

# A ONE-WINGED SAVANNAH SPARROW

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Watching our Brittany spaniel running and circling about in an old hay field near our Winnipeg home in the evening of 30 August 1996, I suddenly realized that he had scented something in a patch of Red Clover. As he wheeled about, two or three sparrows flew up, perched close by, and a moment later flew off. It was then that our dog pounced and seized something; when I shouted, he dropped it, and I ran to see what he had captured. I was surprised to find that he'd killed a Savannah Sparrow fledgling, apparently one of a family group. The species is common in this meadow, but how had he managed to capture a fledged bird?

The dead bird was warm, the eyes were clear, and there was some fresh blood on the abdomen; it was also wet with saliva. The left wing was missing, and I assumed at first that the dog had bitten it off. Closer examination showed that the wing had been severed about halfway along the forearm, but it was an old injury. There was no blood and the distal end, or tip of the stub, was covered with clean bare skin that was slightly calloused. Later dissection showed that the shortened forearm was about half the length of the normal right one, 13 mm, as compared to 23 mm. The radius and ulna, two bones that comprise the forearm, lie close together. The distal end of the radius curved inwards and was

joined to the severed tip of the rounded ulna by a bony bridge which seemed to originate from that larger bone. The bird was a male, with an unossified skull.

The wing could have been severed by some predator while the bird was still in the nest or shortly after fledging. However, the well-feathered and functional right wing, sound legs and feet, etc., and the bird's apparent good health, make this seem unlikely as the cause. The presence of three newly emerged secondaries on the shortened wing was puzzling. The bird could have been hatched with an abnormally short forearm, or, and this seems more likely, it sustained an injury when emerging from the egg. Either way, given the nature of its handicap, the survival of this individual to the fledgling stage seems remarkable.

Although only a minor observation, this provides another example of the strong healing power and tenacious nature of birds. I am reminded of reports of several ducks, including a Mallard and Blue-winged Teal, that had survived the loss of an entire wing prior to being taken by hunters.<sup>1,2</sup>

1. Caskey, R.D. 1950. One-winged duck. *Blue Jay* 8: 28.
2. Nero, R.W. 1960. One-winged ducks. *Blue Jay* 18: 76.