

**HENSLOW'S SPARROW IN NORTHEAST OKLAHOMA**

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Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) nested in Washington County, Oklahoma, in 1987 and records from 1986 through 1989 suggest it may be a regular summer resident in both Washington and Osage counties from mid-April until early October. Late July sightings in Rogers and Tulsa counties hint at a more widespread distribution.

Henslow's Sparrow was listed as hypothetical for Oklahoma by Sutton (1967) until the spring of 1974 when Dotty M. Goard (1974) documented the species on a prairie five miles east of Bartlesville, Washington County. In Kansas, Johnston (1965) listed this sparrow as a local summer resident in the grasslands of Shawnee, Douglas, Morris and Anderson counties. More recently Zimmerman (1985) reported the species as occurring from mid-April to early September on the Konza Prairie in Geary and Riley counties of northeast Kansas. Other recent records in Kansas include a new population in Wilson



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*A singing male photographed by Michael L. Gray near Copan Lake in Washington County, Oklahoma, on 31 May 1987. Note the double whisker marks and the "necklace" of breast streaks.*

County in the southeast part of the state and a population in Anderson County, which has been known for some time (Zimmerman, pers. comm.). In southwestern Missouri Henslow's Sparrow is a resident in St. Clair and Vernon counties (Skinner et al. 1984).

Henslow's Sparrow is a very secretive bird that dwells on the ground in tallgrass prairie. Flights are infrequent, short and close to the ground. If pursued it will likely hide rather than fly. The best opportunity to observe this species is when the male perches on a grass stalk and sings repeatedly his short two-syllabled "se-lick" song. Henslow's Sparrow is only slightly larger than LeConte's Sparrow (*A. leconteii*) and appears flat headed and large billed. A green face and nape and dark reddish back are usually most distinguishing. Other good field marks are the dark streaks forming a necklace on the breast and the double whisker marks.

I first encountered Henslow's Sparrow on 15 August 1986 when I heard one singing along with several Sedge Wrens (*Cistothorus platensis*) in a prairie on the west side of Copan Lake in Washington County. This prairie, which had been burned earlier that spring, is ungrazed public hunting land. The bird was seen again the next day but not thereafter. In 1987 and 1989 Henslow's Sparrows were resident at Copan Lake and in 1988 two other populations were discovered, one in Osage County and another in Washington County.

Occurrence at Copan Lake is summarized as follows: in 1987 birds were recorded from 2 May to 4 October and approximately eight territories were established. In 1988 the west side prairie was burned and Henslow's Sparrows never appeared. From two to five birds, however, were observed on the east side of the lake from 10 April until 28 May in a small idle prairie. In 1989 at least six singing males were in the west side prairie starting 21 April and throughout the summer. Most had apparently left by late September but one was seen on the late date of 15 October.

Another site where Henslow's Sparrows have been found is along the Washington and Nowata county line east of Oglesby. In 1988 five birds were singing in a Washington County hayfield on 14 June and 1 July. In 1989 six birds were counted on 31 May in the same area. This time birds were in both hayfields and grazed prairies and four of the six were in Nowata County.

In Osage County a large colony was discovered a few miles east of Foraker 14 April 1988 when 14 were counted along 1.8 miles of county road. The prairie here was being grazed but, unlike much of the surrounding areas, had not been burned that spring and considerable dead vegetation was standing. A systematic census covering about .5 square mile of this area on 4 June 1988 revealed the presence of 16 Henslow's Sparrows, 21 Grasshopper Sparrows (*A. savannarum*), 49 Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*) and 21 pairs of Upland Sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*). The same day eight additional Henslow's Sparrows were heard along the road outside the census area. In 1989 at least one bird was present in the same prairie on 10 June but a count was not attempted. At another site in Osage County, on the Barnard Ranch, at least two birds were singing 10 June 1989 in a large field that was apparently not being grazed. Perhaps many more birds were present but a count was not attempted.

I have only one record each for Tulsa and Rogers counties. On 28 July 1989 two birds were singing in an idle prairie in north Tulsa County and on 30 July 1989 one bird was singing in a grazed prairie northwest of Talala in Rogers County.

