

Fla. Field Nat. 25(2):64-66, 1997.

FIRST SUMMER RECORD OF THE HENSLOW'S SPARROW IN FLORIDA

BILL PRANTY AND MARK D. SCHEUERELL

*Florida Grasshopper Sparrow Project, Avon Park Air Force Range, 29 South Boulevard
Avon Park Air Force Range, Florida 33825*

The Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) is a declining species of native and human-modified grasslands of eastern North America (Pruitt 1996). In Florida, it is a regular migrant and winter resident in the Panhandle and northern two-thirds of the Peninsula, irregular or absent in the Peninsula south of Lake Okeechobee, and unreported in the Keys (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Because of its secretive behavior and restricted habitats, the sparrow is considered rare in the state; however, the species is common in at least one part of Apalachicola National Forest (ANF) in Liberty County, Florida (Doug McNair *in litt.*, Pruitt 1996).

Stevenson and Anderson (1994) list the two latest spring reports of *A. henslowii* in Florida as 21 April 1962 at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Wakulla County and 22 April 1965 at the WCTV tower north of Tallahassee in Leon County. In the spring of 1995 and 1996, Doug McNair (*in litt.*) observed Henslow's Sparrows in ANF regularly through mid-April, with the latest sighting on 21 April 1996. A few birds sang from late March through departure. In the fall, Henslow's Sparrows arrive regularly in mid-October (Doug McNair *in litt.*), with the earliest Florida report from the WCTV tower on 7 October 1965 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Here, we describe the first summer record of a Henslow's Sparrow in Florida. On the morning of 5 June 1996, Cammy Collins (pers. comm.) discovered a Henslow's Sparrow at the National Audubon Society's Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary in Okeechobee County, where birds are thought to winter regularly (Paul Gray pers. comm.). The bird was found in one of our Florida Grasshopper Sparrow (*A. savannarum floridanus*) study plots in a 700-ha-area of native dry prairie in Section 25, Township 33S, Range 33E. The plot had been burned most recently on 16 June 1993 and was flooded with 0-30 cm of water during most of May and June 1996. The 1.5-ha area of prairie inhabited by the Henslow's Sparrow was relatively unflooded and consisted of saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) clumps, scattered wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), staggerbush (*Lyonia fruticosa*), and pawpaw (*Asimina reticulata*) shrubs, and an abundant ground cover that included wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*), toothache grass (*Ctenium aromaticum*), beard grass (*Andropogon virginicus*), grass-leaved golden-aster (*Pityopsis graminifolia*), hatpin (*Eriocaulon decangulare*), beak rushes (*Rhynchospora inundata*, *R. latifolia*, and *R. decurrens*), fleabane (*Erigeron vernus*), button snake-root (*Eryngium yuccifolium*), deer tongue (*Carphephorus paniculatus*), and dwarf live oak (*Quercus minima*). Most vegetation in this area of the plot was less than 0.7 m tall.

The Henslow's Sparrow was first heard chipping in a saw palmetto clump, then perched in the open and sang twice. On 18 June, MDS found it again in the same location when he heard the sparrow chipping, then singing. At about 0920 the same day, we relocated the bird by broadcasting recorded Henslow's Sparrow songs from a portable tape player. Within a few minutes, we heard the bird singing about 60 m away. During the next 15 minutes, we observed it as close as 2.5 m using Bausch and Lomb 10 × 42 and Zeiss 10 × 25 binoculars, as it sang from low and usually concealed perches inside saw palmetto clumps.

Diagnostic features noted were: a small sparrow with a short tail and a large, flat-topped head; conspicuous olive on the nape, face, and eyebrows; a wide, pale yellow median stripe; a rich brown back streaked with white; chestnut wings; and black streaking

on the buffy breast and white flanks. The song was a short, slurred "si-lick." The sparrow also uttered high-pitched chipping notes on occasion.

Whenever the bird ceased singing, we replayed the recordings on the tape player and the sparrow resumed singing almost immediately. When flushed, it flew 15-50 m and always landed in another saw palmetto clump. After flushing four or five times, the bird landed on an exposed *Lyonia* perch about 1 m tall and remained there for a few minutes, a behavior mentioned by Burleigh (1958), Lowery (1974), Scott (1987), and Rising (1996). The portion of prairie occupied by the Henslow's Sparrow was burned in a prescribed fire the afternoon of 18 June 1996; the bird was not relocated subsequently.

BP obtained distant but identifiable photographs of the bird with a Pentax K1000 camera and a Vivitar 70-210 mm telephoto lens at distances of 30-40 m. Copies of the best photograph have been deposited in the Florida Ornithological Society Archives (FOSA 108) at the Florida Museum of Natural History, and at Tall Timbers Research Station (TTRS P587). MDS recorded the sparrow singing using the condenser microphone on the portable tape player (Sony model CFS 204) from distances of 6-10 m. Sonograms of five songs of the Kissimmee Prairie bird are shown in Figure 1a, along with three songs of a Henslow's Sparrow recorded in New York (Peterson 1983), Figure 1b. The sonograms, produced with Canary 1.2 software (Charif et al. 1995), are similar below 4.5 kHz, but the sonograms in Figure 1a do not show any sounds above this frequency. We suspect the tiny microphone used to record the Kissimmee Prairie Henslow's Sparrow did not capture the higher notes of the bird's song. Brian Nelson (pers. comm.)

