

AN INLAND RECORD OF “IPSWICH” SAVANNAH SPARROW FROM THE LOWER HUDSON VALLEY OF NEW YORK STATE

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On December 29th, 2016, I thought that I had finished birding for the year when I posted the following on social media: “Although it is not quite the end of the year, I do not foresee photographing any new birds in the next two days (although I would love to be wrong and happen upon a new/favorite bird and post an addendum).” On the last day of 2016, I took a break from preparing for company to celebrate the New Year and went to the Black Dirt region in Orange County, NY, to see if I could continue to see the Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings that had been present there, mixed in with a large flock of Horned Larks.

Using my car as a mobile blind, I waited for the lark flock to move in closer. I started to sift through the flock and saw the Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings. The flock would come in and land for a few seconds and then take off again—sometimes because a Northern Harrier or Red-tailed Hawk would fly in close by. My car was parked on a private, narrow farm road. There were irrigation ditches or culverts on either side of the road. I watched the mixed flock take off and then decided to wait for the flock to come in closer again. While I was waiting, I noticed a very dark Savannah Sparrow pop up from the irrigation ditch, and then another, much lighter and larger Savannah appear next. I was able to photograph the paler Savannah as it posed nicely for only a minute. I couldn’t believe the striking differences between the two Savannah Sparrows: the paler bird didn’t have the distinct yellow lore that the other Savannah had, and the paler bird also seemed larger. The paler Savannah Sparrow posed nicely on a rock, and then went back into the culvert, and I did not see it again. I went home and my family celebrated New Year’s, then traveled to visit family.

On January 4th, 2017, I was reviewing my photos (see p. 126) and wondering if my pale sparrow could have been an “Ipswich” Sparrow, the larger, much paler subspecies of Savannah Sparrow that nests on Sable Island, Nova Scotia and winters along the outer coast of the eastern United States. I compared my photos to photos posted by those who had seen them in coastal areas. I felt like I had an Ipswich, but looked up eBird reports and noted with concern there were none seen in this area, or this far from the ocean coast. I also felt embarrassed to ask for others’ opinions. At the same time, I was determined to get a proper identification. I knew that I could seek help from several birders who have far more experience than I do, and that I would have to just get past being too embarrassed to ask.

I emailed my photographs to Ken McDermott (a long time birder with a lot of experience in Orange County) and Rich Guthrie (my eBird reviewer, who has been very helpful in the past). Both Ken and Rich asked for permission to forward my email to others to review also. Among those others was a mutual friend, John Haas, a very thorough and experienced birder whose comments I have always appreciated. John replied: “This bird appears to be an Ipswich Sparrow. The lack of yellow in the lores, the overall pale colorization distinct from that of a regular Savannah and the bill size, the blurry streaks on the breast and sides, and the large size and bulky appearance made me think this might be a legitimate Ipswich. I am certainly not an expert on this bird, but have had a lot of experience with them, and think it is an Ipswich. The thing is, they almost never occur away from the coast and this is quite a find if it is one. Please remember, I am not an expert, and someone who is might see something I am missing.”

John’s response increased my confidence, and I was very happy when Ken and Rich replied that my bird had been confirmed as an “Ipswich” Savannah Sparrow by several very experienced birders, including Andy Guthrie, Shaibal Mitra, Michael Bochnik, and probably others.

I was asked to write an article for *The Kingbird* because Ipswich Sparrows are almost never seen that far away from the coast. A basic eBird search for records away from the coast showed only three examples: Croton, NY (a park situated on a peninsula on the east shore of the Hudson River), Massachusetts, and Ontario. Since the Ipswich is considered to be an inland rarity, I questioned how to define “inland.” “Inland” is defined as: “situated in the interior of a country rather than on a coast (coast as defined as part of the land near the sea). I asked Shaibal Mitra (as *Kingbird* editor and someone who has much more experience with birding terminology than I do) how “inland” is defined in terms of birding, and it seems that the definition of “inland” can vary, depending on the context. The Great Black-backed Gull, for example, is highly coastal but nevertheless occurs regularly on large lakes and rivers, far away from the ocean coast. But in the case of the Ipswich Sparrow, they are completely unexpected even a few hundred yards from the coastal sand dunes. I am so glad that I did not let my embarrassment about seeking assistance in getting a bird identification prevent me from properly identifying this Ipswich Sparrow, and learning more about this species.

I am also glad that my birding for the 2016 year did not end on December 29th, as I thought it may. I am glad that I took a break from the New Year’s holiday preparation and got out to go birding. Ipswich Sparrow is a rare inland sighting—and even if I have doubts regarding a rare species, I need to reach out for help and realize that sometimes it takes a village of birders to properly identify a rare bird. And that sometimes the process of identifying and confirming a bird species is as interesting as locating the bird. Thank you to all those that helped me with this process (many of whom I have never met)—hope to meet you in the field someday.



“Ipswich” Savannah Sparrow, *Orange*, 29 Dec 2016, © Linda Scrima. See article pp. 103-104.