



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Shy LeConte's sparrow makes an appearance at Mentor Marsh

Thursday, October 25, 2007

James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

The challenge of birding is one of the reasons we enjoy it so much.

Finding the birds is the first hurdle. Birds, by their nature, are secretive and don't appreciate being stalked by people with binoculars.

Identifying the different species after they've been located is a talent acquired after years of experience. Often, you must make an identification call after just a few seconds, while the birds typically are obscured or moving about.

Now, apply all of those factors to the pursuit of a bird that Jim McCormac describes in his field guide, "Birds of Ohio," as the hardest to find of the 300 or so species regularly seen in the state: the LeConte's sparrow.

Author Pete Dunne calls the LeConte's "secretive, bordering on clandestine."

It takes an especially talented birder to find and identify a LeConte's, which bears a close resemblance to the Nelson's sharp-tailed, another sparrow that sometimes shares space with LeConte's in the wet, grassy fields that both birds favor.

I had the good fortune to accompany a few of the best birders in Ohio on Sunday for a venture into the Mentor Marsh.

Dense stands of phragmites have filled this magical site over the years, providing ideal habitat for sparrows, but making it terribly tough on birders who seek them.

Several paths have been carved through the marsh, and boardwalks have been laid for access into this imposing terrain. Birders have been rewarded in the past year with awesome views of American bittern, grasshopper and sharp-tailed sparrows.

Our reward was a LeConte's.

Lake County birders Jerry Talkington and Ray Hannikman succeeded in finding the tiniest of North American sparrows, less than 5 inches long. It's a world-class skulker that abhors being flushed, preferring to run away whenever disturbed. Almost all are seen in October when they are silent, and the eastern edge of their migratory corridor brings a trickle of individuals through Ohio.

But when you see one: What a beauty! It has a buff-orange face and breast bib with slim streaks, a gray cheek patch and a white central head stripe.

I knew that description from looking at photos in the field guides. But a firsthand sighting was in doubt for a while, even though Talkington and Hannikman had seen the sparrow the previous three days, once within arms' reach. On this day, the sparrow would have to be spooked into the open.

Then Talkington saw it fly into a stand of cattails and alerted our group of 10. It perched for five seconds and dropped down, disappearing into a tuft of grass. Thirty seconds later it was back up on a cattail stalk, and oh, what a fine bird it was -- a first-time sighting for three in the group.

Finding the LeConte's after that was more difficult than tracking a mouse. Fleeting glimpses and flashes of orange-and-white were as good as it got. Admiring the abundant swamp sparrows and a fly-over Cooper's hawk would have to suffice for the rest of the foray into the marsh.

Sparrows were the target species of the weekend, but none would top the LeConte's. Lincoln's, white-crowned, white-throated and swamp sparrows dominated the pond grass and scrub at the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville on Saturday. A glossy ibis was a nice surprise. And it was great to welcome back the green-winged teal, American wigeon, ruddy and black ducks to the park.

Gordon State Park in Cleveland, outside the fence at Dike 14, was hopping with field, vesper, Savannah, chipping, song, white-crowned and white-throated sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, and palm and yellow-rumped warblers.

To reach James F. McCarty:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-5193

Previous columns online:

cleveland.com/columns

© 2007 The Plain Dealer

© 2007 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.