

CASSIN'S SPARROW NESTING IN WYOMING

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Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*) was first reported in Wyoming on 8 June 1978 near Columbine, northeastern Natrona County, in the central part of the state (Faanes et al. 1979). Another was reported in 1989 east of Glendo Reservoir in Platte County (Bill Hayes pers. comm.). On 28 June 1990, William Howe of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service found four singing males east of Torrington in Goshen County near the Nebraska border (Ritter 1990, Kingery 1990, Scott 1993). Singing males were reported annually from the same area from 1991 (Ritter 1991, Kingery 1991) through 1994 (O. K. Scott in litt.). We had been studying the vegetation of this area since 1986 but always too early or too late in the season to see or hear these sparrows. In 1993, we scheduled our work in this area periodically throughout the summer and planned to watch for the sparrows.

On our first visit of 1993, on 13 June, we did not see or hear any Cassin's Sparrows, but on our second visit, on 22 June, we observed several singing males. We continued to see singing males on subsequent visits: 27 June and 17, 24, and 31 July. On 31 July, while driving down a little-used trail 6.5 km east-northeast of Torrington (T24N, R60W, north half of the north half of section 6), where we earlier had observed a singing male, we flushed an adult with insects in its beak. We immediately stopped the vehicle, hoping to observe an adult feeding young. In a few minutes, the adult reappeared and landed about 25 m in front of us. A few minutes later, we saw the adult sneaking through the brush about 10 m from the vehicle. It then went behind us and finally we heard young being fed, but we were unable to pinpoint the location. The same pattern of feeding continued for about 2 hours, but we still could not locate the young or determine if they were in the nest or not. Finally, we decided to rush in the direction of the feeding on the next visit of an adult. When we did, the adult flushed from within 1 m of the rear of the vehicle. On examining the brush here, we immediately found the nest, which contained three feathered young and one unhatched egg. On being discovered, the young (Figure 1) promptly abandoned the nest and ran into the surrounding brush. The nest measured 90 × 100 mm outside diameter, 70 × 64 mm inside diameter, and 50 mm deep (Figure 2). It was lined with fine grass. The egg was white with no markings (Figure 2) and measured 19 × 16 mm. The nest was about 15 cm above the ground in a Sand Sagebrush (*Artemisia filifolia*). This appears to be the first record of the Cassin's Sparrow nesting in Wyoming.

The habitat here is largely consolidated rolling sandhills with the relief averaging about 15 meters. We estimated total vegetation cover at 60%. The most conspicuous plant is Sand Sagebrush. It averages about 5 dm high, and we estimated its cover at about 30%. Other common species include the Prairie Sandreed (*Calamovilfa longifolia*), Sand Bluemaster (*Andropogon hallii*), Prickly Muhly (*Muhlenbergia pungens*), Blowout Grass (*Redfieldia flexuosa*), Spanish Bayonet (*Yucca glauca*), and Red-fruit Prickly Pear (*Opuntia macrorrhiza*). Andrews and Righter (1992) and Rosche (1994) reported this same habitat for the species in Colorado and Nebraska, respectively.

On 15 August, we again visited the area and observed one adult with one juvenile and another single juvenile. On 28 August, we observed several adults and several independent juveniles in small loose feeding flocks with Brewer's (*Spizella breweri*), Chipping (*S. passerina*), Clay-colored (*S. pallida*), and Vesper (*Poocetes gramineus*) sparrows and Lark Buntings (*Calamospiza melanocorys*). On 12 September, we saw no Cassin's Sparrows, but the other species that we observed on our previous visit were still there. During the nesting season, the only sparrows that we

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Figure 1. Young Cassin's Sparrow that abandoned the nest on discovery, 31 July 1993, Goshen County, Wyoming.



Figure 2. Cassin's Sparrow nest in Sand Sagebrush with one unhatched egg, 31 July 1993, Goshen County, Wyoming. Three feathered young abandoned the nest on discovery.

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saw in the area were the Grasshopper (*Ammodramus savannarum*), Lark (*Chondestes grammacus*), and Vesper and Lark Bunting. The *Spizellae* observed in August and September represent transients.

In 1994, we searched for Cassin's Sparrows in other areas of Sand Sagebrush in Goshen and Platte counties, Wyoming, but we found none. No other areas had this community as well developed as where the sparrows were nesting.

Faanes et al. (1979) reported a northward range extension of Cassin's Sparrows into Nebraska and South Dakota beginning about 1974. The colony in Goshen County, Wyoming, may date from approximately that time.

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