

THE IPSWICH SPARROW ON THE NORTHEASTERN SEABOARD — PART I

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The Ipswich Sparrow (*Passerculus princeps*), sometimes considered a subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow, has interested this writer for many years while studying it on the barrier beaches of Long Island. It breeds only on Sable Island off the coast of Nova Scotia and winters from New England to Georgia along the coast. The width of this winter range is sometimes only several hundred yards, but its length is many hundreds of miles. Here is a species unique for the Northeast both in restriction of nesting grounds and narrowness of winter range.

HISTORY

Perhaps few birds have had such an interesting history as this species. On December 4, 1868 C. J. Maynard collected the first specimen on the dunes at Ipswich, Massachusetts (1869). Previous to this it is believed Alexander Wilson mistook this species for the male of the Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*.) The residents of Sable Island for many years knew it as the island's "gray bird", and a Dr. Cilpin, in 1858, briefly mentioned a sparrow resident there.

The specimen collected at Ipswich was at first misidentified as Baird's Sparrow (*Ammodramus bairdii*) of the far west, but soon, having been recognized as a new species, it received much attention and many field notes were written concerning it in *The Auk*. Its complete winter range was unknown for many years, but records show birds collected intermittently south to Glynn County, Ga. by 1890. On April 14, 1903 Arthur H. Helme of Miller Place, Long Island, shot a female along the east shore of Cumberland Island, southern Georgia, believed to be the southernmost extremity of its range. Alexander Sprunt, Jr. (1950) calls my attention to the fact that Cumberland Island is almost within sight of Florida.

Its breeding ground was suspected by Robert Ridgway in 1884 after eggs, uniformly larger than those of the Savannah Sparrow, were found in the National Museum, Washington, D. C., and labeled Sable Island, July 1862. Soon afterward, C. Hart Merriam sent for and received a summer specimen of the Island's gray bird from Rev. W. A. DesBrisay, resident missionary of Sable Island, which proved to be the Ipswich Sparrow. In 1894 Jonathan Dwight, Jr. visited Sable Island in the spring and solved many mysteries regarding its summer home. Meanwhile in the latter part of the nineteenth century William Dutcher became much interested in the Ipswich Sparrow and had a number collected on Long Island. Shortly afterward, Dwight's and Dutcher's copious field notes, principally from Long Island, relegated the Ipswich Sparrow to the commonplace, and *The Auk's* attention was directed southward with only occasional records from the northeast.

On December 30 and 31, 1927, on an eight and a half mile stretch, Frederick C. Lincoln and Alexander Wetmore found thirty Ipswich Sparrows at Ocean City, Maryland, and Thomas C. Burleigh in 1935 found twenty near Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. A report came in also of birds seen in early January, 1933 on the sand dunes of Portsmouth, Ocracoke, and Hatteras Island, N. C.

For the past two decades Ipswich Sparrow records have been reported principally in local publications, with only occasional notes occurring in the larger ornithological journals.

FALL AND WINTER

Long Island: In fall and winter on Long Island they are seldom out of sight of the sand dunes. They usually shun barren tracts for diversified areas of small ponds, tidal wreckage, and the more luxuriant beach vegetation; however, after heavy snow storms Roy Latham of Orient, Long Island, found them perched in high tide bushes (*Iva*) feeding on the seeds. If the birds are pursued continuously they may be forced out of their favorite habitats. On one occasion in late fall I "squeaked" one into salt marsh grass (*Spartina*) where it joined Seaside and Sharp-tailed Sparrows, but after brief investigation it flew back into a nearby sand tract. Another time I closely pursued a bird by running after it until it flew into the borders of a salt marsh. Here it perched a minute and then in a wide arc flew past me and back into the dunes. Out of their dune habitat and in the brownish marsh grasses they look strangely pallid. Some years, such as 1949 (see Aud. Christmas Count), they may be well distributed from Cape Cod to Cape May; but in other years, particularly after early heavy snowstorms, there is a tendency for the birds to retreat to more southern portions of their wintering grounds. During normal winters favorite habitat may attract four or five birds, and one year there were seven remaining regularly through the cold weather at Gilgo on the Jones Beach strip.

