

A Possible "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow sighting in the Central Valley

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On 28 Feb 2002 while birding at O'Neill Forebay, Merced County, California, I came across a mixed flock of sparrows. I was on the shoreline of this freshwater body of water in the public access area along Hwy 33 where there are campsites and a boat launch. It was about 1000 on a relatively warm, clear, calm winter day. The flock was scattered over a rather wide area that included the grassy shoreline, willows, and bare ground with clumps of grass. I observed a bird in the flock of about 15 Lark Sparrows (*Chondestes grammacus*), 10 Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), and five White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) that puzzled me.

When I initially observed the bird it was in the close company of several Lark Sparrows about 30 m from the shoreline. I was about 25 m from the group of birds and was able to put a spotting scope on them. The birds would work their way in and out of clumps of grass onto the bare ground. However, the bird in question was very reluctant to venture out onto the bare ground for any length of time, often quickly diving back into the clumps of grass that were about 8-10 cm tall and partially concealing itself. The bird appeared larger than the typical Savannah Sparrows and seemed to approach the size of a Lark Sparrow. Very noticeable was the pale bill, which was relatively large both in length and thickness for a typical sparrow. I detected some rufous coloration in the wings along with a faint eyering, and initially thought it might be a Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*). However, when the bird occasionally came out into the open I noticed thick, blurry, rusty-toned streaking on the underparts and that the entire wing had rufous tones, so I ruled out Vesper Sparrow. I noted a very pale but broad supercilium and a rather broad white malar "stripe," which set off a very pronounced brownish auricular patch. I started leaning towards a female *Carpodacus* finch (particularly Purple Finch [*Carpodacus purpureus*]). However, the overall color and plumage characteristics were not right for that genus, and after about 3-4 minutes of close scrutiny with a spotting scope, I realized I was having an embarrassingly difficult time placing this bird into the right family. Finally, the bird faced me head on and briefly vocalized. A weak median crown-stripe and the rather sharp "steek" call note led me to believe I had some sort of Savannah Sparrow.

I observed the bird for about 15 minutes at very close range. In addition to the above characteristics I noted the following: The entire plumage was a dull rufous-brown with the richest rufous tones on the wing coverts, tertials, auriculars, and streaks on the underparts. The back was a medium

brown with very dull dark streaks. The tail was relatively short and the legs were pinkish. The proportions of the bill reminded me of that of a tanager's, relatively long and swollen. The crown was relatively flat and lacked any sort of a crest often present on many forms of Savannah Sparrow. The face lacked any yellowish tones.

After making my observations I consulted the only field guide I had with me at the time which was the 3rd Edition of the *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (National Geographic Society 1999). The illustration therein of "Large-billed Sparrow" (*P. s. rostratus*) made me again ponder the identity of the sparrow I was observing because it had little resemblance to the illustration. In particular, the entire head and bill structure as illustrated differed strongly from my observations, though the facial features were somewhat consistent with what I observed.

Upon arriving home I consulted various other field guides that illustrated "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow and quickly realized that there were many variations in the depictions of this form. Interestingly, the illustrations that best fit the bird I saw were two line drawings: the closest being that by Lee Jones in Garrett and Dunn (1981) (breast streaking should be finer) and the other by Sophie Webb in Howell and Webb (1995) (shape a bit too stubby). I then started gleaning through various birding journals and magazines in the hope of finding some photographs of "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow. I came across several in *Birding* (DeBenedictis 1996, San Miguel and San Miguel 2001). The photograph in the latter reference in particular matched well the individual I observed.

