

HENSLOW'S SPARROW IN NORTHEAST OKLAHOMA

BY DONALD W. VERSER

Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) nested in Washington County, Oklahoma, in 1987 and records from 1986 through 1989 suggest it may be a regular summer resident in both Washington and Osage counties from mid-April until early October. Late July sightings in Rogers and Tulsa counties hint at a more widespread distribution.

Henslow's Sparrow was listed as hypothetical for Oklahoma by Sutton (1967) until the spring of 1974 when Dotty M. Goard (1974) documented the species on a prairie five miles east of Bartlesville, Washington County. In Kansas, Johnston (1965) listed this sparrow as a local summer resident in the grasslands of Shawnee, Douglas, Morris and Anderson counties. More recently Zimmerman (1985) reported the species as occurring from mid-April to early September on the Konza Prairie in Geary and Riley counties of northeast Kansas. Other recent records in Kansas include a new population in Wilson



HENSLOW'S SPARROW

A singing male photographed by Michael L. Gray near Copan Lake in Washington County, Oklahoma, on 31 May 1987. Note the double whisker marks and the "necklace" of breast streaks.

County in the southeast part of the state and a population in Anderson County, which has been known for some time (Zimmerman, pers. comm.). In southwestern Missouri Henslow's Sparrow is a resident in St. Clair and Vernon counties (Skinner et al. 1984).

Henslow's Sparrow is a very secretive bird that dwells on the ground in tallgrass prairie. Flights are infrequent, short and close to the ground. If pursued it will likely hide rather than fly. The best opportunity to observe this species is when the male perches on a grass stalk and sings repeatedly his short two-syllabled "se-lick" song. Henslow's Sparrow is only slightly larger than LeConte's Sparrow (*A. leconteii*) and appears flat headed and large billed. A green face and nape and dark reddish back are usually most distinguishing. Other good field marks are the dark streaks forming a necklace on the breast and the double whisker marks.

I first encountered Henslow's Sparrow on 15 August 1986 when I heard one singing along with several Sedge Wrens (*Cistothorus platensis*) in a prairie on the west side of Copan Lake in Washington County. This prairie, which had been burned earlier that spring, is ungrazed public hunting land. The bird was seen again the next day but not thereafter. In 1987 and 1989 Henslow's Sparrows were resident at Copan Lake and in 1988 two other populations were discovered, one in Osage County and another in Washington County.

Occurrence at Copan Lake is summarized as follows: in 1987 birds were recorded from 2 May to 4 October and approximately eight territories were established. In 1988 the west side prairie was burned and Henslow's Sparrows never appeared. From two to five birds, however, were observed on the east side of the lake from 10 April until 28 May in a small idle prairie. In 1989 at least six singing males were in the west side prairie starting 21 April and throughout the summer. Most had apparently left by late September but one was seen on the late date of 15 October.

Another site where Henslow's Sparrows have been found is along the Washington and Nowata county line east of Oglesby. In 1988 five birds were singing in a Washington County hayfield on 14 June and 1 July. In 1989 six birds were counted on 31 May in the same area. This time birds were in both hayfields and grazed prairies and four of the six were in Nowata County.

In Osage County a large colony was discovered a few miles east of Foraker 14 April 1988 when 14 were counted along 1.8 miles of county road. The prairie here was being grazed but, unlike much of the surrounding areas, had not been burned that spring and considerable dead vegetation was standing. A systematic census covering about .5 square mile of this area on 4 June 1988 revealed the presence of 16 Henslow's Sparrows, 21 Grasshopper Sparrows (*A. savannarum*), 49 Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*) and 21 pairs of Upland Sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*). The same day eight additional Henslow's Sparrows were heard along the road outside the census area. In 1989 at least one bird was present in the same prairie on 10 June but a count was not attempted. At another site in Osage County, on the Barnard Ranch, at least two birds were singing 10 June 1989 in a large field that was apparently not being grazed. Perhaps many more birds were present but a count was not attempted.