L. I. — Migration: November is the flight month, but often December and January prove very productive. For example, on January 2, 1954, six Ipswich Sparrows were seen perched on a piece of machinery near the construction of a breakwater at Short Beach, L. I. In autumn, Cruickshank (1942) gives his maximum as 27 individuals along the Jones Beach strip in a single day of intensive birding; and this writer with John Mayer of South Ozone Park saw 10 in a half-mile stretch at Gilgo, November 11, 1950. As to arrival in fall, apparently Roy Latham's Orient date of September 12, 1922 is by far the earliest. As a rule October birds are not plentiful on Long Island, and Roger T. Peterson (1949) informs me that on a memorable Audubon field trip, October 17, 1948, he was fortunate in finding one bird on the Moriches dunes and showed it to George Sutton, after an unsuccessful hunt at Jones Beach.

Migration proceeds three ways in the New York City region: along the Connecticut coast line and on the North and South shores of Long Island. Of the three, in winter they prefer the South Shore's more extensive dune areas, but, as stated may desert these for a more southerly distribution if early, heavy snowstorms cover their food supply.

Nova Scotia — South Carolina: W. Earl Godfrey of the National Museum of Canada, Ottawa, collected an Ipswich Sparrow in Nova Scotia on February 2, 1929. This was in an area where salt water is kept out of the hay meadows by a system of dikes. Here on top of a snow-swept dike the bird was feeding on weed seeds. Sand dune country in a Canadian winter would usually be completely buried under snow, provoking in such casual individuals a wide range search for food.

High tides and floodel conditions on the sandy stretches also sometimes cause a dispersal, such as near Stone Harbor, N. J., in 1940, when Julian Potter of Collingswood (1949) found 14 Ipswich Sparrows scattered for three-quarters of a mile on both sides of the Sea-gull Highway where they resorted the grassy and weedy edges. When approached they flew short distances and again alighted on the border of the road in company with Savannah and Sharp-tailed Sparrows.

It is also found in winter and on migration in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Douglas L. Kraus (1952) of Rhode Island State College has listed consecutive records showing the bird's presence there regularly. Alfred O. Gross (1952) lists three wintering Ipswich Sparrows, one Jan. 10 at Portland, one on the 1951 Christmas Bird Count (location unnamed) and one on Feb. 23 at Popham Beach. This last bird was feeding voraciously in the wet sea-weed at high water mark on a sandy beach. In this case snowstorms had placed Portland in a state of emergency and the sand dunes were completely buried, according to Wendell Taber of Cambridge, Mass., who also stated that, according to Mrs. Genevieve D. Webb, the Ipswich Sparrow is a fairly common fall and winter bird at Ocean Park, Maine. Another bird was seen at Higgins Beach, Scarboro, Maine, on Jan. 12, 1952. W. Earl Godfrey, aside from the collected February bird mentioned previously, collected one in the fall in Nova Scotia, and Robie W. Tufts (1950), former Dominion Wildlife officer, Wolfville, informs me of three others seen by Mr. Godfrey in November 1937. Interestingly, although a fair number of spring records are listed in New Brunswick, W. A. Squires (1950) of the New Brunswick Museum wrote that it apparently crosses the Gulf of Maine without reaching that province in the fall.

On the 1949 Audubon Christmas Count, from Cape Cod to Cape May, it was well distributed, but during some winters and when there are heavy, early snowstorms, there appears to be a tendency for the birds to retreat southward and casual search may prove quite unproductive. This was also noticed by Jonathan Dwight, Jr., as he searched the winter dunes on the south shore of Long Island sixty or seventy years ago.

Apparently there is a fairly good migration flight down the Rhode Island coast with birds being found even on outlying Block Island. Kraus (op. cit.) of Kingston, R. I., lists 29 records of his own (most of these since 1940) and six earlier ones by the late Harry Hathaway of Quonochontaug, R. I. Twelve of these records came from Jerusalem and the next greatest number from Brigg's Marsh. His earliest date is at Jerusalem on Sept. 29, 1946 and there are good representative winter records. If Kraus's 29 records twenty are of single birds, seven of two, one of three, and a maximum of five. Of five records on Block Island, two are listed in fall and winter and three in the spring. Regarding its status in Rhode Island Kraus (op. cit.) writes, "As you know the Ipswich Sparrow is a bird which must be sought hard and my own records are scanty more because of my negligence than a real scarcity. I do know that the hurricanes of 1938 and 1944 as well as the more severe winter storms have greatly affected the habitat of the Ipswich and certainly reduced the wintering population. The influence of filling, dredging, leveling and building along the R. I. shore is also having a significant adverse effect."

