

ACCEPTED (7-0)  
(Photo)

## Rare Bird Report

**Species:** LeConte's Sparrow**Date:** April 25-27, 1998**Location:** Lake Estes, Estes Park*rec'd 7-2-98 ✓*

**Detailed location/habitat:** Initially flushed from the north lakeshore by trail users, the bird flew across the Lake Estes Trail to the stream, where it was identified by myself and Susan Ward at about 10:30 a.m. on 4/25/98. Initial contact location was 100 yards west of the footbridge over the Big Thompson River as it enters Lake Estes.

The bird stayed along the banks of the river, always in close proximity to the water, and worked its way in an hour's time to the footbridge. During this time, I went to call other birders. When I returned the bird was at the west end of the bridge. Instead of flying from one side of the bridge to the other, it walked across the foot of the bridge, affording views to four birders on the bridge at a distance of 10-15 feet.

The bird continued to work its way along the inlet bank. We observed the bird through a 20x Nikon spotting scope from the opposite bank for about an hour at 40 feet away.

The bird was relocated Sunday by another experienced birder, and Susan Ward, myself, and three other birders found the bird again on Monday, 4/27/98, at 10:00 a.m. along the lakeshore 50 yards east of the footbridge. It remained in this general vicinity through Thursday.

At no time did the bird leave the wet grasses and rocks along the streamside or lakeshore. I observed it pull a caterpillar off a leaf and eat it. Other observers reported it eating leeches washed up on the lakeshore.

**Behavior:** This bird liked to walk! Its longest flight observed was from one side of the stream to the other, about 30 feet. The lakeshore east of the footbridge abuts the Lake Estes Trail, and occasionally it was flushed into a short flight of 10 or 15 feet by trail users. More often, the bird would just stop moving and wait for trail users to pass before resuming feeding.

Although secretive, the bird was not shy. We could stand quietly on the trail and let it work its way along the lakeshore directly below us, often at a distance of less than 10 feet. This bird has a reputation for being nearly impossible to find in its breeding territory, but my feeling is that that has more to do with nesting habitat than a natural shyness or spookiness.

It was very active, picking at vegetation along the water and occasionally walking out on mats of sticks and grasses in the water. There were periods of five to 10 minutes when we would lose visual contact with the bird as it rested underneath matted grasses or in the cover of rocks.

**Viewing conditions:** I observed the bird with 7x42 Zeiss binoculars at distances of from less than 10 feet to 40 feet and with a 20x Nikon spotting scope at about 40 feet. The initial identification was made under nearly ideal light. There was a high, thin, intermittent cloud layer, but distinct shadows were always present. On Monday, the sun was bright with no clouds in the morning and cloudy with intermittent sun in the afternoon. Total viewing time

for me exceeded two hours in the first two days and four hours total. (I liked this bird!)

**Shape and size of body:** Immediately recognizable as a sparrow. At one point, it was next to a Savannah Sparrow, and the Savannah was slightly bigger and a little stockier. The LeConte's body shape was slimmer than shown in some guides, particularly National Geographic.

**Tail:** Tail was of moderate length, neither long or short enough to warrant attention. When the bird preened and when it flew, the tail looked spiky.

**Head shape:** Although somewhat flat, there was a gradual curve up from the bill.

**Bill:** The bill was conical. It was bluish gray.

**Color and markings:** The bird was a fairly bright burnt orange on the head, breast, and undertail coverts. The burnt orange color was most intense in the area of the supercilium, becoming more muted on the breast, and paler under the tail. The belly was white. The breast was clear of marks. The throat was also burnt orange, slightly paler at the chin immediately below the bill.

The overall head color was orange, but there were several prominent markings. I first noted the white median line, edged by black lines, with the white line only slightly wider than the black lines. The white was bright and clean, very striking in contrast to the black. The median line extended to the nape. There was a black eyeline from the back of the eye to the nape. It was slightly larger at the back. Below the eyeline was a light gray cheek patch.

The sides and flanks were streaked. The streaks were dark and distinct, but they were widely separated and, therefore, few in number.

