

FIRST RECORD OF CASSIN'S SPARROW (*Aimophila cassinii*) FOR NEW YORK STATE

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On Saturday 7 Oct, Gail Benson and I were preparing to leave Zachs Bay. After a moderately successful morning of birding at Jones Beach West End (Black-billed Cuckoo and Yellow-breasted Chat as highlights), Zachs had proven much more productive: a huge shorebird flock containing an American Golden-Plover, two Marbled Godwits and a few Western Sandpipers, all chased off by two hunting Peregrine Falcons, nice views of an adult "Black" Brant found by Nick Laviola, three Caspian Terns, and an Orange-crowned Warbler all made it difficult to leave, but it was already well past lunch time. As we approached our car at the western end of Parking Field 6, two Savannah Sparrows hopped up on a snow fence that ran the length of a 20-foot wide divider between Field 6 and a small adjacent parking lot to the west. This sandy strip, containing some sparse grass, goldenrod and other small plants, looked like it might still be sheltering some birds, so I suggested we put lunch off for another minute to check it out.

Halfway down the strip a sparrow jumped up on the fence about 20 feet away and slightly closer than three Savannahs similarly perched. With a good side view of two thirds of the bird (the rear concealed by a protruding fence post), I noted the sparrow's finely streaked crown, noticeable white eye-ring, bland face pattern and larger-than-Savannah size and figured we were viewing a Vesper Sparrow, which is what I called out to Gail, who was walking the other side of the strip. I then moved out to get a view of the front of the bird, and, noticing it was totally devoid of streaks on its grayish breast, retracted Vesper and muttered something like "What the heck is this?" At this point I was also struck by the notable white edgings to the tertials, but then the sparrow proceeded to drop down to the ground on my side of the fence and began running through the grass clumps. I could follow it for a while, though the views were not at all illuminating, and it finally disappeared into thick cover, from which it either could not be flushed or escaped undetected.

Returning to the car and while looking at the National Geographic field guide, I called Tony Lauro to say I'd just seen a bird fairly well that I could not identify. The Geo guide indicated that the only real possibility was an *Aimophila* sparrow. So, after a very late lunch, Gail, Tony, John and Gerta Fritz and I gathered at Field 6 and walked the area thoroughly, but to no avail. After arriving

home, I looked at as many photos and references as I could find, called Guy Tudor for his input, and then called Tony to let him know that I did think the bird was an *Aimophila* sparrow, and probably a Cassin's. We then alerted other birders to the possibility.

Still quite uncertain, Gail and I went back out to Jones Beach West End again Sunday morning. Calls coming in and birders arriving from Zachs Bay all indicated that, unfortunately, the sparrow had probably departed, as many had walked the divider strip with no luck.

As a believer in letting a bird settle into its routine, if it has one, before looking for it, we held off visiting Zachs Bay until midday – this doesn't always work, but sometimes.... About 20 feet down the fence line, the sparrow popped up on a plant below me on the other side of the fence. Recognizing the head pattern as that of the same bird, I immediately concentrated on the fully visible tail; the brown and blackish ladder effect on the central tail feathers was obvious – Cassin's Sparrow (*A. cassinii*)!! I backed away slowly but the bird flushed into the heavy brush anyway.

Some quick calls got a number of birders to Zachs in a hurry – Tony Lauro arrived with Andy Guthrie and Angus Wilson, John and Gerta Fritz, Doug Futuyma, Nick Laviola, Peter Murphy and others all gathering shortly thereafter. In a semi-organized manner we approached the spot where the sparrow had disappeared, but it turned out that it took quite a bit of patience before we were able to view this elusive bird. Finally it flushed into a dead pine at the south end of the strip, where the dusky streaks along the rear flanks were first seen. Some brief views as it fed under a stunted pine were followed by a merry chase back north along the vegetated strip, the paler grayness of the sparrow evident each time it flushed, until it finally perched for a few minutes about four feet high in a bare tree. Here photos and video of varying quality were taken, and most confirming field marks could be seen.

A sparrow with classy field marks a Cassin's is not! However, when enjoying a first New York State record (pending acceptance by NYSARC), even the most subtle of characters are very intriguing. Key for identification purposes were: a reasonably sized grayish bill, darker on the ridge of the upper mandible; a white eye-ring on a fairly bland gray face, with a darker brown line noticeable through the eye, a brownish semicircular border to the ear coverts, and a rather faint darker malar stripe; a whitish throat blending into unmarked pale grayish underparts that exhibited a few smudgy dark streaks along the lower flanks; a flattish crown finely streaked with dark lines; a back pattern looking scalloped, with each dark brownish feather pale edged in gray; and a fairly long, rounded tail, the brown central tail feathers with darker blackish barring throughout seen very well once. The light grayish tail tips, most evident in fresh plumage, were not detected, though the bird did not present its tail optimally for us to determine whether this feature was present.

The main marks for eliminating this overall fairly grayish sparrow from other *Aimophila* species were the combination of laddered central tail feathers, dusky streaks along the lower flanks, lack of buffy tones to the underparts, and lack of rusty on the crown.

Cassin's Sparrows breed in arid grasslands generally from northeastern Mexico west to southeastern Arizona and north through eastern New Mexico, central Texas, and western Oklahoma to eastern Colorado and western Kansas, barely reaching into southeastern Wyoming and southwestern Nebraska. The normal wintering range extends from southeastern Arizona through southern Texas down to central Mexico. Previous accidentals in the northeast have occurred at Island Beach in New Jersey on 22 Sep 1961, at Mount Desert Rock off Maine from 16-25 Sep 1986, and even farther north on Seal Island, Nova Scotia from 18-20 May 1974.

The Cassin's continued its skulking activities along the divider strip through Monday and Tuesday, with most birders eventually getting satisfying views. It was last seen running through the grasses early on Wednesday the 11th by Paul Lehman, after which time it entirely eluded further observation. Nonetheless, this was a much better outcome than if it had disappeared Saturday night – I hate lifelong mysteries!

Editor's Note: Unfortunately, the quality of the photographs will not lend themselves to publication here. However readers are urged to see them on the following web site:

www.oceanwanderers.com/nycasspa.html

