



Baird's Sparrow

Migration, Vagrancy, and Identification

by Jon L. Dunn

Few species are more poorly known as a migrant than is the Baird's Sparrow *Ammodramus bairdii*. Most birders will have seen Baird's Sparrows on their breeding grounds in the northern Great Plains, some may have seen them on the winter grounds, where usually considerable effort is required to get a good view, but only a small number, and even fewer reliably, have seen an actual migrant of this species.

Range

The Baird's Sparrow breeds in the northern Great Plains from southeast Alberta, southern Saskatchewan and southwest Manitoba, south to central and eastern Montana, northern South Dakota and southeast North Dakota (AOU 1998). It occurs rarely in west-central and north-western Minnesota in spring, and formerly bred there (Janssen 1987). As with other grassland species, its numbers declined over much of the 20th century. Its status and classification by various state and provincial agencies are detailed by Jones et al. (1998). Spring arrivals are from as early as the second week of May at the southern end of the breeding grounds, to as late, apparently, as mid-June at the northern end of the breeding range (Jones et al. 1998). It winters from southeast Arizona, southwest New Mexico, and the high grasslands of the Trans-Pecos and western Texas. Oberholser (1974) cites several old specimen records from elsewhere in Texas. In Mexico, it also winters in northeastern Sonora, north Durango, Chihuahua and west Coahuila (AOU 1998, Howell and Webb 1995).

In migration, Baird's Sparrow is almost unknown, and many of the sight records of migrants are probably erroneous. Known records (specimens and photos) are few and far between. Consider that in Colorado, which is on a direct line between the breeding grounds and the winter range, there were only six records listed by Andrew and Righter (1992). Thompson and Ely (1992) list it as "probably a rare migrant" in Kansas, with over half of the known records coming from tower kills. Sutton (1967) listed only a handful of records for Oklahoma with only two specimens. Considering the dearth of records at migration points, one begins to think one is dealing with a rail, as secretive perhaps as a Yellow Rail, rather than a passerine, and in many respects its behaviour is quite suggestive of one of the more elusive rails.

From the small number of "known" records of migrants in the above mentioned states, it appears that migration in the fall is from about the last third of August to mid- October, and in spring from the last week of April through mid-May.

Vagrancy

Proven records of vagrants of this species are few indeed. There are records of single singing males from July 2-9th, 1996 at Rainy River, Ontario (Dobos 1998) and from June 16-26th, 1982 in Manitowac County in eastern Wisconsin (Robbins 1991, includes photo). Robbins (1991) lists six other "probable" sight records in Wisconsin between 1949 and 1980, some of which involve singing birds. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess each of those records.

The two well-documented records above could be considered peripheral males looking for a breeding territory in locations not that far from the regular breeding range.

Farther afield, there is a published record of a spring migrant from northwestern Ohio, partially detailed in Peterjohn (2001); it was seen on South Bass Island on April 22, 1951 during the passage of a cold front that dropped large numbers of migrants (Trautman 1956). The details provided in Peterjohn (2001) are equivocal, and seem less than convincing. The other five definite records include two from the east coast: one collected on November 13, 1899 at Montauk, New York (Levine 1998) and the other collected at Ocean City on October 14, 1966 (in *Maryland Bird Life* 23:87). The remaining three come from the west coast and are all from coastal California. One was collected on the Farallones on September 28, 1969 (DeSante 1980) and another was photographed there on September 7, 1991 (*American Birds* 46:147). The other record was of a widely seen and photographed bird at Rosecrans Cemetery, Point Loma, San Diego from October 5-10th, 1981 (Unitt 1984). There have been numerous other claims of vagrants of this species from the Midwest, east coast, and the west coast, none of which have met with acceptance from various established records committees.

Identification

Kenn Kaufman (1990) gives detailed treatment to some sparrows in his *Advanced Birding Guide*, and encourages observers to learn shape, size, and behaviour of the different genera in the family. Indeed, the main point to grasp in learning to identify a Baird's Sparrow is knowing its behaviour, and behaviour being linked to genus, all one has to do is to understand to which genus Baird's Sparrow belongs. Baird's Sparrow, of course, is an *Ammodramus*, which to a birder equals bad news when trying to see any these species anywhere, other than territorial singing males on the breeding grounds. For birders who frequent Point Pelee in spring migration, think about the number of times you see a group standing in a circle, seemingly about to conduct a prayer meeting, but in fact peering downwards trying to see a skulking Henslow's Sparrow. Henslow's is also an *Ammodramus*. Lowery, in *Birds of Louisiana* (1974) describes well the winter behaviour of the Henslow's Sparrow and it is well worth quoting at length: "The Henslow's Sparrow is also like the Le Conte's in that is seldom seen except when suddenly flushed at one's feet. When it flies away it zigzags slightly just over the top of the grass. After traveling 20 yards or so, it abruptly pitches into the grass and disappears. A good technique that often yields a perched view of both this species and the Le Conte's is to run as rapidly as possible to the spot where the bird disappeared, flush it again and repeat this process over and over. Sooner or later the little bird apparently becomes curious as to the identify of its pursuer and alights briefly in a bush or on a tall weed stalk. If the binoculars are immediately brought to play, the observer obtains a good look at the bird." I've employed this technique successfully on a half dozen or more occasions, and had views of perched Henslow's Sparrows for a minute or more on several of these. It reminds me of that scene in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* from the late 1960s (and I'm dating myself!) where after being chased over hill and dale by the Pinkerton gang, Butch turns to Sundance and says "who are those guys?"

