

## General Field Notes

---

*General Field Notes* briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in *The Chat*.

---

### First North Carolina Record of Cassin's Sparrow (*Peucaea cassinii*)

Gil Miller

22201 Sneads Grove Road, Laurel Hill, NC 28351

About 11:00 on 18 April 2011, I observed a Cassin's Sparrow (*Peucaea cassinii*) on Slate Road, Wagram, NC, just south of Camp Mackall in Scotland County, NC (N34.996269°, W79.463583°). I noticed a large sparrow-like bird perched on a bare tree branch in a brushy field adjacent to the road. The light and angle made for poor viewing. The bird seemed relatively nondescript. My first thought was a large Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*). As I watched, the bird flew up from the perch into the air singing and fluttering its wings. This appeared to be skylarking behavior. The sparrow then flew down into a brushy area about 100 feet from the edge of the road. I heard the bird sing again, but I didn't recognize the song. I went home, did some research, listened to taped sparrow songs, and was reasonably confident that it was a Cassin's Sparrow. I have seen this species once in Texas.

The next day (19 April), at approximately 06:30, I returned with my spotting scope. The bird was already skylarking and perching frequently, allowing me good looks through the scope. The bird had a thin white eye ring and a whitish throat outlined by a dark stripe on each side of the throat. The breast and sides of the breast had some blurry faint streaks. The upper back pattern of black spots on rusty red feathers was a very distinctive field mark on this otherwise drab bird. I was able to view the bird perched and in flight, and the long gray-brown, rounded tail with whitish corners was clearly seen. This tail, along with the larger size, song, and characteristic courtship behavior are all distinctive of Cassin's Sparrow. The local Field Sparrows (*S. pusilla*) on territories nearby were smaller with more rounded heads, lighter and smaller bills, and white wing bars. Both the Indigo Buntings (*Passerina cyanea*) and Blue Grosbeaks (*P. caerulea*) in the vicinity had heavier, two-toned bills and shorter tails.

The following morning (20 April) at approximately 07:00, local birders Fran and Wayne Irvin met me on site. The bird was actively skylarking again. We got good looks at the bird in flight as well as perched at a distance of about 75 to 100 feet. Wayne and Fran confirmed the identification and then started calling other birders who would be interested in seeing the sparrow.

On 30 April, Brady Beck (NC Wildlife Resources Commission biologist) videotaped this Cassin's. Many other observers photographed this bird, and these photographs are currently on the Carolina Bird Club website. Susan Campbell and I were the last to observe the bird on the morning of 3 May. Between 23 April and 3 May, over 100 people viewed the bird.

Cassin's Sparrows are found in the arid shrub grasslands of the southern high plains and southwestern United States. However, the late spring of 2011 produced a mini-invasion of sorts well east of the Cassin's Sparrow's normal range, likely a result of extreme drought on the breeding grounds that led to birds seeking "greener" breeding habitat elsewhere.



Figure 2. Cassin's Sparrow, 26 Apr 2011, Slate Road, Scotland Co, NC. Photo by Greg Massey.



Figure 1. Cassin's Sparrow, Slate Road, Scotland Co, NC. Photo by Brady Beck.

During the first week of May, vagrants were found in Louisiana, Illinois, Arkansas, and eastern Texas, in addition to the bird that was still present in Scotland County (Swick, 2011). This record has been accepted by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee (Tove et al., 2012),

and because it was documented both by color photos and by audio recordings, it was placed on the state's Official List. This is the first record of Cassin's Sparrow for the state.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank Scott Hartley, Superintendent, Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve, for his support in preparing this manuscript. The author also thanks Susan Campbell for her early review and additions to the text.

### **Literature Cited**

Swick, Nate. 2011. Rare Bird Alert: May 13, 2011 - ABA Blog. URL <http://blog.aba.org/2011/05/rare-bird-alert-may-13-2011.html>

Tove, M. (Chair), K. Camburn, R. Davis, E. Dean, W. Forsythe, H. LeGrand, Jr., and J. Pippen. 2012. 2011 annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 76:1–6.

*Received 20 September 2011, accepted 5 November 2012*

## **Fifty Years Ago in *The Chat*—December 1962**

---

David A. Adams, curator of ornithology at the NC State Museum, authored the lead paper, an analysis of collections of birds killed at four TV towers and two ceilometers at Winston-Salem, Raleigh, Goldsboro, Columbia, and Charleston on the night of 6 September 1962. That night was cloudy and rainy, and had a large migratory movement brought about by a 10–20°F temperature drop from the first large cold front of the season. It was thought that cloudiness and precipitation favored disorientation and flying into obstructions, leading to a large kill. Not all of the killed birds were collected, but 4189 specimens representing 61 species were collected and examined.

The fall field trip at Myrtle Beach was attended by 102 members and guests, and they observed 114 species.

Rarity reports included a Roseate Spoonbill seen between Wrightsville and Carolina Beach about 16 August 1962, the first record in NC since 1919. Swallow-tailed Kites were observed a number of times between 26 May and 23 July in the Buxton Woods area near Frisco. On 21 May 1962, James F. Parnell observed a Purple Gallinule at Lake Raleigh, just south of the Raleigh city limits. The only prior Wake County record was by H. H. Brimley in 1887. Dan Knight, Robert Thomas, John Fussell, and John Thompson observed three Ruffs at North River marsh in Carteret County, NC on 29 July 1962. James F. Parnell observed a Gray Kingbird at Battery Island, Southport, NC on 25 July 1962, and with T. L. Quay relayed a previously unpublished record of Gray Kingbird near Buxton on 12 March 1957. Baltimore Orioles were reported nesting near Greensboro, NC for a second successive year.