

Le Conte's Sparrow

21 Dec 1997

Brenton Slough, Dallas Co., IA

*Richard Trief, *Jim Sinclair

IBL 68:53, 63, 86

Record Number: 97-66

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Richard Trief, 1004 North C St., Indianola [6/9/98]

Jim Sinclair, 810 N. B St., Indianola [6/9/98]

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 68:53, 63

Records Committee: IBL 68:86

Sinclair, J. 1998. A winter record of Le Conte's Sparrow. Iowa
Bird Life 68:139.

VOTE: 7 A-D

A-D, Great description of all field marks for thus unusual
winter record.

A-D, An easily identifiable sparrow at close range.

A-D, The behavior and appearance of this bird are typical for
Le Conte's Sparrow. Perhaps this species winters in Iowa. I hope
future sightings are as well substantiated.

A-D, Description eliminate other possibilities.

were long and pointed with no black markings. When sitting, the wingtips extended beyond the tail. The ventral side of the wings was about two shades darker gray. There was a white trailing edge in the secondaries and inner primaries, visible on both the dorsal and ventral sides of the wings. The white trailing edge was widest where the primaries and secondaries meet and got thinner toward the end of the wing. The tail was entirely white and appeared wedge-shaped when spread.

The bird was very active, either flying from one end of the open water to the other or dipping down to alight momentarily on the ice. When the bird was on the ice it walked with rapid leg movement. It would frequently stop to pick at something on the ice. When on the ice, it looked much like a pigeon in profile and movement. In flight it appeared very tern-like.

We saw the bird again on 28 December 1997 in the same location. It was seen by many observers on 29, 30, and 31 December. The weather was warming those last days of December, and more open water was present on Lake Manawa. It departed the area on the morning of 31 December.

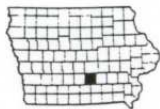
This sighting was the third record of this arctic species for Iowa, the second having been recorded 13 to 18 December 1998 at Red Rocks Reservoir (see note, page 138, this issue).

1405 Little John Road, Bellevue, NE 68005

ROSS'S GULL AT RED ROCK RESERVOIR

JIM SINCLAIR

On 13 December 1997 Rick Trieff and I headed to Marion County for a day of birding the Red Rock Reservoir. We arrived below the dam at 8 a.m. and quickly decided to move downstream from the North Tailwaters Area to the Howell Station campground for a better perspective on the numerous gulls loafing along the north shore of the river. As we were scanning the gulls from our new position, a small pale bird fluttered through my field of view and landed on the shoreline about 60 yards away. Gazing at the bird with the naked eye, my first impression was of a small dove, followed quickly by my exclamation "Ross's Gull!"



The bird remained on the shoreline for a few moments allowing Rick and me a good look. The bird then flew upstream about 50 yards where it landed in the water among some Ring-billed Gulls. We watched the bird for about five minutes as it loafed in the water, at which point the gull took flight and spent the next five minutes patrolling the tailwater area. Our last view of the Ross's Gull came as a Bald Eagle soared across the tailwaters area, sending the bird up and over the dam toward the reservoir proper.

The following description would indicate that this bird was in adult basic plumage. The mantle was a pale gray and the head was white with a small, dark vertical slash behind each eye. The breast and belly had a faint but discernable pink wash. Approximately one half to two thirds the size of the accompanying Ring-billed Gulls, the Ross's Gull's wings were proportionately long and pointed and this, coupled with the wedge-shaped tail, gave the bird a long, tapered look. Dove-like features included a small head, tiny black bill, long tapered body and wings, and very short legs. When patrolling the tailwaters area, the bird's flight was delicate and bouncing, more like a tern than a gull. However, when the gull flew over the dam

after being spooked by the eagle, the flight was fast and direct and resembled that of a pigeon or dove.

After the bird disappeared, Rick and I contacted the birdline and several other birders to insure that word of this find got out. From 13 through 18 December this bird entertained not only Iowans, but numerous people from out of state as well. In an amazing set of circumstances Iowa's third Ross's Gull was found the next week by Loren and Babs Padelford at Lake Manawa (see note, page 137, this issue).

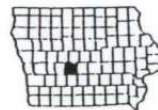
The Ross's Gull is an anomaly in more than one regard. Not only are the shape and color unique, but this species is also characterized by a number of life history mysteries as well. These include where are the Ross's Gulls regular wintering grounds, why are there increasing numbers of records from the lower 48 states, and what is the actual North American breeding range of this species?