So, you are saying, I just have to keep flushing the little bird (other nouns come to mind but this is after all still a family journal), and eventually the little guy pops up. Sorry, Baird's doesn't do that, at least from my experience, and I would have to say that it is the worst of the *Ammodramus* to see, and that's saying something! On a few occasions on the wintering grounds I have seen several birds along the edges of the roads, still in grass, but visible while on the road, but this was only after several inches of snow had fallen! So, on reviewing records of Baird's

Sparrows, as soon as I read something to the effect that the bird hopped out onto the road or trail, or flushed up out of the grass and landed in a bush or on a fence wire, I think “No way, Jose!” or some such epitaph.

To see a Baird’s Sparrow, and this is a technique used by birders primarily on the wintering grounds, one ventures into its grassland winter home and walks slowly until a sparrow flushes out in front. If it drops down again into grass and you walk over and it’s not there, that’s a good sign you are onto an *Ammodramus*. Savannah Sparrows, in the genus *Passerculus*, which are also there, tend to “seep” as they jump and will often fly up into a bush where they are partly in the open, or even on a fence line, and they are quite gregarious so that five or six, or more, may appear together. Baird’s are loners and skulkers, as noted.



Photo 1. Baird’s Sparrow on the winter grounds in the high grasslands of southeast Arizona, doing what the species does best - skulking and blending in to the landscape. Note the prominent but short (in extent) necklace of streaks, the streaked crown with only a slightly evident median crown stripe, and the overall buff colour with an orange tint to the head. The two blackish spots isolated at the rear of the auriculars are just barely visible.

San Rafael Grasslands, San Rafael Valley, Santa Cruz County, Arizona, January 21, 1993.
Photo by Jon L. Dunn.

But this bird you have flushed could also be the slightly smaller Grasshopper Sparrow, also an *Ammodramus*. While it is fun to guess which species it might be, views of the ventral side don't come easily on a bird flushed out in front of you that is viewable for only a couple of seconds. So eventually, to be sure, you have to track it down. Here is where a group is useful. If you have a likely suspect, advance quickly to where it landed, surround the area broadly, and then work slowly in to the centre. Watch carefully for any sign of movement. The little guy has probably already run immediately from the spot where he landed and will then freeze. Once movement is spotted, try to maneuver to where it is being seen. At the very worst you can all hold hands if you are unsuccessful, then repeat the entire fun exercise. And be prepared for other things coming out at your feet, like large Jackrabbits - this can cause heart disturbance.



Photo 2. Baird's Sparrow - same individual as in Photo 1 - it was ultimately caught. The head colour and isolated blackish spots at the rear of the auriculars with no post-ocular line is apparent. Note also the rich chestnut feathering intermixed with whitish and buff edges on the upperparts. The bill is deeper-based than nearly all races of Savannah Sparrow.

Photo by Curtis A. Morantz.

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Photo 3. Baird's Sparrow - same individual as in Photos 1 and 2. Note the overall orangish-buff colour, including the nape, contrasting with the more chestnut upperparts. A paler median crown stripe is only barely evident.

Photo by Curtis A. Morantz.

Seriously, one also has to consider carefully one's impact on the environment and whether one is on private property (e.g. much of west Texas). Since Baird's Sparrows can winter on fairly disturbed grasslands, it could be argued that your intrusion isn't seriously effecting the landscape. But rest assured you will seldom, if ever, see this species just by walking along a road, except when viewing birds on breeding territory. Having said all this, I was utterly shocked one mid-April day when, with a group of birders, I heard and saw a Baird's twice in 15 minutes, sing perched on a weed stalk in the grasslands to the southwest of the Davis Mountains in western Texas. This area is on the species' wintering grounds and, since it was mid-April, it probably involved a wintering bird. True spring migrants are probably a little later. For instance, the two recent and solid records I know of for Big Bend National Park (one involving several birds) where the species doesn't winter, were from the first week of May. I have yet to hear of a known spring migrant singing.

