

Le Conte's Sparrow *Ammodramus leconteii*



Folk Name: Le Conte's Bunting

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Medium height to tall grasses (often where matted), broomsedge fields, open pinewoods

The Le Conte's Sparrow is often called the most secretive member of the sparrow family. South Carolina's Sprunt and Chamberlain may have put it best when they wrote: "Some authorities consider this species the most elusive of the sparrows. It is certainly a difficult bird to find and because it occurs rather sporadically and locally, few observers are familiar with it." This bird has been reported only a handful of times in the Central Carolinas since it was first documented here in the late nineteenth century.

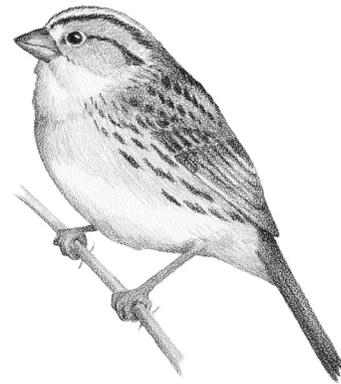
Leverett Loomis made the first discovery of this elusive sparrow ever in North or South Carolina. In fact, it appears he found more individuals of this species in this region than all other birders have found in the Central Carolina region over the past 130 years combined. He published two papers detailing his work with this species in Chester County in the early 1880s.

At that time, Loomis considered the Le Conte's Sparrow to be a common winter inhabitant of "neglected old-fields." He wrote:

Near the town of Chester, S.C., on the dividing ridge between the Broad and Catawba Rivers, there is an "old-field" of some two hundred acres that has been lying out, until recently, for a number of years. Here and there are patches of newly-sown grain, but the greater portion is now in broomsedge and weedy stubble corn land. Near the middle there is a small "wet weather branch," which empties into a large creek a mile distant. November 11, 1881, in this



Le Conte's Sparrow in Gaston County. (Jeff Lemons)



locality, in the weedy stubble, my first specimen of Le Conte's Bunting was secured. Nov. 16, a second was taken in the broomsedge near the same spot. Nov. 17, a third was shot, and several others were seen. Dec. 3, three more were captured; two in the broomsedge, and the remaining one in the swamp grass bordering the "branch." Dec. 10, my last visit to the field, six additional specimens were taken, and as many more were seen. I am not aware that the species has hitherto been reported as occurring so far east as South Carolina.

Loomis later completed a more detailed study of the Le Conte's Sparrow which he published in *The Auk* in 1885. He secured 54 specimens and provided details on stomach contents, plumage, and measurements of length, wing chord, and tail. Three of his specimens can still be examined today in Harvard University's ornithological collection.

He recorded this account of his collecting effort:

This Sparrow displays a very marked preference for dry ground. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "black-jack" fields of broom-sedge, which become somewhat boggy after protracted rains. At such times the level tracts are deserted for the gentle declivities, or, if these are wanting, for some congenial locality, while in ordinary showers they escape from the dense grass, saturated with water, to the thinner growth of the lighter soils. When under the shelter of the thick sedge, few birds are more difficult to get on the wing, as they allow themselves to be nearly trod upon before removing. On one occasion a bird rose so near me it became entangled in my shooting coat. Again, under cover, they are still more difficult to start; although the spot be carefully noted and the ground thoroughly

tramped over. In my earlier experiences I was often completely puzzled, but later observation revealed uniformity in their movements. Their most common way of escape is to lie still until you have passed, then suddenly jumping up from behind, dart off to one side. An assistant, by watching this maneuver, greatly facilitates their capture. In one instance a second ally, a keen-nosed setter, was found useful, doing effective service when all efforts had proved unavailing. Again, as the chance may be, they will steal away in the thick sedge, or fly off through the open weeds. Briers and tall swamp grass are ever resorted to for protection. To gain the latter they will fly directly by the collector, if he happens to cut off the retreat, and when once under this friendly shelter, no amount of thrashing will bring them out. Sometimes they take to bushes or saplings, beginning at lower limbs and hopping upward. One specimen was shot about ten feet above the ground. When not concealed, but in short grass, they are very tame, allowing one to approach within a few feet, and then running off a little way and stopping to look back. Their flight is low, usually feeble and unprotracted, but under repeated molestations it becomes rapid and prolonged. In one instance a bush some six feet in height was cleared.

Few additional reports of Le Conte's Sparrow exist from this region due in large part to its elusive nature. It is prone to "skulk" and is simply a bird that is often "hard to see" well enough to make a definitive identification. Volunteers helping with the Chester Christmas Bird Count reported finding a Le Conte's Sparrow during the winter of 1936 and another on Christmas Day in 1937.

Until the 1960s, only a single record of Le Conte's Sparrow had been confirmed in North Carolina—a specimen had been collected by C.S. Brimley in Raleigh in 1894. In October 1965, Charlotte birder H. Lee Jones published North Carolina's second account of this species. He described in excellent detail a bird he observed near Raleigh while he was a student at North Carolina State University.

In 1983, Harry LeGrand published a report on the status of the Le Conte's Sparrow in the Carolinas. He noted the paucity of records in both states away from its South Carolina wintering area in the Coastal Plain.

Since that time, this species has been reported with more regularity in both the Coastal Plain and Piedmont regions of both states.

On November 1, 1989, David Wright spied a Le Conte's Sparrow at the Wallace Dairy Farm in Huntersville. This was 50 miles to the north of Chester, SC, and 108 years after Loomis collected his first specimen in the region. On October 27, 1991, Doug Shadwick reported finding a Le Conte's Sparrow on Arrowhead Lake in Anson County.

Simon Thompson and Stephan R. Harris discovered a total of six or seven Le Conte's Sparrows at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge, in northern Mecklenburg County on February 19, 2000. Staff from MCPRD helped other birders relocate a few of these birds several times during the next month using a special technique. Everyone would gather in a large circle and slowly draw in the circle, smaller and smaller, until the birds could be seen running along the ground in the grass around everyone's feet, still refusing to take flight. At least three of these birds remained as late as 15 April. Tim Kalbach reported three at the Broad River Wildlife Management Area in Fairfield County, SC, on February 19, 2000. Barbara Gearhart and Wayne Irvin sighted one at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson County on November 15, 2000.

Stephan Harris and Ken and Alan Kneidel found one at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on February 10, 2001. Lawrence Krutulis confirmed a Le Conte's Sparrow present in the same field again from 9 March to 11 March in 2002. Tim Kalbach found another at the Broad River Wildlife Management Area on April 28, 2001.

Taylor Piephoff, the author, and Mary Colbert located a pair of Le Conte's Sparrows on the Gastonia Christmas Bird Count held on December 17, 2011. These birds were in a weedy field in an industrial park near Dallas in Gaston County. They were relocated and photographed several times until January 8, 2012. Michael McCloy provided this comment on the last day the birds were seen:

I flushed this bird twice from the thick broomsedge towards the back left corner of the field. Short tail, large head, short neck, and otherwise *Ammodramus* shaped. Very dark overall (from the back) with bold black patterning. Glimpsed the yellowish coloration on the face. I was hoping for photos but no such luck—both times I flushed the bird it was up and down very quickly—barely long enough to ID it.