

COLORADO RARE BIRD REPORT

LE CONTE'S SPARROW
Ammodramus leconteii

Location: Lake Meredith; near Ordway; Crowley County, Colorado

Date: December 30, 1995; January 1, 1996

Bob Dickson, Dave Johnson and I found this bird while participating on the Rocky Ford Christmas Bird Count. We found it about 11:00 a.m. and observed it under overcast skies for about 10 minutes. We returned with Joey Kellner, Chris Woods, John and Lisa Rawinski, Brandon Percival, and Jerry Poe at about 1:40 p.m. and re-found and observed the bird again. We watched it under sunny skies, and perfect conditions for about 1/2 hour. Kellner and I were as close as 6-8 feet from the perched bird in the afternoon. It was photographed repeatedly by Woods. We observed it with a variety of binoculars (mine B & L Elite 10x40s) and scopes. This bird inhabited a pure stand of dry, matted grass adjacent to the frozen lake edge. This area was bordered by weedier areas and small clumps of tamarisk. We kicked the bird up by walking side by side through the grass. It flew up when we were very close, within about 5 feet or so. It would fly weakly (a pale, short-tailed sparrow) a foot or two off the ground and either drop right back down into the grass (rarely) or land sideways on a dried sunflower stalk, a foot or two off the ground (usually). Here it would perch nervously, but in plain sight, as long as we held our ground and it gave up superb, prolonged views. It also flew to a clump of tamarisk and perched on the outer edges and allowed itself to be very closely approached. The bird was silent.

Description:

This was a tiny sparrow, slender, but big-headed, and about 4 1/2" long. It had a slim, conical bill and a short, thin, spiky tail that it held cocked. The legs and feet were pink. The bill was pale, slightly pinkish, with a dark culmen. The eye was dark. The head had a thin, distinct white median crown stripe, bordered by neat, broader black stripes on each side. The face was bright orange, with an orange superciliary and a light gray cheek patch. There was a small blackish streak behind the eye, biggest at the back of the ear patch. The Nape was dark gray with fine purple stripes. The back was blackish with a white streaks (black feathers with light buffy margins when close up). The throat was white, and the breast was rich buff, nearly orangish. The sides of the breast and flanks were heavily marked with fine, blackish streaks. The lower belly and undertail were white. The tail was short, pointed and light brown.

Similar Species:

The conical bill indicates a sparrow. Vesper has white outer tail feathers, lacks the orange face and breast. Savannah and Song sparrows lack the bright orange on face and white median crown stripe. The grassland habits, short, spiky tail, small two-toned bill and buffy streaked underparts indicate an Ammodramus sparrow. The combination of dark gray nape with purple stripes, orange face and thin pure white median crown stripe rule out all others. Sharp-tailed is most similar but has a gray median crown stripe and lacks the purple streaking on the gray nape.

Experience with Species:

I have seen all the Ammodramus sp. before, including Le Conte's Sparrows in Colorado in 1990 and 1991.

This report is prepared from notes made immediately after observation.

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