Looking over these photographs of "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow, I not only judged I had observed this subspecies, but I also realized how easy it is to misidentify this form using many of the excellent field guides presently available. Sibley (2000) does a good job (perhaps the best) except that the face areas appear to have a bit too much contrast and the bill is too short/small. The National Geographic Society (1999 and all other editions) does not portray the bill and head proportions properly and has the supercilium tapering too finely behind the eye. The back streaking is also incorrect. Rising (1996) may be the weakest of all with the back streaks much too bold, and the entire face pattern much too strong. I personally found the illustration in Peterson (1990) useful. However, in that depiction the bill could be stouter and there is too much yellow in the supercilium. Beadle and Rising (2002) was not yet available at the time of my sighting. The two photographs of "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow therein are excellent (one of these being the same as that in San Miguel and San Miguel 2001).

When shown together with the other subspecies of Savannah Sparrow, one can see how different the Large-billed is from all the others. The distinctiveness of this subspecies from other types of Savannah Sparrow is commented upon by all references that make mention of it. I was particularly intrigued by Unitt (1984), who mentioned that "With its large size, scarcely streaked back, and thick bill, it looks almost as much like a

female House Finch as a Savannah Sparrow,” especially in light of my initial impression of a female *Carpodacus*.

The Savannah Sparrow is widespread and abundant throughout North America in open habitats. There is strong geographical variation within the species and currently 17 subspecies are recognized (AOU 1957, Wheelwright and Rising 1993). Very distinctive are the six races (five resident and one partially migratory) inhabiting salt marshes of California and Mexico. This group has been subdivided into two groups: “Large-billed” Sparrows (*P. s. rostratus* and *P. s. atratus*, the latter a mostly sedentary race breeding along the coast from central Sonora south to central Sinaloa), and four subspecies of “Belding’s” Sparrows (*P. s. beldingi*, *P. s. anulus*, *P. s. guttatus*, and *P. s. magdalenae*) (Wheelwright and Rising 1993).

The subspecies *P. s. rostratus* is endemic as a breeder to the Gulf of California, and is the only strongly migratory salt-marsh taxon. It was formerly considered a regular breeder in northeastern Baja California and northwestern Sonora and commonly dispersed fairly widely during fall to the northwest into southern California. Habitat preference was and continues to be exclusively a combination of open areas and beach grasses along shorelines, salt marshes, and breakwaters. The Large-billed Sparrow was once considered a separate species, *P. rostratus* (AOU 1931), and recent research on *P. s. rostratus*, including studies of mitochondrial DNA variation (Zink et al. 1993) suggests that this may indeed be the case (DeBenedictis 1996). However, a taxonomic decision will probably not be made until a better understanding of the genetic differentiation of Savannah Sparrow populations south of the U.S. border is developed.

Formerly, the Large-billed Sparrow was found regularly along the coast of California north to San Luis Obispo County, rarely to Santa Cruz County, in fall and winter, with interior records restricted to the Salton Sea area (Grinnell and Miller 1944, AOU 1957). By the late 1970s it was practically unrecorded in California, habitat destruction at the mouth of the Colorado River being mentioned as partly to blame for its demise (Garrett and Dunn 1981). However, numerous recent sightings around the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003) and in coastal southern California (Small 1994, Hamilton and Willick 1996) suggest the subspecies is rebounding in numbers, though some of this may be due in part to greater observer awareness and identification skills.

In northern California, documented records are extremely few: Santa Cruz 27 August 1895 (Grinnell and Miller 1944), Princeton Marsh, San Mateo County 8 September 1991 (Yee et al. 1992), and Seal Point, San Mateo County 29 October – 1 November 2001 (Don Roberson, pers. comm.). With only two modern-day records for northern California and interior records only coming from the Salton Sea region, a sighting of *P. s. rostratus* in the Central Valley would seem most unlikely. The habitat and timing of this individual along with what would appear to be a recent population increase or winter range expansion of the subspecies offers some support for the sighting.

However, until there are additional verifiable northern California sightings, particularly from the interior, I submit this as a possible sighting. Since some birds on the coast of southern California have returned year after year (Jon Dunn, pers. comm.), it would be worthwhile to check the shores of O'Neill Forebay during fall/winter for this intriguing bird.

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