Once you are lucky enough to actually see what appears to be a Baird's Sparrow, concentrate immediately on the head pattern. Assuming the bird isn't a Grasshopper Sparrow which, except for a juvenal plumaged bird, would be essentially unstreaked below, your main species to

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Photo 4. San Rafael Grasslands, San Rafael Valley, Santa Cruz County, Arizona after a winter snow. Such conditions can push Baird's Sparrows to roadside edges. The "unfriendly" sign is a result of unsuitable birder behaviour a couple of years ago while trying to study longspurs. As always, respect property rights and use commonsense!

Photo by Jon L. Dunn

eliminate will be Savannah Sparrow. Savannah Sparrows have a strong and solid post-ocular line and a well-outlined supercilium which is often partly yellowish, but not always; the yellow in the supercilium of Savannah Sparrows is individually as well as geographically variable. Baird's Sparrow on the other hand has no post-ocular line, but instead shows two dark spots in the rear of the auricular that are isolated in an overall blank face. Further, there is no strongly outlined lateral crown stripe, or often a well-defined median crown stripe, as in Savannah Sparrow. With no strong lateral crown stripe, the supercilium isn't well defined either, an effect enhanced by the lack of a post-ocular line. Particularly striking in fresh plumage is the overall orange-buff colouration to the head of a Baird's Sparrow. I like to think of the entire head as having been dipped in pumpkin juice, but that's a little bit of an exaggeration.

There are other characters, such as the rufous-chestnut present in the mantle and scapular feathers (paler edges and tips), but by the time you are noting how beautiful the species is dorsally, you have long since (hopefully!) noted the diagnostic head pattern. Baird's is indeed not as extensively streaked below as a Savannah Sparrow, but this is a relative character, and some Savannah Sparrows don't seem very streaked below, especially perhaps when you are hoping for a Baird's! Some have made much of the pale in the outer webs of the outer tail feathers visible in flight, and while this is apparent, it is apparent also in other *Ammodramus* and to a lesser degree in Savannah Sparrow; at best it is only a very minor character and one that can steer you down the wrong path. Observers with very sharp ears do occasionally hear a



Photo 5. Baird's Sparrow photographed on the same day as Photo 4 after a snowstorm, when several Baird's Sparrows were forced out to the roadside but were still doing their best to hide. Note the overall orange-buff head colour, and the head pattern with two blackish spots at the rear of the auriculars and no strong median crown stripe. The weak median crown stripe that is present is orange-buff like the remaining underlying head colour.

San Rafael Grasslands, San Rafael Valley, Santa Cruz County, Arizona, January 2001.
Photo by Jon L. Dunn.

soft note from a flushed Baird's, but they are generally silent. Savannah Sparrows on the other hand often "seep" when flushed.

Baird's Sparrows have a partial pre-alternate moult in late winter and early spring, and a complete moult in fall between August and November, which can occur on either the breeding or winter grounds, or partly on each (Pyle 1997). Migrants appear to be in fresh plumage, but worn summer birds can essentially lack colour on the head. The well photographed immature on Point Loma in 1981 retains some juvenile feathering but has acquired some of its first basic plumage. This delayed retention of juvenile feathers, including while on southward migration, is not unusual in sparrows, including *Ammodramus* (Pyle and Sibley 1992).



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Photo 6. Baird's Sparrow - this widely seen and photographed individual established only the second California record and remains the only record accepted by the California Bird Records Committee away from the Farallons, where two have been recorded in the fall. This immature bird retained much of its juvenal feathering on the upperparts (blackish feathers with white fringes) which creates a scaly appearance, much as in other grassland species e.g. Sprague's Pipit, McCown's Longspur, and Chestnut-collared Longspur. The diagnostic head colour and pattern is clearly evident in this photograph. Fall migrants can suspend moult prior to fall migration, and then complete it on the winter grounds.

Rosecrans Cemetery, Point Loma, San Diego, San Diego County, California, October 8, 1981. Photo by Larry Sansone.

Summary

We certainly need to learn much more about the migratory movements of Baird's Sparrows. I would urge observers, where practical, ethical, and legal, to carefully check grassland areas in spring between early May (perhaps the last few days of April) and mid-May, and in fall from the end of August to mid-October. These would probably be the best times to find a far afield vagrant, though to date all of the well documented records are from the fall period. Knowing the behaviour of this species is just as essential, if not more important, than knowing the field marks. Once you are lucky enough to have an apparent Baird's Sparrow on the ground, concentrate on the head pattern. And remember, if it flushes up into a bush or up on a wire, this should be a sign of alarm, that maybe you are on the wrong track. For further reading on this most interesting and elusive species, including information on identification and behaviour, I recommend the papers by Jones et al. (1998) and Zimmer (2000).

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