

HENSLOW'S SPARROW WINTERING IN
McCURTAIN COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

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We report the first winter records for Henslow's Sparrow (*Ammodramus henslowii*) in Oklahoma. Although Henslow's Sparrow is known to nest in northern Oklahoma counties such as Craig, Osage, Tulsa, and Washington (Verser 1990, Reinking and Hendricks 1993, Reinking 2004), there are no confirmed winter records for Oklahoma (Oklahoma Bird Records Committee 2004).

The first visual observation of a Henslow Sparrow was 13 December 2005 at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area in McCurtain County, Oklahoma by D. Arbour. Further observations and photographs were made by D. Arbour from December 2005 to February 2006 (Table 1). Typically, the sparrows flushed from the grass and made a short steep ascent before quickly dropping back in the grass. After a Henslow's Sparrow was flushed 3-4 times, it would perch in a tree for several minutes, which allowed for detailed observation. Henslow's Sparrows also were observed at close range while still on the ground.

Henslow's Sparrows were observed in unit #36 on the east side of Red Slough. The habitat was a pine-hardwood savanna of scattered loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) and sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). The understory was primarily Bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) and weedy vegetation. Unit #36 has Felker soil type with a southern-facing slope from a pine-hardwood forested area to an impoundment. The combination of a warm southern exposure with a pine-hardwood savannah offered Henslow's Sparrows suitable wintering habitat at Red Slough.

Table 1. Observations of Henslow's Sparrow at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area, McCurtain County, Oklahoma.

| Date | Number of birds | Notes |
|------------------|-----------------|----------|
| 13 December 2005 | 1 | |
| 20 December 2005 | 1 | |
| 30 December 2005 | 1 | |
| 3 January 2006 | 3 | |
| 10 January 2006 | 1 | |
| 18 January 2006 | 2 | |
| 1 February 2006 | 1 | |
| 5 February 2006 | 4 | 3 banded |
| 14 February 2006 | 1 | no band |

On 5 February 2006, D. Wood and students from Southeastern Oklahoma State University accompanied D. Arbour to Red Slough and attempted to capture and band Henslow's Sparrows. Three adult Henslow's Sparrows were mist-netted and banded. One Henslow's Sparrow was observed but eluded capture. We conservatively estimate that ≥ 4 Henslow's Sparrows remained at the site during the winter months.

Our observations and banding of Henslow's Sparrow are the first confirmed records for this species wintering in Oklahoma. Baumgartner (1992) observed Henslow's Sparrow in December and January 1938 and 1940 in Tulsa County and in January 1951 in Cleveland County, but no photographs were taken or specimens obtained. D. Reinking (pers. comm.), Oklahoma Winter Bird Atlas coordinator, confirmed that no other observations of Henslow's Sparrows have been reported in winter in Oklahoma. Henslow's Sparrow is known to winter nearby in southern Arkansas (Herkert et al. 2002) and northern Texas. D. Pogue (pers. comm.) banded 12–14 Henslow's Sparrows during 2 winters at Camp Maxey near Paris, Texas.

Our observations may represent a northward winter range expansion of this Nearctic-Neotropical migrant. At Red Slough, the winter in 2005–2006 was one of the warmest on record and drought conditions prevailed, which may have allowed Henslow's Sparrows to winter farther north than typically expected. Alternately, Hurricane Katrina may have disturbed Henslow's Sparrow winter habitat along the Gulf Coast, which may have caused Henslow's Sparrow to disperse into new areas like Red Slough.

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