North Carolina has a far greater winter population of Ipswich Sparrows than South Carolina where Arthur T. Wayne, prior to 1902, searched unsuccessfully for thirteen years from Charleston to Bull's Bay. On January 20, 1902 a male and two females were taken at Keys Inlet by D. G. Taylor, a collector for Wayne. Later Wayne, with Alexander Sprunt, Jr., became well acquainted with the bird along the South Carolina coast. They traveled many miles a day searching for it in the sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*) the seeds of which Sprunt regards as this bird's mainstay in South Carolina. Sprunt related that Wayne became intimate enough with the Ipswich Sparrow to tell male and female apart in the field and proved it by collecting. Wayne reportedly could do this with other birds of like sexual color.

SPRING

Long Island: On Long Island some January appearances of this sparrow probably indicate a shifting of the winter population rather than a northward migration. For example, sometimes ten or twelve may appear in late January and normal counts of two or three continue again in the same area before the spring migration is noticed. Roy Latham at Orient, writes (1949) that he has fewer eastern Long Island records during February than for other months. He reports northern movements in March on days when there are increases in Song Sparrows. Although regarded as uncommon on Long Island by some observers, two or three Ipswich Sparrows may sometimes appear with a northern movement of Song and Tree Sparrows along the grassy strips bordering the ocean parkway at Gilgo, L. I. On April 1, 1950, I counted six in about a two mile stretch. Similarly on March 29, 1940, ten were identified in the same area. Along these border strips they, with the other sparrows, are kept in constant alarm by passing cars. Unlike many of the others, the Ipswich Sparrow will often sulk and run a few feet into deeper cover to avoid flying. Apparently this habit offers some protection from injury which might be sustained by flying across the road. I have never found one killed by a car as is quite often the case with the associated Song and Savannah Sparrows.

In a ten year search for late arrivals on Jones Beach, my records indicate a scarcity after the first ten days in April. Cruickshank (1942) listed the latest report from Long Island as Long Beach, April 25, 1926.

As winter passes into spring, snow, rain and freshening March winds which blow the sand reduce the food supply on the dunes. This results in a wider dispersal into bordering vegetation. Birds in March, therefore, are rather regularly reported from the north side of Jamaica Bay, L. I., and Latham says they may occur at Orient in grassy fields near the beach. There are also one or two records south of Long Island where birds deserted the dunes for short distances at this season.

South Carolina — New Brunswick: George B. Rabb (1949) of the Charleston Museum, South Carolina, states that the Ipswich Sparrow in this southern part of its range does not become common enough in spring migration to indicate a marked movement of more southerly individuals. Alexander Sprunt, Jr. (op. cit.) gives April 8 as South Carolina's latest spring date. This April 8th bird with Helme's female collected April 14th on Cumberland Island, Ga., indicates that stragglers remain almost as late in the southern extremity of their range as they do in New Jersey and on Long

Island. Charles K. Nichols writes (1949) that the largest numbers in New Jersey are reported in March and the flight terminates by the second week in April. Julian Potter (op. cit.), in a ten year study in New Jersey, found a fair number of individuals during February at Stone Harbour, Brigantine, Beach Haven and Barnegat.

Kraus (op. cit.) states that it is less common in the spring in Rhode Island and lists three spring records from Block Island, the latest date April 10, 1920 by a resident, Miss Elizabeth Dickens. In Massachusetts, Forbush (1929), says it is uncommon in the spring, and in New Hampshire and Maine is a rare local migrant. In Maine, Palmer (1949) lists March 20, 1875 as the earliest spring record and April 8, 1896 as the latest.

Squires (op. cit.) wrote that it was a rare transient in spring migration in New Brunswick. His records run from March 26 to May 7, the latter date being the latest known to me away from Sable Island. Records came from Grand Manan, Point Lepreaux, Saint Stephen, Saint Andrews and Kent Island, the latter producing the May 7 date. A maximum of three birds was seen at St. Stephen on April 23. These were in a marsh just above salt water.