I have only one record each for Tulsa and Rogers counties. On 28 July 1989 two birds were singing in an idle prairie in north Tulsa County and on 30 July 1989 one bird was singing in a grazed prairie northwest of Talala in Rogers County.

Observations in northeastern Oklahoma support the conclusions of Zimmerman (1988) that Henslow's Sparrows prefer habitat with a large amount of standing dead vegetation and few woody plants. With the widespread burning each spring and high stocking rates, this preferred habitat is not easy to find. Periodic burning and only light grazing would seem to be the best management for Henslow's Sparrow.

Some nesting details were uncovered in 1987 by patiently observing one territory near Copan Lake. The male was singing as early as 16 May. After locating a spot where the pair could usually be found, I set up a net at 2015 on 3 June. The male was quickly flushed into the net but the female avoided capture. Band number 73-39801 was placed on his left leg. On 19 June at dusk I observed the female sneaking through the grass toward me approaching the nest to incubate. On 23 June she was still incubating but during the next visit on 26 June feeding activity was noted at 2030. The nest was inspected on 30 June and contained four sky blue nestlings. According to Hyde (1939), the blue color indicates an age of four days and, allowing 10 to 11 days for incubation (Hyde 1939), the clutch was probably complete by 16 June.

Many times the male was conspicuous as he sang but the female was seen only when she was approaching the nest at dusk to brood or when carrying food to it during the day. A flurry of feeding activity was observed 28 June when the nestlings were presumedly about two days old. I watched from a distance and counted the arrivals and departures at the nest. The male was easy to observe and frequently perched on a stalk of eastern gamagrass (*Trip-sacum dactyloides*) with a grasshopper or spider (sometimes both) in its bill before dropping down to the nest. The female stayed very low and was difficult to track. Several times she arrived or departed the nest undetected. Between 1915 and 2040 the male made five trips to the nest and the female made seven.

The nest was only three inches above the ground and situated in the middle of a clump of switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), which gave it much of its integrity. The switchgrass was approximately 30 inches tall and intermixed with little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparius*). The nest was constructed of broad grass leaves with a lining of fine grass stems. It was an open cup and oblong in shape. The inside dimensions were 1.75 by 2.25 inches and the depth was 0.5 inch. Externally it measured 2.5 by 3.5 inches with the narrow ends 2.5 inches high and the middle only about 1.5 inches high.

By observing the movements of the banded male, I estimated the territory size to be about 2.5 acres. The other birds that apparently nested in the prairie not far from this territory included Dickcissels, Field Sparrows (*Spizella pusilla*), Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*), Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*), Common Yellowthroats (*Geothlypis trichas*) and Sedge Wrens.

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P.O. BOX 1494, BARTLESVILLE, OKLAHOMA 74005, 13 APRIL 1990.

GENERAL NOTES

Red-Tailed Hawk captures Great-Tailed Grackle in mid-air. — At 1108 on the humid, overcast day of 1 February 1990 (54°F, SW winds blowing at 3 mph) I was watching a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) circling above a small creek less than a mile west of Cameron University in Lawton, Comanche County, Oklahoma. The hawk was soaring almost directly over a large cottonwood tree (*Populus deltoides*) growing near the creek. It apparently put to flight a flock of approximately 25 Great-tailed Grackles (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) that had been perched in the tree. Suddenly, the raptor swooped downward, not at the flock, but toward a single male grackle that had belatedly left the tree, desperately attempting to rejoin the flock. The hawk struck from above and behind; after contact, it levelled off, swung around and returned to the same cottonwood. It then proceeded to consume its prey.

