

Notes on Henslow's Sparrows, 2003, Rita Goranson

Near Mason City

June 9: This a.m. early I heard at least six Henslow's Sparrows in a short walk around the McKiness land (a private area) on Kentucky. Two of these sparrows were up on forbes and picture perfect. As I walked past the north area, I am sure that I heard yet another sparrow. Of course, there were many Bobolinks, Sedge Wrens, and other birds about.

June 14: This a.m. (5:45) the Henslow's Sparrow let me within 20 feet before it flew. I took some pictures. They don't have any immature birds out of the nest yet, at least I didn't raise any. The field is perfect. The grasses are just right for them to run around in.

June 18: At least three Henslow's calling, but a nest couldn't be found.

June 24: More searching for a nest and nothing. The one male was in the area I had seen him in before, on a parsnip singing. Another one was in the bromme, close by. I don't think that there are immature sparrows out of the nest yet, at least I didn't see any movement.

June 28: When I arrived at the field this morning there were no adults up and on forbs and singing. However, I could hear them in the grasses calling. I went into the south part and headed toward the sound. Twice I had adults fly out and around and down into the grasses. Once I had an immature (light brown back, buffy face and underbelly) fly up and go only a short distance and try to land on a forb. It missed the plant and then plopped into the field. I could not relocate this bird.

There appears to be a colony of six or seven Henslow's Sparrows nesting in the first part of the main field and the south field. I have not see or heard any Grasshopper Sparrows.

Further notes: June 28, 2003

Paul and I have been monitoring this field since spring. There were at least six singing Henslow's Sparrows heard in the field on June 9. We had been there a couple of times looking for a nest after this.

I arrived at the field at 7:30 a.m. There was a 10 to 12 mph wind and it was partly cloudy in the sky. I could hear Henslow's Sparrows calling in the area where I had seen them on previous visits. Entering the mostly bromme field I headed towards the calls (south) slowly, searching the grasses as I went along. Suddenly a sparrow-sized bird flew out in an upward arch and went a short way west. It came down on a very thin grass stalk forty feet from me. It tried to hang on and couldn't and went to another thin stalk. It grabbed for that but couldn't get it and plopped into the field. This was all done in a rather clumsy manner. This bird was light brown on top and very buffy from beak to under tail. It immediately hit me that this was an immature. I headed towards the area it had dropped in but could not relocate the bird.

I did not have binoculars with me as I was carrying a camera and other paraphernalia. The adults that I have seen the last few weeks have typically flown to milk weed stalks that are substantial for their weight. The morning sun was on the bird and washing out the colors but this bird was still lighter colored than the adults that I have seen there.

Another Henslow's call led me towards the south. Suddenly a bird came up from the grasses and flew quite a ways in an upward and then lateral arch before it dove into the grass. It was a typical adult with a dark body and with a splayed pointed tail as it dropped. It went in about 70 feet from me.

I heard yet another bird calling from the east. I headed in that direction and again a bird flew up and off further east. It too flew in an upwards arch and then lateral arch and down into the grasses. It too was an adult in color and in the way it disappeared down into the grasses.

At this point, since the wind was strong and it was late in the day, I decided to let them be and not continue searching for them.

In another area, not too far away from the above area, two more Henslow's Sparrows were calling from the grasses. So far I have heard six different birds calling in this one area of the field.

I have not had any other species of sparrow in this field other than hearing a Song Sparrow sing off in the distant area near trees. Sedge wrens are in the ditch and the lowest /wettest area of this field. A number of Bobolinks are nesting in the field, also.

July 2: 5:30 a.m. I arrived at the field and went to the area I had been monitoring (the south field). The adult was upon a parsnip plant singing. The juvenile was on a forb beside the adult and hanging on tenuously. It was nervous and moved from side to side. It had a darkish crown area and a very light face. A thin dark line went from the eye to the back of the face. It had an eye ring and some dark marks lower on the face and toward the rear, but in the morning light these were very light. The face was so light that the eye appeared to bulge out. The throat to tail was very light buffy colored with only a hint of streaking on the sides and no apparent streaks on the throat. The tail was ratty looking and thin. The streaking on the back appeared to start lower on the nape than on the adult. The neck

was very light. There was streaking on the back. It was dark brown in the medium brown back with a hint of rufous. When I went to approach close to the juvenile, it popped down into the field. It did not call or make any sound.

July 3: Since I didn't get a picture of the juvenile yesterday, I went again this morning, but birds were leery and moved the minute I entered the field.

July 7, 2003 It was sunny and partly cloudy. I arrived at the field at 7:20 a.m. It had rained a bit over night and I waited until it dried up a bit so the grasses wouldn't be so wet. I walked in toward the shed, east, and went to the left, north of the shed, and further east into the field. Immediately, I could hear a Henslow's Sparrow calling and maybe a second one. I looked around and spotted to the south a hundred feet a Henslow's Sparrow on a parsnip and calling. I headed in its direction. I could hear another one calling in the grasses to my left. Suddenly a sparrow came up out of the grasses in front of me and headed south towards the adult. It flew in an undulating way and actually went a bit beyond and to the right of the adult and down to a forb. However, there was no forb there and it tried to hover to find one and dropped instead into the grasses. The adult then left its perch and headed to the west. It went from parsnip to parsnip as though it had seen and was heading to a specific spot. The one from the grass just headed in that direction and was not able to spot a forb while flying and was not able to hover and find a forb. In my experience the adults go from forb to forb, or hover and grab a forb. The immatures do not seem to bet that adept, so I feel that this one was an immature. The other adult was still calling in the grasses.

Then I went to the area south of the path that goes to the creek. This is where we had an immature last week. I went to the area where the sparrows had been last week, there were no sparrows calling or on forbs. However, I could hear one calling further to the east. I headed in that direction. I was able to get within 50 feet of the adult and it flew off to parsnip. Then I heard another sparrow calling in the grasses close near the forb the sparrow had just left. So I looked a bit for a nest but didn't find one. This area has shorter grasses. The grasses in the area they had just been in are getting quite high.

July 25: I went to the field at 8 a.m. this morning. North of the building, I walked into the field about 100 feet to the east. There was a singing Henslow's Sparrow. As I walked towards him, another sparrow, flew up and 30 feet and down again onto some bromme. It hung on a bit and then slid down into the grass. It was lighter on the back, but I didn't get a good look at it. Then I approached the adult and got within 30 feet before it flushed away. With the camera, I took a few pictures of the adult.

When I started walking further east I heard "tip" in the grasses somewhere. I continued walking and came out in a mowed area and there were a couple of sparrows on the ground that rose and went to another spot in the stubble. They were doing the "tip" call and were immature Grasshopper Sparrows. I went back to the car to get my scope as there was activity going on. In the short grass area I continued to raise up immature Grasshopper Sparrows and heard at least one adult. I heard several Henslow's, but they were always in the long grasses. Heading back on the path toward the west, there is a small dead tree. Immature Grasshopper Sparrows and immature Bobolinks were in and out of this tree. Only once did a Henslow's Sparrow set up there for a few seconds. It was an adult.

So now there were Grasshopper Sparrows in the field, along with the Henslow's Sparrows. The Grasshopper Sparrows seemed to stay visible, whereas the Henslow's were always in the deeper grasses. I heard three or four Henslow's calling in that one area.

July 29: At 6 p.m. Paul and I went to the field to find a few birds for our Big Day count. We walked two miles through the fields and there were no Bobolinks, no Henslow's calling or up, and only two lone Grasshopper Sparrows calling. No Henslow's. I was amazed.