

SHARP-TAILED SPARROWS IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Norman P. Hill, M.D., Assonet

Two obscure sparrows occur in the marshes of Massachusetts, little known because of their secretiveness and because of the difficulties of access to their habitat. These are the Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammospiza caudacuta*) and the Seaside Sparrow (*Ammospiza maritima*). The Seaside Sparrow is rare and local in this state, but the Sharp-tailed Sparrow occurs in almost all the marshes of our coastline and occasionally in inland fresh-water marshes during migration.

The Sharp-tailed Sparrow breeds from Virginia northeast along the coast to Nova Scotia and then west along the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, with isolated populations at James Bay and in the prairie provinces of Canada. Within this elongated and mostly very narrow range, the species is separated into five geographical races, four of which occur in Massachusetts.

The field identification of this species is not difficult if time and care are taken to obtain an adequate study. The essential field mark is the ochre-buff facial marking nearly surrounding the gray cheek patch; the crown and nape appear grayish and the back brownish. There are variable breast streakings, depending upon the race involved. With its short and sharply pointed tail feathers it could be confused only with the Seaside Sparrow, which appears appreciably larger, darker and grayer.

The typical habitat of Sharp-tailed Sparrows in Massachusetts is in the wide green marshes behind the dunes of the barrier beaches. Marshes filled with *Spartina patens* in which the Sharp-tails nest, and with the taller, coarser *Spartina alterniflora* along the creeks, along with various other grasses and rushes on the drier edges where the uplands begin to rise, are preferred. The Plum Island Marshes, the Barnstable Great Marsh and the Nauset Marshes are typical examples; however, the Sharp-tails tend to be colonial, even within these marshes, being found in small groups of three to fifteen pairs with half a mile or more between the groups. At Barnstable, the sum of many such colonies is about a thousand pairs.

Sharp-tailed Sparrows are late spring migrants. A few stragglers may arrive about mid-May but the bulk arrive at the end of the month. Nesting begins at once, with incubation lasting ten or eleven days and with young fledging in another ten or eleven days. By early July the marshes swarm with immatures in their rich buffy-brown plumage, very different in appearance from the adults. The nests are well hidden within tufts of grass and are cup-shaped and rest on the ground, protected from above by the arched grass stems.

In September the birds gradually withdraw southward down the coast, though stragglers remain until December or January. These stragglers seldom if ever survive the entire winter season. The main wintering grounds are in the marshes of the South Atlantic states, the Carolinas, Georgia and northern Florida, with a few birds also on the west coast of Florida. On these marshes, all five of the races occur in great abundance.

As mentioned above, four of the five races of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow occur in Massachusetts. Attempts to identify these races in the field are entertaining, and in some ways satisfactory, but in many ways not very convincing. For those who wish to try, the following will be helpful:

- 1) The Eastern Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammospiza c. caudacuta*) is the race that breeds in Massachusetts and occurs exclusively in salt-water marshes. It is described above and may be considered the "mean of the species."

- 2) The Acadian Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*A. c. subvirgata*) is much paler and grayer, often appearing almost lavender on the back and with lemon-yellow facial markings and blurred breast streaking. This race breeds from Cape Elizabeth, Maine, northeastward through New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and west along the south shore of the St. Lawrence River to Kamouraska. Some colonies of this race occupy fresh water habitats when breeding. Birds of this race pass through Massachusetts very late in May and until mid-June and then again from mid-September through October. They occur mostly in the salt marshes of the coast, but a few individuals, presumably from the more western colonies along the St. Lawrence, are occasionally found in inland fresh-water marshes. The birds breeding in the marshes of southwestern Maine are intermediate in appearance between this race and the Eastern and are surprisingly similar to the James Bay race, so much so that field identification is impossible.

3) The James Bay Sharp-tailed Sparrow (A. c. altera) is gray on the back but not as pale as the Acadian and with richer orange facial markings. It breeds in the salt marshes at the southern end of James Bay and migrates south and southeast so that a few birds straggle through Massachusetts in the fall, where they have been collected both along the coast and in inland marshes. There are no spring records. Sight identification is impossible because of confusion with some Maine birds as well as with the next race.

4) The Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (A. c. nelsoni) is a slightly smaller bird with a relatively smaller bill; the breast is nearly devoid of streaking and the facial markings are very rich ochre. It breeds widely but sparsely through the prairie provinces of Canada and just across the border into North Dakota and Minnesota. As with the James Bay race, there are no spring records for Massachusetts; however, a few fall and early winter reports from both salt and fresh water marshes exist. In the field it is not separable from the James Bay race.

5) The Southern Sharp-tailed Sparrow (A. c. diversa) does not occur in Massachusetts as it breeds only as far north as central New Jersey. It is darker than the Eastern and has heavier breast streaking.

In conclusion, though the Sharp-tailed Sparrow is an easy bird to see each year, there is much that is still unknown about it. For instance, what confines the Sharp-tailed Sparrow to breeding in the Spartina patens and thus prevents their invasion into the niche of the Seaside in the wetter marsh areas or that of the Savannah in the drier grasses? Or why is the Sharp-tail colonial in Massachusetts whereas it is ubiquitous in apparently identical marshes further south? Or why, contrary to apparent geographical logic, does the Nelson's Sharp-tail occur more often in Massachusetts than does the James Bay race? The articles in "Life Histories of North American Birds" published by the U. S. National Museum in 1968 describe what is known in more detail than can this short communication and will better serve as a "take-off" point if you are interested in further study.

WITHOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

WE WILL HAVE NOTHING

KEEP AWARE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES !!
BE ALERTED TO ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION !!

SUBSCRIBE NOW

The



OUTDOOR message

A monthly publication by the Organized Sportsmen of Massachusetts. Dedicated to the conservation and wise recreational use of our natural resources and to the preservation and encouragement of traditional outdoor sporting activities.

Mail To: The OUTDOOR MESSAGE, P.O. Box "U", Burlington, Mass. 01803

_____ Start my subscription now. \$3.00 Enclosed for 12 issues.

_____ Mail me a free copy to look over.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

ZIP _____