

A 1986 RECORD OF CASSIN'S SPARROW FROM MAINE

Mount Desert Rock, September 16-25, 1986

by David J. James

On several occasions between September 16 and 25, 1986, an unusual sparrow was observed on Mount Desert Rock, a three-acre, isolated island twenty-five miles to the south of Mount Desert Island in Maine (lat. 43° 58' N, long. 48° 06' W). Efforts to identify this sparrow in the field were unsuccessful, but a fine documenting series of diagnostic photographs obtained by Harriet Corbett (then Project Director of the Mount Desert Rock Marine Research Station) was later used to identify the bird as a Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*).

Description. The following description of this bird was compiled from field notes and photographs.

Jizz. The bird was intermediate in size between Lincoln's (*Melospiza lincolnii*) and White-throated (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) sparrows. The head seemed proportionally large, and a sloping forehead and large pink bill gave a Roman-nosed appearance. The legs were pink. Almost all the tail feathers were missing, lending the bird an unnatural "dumpy jizz."

Head. The crown and ear coverts were rufous, finely streaked with gray. The gray median crown stripe and supercilium were indistinct. The white eye ring was conspicuous.

Upperparts. These were overall rather pale and gray, blotched with rufous and dark brown; this was an effect of the rather complex scapulars and secondary coverts, which were tawny brown basally with a dark brown shaft streak and subterminal crescent, a rufous terminal spot, and bold gray fringe. The rump was rufous and slightly brown-barred.

Underparts. These were generally pale grayish white with profuse fine streaks on the breast and scattered streaks on the lower flanks.

Discussion. Comparison of the photographs with field guides and handbooks led to an initial, tentative identification. Of particular use was the photograph of an adult Cassin's Sparrow in Terrill (1983), which bears considerable resemblance to the Mount Desert photos. The most useful characteristics for identifying Cassin's Sparrow are the diagnostic cross barrings and white tips to the central and outer rectrices, respectively (Terrill 1983; Roberson 1981), but, unfortunately, this bird was tailless. The literature is otherwise scanty on details of *Aimophila* identification, so Corbett's photographs were compared with specimens of Cassin's, Botteri's (*A. botteri*), and Bachman's (*A. aestivalis*) sparrows at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University. The intricate pattern of the scapulars and lesser

and median coverts, described above, was found to be diagnostic of Cassin's Sparrow at all ages. The series of dark crescents and rufous spots creates a blotched effect quite distinct from the streaked upperparts of its congeners, and of these the rump of Cassin's Sparrow, alone, is lightly barred by crescents.

Cassin's Sparrow has been recorded well outside its usual range (the arid region of the Southwest) on several occasions. As well as being a casual visitor to southern California (Roberson 1981; McCaskie, personal communication), the species has been recorded three times in Ontario (Weir 1984) and once in New Jersey and Nova Scotia (A.O.U. *Check-list* 1957). This record seemingly constitutes the first published record of this species and of the genus *Aimophila* from Maine and New England.

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References

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DAVID J. JAMES was born and raised in Sydney, Australia, where his interest in birds began in the late 1970s. During a prolonged visit to North America from 1984 to 1987, he birded most corners of the ABA area. His special interest in seabirds and marine mammals brought him repeatedly to the New England coast, where he contributed to several marine research programs. While working at the Mount Desert Rock Marine Research Station, he recorded the Cassin's Sparrow and other avian rarities, including the Red-billed Tropicbird—only a week before the Cassin's! David recently completed his bachelor's degree in biological sciences in north Queensland, Australia, checking out tropical rain-forest wildlife in his spare time. His current address is 54 Bushlands Avenue, Gordon, New South Wales 2072, Australia.

