

## Probable Breeding by Savannah Sparrows in Yolo County, California

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While birding the auto tour loop of the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area (YBWA) in eastern Yolo County on the morning of 4 July 1998, I was surprised to encounter two Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*). This species is rarely found in the county in summer, known only from scattered records of lone individuals (Ted Beedy, pers. comm.). In winter, Savannah Sparrows are common to abundant in agricultural fields in the Yolo Bypass and throughout the Central Valley.

Because the two birds seemed partial to a fairly small area (~1 ha), and because I heard one sing, I was confident they could be relocated the next day. Indeed, on 5 July Michael Perrone and I quickly relocated not two, but five Savannah Sparrows at the same location. When we played a tape of a singing Savannah Sparrow (National Geographic Society Guide to Bird Sounds), we were impressed by the immediate and vociferous response of one of the birds. About three seconds after the first song and before the tape reached the second repetition of the song, this bird flew directly toward us, perched on a tall weed, and began singing. It repeated this response to the tape about four times in 15 minutes. For the most part the birds stayed close to each other, often flushing, flying, and landing on the same weed together in groups of two or three, with the others not far off.

I returned on 26 July and again encountered two Savannah Sparrows. At this time, I observed one of the birds begging food from another. At all times, the birds were quite loyal to a small area near the southern apex of the auto tour loop. This area is normally dry by July, however 1998 was characterized by record-setting, late spring rainfalls (e.g., greatest number of rainy days ever recorded in Sacramento in May) as well as a partial and unprecedented flooding of the Yolo Bypass during the first week of June. This flooding came to within 100 yards of the site where the sparrows were seen. In July, the site was a variably marshy to damp field, covered with a variety of green weedy vegetation, one to six feet tall, including watergrass (*Echinochloa crus-galli*), curly dock (*Rumex crispus*), swamp timothy (*Crypsis schoenoides*), common sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*), and common cocklebur (*Xanthium strumarium*) (C. Stowers, pers. comm.). Nesting birds in nearby fields included Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*), and Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) were also active in the area and had parasitized at least one Horned Lark nest.

Of the five birds, two were boldly streaked with dark brown, resembling the subspecies (*P. s. alaudinus*) found along the central and northern California coast, though the upper breast and flank streaking was much reduced. The

pale, median crown stripe was extremely thin on the forehead and totally absent at the top of the crown, creating a solid, dark, rear crown cap. The other three individuals were noticeably paler, with variably buffy breasts, again with limited streaking, and solid crowns with thin streaking and no median crown stripe (reminiscent of a Brewer's Sparrow, *Spizella breweri*).

I suspect the two darker birds were adults, while the paler birds were juveniles. One of the darker birds was singing to the tape and one of the paler birds was observed begging food.

A definite subspecific identification of these birds probably cannot be made. The two obvious candidates are the coastal race, *P. s. alaudinus*, and the inland race, *P. s. nevadensis*. *P. s. alaudinus* breeds in tidal salt marsh habitats and moist areas of upland grasslands within the coastal fog belt. Its range extends well into the Sacramento River Delta (Grinnell and Miller 1944), into which the Yolo Bypass drains. Within California, *P. s. nevadensis* breeds in moist areas around streams or alkaline lakes in the Great Basin, but is also known from Battle Creek Meadows in northwest Tehama County on the east side of the Sacramento Valley (Grinnell and Miller, 1944). Rising (pers. comm.) reports that these two subspecies are very poorly differentiated. The darker birds, while apparently closer to *P. s. alaudinus*, lacked the extensive breast and flank streaking which I observed on birds in August in San Mateo County.

While no nest was found, these birds seemed to be a family group. These observations appear to document the first nesting of this species for Yolo County.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Grinnell, J. and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avifauna No. 27.
- Rising, J. D. 1996. A guide to the identification and natural history of the sparrows of the United States and Canada. Academic Press, San Diego, CA.