

ART. VII. CRITICAL REMARKS ON THE RACES OF THE
SHARP-TAILED SPARROW

By W. E. CLYDE TODD¹

In the Auk for January, 1938 (vol. 55, p. 116), I described a new race of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow under the name *Ammospiza caudacuta altera*; the description was based on a series of specimens from southern James Bay. The type selected was a breeding bird, but the majority of the specimens (adults and immature) were in fresh fall plumage. This plumage shows the characters of the new form even to better advantage than does that of more worn breeding birds. *A. c. altera* is intermediate between the plainly colored race, *subvirgata*, of the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia coast and the richly colored form, *nelsoni*, of the upper Mississippi Valley and adjoining parts of Canada. In describing it, I surmised that its migration route bore eastward to the Atlantic coast rather than southward to the Great Lakes—a supposition that would account for the number of presumed intergrades between *nelsoni* and *subvirgata* known from the former region. I found that specimens (in the collection of the U. S. National Museum) from the type locality of *nelsoni* (northern Illinois) all belonged to the richly colored form, of which I had an ample series of breeding specimens from Saskatchewan. A series of fall birds from Erie, Pennsylvania, also appeared to be referable to the same race.

Dr. Harry C. Oberholser, after examination of certain pertinent material, now advises me that both these races (*nelsoni* and *altera*) occur in migration all over the Mississippi Valley in general and in northern Illinois in particular. Moreover, there are specimens of both (so he claims) among the type series collected by E. W. Nelson himself. Relying on Dr. Nelson's statement that the specimen he was sending J. A. Allen for identification was a fair average of the birds he had collected, I felt that I was justified in assuming that his other specimens were like it. If there was a chance, however, that two races were involved in the series from the type locality, a re-examination of the actual type specimen was

¹ This paper was written in 1939, but was held over pending the expected acquisition of more pertinent material. In the summer of 1941 I went to James Bay with the special object of securing additional breeding specimens of the form of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow of that region. These were sent to Mr. Peters for study and comparison, and his report thereon has been elaborated into the paper that follows herewith.

needed to determine the true application of the name *nelsoni*. At Dr. Oberholser's instance, Mr. J. L. Peters undertook the re-examination and used for comparison a carefully selected specimen which had been compared with the type of *altera*. Mr. Peters' conclusion was that the type of *nelsoni* is the same as the birds I have recently called *altera*, and that there were, indeed, two forms represented in the series of birds collected by Nelson at the type locality.

Unfortunate nomenclatural complications thereupon ensue. The race so long known under the name *nelsoni* would have to be called *Ammospiza caudacuta becki* (Ridgway), a name given to a vagrant example taken in California. The intermediate race would then take the name *nelsoni* (with *altera* as a synonym). Before accepting these confusing shifts in the names I felt it would be well to make a further and independent study of the points involved. The results of this review deserve to be put on record.

Ammodromus caudacutus var. *nelsoni* was described by Dr. Allen in the Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History for March, 1875 (vol. 17, p. 293). It was based on a single specimen received from Dr. Nelson—presumably one of several collected by the latter on September 17, 1874, in the Calumet Marshes at Ainsworth (now South Chicago) near Chicago, Illinois. The describer compared it with a series of Sharp-tailed Sparrows "taken at the same season in the Charles River marshes, in Cambridge," from which he found it to differ "very markedly." Almost certainly, Dr. Allen's comparison was made with specimens of the race now known as *subvirgatus*, and not with true *caudacutus*. Despite Dr. Allen's definite statement that he had only one specimen before him for description, Outram Bangs listed *two* specimens as co-types (Bulletin Museum of Comparative Zoölogy, 70, 1930, 383). These (Nos. 24,407-8) were collected in the Calumet Marshes in October, 1874. Through Mr. Peters' courtesy I have had the opportunity of examining these specimens and comparing them with others in the U. S. National Museum from the same locality and collector. I doubt the propriety of considering these specimens as the types. The discrepancies in the dates and in the number of specimens are certainly suggestive. Both specimens unfortunately lack original labels. On the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy label of one is penciled in Dr. Allen's handwriting the word "type." In the catalogue both are marked "types of description"—also in Dr. Allen's characteristic handwriting.

There is another specimen of Nelson's Sparrow (No. 24,802) in the

Museum of Comparative Zoölogy. This example bears Dr. Nelson's original label, with the locality Ainsworth, Illinois, and the date September 17, 1874. The catalogue entry on this bird, however, seems to be confused, since the date of collection is given there as September 28, 1875, and the date of receipt January, 1876. Mr. Peters thinks that the entry date is probably correct, as all the other entries in the catalogue between 24,456 and 24,803 are also dated in 1876. But in view of the several discrepancies in the records I am led to suspect a mixup involving the identity of the type. In my opinion it is far likelier that No. 24,802 is the actual type of *A. c. nelsoni* and that Dr. Allen inadvertently marked the other two specimens as types at a later date.

However this may be, it so happens that all three specimens are virtually alike. They are a little paler and duller, it is true, than most of the other specimens from the region, but all are clearly and unmistakably referable to one and the same race. When compared with fall specimens from James Bay, the differences stand out distinctly. Individual variation exists in both series, but it is not excessive. The single specimen in the collection of the U. S. National Museum that Dr. Oberholser calls an intermediate (No. 83,497) I have no difficulty in placing with *nelsoni* (as that form is generally understood). Whichever specimen we accept as the actual type of *nelsoni*, I would unhesitatingly include it in the richly colored series. The slightly paler coloration is fully within the range of individual variation in that form; it has no geographical significance.

Although naturally reluctant to question the conclusions of such distinguished authorities as Dr. Oberholser and Mr. Peters, I find myself unable to follow them after having again gone over my material with great care. I think the names ought to stand as given in my first paper. Further study and comparison have indicated that our series from Erie, Pennsylvania, collected in the fall of 1900, is not quite typical of *nelsoni*, yet is not referable to *altera*. Is it possible that these birds have come from a distinct and probably intermediate breeding ground, as yet undiscovered? In view of what we know at present of the respective ranges of *altera* and *nelsoni*, direct intergradation between these two forms would seem unlikely.

I am indebted to the authorities of the U. S. National Museum, the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy, for the loan of specimens, without which this study would have been impossible.



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