Buteo jamaicensis depends chiefly on small rodents as prey. Fisher (1893, Hawks and owls of the United States in their relation to agriculture, Wash. D.C., p. 50) found remains of 105 birds of at least 20 species in 562 Red-tailed Hawk stomachs from the eastern United States (chiefly Maryland and Pennsylvania). About half were game birds or poultry. Behavior and food habits of this habits of this hawk were studied in the San Joaquin Experimental Range in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Madera County, California, during 1939, 1940 and 1941 (Fitch, H.S., et. al., 1946, Condor 48:205-237). A total of 169 birds were recovered from 2094 pellets collected during the nesting season. Of these, 117 were unidentifiable, 14 were jays, 13 woodpeckers, 10 finches, 6 quail, 5 meadowlarks, 2 hawks, 1 warbler and 1 bluebird. Of 625 food items brought to 14 nests by parent hawks, only 23 were birds (11 quail, 4 jays, 4 finches, 1 roadrunner, 1 screech owl, 1 kingbird, and 1 unknown). Therefore, it is clear that Red-tails rarely prey on small birds of any kind, and

very seldom on grackles. — Gerard A. Clyde Jr., 4103 Currell Dr., Lawton Oklahoma 73505, 14 February 1990.

First Common Poorwill nest for Comanche County, Oklahoma. — A sudden flutter of wings startled us as several birds flushed from near a small boulder not far away. They flew rapidly and low into a nearby oak copse. The surprise and speed of their flight rendered identification uncertain. My wife Janet had seen two birds, I counted three. They were approximately the size of Northern Bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*). One bird that she concentrated on displayed short rounded wings and white spots at the corners of its tail. My impression was "nightjar."

The date was 26 May 1989, the time midmorning. My wife Janet and I were making a reconnaissance of the Hollis Canyon area (34°45'33" N., 98°45'15" W.) of the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma.

By the boulder we found a small egg resting on a mat of spike moss (*Selaginella* sp.). There was no evidence of nest preparation. On the larger end were very faint blotches only slightly darker than the base color. The creamy white egg measured 26x19 mm. The eggs of the Common Poorwill are smaller and much less distinctively marked than those of either of the other two species of caprimulgids found in southwestern Oklahoma (Bent, A. C., 1940, Life histories of North American birds, U. S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 176, pp. 150, 189, 212). Averages for the three species' eggs are: Common Poorwill (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*), 26.3x19.9 mm; Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), 30.0x21.8 mm; and Chuck-will's Widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*), 35.6x25.6 mm.

That afternoon we returned to the nest with refuge staff member Claudine Daniel. We approached to within about 10 meters of the incubating bird before it flushed. The short rounded tail showed faint beige tips on the outer rectrices and the bird's wings were rounded and uniformly dark. We could see a white band separating the dark throat from the poor-will's mottled underparts, and that its back was variegated with brown and gray.

On 27 May, assistant refuge manager Bill McCoy and I checked the nest and found the female bird still incubating the egg. We made several 35 mm photographs at varying distances both before and after she flushed.

My wife and I returned on 28 May. Using a video camera, we taped the nest and adjacent habitat. We also took additional pictures with our still camera. When the female finally took flight, we found two eggs. Photographs of the eggs were taken after a scale had been positioned next to one.

Not wanting to disturb the nesting bird unnecessarily, we did not return to the location until 14 June 1989, at which time we found neither bird nor eggs. In the interim, nearly 10 inches (25 cm) of rain had fallen. At refuge headquarters, about five kilometers southeast of the nest, rainfall (in inches) was as follows: 31 May, 0.10; 1 June, 0.25; 4 June, 2.90; 7 June, 2.00; 8 June, 0.87; 11 June, 0.40; 12 June, 1.45; 13 June, 1.80; and 14 June, 0.04. Flooding of the hillside may have washed the eggs away.

The above observations, together with the photographs, constitute the third

Common Poorwill nesting record for the state, and the first for southwestern Oklahoma. Photos have been deposited in the Oklahoma Ornithological Society bird records archives at the University of Oklahoma. There are only two previous breeding records for the state. "Nest (two eggs) found on July 9, 1954, in opening among junipers and small oaks in rough country near Cogar, Caddo County; nest held one egg and one chick, July 22, two chicks, July 24 (R. R. Graber, Jean W. Graber)" (Sutton, 1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 272). John S. Weske discovered another poorwill nest on a mesa slope near Kenton in Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, on 21 May 1972 that contained two chicks (Weske, 1973, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 6:22). — Louis E. McGee, 1703 NW 43rd St., Lawton, Oklahoma 73505, 15 November 1989.

