



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Sighting Baird's sparrow the perfect gift - Aerial View

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The Plain Dealer

ON THE ROAD- In an hour's time, we drove from the cool, wet spruce and aspen forests of Central Manitoba to the hot, dry windswept grasslands of the province's Southwest corner.

The change in scenery was energizing, and the perfect kickoff to the last leg of my two-week birding tour of the Upper Midwest with my son Bret.

Plows and bulldozers have made prairies such as these precious. The existence of the birds that depend on this specialized eco-system is tenuous, and many are listed among the most threatened species in North America.

So it was with a mix of joy and awe that we embraced a special opportunity to commune with birds that once thrived across the Great Plains, and could be found as far east as Ohio, but are now limited to pockets of shrinking prairie in remote corners of the map.

Cruising the dusty backroads around Melita, I stopped the car and we jumped out whenever a bird of interest appeared. Traffic posed little danger; we typically had the roads to ourselves - a good thing considering the fields and roadsides were alive with bird activity, requiring frequent stops.

Out here in the land that development forgot, upland sandpipers were easily observed perched on fence posts, occasionally emitting their comedic wolf-whistle calls and seemingly unbothered by our presence.

Swainson's and ferruginous hawks outnumbered the red-tails. And - hurray! - there were no house sparrows to be found, only Savannah, vesper, grasshopper, and clay-colored sparrows, with a few rarities thrown in for excitement.

Bret's sharp ears detected the odd hissing song of a Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow, described as a "choking, wheezy gasp," and we soon had up-close views of this bright, orange-and-gray striped marsh skulker.

Sharp-tailed grouse and gray partridge flushed at our approach, but later posed as if we weren't there.

Sprague's pipits soared and fluttered in elaborate mating displays, all the while delivering a rolling cascade song of descending whistles from high overhead.

This is where East meets West, and no two species better exemplify this than the Eastern and Western kingbirds, which often perch side-by-side on the barbed wire fences that line the miles of roadways, hawking insects and chattering in their own languages.

We laughed watching a flock of blackbirds and crows chasing a coyote, which must have just raided a nest.

Of all the grassland birds we had targeted, few posed a greater challenge or promised a greater reward

than the Baird's sparrow. It's rare. It's beautiful. And it's extremely secretive and evasive.

Many birders who travel to this stretch of prairie in Manitoba and North Dakota arrive with one bird in mind, and return home empty-handed.

Bret and I struck out in Canada, and were determined not to miss on our home turf.

Our first stop was the Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge in the northwest corner of the state, a mix of grasslands, potholes and pockets of scrub and woods. A cold wind was blowing, and the sunshine of dawn had given way to steel-gray cloud cover. As usual, it appeared as if we had the park to ourselves.

We spotted a Sprague's pipit, a sharp-tailed grouse, and uncountable numbers of vesper, clay-colored and Savannah sparrows - but not the one sparrow we most desired.

Less than a mile from the park exit, right beside a sign for a grouse-viewing blind, Bret heard a distinctive song: three light, ringing notes followed by a trill. My friend Jim Heflich of South Euclid, a regular visitor to North Dakota, says the Baird's song reminds him of the familiar closing chords of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: "Buzz, buzz, buzz, bzzzzz!"

So we had found the sparrow, which was only half the battle. Now to see it. We pished and called and searched the grass for movement. And then a miracle happened. The bird fluttered up to our car and walked around for a few minutes before running back into the grass and disappearing.

No matter what happens from now until we return home, the trip is a success.

What a Father's Day gift: a Baird's sparrow.

NOTE: To read more about the Baird's sparrow, to see a photograph and listen to its song, log onto the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Web site at: www.birds.cornell.edu/ and click on allaboutbirds. Read more of McCarty's blogs at cleveland.com/insideout.

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