

House Finch on the Mississippi Coast

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On 18 November 1980 we observed a female, or immature, House Finch, (Carpodacus mexicanus) at Port Bienville Industrial Park, Hancock County, Mississippi. The finch was found at approximately 2:00 p.m. Total viewing time was about 20 seconds, the bird being scrutinized as it perched in the open on a utility wire, in good light, at a distance of about 35 feet.

The House Finch was identified without difficulty because both observers have had previous and frequent experience with the species in the west (Toups and Hodges), or in New England (Toups).

Through 7X35 binoculars, the bird was seen to be about the size of a House Sparrow (Passer domesticus). The bird in question most resembled the female Purple Finch (Carpodacus purpureus) but the crown, which is slightly raised in the Purple Finch, was rounder. The moderate length tail was squared as opposed to the forked tail of the Purple Finch.

The bird was identified as a House Finch because of the total lack of facial features like eye stripes, etc., and by the presence of a dark cheek patch which was not delineated by any other color. In addition it had a typical finch bill, conical, but shorter and proportionately smaller than the bill of the Purple Finch.

The breast and flanks were narrowly, but profusely, streaked in a light brown (not as dark as in Purple Finch) against a dingy background. When the bird flew to a brush pile just ahead and to the left of us, no wing or tail pattern was seen.

Cassin's Finch (Carpodacus cassinij) was not seriously considered as a possibility, but was eliminated only in retrospect. Again the profuse light streaking on the flanks and belly of the House Finch separate it from the female or immature Cassin's, which has darker streaks, confined to a whiter breast.

The House Finch is primarily western in origin. Birds of latter-day eastern origin are descendants of cage birds which were taken illegally in the west and brought east to be sold. Quick action by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service brought the trade to an end, and dealers avoided prosecution by releasing their cage birds, in and around the Long Island, New York area.

Since 1940, the species has had a remarkable range expansion in the east. In the winter of 1979-80 it had reached the Starkville, Mississippi area (see article by Jackson, this issue).

The presence of the species on the coast of Mississippi, represented by just this one sight record, prompts the question of its origin. Was it another wanderer from the west, as are so many fall migrants, or was it the advance guard of the range-expanding eastern birds?

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Lark Bunting in Mississippi - Photographic Documentation

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On 29 August 1980, at 7:00 a.m., Toups discovered a Lark Bunting, Calamospiza melanocorys, feeding on the ground at her backyard feeder in Gulfport. The bird was immediately identified, without field guide, due to Toups previous experience with the species in Colorado. Hodges joined Toups at 8:00 a.m. and secured numerous photographs. The bunting was seen often throughout the day until 7:30 p.m. Observations were made from a distance of 12-15 feet in good light, for periods of as long as five minutes. Viewing aids were 7X35 binoculars, but we often watched the bird unaided by binoculars.

The bunting was pale enough to be instantly separated from the numerous House Sparrows (Passer domesticus) nearby, and when compared directly, was slightly larger than that species, and noticeably smaller than a male Cardinal (Cardinalis cardinalis). Its posture was upright, its manner alert. There was some twitching of the tail. The bird exhibited caution in approaching the feeding station, moving in short hops through a lower oak canopy. It waited until the feeding area was well populated with other species before coming in. Conversely, it was unfailingly the last bird to fly when the area was disturbed.

A plumage description follows. The field marks which helped us to positively identify the bird as a Lark Bunting are underlined. We believe that the description points to the bird being an adult female nearing the end of its post-nuptial molt.

Head: Feathers of crown were medium brown streaked with gray or light buff. At all times the crown feathers were erected, suggesting a head shape similar to sparrows of the genus Zonotrichia. There was