810 North B Street, Indianola, IA 50125

A WINTER RECORD OF LE CONTE'S SPARROW

JIM SINCLAIR

On 21 December 1997, while participating in the Saylorville Christmas Bird Count, Rick Trieff and I discovered a Le Conte's Sparrow at Brenton Slough in northeastern Dallas County. The bird was found in a tuft of grass on the edge of a dry pothole. As we approached the bird, it flew a short distance into the marsh vegetation and landed on a weed stem. At this point the bird allowed us to approach within 10 feet and afforded us a leisurely and detailed look.



The feature which first alerted us to the bird was its small size, approximately five inches in length. The flat-headed, small-billed head was dominated by a white crown stripe, a broad orange eyebrow stripe, and a purplish cheek patch. The breast and flanks were a rich buff color with fine streakings extending down the flanks. The mantle was dominated by prominent white feather edgings which gave the bird's back a white striped appearance.

The Le Conte's Sparrow is rare in Iowa in winter with this being only the fourth accepted record. Although rarely found in Iowa in winter, this species' winter range extends into southern Illinois and central Missouri. The fall and early winter of 1997 were exceptionally mild, perhaps contributing to this bird's late Iowa residence.

810 North B Street, Indianola, IA 50125

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

97-66

What species? Le Conte's Sparrow How many? one

Location? Brenton Slough - west of Granger Iowa

Type of Habitat? rolling short grass field adjacent to pathole depression

When? date(s): Christmas Bird Count - 12/21/97 time: Approx 9:30 to 10:00 am

Who? your name and address: Richard Trieff, 1004 North C St, Indianola IA

Others with you: Jim Sinclair

Others before or after you: None

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

I was approximately 30 feet from the bird when it flew out of the field a short distance (10 to 20 feet) into taller grasses at the edge of a small wetland area. As I approached the spot ^{where} I believed it to be, the bird flew up from the ground ~~and~~ and perched approximately 2 to 3 feet below eye level in the marsh grass within six feet of my position.

The bird gave the appearance of a small sparrow with a striped head. Its crown had a white median line with distinct black lines on both sides of the median stripe. On either side of the black crown stripes were buffy eyebrow stripes. Below the eyebrow lines and behind the bird's eye was a gray ear patch.

Given the very close proximity of two human observers, the bird's behavior was not furtive and after observing us for 15 or 20 seconds, it flew another short distance back to the ground in the pathole among the tall grasses.

Similar species; how eliminated:

Grasshopper sparrow - The bird I observed did not give the flat head appearance of a Grasshopper sparrow, had more distinctly striped appearance on its crown than a Grasshopper sparrow, and did not display the shy, secretive behavior of a Grasshopper sparrow -

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? No

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Overcast morning; within six feet (two strides); optical equipment redundant at the distance bird observed

Previous experience with species and similar ones: two previous sightings. The first approx 15 years ago (siskin bird); the second sighting at an Iowa Fieldtrip where several were observed

References and persons consulted before writing description: Jim Sinclair and I discussed our observation during the viewing and afterward

How long before field notes made? 3 hrs this form completed? within 24 hours

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).

What species? Le Conte's Sparrow How many? 1
 Location? Brenton Slough, Polk Co.
 Type of Habitat? edge of hay field and dry prairie patch
 When? date(s): 12/21/97 time: 10 a.m.
 Who? your name and address: Jim Sinclair, 810 N. B St, Indian
 Others with you: Rick Trieff
 Others before or after you: _____

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Very small, short-tailed sparrow
Small billed with a white crown stripe, a broad orange eyebrow stripe and a purplish cheek patch.
Breast and flanks buff colored with fine streaking extending down the flanks.
Mantle dominated by white feather edgings giving the bird a white striped appearance.
Bird flushed from a tuft of grass after a close approach, after a short, weak flight the bird landed in marsh foliage allowing us a close and detailed look.

Similar species: how eliminated:

Seen at close range it is hard to confuse the Le Conte's Sparrow with anything else

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? NO
 If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Bird seen as close as 10 ft. under good viewing conditions 10x42 field glasses

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Plenty of Le Conte's experience

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Birds in Iowa, Kent and Dinsmore

How long before field notes made? 2 hrs this form completed? 5 days

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).