The nape was gray with fine barring. At close range in good light, the barring was reddish brown or cinnamon. The barring seemed more concentrated in the center of the nape below the median line, and in that area, the reddish color was as prominent as the gray. Cloudy conditions enhanced the reddish color.

The wings were brown overall. The mantle was darker, almost black. The mantle feathers were edged in buff on the sides *and ends*. The sides formed buff-colored lines running down the back, while the ends made the back appear scalloped or scaled. It was intricately and distinctly patterned.

Feet and legs were a dusky flesh color. They were not bright and did not stand out.

**Voice:** Not heard.

**Similar species considered:** There was only one other bird that I considered to be a serious contender here, Nelson's Sharp-Tailed Sparrow. I found three characteristics to be most important in identifying this bird as a LeConte's.

First, the median line was white. Nobody would call it gray, not even light gray. Second, the pattern on the back of the bird was scalloped or scaled, and it was buffy, not white. Although there were light vertical lines, they were broken over the entire back by the semicircles of the mantle feathers' ends.

Third, the streaking was distinct, occurring on the sides and flanks. Bill color was also considered.

The most difficult identifying characteristic was the nape. Much is made of the cinnamon streaking on the LeConte's nape. While there was definite streaking, I did not find the cinnamon color itself to be a good field mark, since it was obvious only under ideal lighting and viewing conditions. Otherwise the streaking appeared dark, but without color definition. However, under ideal light and at close distances, the cinnamon color *was* pronounced, especially immediately below the median line.

**Previous experience with species:** None. This was a life bird for me. I have seen Sharp-tailed Sparrows on many occasions in Texas in the winter and in Canada during breeding season. No other sparrow I've seen had the intense burnt orange color of this bird. The white median line, the scalloped pattern on the mantle, facial pattern, throat color, and cinnamon-streaked nape were key field marks used to eliminate the Sharp-tailed. Other birds discussed among the birders present included Baird's and Grasshopper sparrows, but these were also eliminated based on those field marks.

**Collaboration:** After the preliminary identification, four experienced birders worked together on this bird, employing several field guides and *Sparrows and Buntings* by Byers, *et al.* These included Susan Ward, Julie Roederer, Jim Thompson, and myself. Subsequently the bird has been seen and identified independently by several local birders, including Scott Rashid and David Bray.

Respectfully submitted on June 8, 1998 by Scott Roederer, 1661 Windham Dr., Estes Park, CO 80517. Telephone: 970-586-8812 Email: [osprey@verinet.com](mailto:osprey@verinet.com)



R. G. Coe - 970 586-4518

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June 11, 1998

To: Susan Ward and to Whom Else It May Concern:

The enclosed slide of a LeConte's Sparrow photographed at Lake Estes, Estes Park, Colorado may be shown as proof of its presence.

Publication of this photograph must be with my permission, under copyright laws. I have other slides of the LeConte's Sparrow.

Please return the slide on or before August 1, 1998.

Thank you and I hope this helps.


Sincerely,

Dick Coe

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P.S. From Susan Ward to Mark Janos

I made copies of this so you do NOT have an original. However, please respect the copy right and return the slide when you are finished as Dick requested. (Return it directly to Dick Coe)



CFO-RC FILE#: 1998-153 PHOTO

RESULTS: \_\_\_\_\_

✓ rec'd 7-2-98

## COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS SIGHT RECORD REPORT

SPECIES: LeConte's Sparrow      *Ammodramus leconteii*

DATES OF OCCURRENCE: First sighted April 25, 1998. Also seen by this observer on April 27, 1998.

NUMBER SEEN: 1      SEX: Not determined      PLUMAGE: Adult

EXACT LOCATION: The first sighting was on the north side of Lake Estes Trail east of Matthews-Reeser Bird Sanctuary and west of the footbridge where the Big Thompson River enters Lake Estes. This section of the trail is narrow and bounded on the north by the Big Thompson River and on the south by Lake Estes. The bird was subsequently observed over a period of several days by many birders in the same general area along the north shore of the Big Thompson River, south side of the Lake Estes Trail (north shore of Lake Estes) between the footbridge and the Lake Front Street parking area as well as in various rocky and grassy areas on the spit of land that extends into the lake near the footbridge.

