

Nelson's Sparrow *Ammodramus nelsoni*



Folk Name: (formerly Sharp-tailed Sparrow)

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Wet grassy fields / marsh edge

Two birds, the Saltmarsh Sparrow and Nelson's Sparrow were once considered a single species called the Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Detailed study of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow in North America led bird taxonomists to "split" this sparrow into these two separate species in 1995. The split was primarily due to distinct differences noted in song, body measurements, habitat preferences and the fact that the two seldom interbred. Birds identified as Sharp-tailed Sparrows found inland in the Carolinas prior to the taxonomic split are generally considered to have been Nelson's Sparrow; although, these reports will have to remain unsubstantiated.

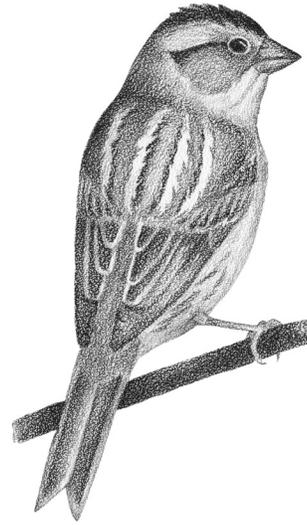
The Nelson's Sparrow migrates through the Carolinas and is found along the coast during the winter. It is very rarely reported inland. Surprisingly, all five reports of this rare sparrow from the Central Carolina region were recorded in Mecklenburg County.

In the late 1970s, Professor Dick Brown and his biology students from UNC Charlotte were studying nighttime bird collisions at local towers during fall migration. On October 27, 1978, they collected a Sharp-tailed Sparrow that had been killed at the WRET television tower on Hood Road in eastern Mecklenburg County. They added this specimen to their zoological collection.

The group returned on 29 October and found another Sharp-tailed Sparrow. A handwritten notation in Dr. Brown's notes appears to indicate this second bird was



Nelson's Sparrow specimen in Discovery Place collection.
(Leigh Anne Carter)



alive when found. Unfortunately, the fate of this second bird is unknown. It may have recovered and flown off or it may have been taken to a songbird rehabilitator for care.

The third record for Sharp-tailed Sparrow is a bird that presumably struck a window during spring migration at South Park Mall. The dead bird was collected by Mildred S. Harris on May 22, 1986, and donated to the Discovery Place Museum. The museum staff used a freeze-drying machine to prepare it for use as a study skin in their bird collections. An examination of this specimen confirmed that it is indeed a Nelson's Sparrow and not a Saltmarsh Sparrow. This is a very rare spring record of this species in the North Carolina Piedmont.

Taylor Piephoff sighted the fourth Nelson's Sparrow in the county. He observed one moving along the McAlpine Greenway on October 14, 2003. The fifth record is a bird Kevin Metcalf located at the McDowell Nature Preserve prairie in southwestern Mecklenburg County on May 14, 2017. Metcalf wrote:

This attractive little sparrow flushed from the grass near the gravel road just north of the small pond in the prairie. It obligingly landed on a branch at the edge of some shrubs in clear view, staying for a couple minutes before flying back down into the grass. I got some blurry but identifiable photos (light was getting low).

He later posted the photograph and these very detailed field marks:

Deep ochre supercilium, malar and rear of face. Blackish lateral crown stripes with slaty gray central crown stripe, blackish line back from eye. Dark grayish, conical bill. Gray "cheek" patch. Gray, unstreaked nape. Back with bright white, obvious lines down it, against dark feathers. Throat pale ochre yellow, deepening to slightly darker ochre on breast. Blurry grayish flank feathers. Belly whitish.

No obvious streaks around center of breast. Pattern of breast, back, flanks should eliminate similar Saltmarsh Sparrow.

This bird was heard singing in the same general area the next day, but it was not seen again. The Nelson's Sparrow remains an extremely elusive and very exciting find during migration in the Carolina Piedmont.