

SAGE SPARROW: A NEW SPECIES FOR OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

On 21 January 1988, in a large field of annual sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) 8 miles west and 1¼ miles north of Boise City, in Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma, I observed two Sage Sparrows (*Amphispiza belli*) and photographed one of them. This species has not previously been photographed or collected in the state.

At 1100, I began "squeaking" from my truck parked on a dirt road at the western end of the extensive sunflower plot, a quarter-mile wide and a full mile long, east to west. Within five minutes, I had attracted 40 Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*), 15 American Tree Sparrows (*Spizella arborea*), 5 White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) and a Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) into viewing range. With my 9 x 36 binocular, I scanned the loose assemblage of finches. A gray-headed bird that came into view showed a light breast bearing a single black spot. The bird resembled a Black-throated Sparrow (*A. bilineata*) without its black throat. Closer scrutiny revealed a white eyering. Moments later I noticed a similar bird only several yards to the west. When I consulted a field guide, I realized that only one sparrow at this time of year bore this combination of field marks: the Sage Sparrow.

The two Sage Sparrows disappeared eastward, under cover of the dense, erect sunflower stalks. With my camera, I walked toward them and squeaked



SAGE SPARROW

Photo taken 30 January 1988 by John S. Shackford 8 miles west and 1¼ north of Boise City, Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

again, but got only a fleeting glimpse of one bird. Though I tried repeatedly to relocate them during the following eight days, I was unsuccessful.

In the same spot on 30 January, however, one Sage Sparrow responded to my squeaking at approximately 0900. The hastily composed photograph I snapped was much too poor to provide proper identification. A little over an hour later, I succeeded in flushing a good-sized flock of finches into an open pasture of short grasses interspersed with yucca (*Yucca* sp.) and sandsage (*Artemisia filifolia*). For the next 15 minutes, I cautiously stalked the group until only three birds remained that had not doubled back to the sunflowers. I was delighted to discover that two, and possibly all three of them, were Sage Sparrows. Fortunately, two of the four color photographs I shot of one bird (420 mm magnification) were adequate to verify my identification (see cover pictures.)

When I returned from a quick trip back to the car for a larger lens, the birds were gone. Nor could I find them again between 31 January and 2 February. It was simply too easy for the sparrows to slip away under cover of the vast field of dense, chest-high sunflowers.

Alone or in combination, the cover photos show the gray crown, dark breast spot, light underparts and dark malar stripe indicative of *A. belli*, all traits I had noted in the field. The white outer tail feathers shown in one picture I did not actually see. An additional behavioral characteristic I did observe at least once was tail-flicking. I do not recall the slight flank streakings hinted at in the cover photographs.

A few notes regarding the habitat where the Sage Sparrows were found are in order. To the southwest and south of the sunflower patch stretched considerable fields of unharvested milo (*Sorghum* sp.); the native yucca-sandsage pasture in which I photographed the birds lay to the northwest. All these fields centered about the junction of a westward dirt section line road that dead-ended with a north-south one. Approximately 350 yards south of this point was a large field covered with dense grass averaging about a foot in height. Into it late one evening I noticed many small birds flying, apparently to roost. I suspect that the Sage Sparrows were among them.

The foregoing constitutes the first documentation of *A. belli* in Oklahoma and places it on the list of species officially recognized from the state. There is one earlier sight record for Oklahoma. On 2 January 1982, Nanette Johnson, Carrie Swink and JoAnn S. Garrett saw two Sage Sparrows 1½ miles north and ½ east of Kenton in Cimarron County (Garrett, J. S., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 15:33; Amer. Birds 36:653, 1982). There appear to be no records from contiguous areas of New Mexico and Colorado, but the species is a "casual to rare migrant and winter resident in the High Plains" of the Texas Panhandle (Texas Ornithological Society, 1984, Checklist of the birds of Texas, 2nd ed., Austin, p.123). In Kansas, it is considered to be a "winter resident in southwest, in xeric scrublands" and there are records from Morton and Seward counties in the time span between November and January (Johnston, R. F., 1965, A directory to the birds of Kansas, Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Kansas, Lawrence, p.58).