

Ohio's Second Black-throated Sparrow

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It was 7:20 A.M. on June 4, 1988 and the traffic on State Route 608 in Hambden Township had become so heavy that we were having difficulty listening for birds. Three of us were conducting the annual Breeding Bird Census. We were at stop number 16 which in the past had always been conspicuous for its absence of birds. John Austine and I were on the road while Bob McCullough was in the car keeping time.

I noticed a small bird that had landed on an electric wire across the road. Through my binoculars I could see a triangular-shape black patch on its breast, a white stripe above and below the eye and a dark tail. We discounted its being a Dickcissel since it showed no yellow on the breast. I casually mentioned Black-throated sparrow as a possibility although at the time I could not have given a definite description of the bird. I had seen the bird twice before, once in Arizona and again at Big Bend in Texas. At this point a car came along and frightened the bird off the wire. Then it disappeared. Our time for this stop had expired, so we had to move on.

After completing the survey we returned to the spot but did not see any sign of the bird. At home I checked the field guides and felt more certain than ever that I had actually seen a Black-throated sparrow. I debated calling anyone for fear of being ridiculed, but my excitement overruled my caution. Finally with some trepidation I contacted two fellow members of the Kirtland Bird Club, Larry Rosche and Rob Harlan. They were both supportive of my discovery. Larry said he would meet me at the site the next morning.

When I arrived at about 7:15 A.M. the bird was on the wire. At this point I was positive it was a Black-throated sparrow. About an hour later Larry arrived and confirmed the identity of the bird. It remained in this area until at least July 29 and was seen by scores of birders.

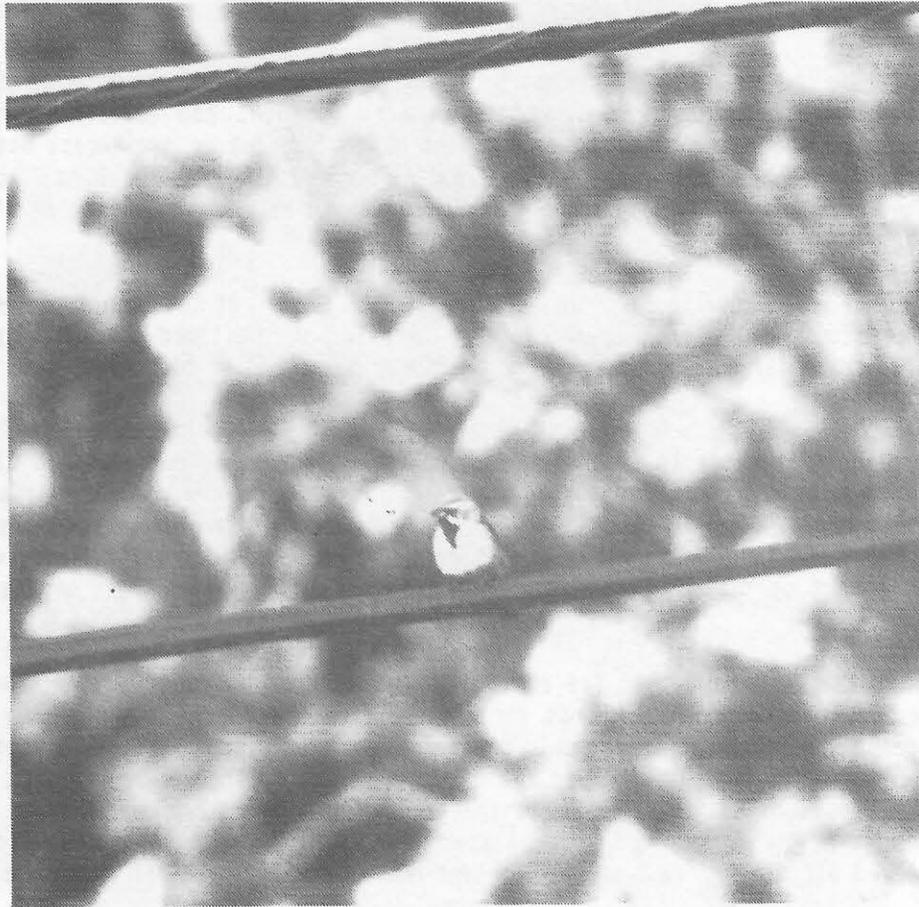
With a parabolic microphone I recorded three different vocalizations - two calls and a song. The main song is similar in cadence to that of a Song sparrow. It starts out with two clear notes followed by a short siurred note and ends with a rapid trill. The two calls seem to be variations of the song. The one used most often when the bird is in dense shrubbery, sounds like a higher-pitched, speeded-up version of the trill part of the song. The other call that I recorded while the bird was on the wire was clearly the trill part of the song. Perhaps this cannot even be considered a separate call but only a part of the song.

To say that the bird is out of its range is a gross understatement. It normally resides in the southwest from Texas to California and as far north as Utah and Nevada inhabiting creosote and sage regions. The general size of the trees would be the only similarity between its present Ohio habitat and the one it inhabits in the desert. Most of the area frequented by the sparrow here in Ohio is made up of low shrubs and trees, such as ash and cherry, that are in the process of succession. The closest thing resembling a desert in the area is a 51 acre almost bare field adjacent to the territory. A landscaping company had skimmed off the top soil and the present owner is selling it off into lots.

When you have so many expert birders in an area, it is not surprising that many other species of birds "turn up". I compiled a list of 42 birds seen or heard near the Black-throated sparrow site including three Red crossbills, a Mourning warbler, a chat, a White-eyed vireo, a redstart, an Alder flycatcher and a Black-billed cuckoo.

It is interesting to speculate as to how the bird arrived in Northeastern Ohio. Was it blown here by some storm or perhaps a series of storms? Did it make its trip in one year, two years, or longer? Perhaps it joined a flock of migrating birds in Texas and ended up in Ohio. Why did it decide to stop in this particular spot? The only other state record was at a residence in Ashtabula County in 1961. So, why have the only two Black-throated sparrows found in Ohio been located in the Northeastern part of the state?

Finding the unexpected is one of the many joys of birding. It fuels one's enthusiasm to look for more.



Black-throated sparrow in Geauga County, Ohio. June 4 - July 29, 1988. Photograph by Andy Fondrk.