MORE THAN A NAME:

HENSLOW'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus henslowii*)

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Learning the name of a certain plant or animal is where the naturalist begins. Given the diversity of living organisms, this is often no mean feat. Indeed, there was a time when the natural sciences were primarily concerned with describing and naming. Since that time, endless numbers of amusing games, both formal and unwritten, that pertain to naming have been devised. A certain sense of accomplishment and pride comes to the observer when he correctly names this animal or that plant. For some, speaking the name is an end in itself.

The name can also be the starting point for investigations into what lies behind the nomenclature. A little research may lead to a line of undiscovered facts, the life of a great naturalist, or to one or more of the underlying themes of natural history. Which path is taken, and hence where one ends up in such burrowings, is to a large degree determined by the digger.

Henslow's Sparrow is a rare migrant with a sporadic nesting history in Massachusetts. Nowadays one is lucky to get a glimpse of one of the few birds that are recorded annually (Komar 1983). There was a time, however, when this diminutive sparrow nested in the state in fairly good numbers. William Brewster made the following journal entry for June 16, 1886: "The road to Wayland is generally wild and little settled. I saw and heard many birds both going and returning; but nothing of much interest except Henslow's Sparrows, of which I heard no less than six males on the way home" (Walton 1984, p.79).

But what of the name? As may be expected, this sparrow was named to honor an individual - John Stevens Henslow. If this gentleman's name doesn't ring a bell, a quick trip to the library will soon immerse you in a story involving some rather more familiar folk - John J. Audubon and Charles Darwin.

It turns out that Audubon collected the "type" specimen for this species near Cincinnati in 1820. Audubon described the event in the species account he wrote for the first American edition of *Birds of America* completed in 1844. "Perceiving it [the sparrow] to be different from any which I had seen, I immediately shot it, and the same day made an accurate drawing of it" (Audubon 1844). There's at least one story behind that drawing as well. In December of 1820, Audubon set out on one of his frequent river boat excursions along the Mississippi. During the trip some of his luggage and the portfolio containing this drawing were misplaced (some things never change). Fortunately for Audubon, and our story, the portfolio was later recovered. In his description, Audubon goes on to explain why he chose to honor Henslow: ". . . my object has been to manifest my gratitude for the many

kind attentions he has shewn me." J. S. Henslow (1797-1861) was an English botanist and geologist who taught at Cambridge. He was one of a group of Englishmen and Europeans who befriended the American woodsman during the period in which he was struggling to have his monumental work published and promoted. Audubon's earlier attempts to have his drawings and accounts produced in America had been spurned. The politics of publication led a Philadelphia group including Alexander Lawson and George Ord to send Audubon packing. They had their money on Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* and certainly didn't need the type of competition Audubon was obviously capable of offering. Audubon's European journal mentions his meetings with Henslow and several invitations to dinner. Henslow was also a pastor, and one account by Audubon tells of attending a service at which Henslow's sermon was titled "Hope." Certainly this was a time in Audubon's life when large amounts of hope would have been useful. In order to promote both himself and his work, Audubon frequently gave lectures on American birds at the meetings of various natural history societies in England. Among the lecturegoers at one such meeting of the Wernerian Society was a young Charles Darwin.

In the early 1830s Darwin was in the middle of a not-so-illustrious career as a student at Christ's College, Cambridge. His father, noting his son's enthusiasm for horseback riding, hunting, and beetle collecting, was convinced Charles Darwin would amount to nothing. Professor Henslow, on the other hand, carefully nurtured the boy's enthusiasm for things natural. He botanized with his young student, took him on many field trips, and prompted Darwin to study geology. At the end of his years at Christ's College, Darwin became known as "the man who walks with Henslow." During the summer immediately following his graduation from Cambridge, Darwin received an offer, expedited by Henslow, to take the position of naturalist aboard *H.M.S. Beagle*. Darwin's father looked at this possibility with a jaundiced eye. Two years at sea with no pay - it would damage his reputation and just put off getting on with life's real work. But the younger Darwin was incorrigible. His father held out one last challenge. "If you can find one man of common sense who advises you to go I will give my consent." Charles Darwin found this advocate in the person of Josiah Wedgwood, his future father-in-law. The rest is history.

Professor Henslow was also there thirty years after Darwin's epic voyage on the *Beagle* when the debate heated up over *On the Origin of Species. . . .* It was Huxley, Hooker, and Henslow on one side of the aisle (Darwin's side) and the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel ("Soapy Sam") Wilberforce on the other. But that's another story.

So it was that John Stevens Henslow played a significant role in the lives of two of the greatest nineteenth century naturalists. What we find behind the nomenclature may not only be interesting in its own right but may as well add meaning to our field excursions.

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Audubon's Henslow's Bunting
Photo by R. K. Walton