Early nesting of Eastern Meadowlark in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. — In north Oklahoma City, on the early date of 11 April 1986, I found the nest of an Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*). The location was about ½ mile north-northeast of the intersection of U.S. Highway 77 (Broadway Extension) and Wilshire Boulevard.

Shortly after noon on that date, as I stopped for a moment in an open pasture, a meadowlark fluttered off a nest six feet away. Presumably this was the female, for Bent (1958, Life histories of North American blackbirds, orioles, tanagers, and allies, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 211, p. 63) reported that it is probable that only the female incubates. The nest held four spotted eggs.

Located on the north bank of a ravine which ran southwest to northeast, the nest was about 8–10 feet from the top. The ravine sloped downward approximately 30 feet at an angle of perhaps 25 percent. The opening of the nest faced southeastward toward the bottom of the ravine and was domed over with strands of grass. Weather that day was cloudy and cool (ca. 65°F). Although I heard only Eastern Meadowlarks singing in the area that day, I was unable to positively identify the incubating bird as it left the nest.

The following day, 12 April, and on 15 April, I revisited the nest, which still contained four eggs. On the 15th the (presumed) female fluttered from the nest, but I was once again unsuccessful at identifying her to species, although a male Eastern Meadowlark singing nearby showed concern at my presence. On 18 April the nest held four young, their eyes closed, but with tufts of down present. At 1700 no adult was at the nest, but about 40–50 feet from it, at 1830, I saw a female Eastern Meadowlark with food in her bill through a 15X spotting scope. She showed no yellow in the malar region (as does the Western Meadowlark, *S. neglecta*), and gave the typical "spriggity" call of the eastern species. Because she was close to the nest and accompanied by a male which gave the typical four-note call of the Eastern Meadowlark, there could be little doubt that she, too, was an Eastern Meadowlark and that this was *her* nest. A second male in the area was also singing the Eastern's song.

Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 537–539) stated that the Eastern species is found in "eastern and central Oklahoma . . . [and] Breeds westward in low-lying areas bordering rivers to Beaver, Ellis, Greer, and Harmon counties." The Western Meadowlark is "Found all

year in western and central Oklahoma” and “Has been heard singing . . . eastward . . . in summer to Payne, Oklahoma, Cleveland, and Marshall counties.” One of these nestings was a mixed pair of *S. magna* and *S. neglecta* in Cleveland County, the only known instance of interbreeding in Oklahoma (Sutton, G. M., and G. W. Dickson, 1965, *Southwest. Nat.* 10:307–310).

The earliest known nesting for the Eastern Meadowlark in the state heretofore was on 25 April 1965, when a nest with five eggs was discovered in Cleveland County by John S. Weske (Sutton 1967). Thus, the Eastern Meadowlark nest I found in Oklahoma City on 11 April 1986 was at least two weeks earlier. — John S. Shackford, *6008-A Northwest Expressway, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132, 13 March 1990.*

Second record of Northern Cardinal in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. — On 13 May 1989, Florence Wass of Stillwater, Oklahoma, a few members of the New Mexico Ornithological Society and I observed a Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) in the yard of the Laurance Regnier ranch house situated on Texakeet Creek about 4 miles south of Kenton, in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. We were attending a joint meeting of the Oklahoma and New Mexico Ornithological societies at nearby Black Mesa State Park.

We were waiting for various birds to come to a backyard feeder and, among others, I could hear a number of American Goldfinches (*Carduelis tristis*) singing from surrounding trees. The New Mexico group was anxious to get good looks at the goldfinches because this species is uncommon in their state. A few of these black and yellow birds dropped down to the feeder where they were quite easily observed. As we continued to watch them, a male cardinal flew into the yard and perched on a water well pump. A few seconds later, it came to the feeder for sunflower seeds, providing us excellent views at very close range. This bird's solid red plumage and black facial patch clearly distinguished it from the closely related Pyrrhuloxia (*C. sinuatus*) which has been reported once in Oklahoma, and from this very locale (see Patti, S. T., 1976, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 9:28–30). The New Mexicans were delighted; within moments, most had added two new birds to their life lists.

