

HENSLOW'S SPARROW IN OKLAHOMA

BY DOTTY M. GOARD

Between 26 April and 10 May 1974 Ella Delap, Emma Messerly, and I observed from time to time up to four or five Henslow's Sparrows (*Ammodramus henslowii*) in virgin bluestem "tall-grass prairie" pastureland about 5 miles east of Bartlesville. Washington County, northeastern Oklahoma. The birds were three-quarters of a mile from the nearest road. At least three of them were singing males. The song-perches of these males were high in the grass or on the tops of low shrubs. Photographs of one of the males authenticated at long last the occurrence of *A. henslowii* in Oklahoma.

The Henslow's Sparrows that we heard and saw all lived within a 170-acre plot that I had chosen and mapped in preparation for conducting a breeding-bird survey for the National Audubon Society. The plot was in the middle of 2500 acres of road-free prairie in the highest part of the limestone-based plateau that runs from the southwest corner to the northeast corner of Washington County. In the plot were two widely separated shrub-lined gullies — an eastern and a



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Photographed on 10 May 1974 in virgin prairie in Washington County, Oklahoma by Dotty M. Goard. All three pictures are of the same singing male bird.

western — that drained into a 55-acre impoundment. Among the tall grasses and low shrubs near these two gullies the Henslow's Sparrows lived.

I censused the plot at irregular intervals between 24 April and 12 June. Each census in April and May started 15-30 minutes before sunup, thus giving me a chance to hear the early morning singing. It was this timing that put me in the right place at the right time for finding the elusive birds.

On the second trip to the plot — the date was 26 April — at about 0700, I heard a strange "hiccupping" song near the west gully. I was upslope from the song, which seemed to move off as I walked toward it. Finally, about a hundred yards from the spot at which I had first heard it, I found the singer — a small bird perched on a dead grass stem in a shallow depression in the prairie. The feature that captured my attention at once was the white throat as it flashed in the morning's first sunlight. Then I saw the streaking on the breast and sides, the light eye-ring, and the enormous bill. The bird was singing frequently, once about every five seconds. The song was a two-syllabled *slick-slick* which, put into human syllables, immediately "stuck" as a nickname for the little bird. I observed the singer for several minutes, approached to within about 30 feet, and watched him fly upslope to a false indigo-bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*) on the top of which he perched about 18 inches from the ground. Now I could see the rufous tone of the wings and slightly forked tail. Before I left him to continue the census, I knew what I had found — in a very real sense of the phrase, a new bird for Oklahoma.

Later that morning (between 0900 and 1000) I heard a similar song from the grass near the east gully about a quarter of a mile from the spot at which I had watched the first bird. I followed the song eagerly, but the singer must have dropped to the ground as I approached, for I could not find him.

On 1 May, again before sunup, Ella Delap and I found a Henslow's Sparrow singing near the west gully. He was in the top of the very same false indigo-bush that had served as his principal song-perch on 26 April. When a Long-billed Marsh Wren (*Telmatodytes palustris*) started singing in the wet grass about 50 feet away, the Henslow's immediately gave chase, driving it off. On his return to what must have been a favorite song-perch, he found another Henslow's Sparrow in the bush, presumably a female, since it was not singing. This bird he drove not away but into the grass near the base of the shrub. Then he returned to his perch and resumed singing.

A few minutes later, shortly after sunup, we heard another Henslow's singing about 100 yards downslope along the west gully. This bird proved to be paler than the first one for the bib of streaks did not quite meet in the middle of the breast, and the wings and tail were only faintly rufous. At about 0800 we heard a third male singing near the east gully. As we approached, the sound seemed to move ahead of us. After it had led us 150 feet or so, it stopped abruptly.

Though we walked back and forth for some time trying to flush a bird from the grass, we failed to find one. About an hour later, on returning to this part of the east gully, we found a Henslow's singing a hundred yards downslope from the spot at which we had heard one earlier, but we had no way of ascertaining whether we had heard one bird or two in that area.

On 6 May I saw what I believed to be a pair of Henslow's not far from the spot near the west gully at which I had first seen the species. One bird was singing, the other silent. I also saw the less colorful male in the area downslope, but I did not hear or see a bird near the east gully. On 10 May, when Emma Messerly was with me, I photographed the richly colored west gully male using a 7× telephoto lens. That day we saw one non-singing bird, presumably a female, near the bird that I photographed, but we neither saw nor heard a Henslow's near the east gully.

On 20 May, Ella Delap and I returned to the census plot before sunup but found no trace of a Henslow's Sparrow. Again, on 27 May, I searched in vain before sunup. In the evening dusk on 10 June, Ella Delap and I searched, but found no birds. On the evening of 12 June I tried once more, but found nothing. Either the song period was over or the birds had left the area or been killed.

