scattered yucca. Small inclusions of sod-forming Blue Grama made patches of shorter grasses.

BEHAVIOR:

Sneaky, shy, bird. In response to my squeaking, the bird stretched its' head and tilted bill upward for maximum extension to see over the patch of short grass it had landed behind. I saw it run several times between clumps of grass. It would run with head pulled in and tail and head held parallel to the ground. Bird eventually ditched me by sneaking away on foot.

VOCALIZATIONS:

None.

OVERALL IMPRESSION/SIZE/SHAPE:

A brief description would be a medium-sized, stout, short-and-round tailed, grass sparrow, with orangish crown stripe, yellowish supercilium, dark eye, thin white eyering, two black "whisker" marks, and a plain, tannish face bordered by two "ticks" of black along the rear border of the ear patch.

HEAD:

Bill conical and sparrow-like. Upper mandible darker than lower. Overall bill color fleshy, but exact color not noted. Median crown stripe ochre (I never knew what this color was until I started looking at Baird's Sparrows, now I can't seem to describe the earthy-orange shade any other way!). Median crown stripe widened slightly from forecrown to rearcrown (seen when bird was facing observer, then turned its head, showing nape/rearcrown perspective). May have had some very fine dark streaking in interior of median crown stripe at anterior end, but hard to say with brief looks. Lateral crown stripes black (or very dark brown) with fine internal streaking of a lighter color (yellow? tan?). Supercilium brownish-yellow. Black eye narrowly ringed with white. Ear coverts tan. Thin, black, post-ocular stripe started about one or two eye-diameters behind eye, then abruptly widened into small triangle patch. Posterior/ventral corner of ear coverts also lined with dark black. The effect was a mostly-broken black border at the rear side of the face patch, for a rather plain-faced look. Thin black malar and moustacial stripes. Submoustacial stripe color not noted, but light (tan or buff). Throat very light yellow or white (exact color not noted).

UPPERPARTS:

In flight (seen with naked eye) back looked dull gray with darker internal markings. On ground (as seen with binoculars) back looked lighter, being a mix of dark brown or black with heavy buff (dried grass color) streaking (or perhaps a buff base color with heavy black streaking - either description would match). Some rufous tones seen on wing coverts, but exact pattern not noted. Nape lighter than crown or back, and seemed to be have a yellowish-base color overlain with fine black streaking.

UNDERPARTS:

Underparts poorly seen. Center of breast and belly not seen at all. Sides of breast and flanks whitish or light-buff. Upper breast sides with some short black streaks. Legs not seen.

TAIL:

Tail was brown on dorsum, ventrum not seen. In shape, tail relatively short in comparison to body size (as is typical for this genus). Tail lacked the pointy-look of Savannah Sparrows, and by comparison would have appeared rounded. Tail held cocked down at least during first portion of its short flight.

IDENTIFICATION:

Main i.d. contenders are Savannah Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Grasshopper Sparrow. All three eliminated by ochre crown stripe, as well as combination of overall buffy head color, double whisker mark and facial patch bordering. Bird did not have rufous wings nor olive-colored head of a HESP. In profile, the head shape was relatively flat (suggesting against Savannah), but not as pronounced as in GRSP (I have no comparative experience with HESP). Breast streaking further eliminates local adult GRSP. Yellow lore mark (found on some Savannahs) not present. Face pattern also different from Savannahs - Baird's has a tan or buffy face with a thin, often broken dark border to the cheek patch, while Savannahs have a darker face with a heavier malar stripe, and postocular stripe that begins at eye.

REMARKS:

I did not see the whitish outer tail feathers oft cited for Baird's Sparrow, but I only saw the bird in flight without binoculars. On the ground, the tail was typically out-of-view, obscured by grass. Rising (1996: Rising, J. 1996. A guide to the identification and natural history of the sparrows of the United States and Canada. Illus. by D. Beadle. Academic Press. 365 pp.), notes that pale lateral tail feathers are sometimes [emphasis added] apparent in flight. Rising gives iris color as brown, not black - eyes looked black to me. I was a little surprised by the fact that the median crown stripe was of almost equal-width throughout the crown, as many of the Baird's I've seen (all in June/July) have shown a more pronounced posterior widening of the median crown stripe. Reading in Rising (1996, p. 31, figure 31b) however, I see that this widening may be the result of wear later in the breeding season.

I would have thought this species passed through s.e. Colorado in early May, making this sighting 15 or so days early (it will be interesting to learn whether migration for other species in s.e. CO was early this year, or if Baird's Sparrow migration was early in other parts of the Great Plains). The date of this sighting however, does not seem out-of-line with the sparse published data I could find - migration dates described as "beginning in late February, with birds arriving on breeding grounds from late April" (p. 261, Byers, C. J. Curson, and U. Olsson. 1995. Sparrows and buntings: a guide to the sparrows and bunting of North America and the world. Houghton Mifflin Company. 334 pp.), "Apr.-May" (Rising p. 147), and as "arriving in the southern and central breeding areas from the first week of May" (Jones, S. M. Green, and G. Geupel. Baird's Sparrow. Birding 30(2):109-116.) =20