COUNTY: Larimer      CITY: Estes Park      ELEVATION: About 7500 ft.

LENGTH OF MY OBSERVATION: Three hours (10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on April 25 and 1 1/2 hours ( 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.) on April 27.

OTHER OBSERVERS WHO SAW THE BIRD: Margaret Gallup was with me when we found the bird on 3/25. We were later joined by other birders including Scott & Julie Roederer, Jim Thompson and Judie Wright. Other observers with us on 3/27 included John Ward and Karen Zipser. Many other birders, including Dick Coe who photographed it, observed this bird at various times.

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Varied. Often excellent and in full sun. At other times in shade with good general light. One could not have had much better views of this bird!

OPTICS: Zeiss 7 x 42 binoculars. Also seen through Scott Roederer's scope.

DISTANCE FROM BIRD: Seen as close as 10 feet when the bird walked across Lake Estes Trail (cement) at the end of the footbridge, giving our group of delighted birders an outstanding view of this "elusive" bird. While many observations were made from 30 or 40

feet away, at other times I was too close to focus my binoculars.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Included with this report is a copy of a slide taken by Dick Coe, 1070 Pine Knoll Drive, Estes Park, CO 80517 (Phone: 970-586-4518. Dick gives permission for this slide to be published in the CFO Journal (with proper copyright and credit as noted on the slide) but would like the slide returned after publication. If there are questions about this, please contact him directly.

HABITAT: Grassy and rocky shorelines and river edges. As noted above, the Lake Estes Trail is bounded by the Big Thompson River on the north and Lake Estes on the south. There is also a section of golf course nearby but this bird kept to the cover of natural grasses and rocky areas near water.

BEHAVIOR: Except for the first observation when the bird was seen about 6 feet from the ground in a small tree, it stayed low. It rarely flew. It foraged in and out of grass clumps and rocky areas. Although it sometimes disappeared from view as if hiding, it did not really seem to be shy and, if observers stood quietly, the bird would forage within 15 feet or closer. After I first spotted the bird in the tree, it flew across the Big Thompson River and for the next hour worked its way along the north shoreline in and out amongst the grasses while several of us tried to keep it in view as we waited for other birders to arrive. As noted above, when it came to the footbridge area where it could have flown over or under the bridge to get to the lake shore, it chose to walk across the wide cement path in full view of birders just a few yards away. In doing this, it did not seem to be in much of a hurry and sort of ambled across instead of dashing for cover. On the few occasions when it flew, the flights were low and it spread its spiky tail just before landing. When foraging, it walked around probing and picking among grasses and rocks for food items. It was never seen inspecting leaves or branches of trees or shrubs.

DESCRIPTION: A beautiful, brightly colored, strongly marked bird.

Bright orange-buff around the breast and face.

Grayish check patch

Strongly marked crown: White center stripe bordered by black line then bright orange-buff.

White eye ring

Thin black line extending back from the eye and widening into a small wedge near the sides of the nape.

Back strongly marked with black and buff and white giving a sense of lines down the back as well as a scalloped effect.

Throat whitish.

Dark streaks on the sides and flanks but the breast was clear

Belly white with buffy undertail coverts

Nape was gray with thin chestnut stripes which were sometimes hard to see but in good light and from the right position were clearly observable.

Tail feathers were spiky.

Bill was dark.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Other Ammodramus sparrows

Grasshopper Sparrow: Does not have streaks on sides or gray ear patch.

Baird's Sparrow: Has streaked breast. Median crown stripe is buff. Has dark moustachial and malar stripes.

Sharp-tailed Sparrow: Crown stripe is gray, not white.

Henslow's Sparrow: Has dark moustachial & malar stripes.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE WITH THIS BIRD: None.

REFERENCE BOOKS USED:

National Geographic Field Guide

Peterson Western Birds

Audubon Master Guide, Volume 3

The Sparrows of the United States and Canada (Rising & Beadle)  
Sparrows and Buntings (Byers, Curson & Olsson)

This report was made from notes taken during and made after the initial and subsequent observations. Because this bird was seen for lengthy periods on two separate days, there was adequate time to study source materials and confirm field marks.

SUBMITTED BY Susan E. Ward DATE: June 29, 1998

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