Food

Beal examined thirty-seven Ipswich Sparrows' stomachs, sent in by Dwight (1895), and found 7.3% animal matter, 57.8% of vegetable matter and 34.9% of gravel or sand. In twenty-four of these winter specimens from Long Island and New Jersey there was no animal food or only a trace. The vegetable matter consisted largely of seeds and hulls of unrecognizable grasses, some other unknown seeds, as well as *Eragrostis*, *Elymus*, *Polygonum* and *Chenopodium*. Animal food consisted of beetles — among them scarabaeids and weevils — caterpillars and their cocoons, hymenoptera (including some ants), diptera, spider's cocoons and some snails. William Dutcher (1886) remarked that birds received April 1, 1885 had stomachs filled with small black insects and claims this to be the first instance of anything but vegetable food found in their stomachs. Forbush (op. cit.) wrote that Charles W. Townsend found the Ipswich Sparrow along the seaweed drifts thrown up on the Massachusetts beaches and saw birds actually jumping into the air feeding chiefly upon small flies and beetles.

No doubt this sparrow would fare badly in winter without beach-grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) whose elevated stems stand up fairly well in ordinary fluffy snowstorms. On one occasion I watched five Ipswich Sparrows actively feeding on this grass with an inch of snow on the ground. These jumped or reached up to pick at the seed heads as they flitted from clump to clump. Once, when a snowstorm had changed to rain, and freezing weather had encased every weed stalk and blade of grass in a heavy coat of crystal, I saw a sparrow slipping about as it leaped upward for the top-heavy seed panicles of the beach grass, an occasional one of which had escaped glazing on the underside. This meager ration was the only food in evidence.

George M. Sutton collected a grass favored by the Moriches bird in 1948. J. R. Swallen of the United States National Museum identified this as sand grass (*Triplasis purpurea*). Along the grassy strips in winter at Jones Beach I found birds manipulating the seed stalks of crab grass (*Digitaria*), picking

off the seeds as they passed through their mandibles. They have also been observed feeding on beard grass (*Andropogon*), *Agrostis* and rarely salt grass (*Spartina patens*) as well as beach golden-rod. In the south, Sprunt (op. cit.) remarks that it feeds largely on sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*).

As to artificial feeding, there is an old New England report of the Ipswich Sparrow picking up grain scattered about on the beach. At Gilgo, five years ago, I watched one feeding on cracked grain which I had spread out for that purpose.

(To be continued.)

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CRITICALLY NEEDED BIRD SPECIMENS FROM NEW YORK

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Most serious amateur bird students are aware that certain factual questions about birds can be answered satisfactorily only by the collecting of specimens. In many cases the specimens which already exist in our museums are more than ample to serve our needs, especially in a relatively well-studied state like New York. The two outstanding collections of New York birds are those at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and Cornell University in Ithaca. Other museums in the state, such as those at Albany, Buffalo and Rochester, have smaller but nevertheless valuable collections. In spite of the existence of this fine New York material, some questions about distribution within the state remain, and some of these questions can be solved only by collecting specimens. In most cases these questions pertain to the subspecific status of a relatively few species, in certain special areas of the state. For example, we do not know for certain the relative distribution of two subspecies of Henslow's Sparrow in New York, primarily because of a lack of specimens from that part of the state lying south and east of Syracuse. Such questions become important when, for instance, the species' range is being described in the new edition of the A.O.U. Check-list. In such cases only the specialist will know just which birds, from which areas of the state, are needed to complete our knowledge of distribution.

There are a few species, mostly rather uncommon, which *should be collected*, at least in certain parts of the state (sometimes *anywhere* in the state) whenever the opportunity presents itself. Many readers will want this statement justified, and I hope to show that, for about a dozen species, the knowledge of bird distribution gained will amply justify the collecting of the few birds involved. Most of the species I shall discuss are quite rare in New York, and (here is the crucial point) may enter our borders from several different directions. In each of these cases there are subspecific distinctions involved which will allow us to say, after the specimen has been identified by a qualified taxonomist, from which segment of the species' geographic range this bird has come. As an example, let us take Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*). There are now several good sight records of this species in various parts of New York, but no specimen has ever been collected within our borders. It would be of much interest to students of