

Le Conte's Sparrow
25 Feb 1996
Walnut Creek, Polk Co., IA
*Denise Friedrich
IBL 66:58; 67:83

Record Number: 96-27
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Denise Friedrich, Crestview Mobile Home Park, Lot 69, RR4,
Ames 50010 [4/6/97]

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 66:58
Records Committee: IBL: 67:83

VOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

A-D, Crown stripe, facial color, and unstreaked breast eliminate similar species.

NA, Similar sparrow species are not discussed or eliminated.

A-D, Good description of this species, although I think of the "yellow" as being more orange-brown rather than yellow as in a Savannah Sparrow.

A-D, I would have liked a description of the flanks and tail, but this appears to be an early spring migrant. I believe the strong median stripe and distinct facial pattern eliminate Grasshopper Sparrow. Since Le Conte's winters not too terribly far south of here, the record is plausible.

A-D, Behavior typical of Le Conte's Sparrow and I assume the habitat was grassy. The description of the color and marks on the head appears to be very accurate. On the negative side, there is no overall description of the size and shape of the bird, especially the tail length and shape. There is no mention of limited streaks on the sides or gray on the nape. We do not know how much the description was influenced by looking at a field guide nor how much experience the observer had with this species. With experience and a good look, Le Conte's is not that difficult, but a first time look is often frustrating. The date is quite unusual for a species that winters locally north to central Missouri and has been found in northwestern Missouri in December. There are 3 Iowa records for December and an early spring date of 12 March. This species tends to be found in the same locations year after year. I would recommend searching this area in winter in an attempt to confirm wintering in Iowa (It would be unusual for this bird to be either a winter resident or an early migrant, but it must be one or the other).

NA, Not enough detail on bill color, streaking (how heavy, where), color on lower part of bird. I have never seen a Le Conte's that could be called yellow on the face and breast, color should be more of a subdued orange or buff.

A-D, The description, along with the time of year (many species reappear in Iowa in late February), and the known "half-hardiness" of this species (there are Dec records in nw Missouri), have me convinced the identification is correct.

RE-VOTE (by mail): 5 A-D, 2 NA

96-27

NA, Le Conte's Sparrow would have a purplish nape which should have been noticed since the bird was studied for several minutes. Also not described was the size, location and extent of any streaking, and the tail.

A-D, The white crown stripe eliminates Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. The yellow face with black eye stripe and gray ear coverts eliminates Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Baird's Sparrow. The unstreaked white breast eliminates Savannah Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Baird's Sparrow. The behavior and habitat are typical for this species. The winter range of Le Conte's Sparrow extends to central Missouri, making an early migrant in south-central Iowa plausible. Although there is no description of the bird's general shape or size, and certain details are lacking, I believe similar species can be eliminated.

A-D, Habitat is correct and could reasonably be an over-wintering bird. Description of upper portions of bird seems accurate except for the "yellow", which apparently describes the orange-buff of the face.

A-D, Description of yellow versus "subdued orange or buff" doesn't bother me since color is somewhat dependent on frame of reference. I have no hesitation calling Le Conte's yellow when compared to orange of a Sharp-tail for instance. While a more thorough description of the other parts of the bird might have been helpful, as would a more thorough discussion of similar species, sparrows can be identified solely on head and facial patterns. Here we have a good description of the median stripe and facial pattern.

A-D, Immature Swamp, Grasshopper, Sharp-tailed, and Savannah sparrows are the only contenders. Grasshopper and Sharp-tailed are much less likely than Le Conte's and the description of the facial pattern eliminates these. The lack of streaking and facial description do not fit Savannah. Immature Swamp Sparrows vary considerably in appearance and could occur in this habitat in winter, especially if moist. The size difference from Swamp Sparrow should have been immediately obvious. I think it much more likely that this bird over-wintered than that it was an early migrant.

NA, I still do not think other species are eliminated by description as one other committee member noted. Again crown coloration is the only thing that is really suggestive of this species. Other committee members indicated other field marks that were not in the description that they thought should be included but were not noted. Overall the description is short some very important details and without them this record is not beyond reasonable doubt in my mind.

A-D, No change in my position.

96-27

FEBRUARY'S WALNUT CREEK BIRD SURVEY
DENISE FRIEDRICK
25 FEBRUARY 1996
SITE #21
TIME: 0952-1130

While walking through a "Grass-riparian" area along Walnut Creek I flushed a Le Conte's Sparrow. The sparrow flew up from the ground, flew a short distance and landed in an area of dense grass. I followed the bird and flushed it again. It flew a short distance crossing the creek and landed at the edge of an area of dense grass on the opposite bank. The sparrow remained there for several minutes enabling me to study its features and check my bird guide.

The sparrow's most prominent feature was its yellow facial color. The neck was yellow fading into an unstreaked dirty white breast. The face below and above a slight black eye streak was yellow with some gray behind and below the eye. The crown of the sparrow consisted of two black bands with a definite white stripe down the middle. There was a definite and conspicuous black "spot" on either side of the neck towards the back in the region where the eye streak ended. This was definitely noticeable. The sparrow's back was streaked and dark. The sparrow's most striking feature was its yellow facial pattern.

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