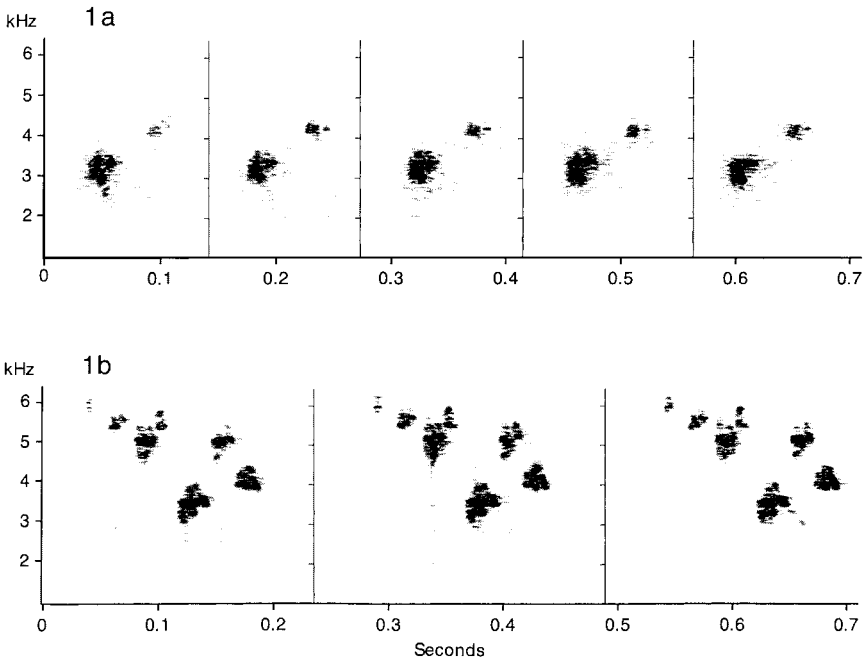


Figure 1. Five Henslow's Sparrow songs recorded at Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary, Okeechobee County, Florida, on 18 June 1996 (1a) and three songs recorded in New York (1b) (Peterson 1983).

tested the frequency response of the condenser microphone and confirmed that frequencies above 4.5 kHz could not be recorded as well as frequencies below this number.

The distance from Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary to the nearest breeding grounds, in North Carolina, is over 800 km. Extreme dates of occurrences for other southern states where Henslow's Sparrows do not breed are: Alabama, 31 October-4 May (Imhof 1962); Georgia, 17 October-27 April (Burleigh 1958, Haney et al. 1986); Louisiana, mid-October-the end of March, "but occasionally a few remain longer" (Lowery 1974); South Carolina, 21 October-13 April (Post and Gauthreaux, Jr. 1989); and Texas (excluding the breeding reports), mid-October-late April (Oberholser 1974). The Kissimmee Prairie bird appears to be the first summer record of a Henslow's Sparrow in the Southeast.

We thank Paul Gray, manager of Ordway-Whittell Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary, for allowing us to work in the sanctuary and for the use of a swamp buggy, Brian Nelson for producing the sonograms, Doug McNair for sharing his data with us, Tylan Dean for loaning us the tape player, Steve Orzell for identifying many of the grasses and forbs, and Tom Webber and Todd Engstrom for giving us the catalog numbers of the photographs archived in FOSA and TTRS, respectively. Our observations were made while conducting research on the breeding biology of Florida Grasshopper Sparrows, funded and supported by Environmental Flight, Avon Park Air Force Range, Department of Defense, Avon Park, Florida. For additional support, we thank the National Biological Service and the Wildlife Cooperative Unit of the University of Massachusetts. Many of the references were obtained from the library at Archbold Biological Station in Venus, Florida. This note benefitted greatly by comments from Reed Bowman, Paul Gray, Dave Leonard, Doug McNair, Walter Taylor, Peter Vickery, and Glen Woolfenden.

Postscript.—On 9 May 1997, MDS found a singing male Henslow's Sparrow at Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary about 25 m northwest of the 1996 observation.

LITERATURE CITED

- BURLEIGH, T. D. 1958. Georgia Birds. Univ. of Oklahoma Press. Norman.
- CHARIF, R. A., S. MITCHELL, AND C. W. CLARK. 1995. Canary 1.2 User's Manual. Cornell Lab. of Ornithol. Ithaca.
- HANEY, J. C., P. BRISE, D. R. JACOBSEN, M. W. OBERLE, AND J. M. PAGET. 1986. Annotated Checklist of Georgia Birds. Georgia Ornithol. Soc. Occ. Publ. No. 10.
- IMHOF, T. A. 1962. Alabama Birds. Univ. of Alabama Press. University, Alabama.
- LOWERY, G. H., JR. 1974. Louisiana Birds. 3rd ed. Louisiana State Univ. Press. Baton Rouge.
- OBERHOLSER, H. C. 1974. The Bird Life of Texas. Univ. of Texas Press. Austin.
- PETERSON, R. T., ed. 1983. A Field Guide to Bird Songs of Eastern and Central North America (cassette tapes). Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston.
- POST, W., AND S. A. GAUTHREAUX, JR. 1989. Status and Distribution of South Carolina Birds. Contributions from the Charleston Mus. No. 18. Charleston.
- PRUITT, L. 1996. Henslow's Sparrow status assessment. U.S. Fish and Wildl. Ser., Bloomington Ecological Service Field Office. Bloomington, Indiana.
- RISING, J. D. 1996. A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada. Academic Press. San Diego.
- ROBERTSON, W. B., JR., AND G. E. WOOLFENDEN. 1992. Florida Bird Species: An Annotated List. Florida Ornithol. Soc. Spec. Publ. No. 6. Gainesville.
- SCOTT, S. L., editor. 1987. Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 2nd ed. Natl. Geogr. Soc. Washington, D.C.
- STEVENSON, H. M., AND B. H. ANDERSON. 1994. The Birdlife of Florida. Univ. Press of Florida. Gainesville.