

WHERE DOES THE LARGE-BILLED SPARROW  
SPEND THE SUMMER?

BY JOSEPH GRINNELL.

STRANGE as it may seem, there is a land bird of California which abounds at times in suitable places but whose nesting grounds appear to be entirely unknown. This species, our only land bird yet remaining thus distinguished, is the Large-billed Sparrow (*Passerculus rostratus*). A bird of such unusual interest warrants particular attention. It is the object of my present article to show how little we really know about it, in the hope that some one may soon come forward with additional and definite information.

The bird was originally described<sup>1</sup> by Cassin in 1852 from specimens taken at San Diego. In 1859 Heermann recorded<sup>2</sup> it from San Pedro and Santa Barbara, as well as San Diego. Cooper in 1870<sup>3</sup> added Cape St. Lucas to its list of record stations, and also presented some information in regard to its occurrence at San Pedro. This information, quoted far and wide to the present day, is to the effect that *Passerculus rostratus* was found breeding. But that there must have been some error seems now to be more than likely. The evidence for my belief in this respect is presented further on.

In 1883 Belding recorded<sup>4</sup> the species as found in winter at several localities in the Cape region of Lower California; also in December and April at Guaymas, Sonora, across the Gulf from Lower California. In 1885 Brewster recorded<sup>5</sup> two specimens taken by Stephens at Port [= Cape] Lobos, on the Mexican shore of the Gulf of California just south of the 30th parallel. These were taken on August 20, 1884, on a gravelly beach with no marshes near (as Mr. Stephens has recently informed me). In

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<sup>1</sup> Proc. Ac. Nat. Sc. Phila., Oct. 1852, 184.

<sup>2</sup> Pac. R.R. Rep., X, 1859, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Orn. Cal., I, 1870, 184.

<sup>4</sup> Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus., V, March, 1883, 537; VI, 1883, 343.

<sup>5</sup> Auk, II, April 1885, 198.



1890 Belding stated<sup>1</sup> that he had found the species common in winter only, in the Cape region of Lower California, and in the vicinity of San Diego Bay, but although he had searched for it in the latter locality during April and May he had been unable to find it later in the spring than March 10.

In 1893 Anthony recorded<sup>2</sup> Large-billed Sparrows as very common in fall and winter all along the seacoast of northern Lower California from San Ramon northward. He remarks on their abundance "until the nesting season approaches, when they suddenly disappear and are not again noticed until August." It is further stated by the same writer that a bird was seen by A. M. Ingersoll at San Diego apparently "carrying food for its young," but no nest could be found. Anthony also records that in April, 1887, he "shot a female at San Ramon that had undoubtedly left her eggs but a few moments before." But he subsequently says that in spite of patient search since, he has "never again seen birds during the nesting season," so that the above observations lack confirmation. In the same connection Anthony makes the following remark, with which I have reason to concur. "The eggs of this species which are frequently offered to the public by local collectors of Southern California have, so far as my observations have gone, always been taken from the nests of *A. beldingi* [= the Belding Marsh Sparrow]."

In 1898 I recorded<sup>3</sup> the Large-billed Sparrow as "common in winter in the salt marshes and along the beaches" of Los Angeles County, but less numerous than the Belding Marsh Sparrow. "In San Pedro Harbor the birds frequent wharves and breakwaters, and even hop fearlessly about the decks of vessels, feeding on crumbs and flies. Although observed from August to late in April, this sparrow apparently disappears altogether during the summer months, but where it breeds seems to be as yet unknown." These statements both accord exactly with my knowledge at the present day and I have nothing to add.

In 1899 Price recorded<sup>4</sup> what he called the St. Lucas Large-

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<sup>1</sup> Land Bds. Pac. Dist., Sept. 1890, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Zoe, IV, Oct. 1893, 240.

<sup>3</sup> Bds. Pac. Slope Los Angeles Co., March 1898, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Bull. Cooper Orn. Club, Sept. 1899, 92.



billed Sparrow, with an interrogation mark, as "quite common" in November and December, 1898, on the marsh lands about the mouth of the Colorado River at the head of the Gulf of California. "It was not seen away from the coarse sea grass, *Uniola palmeri*."

In 1902 appeared Brewster's paper<sup>1</sup> reviewing the ornithology of southern Lower California. In this he states that "all the specimens [of the Large-billed Sparrow] thus far collected in the Cape Region have been taken in autumn, winter, or early spring. Indeed, there is no present evidence that the bird breeds anywhere in Lower California." Mr. Brewster's collector obtained no less than fifty-nine skins, secured from August 31 until "early March."

Joseph Mailliard has only this year recorded<sup>2</sup> a specimen taken at Santa Cruz, California, August 27, 1895. This is by far the northernmost station. And Breninger has even more recently recorded<sup>3</sup> the species as secured in February on San Clemente Island.

This completes the definite distributional data at hand. Now let us turn to what evidence has been offered in regard to the breeding grounds of *Passerculus rostratus*. I have made personal inquiry of several observers who ought to know something along this line, if anything is known at all, but without eliciting any new facts. Mr. Frank Stephens, who is probably best posted of anyone on the general ornithology of the Southwest, writes me that he knows of "no breeding record that may be considered of value."

Cooper's statements,<sup>4</sup> previously referred to, are as follows: "I found them plenty at San Pedro and San Diego at all seasons, and doubt whether they migrate at all." "At San Pedro I saw them in July feeding their young, but never found a nest that I was certain belonged to this species." Now here are some present day facts: The Belding Marsh Sparrow (*Passerculus beldingi*) is an abundant permanent resident on the salt marshes

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<sup>1</sup> Bull. Mus. Comp. Zoöl., XLI, Sept. 1902, 138.

