

Le Conte's Sparrow: Arizona's Second Record

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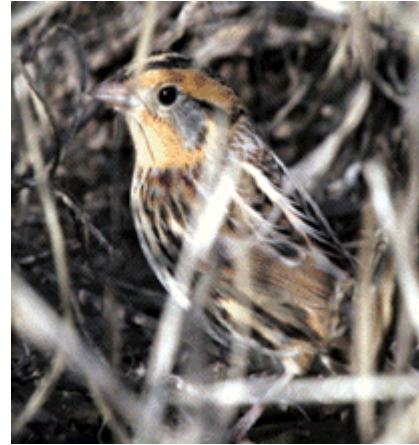
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This paper documents the second Arizona record of Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*), a single bird photographed in Marana, Pima County, Arizona, December 19, 2004, to February 10, 2005. It provides comments on context, distribution, and field identification of this *Ammodramus* sparrow.

On December 19, 2004, Peter Salomon and the author observed an *Ammodramus* sparrow along the Santa Cruz River in Marana. GPS coordinates of the initial sighting: UTM 12 S 0492449 3577444, or N 32 deg 20min 01.9 sec W 111 deg 04 min 48.9 sec. This observation occurred at about 1220 MST while the observers were participating in the Tucson Valley Christmas Bird Count. Salomon discovered the sparrow when it flushed directly in front of him. It traveled a very short distance (ca.15 feet) before dropping to ground level. The small size and relatively short tail immediately drew the observer's interest. The sparrow was briefly visible near the ground, but partially obscured.

Description and Identification

In addition to the small size and short tail—particularly when compared to the numerous Lincoln's Sparrows (*Melospiza lincolni*) present—several characteristics confirmed that this was an *Ammodramus*, more specifically either Le Conte's Sparrow or one of the sharp-tailed sparrows (Saltmarsh or Nelson's—*A. caudacutus* or *A. nelsonii*, respectively). Among the characteristics: a broad orange or ochre supercilium; lores and submustacial stripe of same color



Le Conte's Sparrow - Photo by Keith Kamper

as supercilium; dark eye-stripe that was thicker behind the eye; grayish ear coverts, and a white throat. Breast and flanks were ochre, with fine dark streaking. Other similar *Ammodramus* sparrows were eliminated as candidate species for the following reasons: Henslow's (*A. henslowii*) has a larger bill, flatter head, and reddish wings; *Grasshopper* (*A. savannarum*) has a larger bill, less contrasting head pattern, and unstreaked or lightly streaked flanks; Baird's (*A. bairdii*) has marked moustacial and malar stripes (Beadle and Rising 2002). The nape, median crown stripe, and back were not seen well upon the initial observation, precluding identification to species level. The sparrow was lost as it entered the surrounding Bermuda Grass. Local observers were notified, two of which (G. Bieber and R. Hoyer), were able to join the initial observers at the site. The assembled observers were able to flush what was likely the same sparrow, but views precluded positive identification.

On the morning of the 20th, seven observers (G. Bieber, C. Benesh, R. Hoyer, B. Massey, G. Rosenberg, D. Stejskal, M. Stevenson) were able to relocate, positively identify, and photograph Arizona's second Le Conte's Sparrow. A white median crown stripe (rather than gray median crown stripe), a streaked nape (rather than a solid gray nape) and white tertial edges were among the definitive characteristics observed and photographed—marks that eluded the initial observers. The sparrow was observed with regularity by many observers until February 10, 2005. Upon flushing, it would often perch in small willows, tangles, and palo verdes for extended periods.

Distribution and Status

The known winter range of Le Conte's Sparrow includes: "s. Illinois, central and s. Missouri, se. Kansas, w. central Oklahoma, and w.-central Texas south to the Gulf Coast and east to w. Tennessee and the panhandle area of w. Florida. Also reported to winter in the lower Pecos River valley of se. New Mexico" (Lowther 2005). Arizona's first record occurred in the northwest section of the state near the town of Topock on November 30,

1981 (Rosenberg 1991).

Literature cited

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Lowther, P. E.. 2005. *Le Conte's Sparrow (Ammodramus leconteii)*. The Birds of North America Online. (A. Poole, Ed.) Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca; Retrieved from The Birds of North American Online database: [http://bnabirds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Le Conte's Sparrow/](http://bnabirds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Le%20Conte's%20Sparrow/)

Rosenberg, K.V., Ohmart, R.D., Hunter, W.C., and Anderson, B.W . 1991. *Birds of the Lower Colorado River Valley*. University of Arizona Press. Tucson.

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