The only other published record for Cimarron County is that of a female (CUMZ 4543) collected by Lewis W. Oring on 27 November 1960 along the Cimarron River 13 miles north of Boise City (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 572); Sutton stated that the cardinal “appears to be making way westward across Panhandle following Beaver and Cimarron rivers, being fairly well established locally in Beaver and Texas counties.” This species is known to have bred as far west as Guymon in Texas County (Sutton, 1974, *A check-list of Oklahoma birds*, *Contrib. Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist.* No. 1, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 41).

Farther west in New Mexico, J. Stokley Ligon wrote that cardinals are “very rare in the eastern part of the state” (1961, *New Mexico birds and where to find them*, Univ. New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, p. 269). South of the Oklahoma Panhandle, Oberholser's map of Texas shows no record of the cardinal

for any of the four northernmost Panhandle counties (1974, *The bird life of Texas*, Univ. Texas Press, Austin, p. 853).—Dorothy B. Newell, 8304 Lakeaire Dr., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132, 15 February 1990.

Impaled Grasshopper Sparrow in Jefferson County, Oklahoma. — On 2 July 1987, as I was driving a few miles east of Temple, Cotton County, Oklahoma, a sparrow-sized bird suddenly darted in front of my pickup from roadside sunflowers (*Helianthus* sp.) and Johnson grass (*Sorghum halapense*). Unfortunately, the bird bounced off the passenger side of my windshield and over the cab. Immediately, I looked into the rearview mirror and saw the bird flopping around in the road. Due to oncoming traffic, I was forced to drive another quarter mile before turning around. When I finally got back to the spot where I had last seen the wounded bird, I did not find it. However, a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) was perched on the top strand of a nearby barbed-wire fence, pecking at a small bird it had impaled there. I pulled off the roadway and walked over to the skewered bird. To my amazement, it was a recently-killed fledgling sparrow, undoubtedly the same bird I had hit moments before. So fresh was this kill that blood was still dripping from the barbed-wire. The little bird had been impaled through the neck, from nape to throat, and hung facing the road. I returned to the truck, which was parked approximately four m from the fence, and watched the carcass. The shrike soon returned and began to peck savagely at the sparrow's neck. I watched this activity for 30 or 40 seconds, then walked back over to the fence and removed the little sparrow under the watchful gaze of the shrike, which was perched about 13 m away.

I froze the sparrow, and later had it identified by Dr. Jack D. Tyler of Cameron University. It was an immature Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), a fairly common resident of Oklahoma's grasslands in summer.

Bent (1950, *Life histories of North American birds*, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 197, p. 136) states that for the Loggerhead: "Sparrows and warblers appear to make up the bulk of small-bird prey" but does not mention an instance of predation on the Grasshopper Sparrow. Leppla and Gordon (1978, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.*, 11:33) however, found a Grasshopper Sparrow impaled through the forehead on a barbed-wire fence in Noble County, Oklahoma, on 29 April 1978. — M. Earl Stewart, HC63, Box 5080, Hodgen, Oklahoma 74939, 15 August 1987.

FROM THE EDITOR. — Special thanks are extended to John G. Newell, who paid for the color photos of the Royal Tern that appeared in the December 1989 Bulletin.—Jack D. Tyler.

THE BULLETIN, the official organ of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December, at Norman, Oklahoma. Subscription is by membership in the OOS: \$5 student, \$7.50 regular, \$10 family, \$15 or more sustaining, per year. Life membership \$125. Treasurer, Dr. Jeffrey A. Cox, P.O. Box 27516, Tulsa, OK 74149. Editor, Jack D. Tyler, Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505. Associate editors, John S. Shackford, 6008A NW Expressway, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73132, and Melinda Droege, Rt. 1, Box 516AA, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74006. Questions regarding subscription, replacement copies, back issues or payment of dues should be directed to: Darrel W. Pogue, OOS Membership/Circulation Chairman, P.O. Box 65, Ada, Oklahoma 74821-0065. ISSN 0474-0750.