<sup>2</sup> Condor, VI, Jan. 1904, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Auk, XXI, April 1904, 223.

<sup>4</sup> Om. Cal., I, 1870, 184.



in the vicinity of San Pedro (and San Diego, too). It nests profusely in the immediate vicinity of San Pedro, as can be attested to by numerous recent observers, such as Swarth, Morcom, Daggett, Law, Judson, and myself. But none of these students has detected the presence of the Large-billed Sparrow in the same locality, or anywhere else, for that matter, between "late in April" and August 31, as far as I have been informed. Now turning to Cooper's account of "*Passerculus anthinus*, the Titlark Sparrow," which to this extent equals the Belding Marsh Sparrow, we find these statements:<sup>1</sup> "They abound in winter south of San Francisco, but I am not sure that any of them spend the summer so far south, though inclined to think that they do. Near San Diego, in February, they began to utter a short but pleasant song as they perched on the top of some tall weed; and though I observed them there until April, I did not succeed in finding any nests, and *have not found the species at San Pedro in summer.*"<sup>2</sup> It is well known that Cooper collected but few specimens (often only one) of a species, and from the above-quoted statements it is plain to me that in his field observations he sadly confused the two species, which are not strikingly different out of hand. This reasonably accounts for the "breeding record" of *Passerculus rostratus* at San Pedro, which we need therefore no longer hesitate to put down as erroneous.

Right here it is interesting to note how definitely expressed assertions may have evolved from a very small foundation of fact. Among the many general accounts of the species in current literature, I select two of the extremest illustrations. In Reed's 'North American Birds' Eggs,' recently published, we read (p. 253) under the heading of Large-billed Sparrow, "...their nesting habits are similar to and the eggs not distinguished with certainty from those of the latter [Belding Marsh Sparrow]." Of course this is *probable*, perhaps; but have authentic eggs been compared? Again, in Wheelock's 'Birds of California,' we find under Large-billed Sparrow (p. 219), "California Breeding Range: along the salt marshes of the coast from the San Diegan district north to

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<sup>1</sup> Orn. Cal., I, 1870, 183.

<sup>2</sup> Italics mine.



Santa Barbara" [!]. Also: "Its breeding habits are so similar to those of the Belding Marsh Sparrow that no separate description is necessary." What positive assurance! Such things would be only amusing if they were not a menace to the reputation of ornithology as a serious science.

In recounting the foregoing evidence I have not been endeavoring to prove that the Large-billed Sparrow does not breed at all! But simply that its whereabouts during the nesting season are not so far definitely known. This is for us to yet find out. To sum up, *Passerculus rostratus* is a migrant, occurring in winter on suitable seashores from Cape St. Lucas and Guaymas, Mexico, north as far as Santa Cruz, California. Its numbers are large enough so that its time of arrival and departure are easy to determine. But the interval between its departure in the spring and arrival in the autumn amounts to a period of four months, during which we know nothing of its whereabouts. It might not be a sin to speculate somewhat in this regard.

On the Atlantic coast a similar problem puzzled ornithologists for many years. The Ipswich Sparrow occurred on the coast of New England in winter, but totally disappeared in summer, no one knew where. The breeding grounds were finally discovered to be on Sable Island near Nova Scotia, to which it is now known to be exclusively confined during the nesting season. I once thought that *Passerculus rostratus* might have a similarly restricted habitat to the northward or westward somewhere. But all of the Santa Barbara group of islands have been explored in summer, and so has every other likely locality on the coast and islands of British Columbia and Alaska. That the Large-billed Sparrow has a northern insular breeding area, paralleling the case of the Ipswich Sparrow, seems to me therefore extremely doubtful.

The alternative theory is that the Large-billed Sparrow breeds somewhere to the *south* of its winter home, and *migrates north* in the fall, returning southwards each spring! Such a suggestion may seem absurd, but nevertheless fits best the limited amount of data so far in our possession. This possible southern summer home may exist on either coast of Lower California, or on the coast of Mexico, great stretches of which remain unexplored. The possibility that the closely related forms *sanctorum* and *gutta-*



*tus* (= *halophilus*), which appear to be chiefly represented so far in collections by *breeding* specimens, represent the worn summer plumage of *rostratus*, also presents itself. The effects of abrasion in fading colors, in restricting and intensifying shaft-streaks, and in modifying measurements, are well known. The many experienced workers who have studied the large series of specimens in eastern museums must have given these factors due consideration, so that we may be wasting space in suggesting this possibility. In either case, what a remarkable exception there would be to the rule of southward migration in the northern hemisphere!

Finally, let me ask the question again — Where does the Large-billed Sparrow spend the summer?

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THE STATUS OF *HELMINTHOPHILA LEUCOBRON-*  
*CHIALIS* AND *HELMINTHOPHILA LAW-*  
*RENCEI*.<sup>1</sup>

BY LOUIS B. BISHOP.

IN the way of theory as to the status of the puzzling specimens labelled with these names I have nothing new to offer, but wish simply to bring to your attention a few facts that seem to go far to establish an old theory, first advanced, I believe, by Mr. Chapman.

In southern Connecticut there are three distinct forms of the Blue-winged Warbler (*H. pinus*), taking males alone into consideration — the ordinary form with rich gamboge-yellow lower parts, white wing-bars and bright olive-green back; a second form, like the last but with gamboge-yellow wing-patch, resembling the Golden-winged (*H. chrysoptera*), which is much the rarest; and, third, a form with pale yellow lower parts, much paler back, and

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<sup>1</sup> Read at the Twenty-second Congress of the American Ornithologists' Union, Cambridge, Mass., Nov. 29, 1904.



Grinnell, Joseph. 1905. "Where Does the Large-Billed Sparrow Spend the Summer?" *The Auk* 22, 16–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4069871>.

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