Observations in northeastern Oklahoma support the conclusions of Zimmerman (1988) that Henslow's Sparrows prefer habitat with a large amount of standing dead vegetation and few woody plants. With the widespread burning each spring and high stocking rates, this preferred habitat is not easy to find. Periodic burning and only light grazing would seem to be the best management for Henslow's Sparrow.

Some nesting details were uncovered in 1987 by patiently observing one territory near Copan Lake. The male was singing as early as 16 May. After locating a spot where the pair could usually be found, I set up a net at 2015 on 3 June. The male was quickly flushed into the net but the female avoided capture. Band number 73-39801 was placed on his left leg. On 19 June at dusk I observed the female sneaking through the grass toward me approaching the nest to incubate. On 23 June she was still incubating but during the next visit on 26 June feeding activity was noted at 2030. The nest was inspected on 30 June and contained four sky blue nestlings. According to Hyde (1939), the blue color indicates an age of four days and, allowing 10 to 11 days for incubation (Hyde 1939), the clutch was probably complete by 16 June.

Many times the male was conspicuous as he sang but the female was seen only when she was approaching the nest at dusk to brood or when carrying food to it during the day. A flurry of feeding activity was observed 28 June when the nestlings were presumed about two days old. I watched from a distance and counted the arrivals and departures at the nest. The male was easy to observe and frequently perched on a stalk of eastern gamagrass (*Trip-sacum dactyloides*) with a grasshopper or spider (sometimes both) in its bill before dropping down to the nest. The female stayed very low and was difficult to track. Several times she arrived or departed the nest undetected. Between 1915 and 2040 the male made five trips to the nest and the female made seven.

The nest was only three inches above the ground and situated in the middle of a clump of switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), which gave it much of its integrity. The switchgrass was approximately 30 inches tall and intermixed with little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparius*). The nest was constructed of broad grass leaves with a lining of fine grass stems. It was an open cup and oblong in shape. The inside dimensions were 1.75 by 2.25 inches and the depth was 0.5 inch. Externally it measured 2.5 by 3.5 inches with the narrow ends 2.5 inches high and the middle only about 1.5 inches high.

By observing the movements of the banded male, I estimated the territory size to be about 2.5 acres. The other birds that apparently nested in the prairie not far from this territory included Dickcissels, Field Sparrows (*Spizella pusilla*), Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*), Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*), Common Yellowthroats (*Geothlypis trichas*) and Sedge Wrens.

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## GENERAL NOTES

**Red-Tailed Hawk captures Great-Tailed Grackle in mid-air.** — At 1108 on the humid, overcast day of 1 February 1990 (54°F, SW winds blowing at 3 mph) I was watching a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) circling above a small creek less than a mile west of Cameron University in Lawton, Comanche County, Oklahoma. The hawk was soaring almost directly over a large cottonwood tree (*Populus deltoides*) growing near the creek. It apparently put to flight a flock of approximately 25 Great-tailed Grackles (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) that had been perched in the tree. Suddenly, the raptor swooped downward, not at the flock, but toward a single male grackle that had belatedly left the tree, desperately attempting to rejoin the flock. The hawk struck from above and behind; after contact, it levelled off, swung around and returned to the same cottonwood. It then proceeded to consume its prey.

*Buteo jamaicensis* depends chiefly on small rodents as prey. Fisher (1893, Hawks and owls of the United States in their relation to agriculture, Wash. D.C., p. 50) found remains of 105 birds of at least 20 species in 562 Red-tailed Hawk stomachs from the eastern United States (chiefly Maryland and Pennsylvania). About half were game birds or poultry. Behavior and food habits of this hawk were studied in the San Joaquin Experimental Range in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Madera County, California, during 1939, 1940 and 1941 (Fitch, H.S., et. al., 1946, Condor 48:205-237). A total of 169 birds were recovered from 2094 pellets collected during the nesting season. Of these, 117 were unidentifiable, 14 were jays, 13 woodpeckers, 10 finches, 6 quail, 5 meadowlarks, 2 hawks, 1 warbler and 1 bluebird. Of 625 food items brought to 14 nests by parent hawks, only 23 were birds (11 quail, 4 jays, 4 finches, 1 roadrunner, 1 screech owl, 1 kingbird, and 1 unknown). Therefore, it is clear that Red-tails rarely prey on small birds of any kind, and