All Henslow's Sparrow activity observed by us took place on gentle northward-facing slopes of about 5% grade. The birds kept to the grass and low *Amorpha* bushes. The soil of the plateau is dark-colored, granulated, slightly acid loam of the so-called "Summit Series" (Polone, 1968, Soil Survey Washington County, Oklahoma, U. S. Dept. Agri. and Oklahoma Agri. Exper. Sta., pp. 15, 22). The average rainfall in this area is 35.5 inches. In my census plot, which has never been plowed, the soil supports a lush growth of prairie vegetation. The most abundant grasses there are switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardi*), and little bluestem (*A. scoparius*), but there is also some Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*); among other characteristic plants are blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), wild alfalfa (*Psoralea tenuiflora*), Illinois mimosa (*Desmanthus illinoensis*), a purple coneflower (*Echinacea* sp.), and an evening primrose (*Oenothera* sp.). The gully edges and bottom are lined with sedges and thick growths of *Amorpha fruticosa*. The average height of the grasses in early May was 12 to 18 inches.

Birds that nested in grassland nearby were the Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*), Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*), Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), and Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*). Areas chosen by the Grasshopper Sparrow tended to be higher and to have shorter grass than those occupied by the Henslow's. Of several Grasshopper song-perches in the general vicinity of the west gully Henslow's favorite song-perch on the false indigo-bush, the closest was about 200 feet away. Along the east gully, defended territories of the two species seemed to me to overlap, though not once did I observe a Grasshopper chasing a Henslow's, or *vice versa*.

Present continuously on the plot were Hereford cattle, about one animal per 10 acres, that received supplemental food in winter — until mid-April. I noticed heavy cattle traffic and grazing on the Henslow's slopes between 10 May, when we last saw the little birds, and 20 May, when we failed to find one. Heavy rains fell, too, during that period, as much as two inches in a night. Possible predators were a Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), which lived about 200 yards from the Henslow's slopes, and a family of Coyotes (*Canis latrans*), whose young we heard not far from the census plot on 1 May.

What I have stated above does not, of course, completely validate the following sightings for Oklahoma, but it does prove that Henslow's Sparrow can be seen here: 28 April 1923, one observed by Margaret M. Nice "at close range as it fed in an old corn field near the side of a pond" in Cleveland County (Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 182); 14 March 1924, one seen Tulsa by N. J. Gubser (Force, 1936, *Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci.*, 15: 62); 26 March 1932, one seen Tulsa by R. L. Luckhardt (Force, *loc. cit.*); 3 October 1932, one seen along Texakeet Creek near Kenton, Cimarron County, by G. M. Sutton (1934, *Ann. Carnegie Mus.*, 24: 47; 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, p. 609); 14 April 1934, one seen Tulsa by H. D. Chase (Force, *loc. cit.*); 24 January 1951, one seen Norman, Cleveland County, by Lovie M. Whitaker; 20 April 1967, one seen Bartlesville by Doris Williamson.

P. O. BOX 591, BARTLESVILLE, OKLAHOMA 74003, 20 JULY 1974.

GENERAL NOTES

Did this Great Blue Heron die of starvation?—Parts of the winter of 1973-74 were unusually severe in central Oklahoma. According to U.S. Weather Bureau records for the area, the air temperature from 30 December to 12 January did not rise above 52° F. and the daily low was never above 20° F. A small farm pond on the Wilk farm 1 mile east and 1 mile south of Goldsby, McClain County, central Oklahoma froze over in late fall except at the extreme north end. At this open end, around which willows grew, a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) fed regularly. It did not, so far as anyone knows, spend all of its time there, but it was seen daily by John H. Wilk, who drove with his father, Kenneth E. Wilk, from Norman every day to feed the horses on the farm. From 1 to 4 January John saw the heron repeatedly at the open end of the pond. On the night of 4 January the whole pond froze shut. On 5 January John found the heron dead on the ice at the foot of a willow. He brought the bird to me the next day.

The specimen was in beautiful first winter feather. It proved to be an exceedingly thin male (weight 1630.1 grams; testes each about 2 x 8 mm., stomach empty). I searched in vain for the slightest evidence of injury and for parasites either external or internal. Believing that the bird had starved to death, I wrote Robert W. Storer of the Museum of Zoology at the University of Michigan, asking for information concerning the weight of specimens in the large collection there. Dr. Storer obliged by listing the weights of ten adult males (2070 to 2643 grams, average 2311.6), eight adult females (1436 to 2150 grams, average 1861.2), 15 immature males (1530 to 2660 grams, average 1941.8), and 12 immature females (1125 to 2270 grams, average 1687.0). Only three of the 15 immature males weighed less than the emaciated Oklahoma specimen discussed above.