



# THE PLAIN DEALER

**AERIAL VIEW**

## **Remarkable hybrid sparrow a gem of a find in Lorain County**

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**Plain Dealer Reporter**

I never had visited the Charlemont Reservation in the deepest southwestern corner of Lorain County, and yet on a visit last weekend, the park felt strangely familiar.

It must have been the summer stew of steamy heat, droning bugs and intoxicating scents of grass and flowers that flicked a memory switch in my head and took me back to my youth.

I spent many a hot July day stomping through the fields of west Akron in search of wildlife and adventures, which branded a permanent imprint on my mind and character. If only I had the foresight to bring along a pair of binoculars, imagine the variety of birds I could have found.

In my search for exciting new birding destinations, I took a tip from Ethan Kistler and drove far into the countryside in the hope of finding as many grassland species as possible.

Ethan, 17, is one of Northeast Ohio's top young birders and recently made a startling discovery while conducting a breeding-bird census at Charlemont. As he scanned Quarry Road, he heard the unmistakable insectlike buzzing song of a clay-colored sparrow, a common Great Plains breeder but a remarkable bird in these parts and potentially a first summer sighting for the area.

Only later, after the bird was netted and examined in the hand, did we learn how special this bird really is.

Andy Jones, curator of ornithology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, determined the bird is actually a hybrid of clay-colored and field sparrows, and it exhibits traits of both species of *Spizella* sparrows.

My son Bret and I had no trouble finding the bird on Saturday as it sang merrily from atop a bush, apparently unfazed by its brush with the net and time in the hand. From our vantage point, it looked more like a field sparrow with its pink bill and plain face, with only a hint of a clay-colored's moustache stripe and streaked cap.

Check out photos and video of the bird, posted by Aaron Boone of the breeding-bird census:  
<http://picasaweb.google.com/boone70/SpizellaSparrow?authkey=3tHI2xApLRQ>.

A mowed bridle trail weaves through the park, offering access to prime grassland and brush habitat. Field, chipping and song sparrows were plentiful and vocal, joined by indigo buntings, Eastern towhees, willow flycatchers, Eastern bluebirds, Baltimore orioles, Eastern kingbirds, house wrens, Eastern meadowlarks and gray catbirds. Bret's sharp ears detected the distinctive "hiccup" song of a secretive Henslow's sparrow.

A sharp metallic "kick" from a treetop revealed the presence of a rose-breasted grosbeak. A wood thrush sang from a distant tree line. American kestrels hunted from atop trees, barns and utility wires.

Passing a pond, we kicked up a green heron and a solitary sandpiper. As we walked away, we heard the whinny of a sora rail.

Before heading for home, we stopped by one of our favorite summer hot spots, the nearby Wellington Reservation. The usual profusion of willow flycatchers was there, along with field sparrows and indigo buntings. But I can't recall ever seeing so many cedar waxwings, which seemed to be everywhere hawking insects.

Wood ducks burst from the ponds, and several marsh wrens rattled from the cattails. A Henslow's sparrow sang from inside a tuft of grass, and a juvenile bobolink hopped up on a perch. A red-shouldered hawk called from the woods.

The ponds were still too deep to attract shorebirds, but there should be reliable mud there for migrating peeps and waders when they pass through in a month or so.

#### Sightings

A black-billed cuckoo made a welcome appearance in the woods behind the Bay Village fire station, Dean Good reported. A pair of scarlet tanagers and a barred owl have been there throughout the summer.

The Lorain impoundment continues to provide good shorebird habitat with semipalmated plover, spotted, least and semipalmated sandpiper, lesser yellowlegs and short-billed dowitcher, Paula Lozano reported.

At least three families of prothonotary warblers are at the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville, naturalist Tim Fairweather said. Greater yellowlegs and American woodcock also have made appearances.

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