

HENSLOW'S SPARROW AT ENNISKILLEN: THE FIRST RECORD FOR SASKATCHEWAN

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On 8 July 2014, I was part of a team conducting habitat assessments and detection surveys for the endangered Dakota Skipper (*Hesperia dacotae*). Our target habitat was dry hilltops containing purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and porcupine grass (*Stipa spartea*) on select sites in the Rural Municipality of Enniskillen No. 3, about 55 km east of Estevan, Saskatchewan. The weather was warm with a mix of sun and cloud and a steady breeze. While returning from the target habitat, we passed through a multi-year fallow area of tall, mixed-grass prairie that appeared to have a seep or spring widely pooling (or draining) below the vegetation. The northwest corner of the tall grass plot appeared to hold more water than the rest, and contained several singing Sedge Wrens (*Cistothorus platensis*). The remaining 90 per cent of the plot had an unusual abundance of singing Grasshopper Sparrows (*Ammodramus savannarum*). It was unlike other habitats or avian communities visited during our fieldwork in the region. While traversing the habitat at roughly 14:00 h, I first heard a short insect-like song of a Henslow's Sparrow (*Centronyx henslowii*) and paused to listen. After several minutes, I was reasonably confident a second clear yet short song of the Henslow's Sparrow had been heard. Being new to Saskatchewan, I used a smartphone to verify that the province is outside the normal range of Henslow's Sparrow. After waiting several more minutes, a single, poorly defined and unconfirmed song was the only additional audio observation. My unfamiliarity with many aspects of the local fauna and their noises, time of day, brevity of calls, range disparity and a pressing work schedule led me to dismiss the short calls and we traveled to our next survey site.

Early that evening, I conducted additional research, noting that Henslow's

Sparrow did not appear on the official checklist of birds of Saskatchewan or Manitoba.^{1,2} A query of the eBird database showed numerous records in Minnesota with sporadic occurrences in North and South Dakota.³ Further reading was focused on the Henslow's Sparrow's preferred habitat requirements, listed in the Canadian Recovery Strategy as tall and dense grass cover, a thick thatch layer, a lack of emergent vegetation, large areas of grassland habitat and low-lying wet areas.⁴ Many of these features were matched by the habitat where the potential Henslow's Sparrow songs had been heard earlier in the day.

Considering the habitat preferences and the potential calls heard, I decided to drive back to the site in an attempt to confirm the observation, arriving at dusk, with digital recordings of the Henslow's Sparrow song and a portable speaker. The wind had dropped and the skies cleared, with a large moon rising above the horizon. LeConte's Sparrows (*Ammodramus leconteii*) were now the only birds singing. After a few minutes of silent listening and no results, the playback was initiated and repeated 40-50 times without response. I then ceased playback and began preparing to leave the site when a loud song of the Henslow's Sparrow was clearly heard very close to where I was standing. It was so prominent that I thought the recording had accidentally played while idly held. Playback was initiated again with six or seven additional songs but none received a response. It wasn't until playback had been stopped that the loud, clear song of a Henslow's Sparrow was heard once again at close range. Over the next several minutes, brief 2-3 plays of the digital song were used to elicit a response from the inquisitive male Henslow's Sparrow. The light was not suitable for photographs, so recordings of the song were made with "video mode" on a standard point-and-shoot camera (Canon Powershot SX30). After securing audio documentation, I left the site. Our busy survey schedule and the bird's presence

on private property prevented any further observations from being made.

Identification

The identification rested on the brief but distinctive, insect-like song heard several times during two visits on 8 July 2014. Each song was a distinctly two-syllabled, insect-like *sic-tlic*, less than a second in duration. The double note and short duration of the songs is unlike those of closely related species such as Grasshopper, Nelson's (*Ammodramus nelsoni*), or LeConte's Sparrows. Calls of other sparrow species were considered, as well as the potential for other birds or even insects to produce a similar noise. It was the second site visit that put any questions about the identification to rest, providing the ability to simultaneously compare the song at close range, in direct response to the Henslow's Sparrow playback, with little other background noise. The song was almost identical to playback with only slight variation, and the vigorous response further solidified the identification. The digital recording of the song is available, and two sonograms have been produced (Figure 1). The cluster of five strong features within the frequency range 4-10 kHz and barely half a second total duration closely resembles published sonograms and appears to be diagnostic for Henslow's Sparrow. An absence of visual evidence, the secretive nature of the individual, providing little viewing opportunity despite close proximity, match the behavioural traits of the species.

Habitat

The habitat was a tall stand of multi-year, fallow mixed-grass prairie, notable in having very shallow pools of water beneath the thatch layer. Using Google Earth, the core habitat was measured as roughly 500 m east/west by 200 m north/south, roughly 10 ha, with a sparse border of deciduous shrubs and trees. Within the core habitat, the northwestern corner appeared to be the water outflow

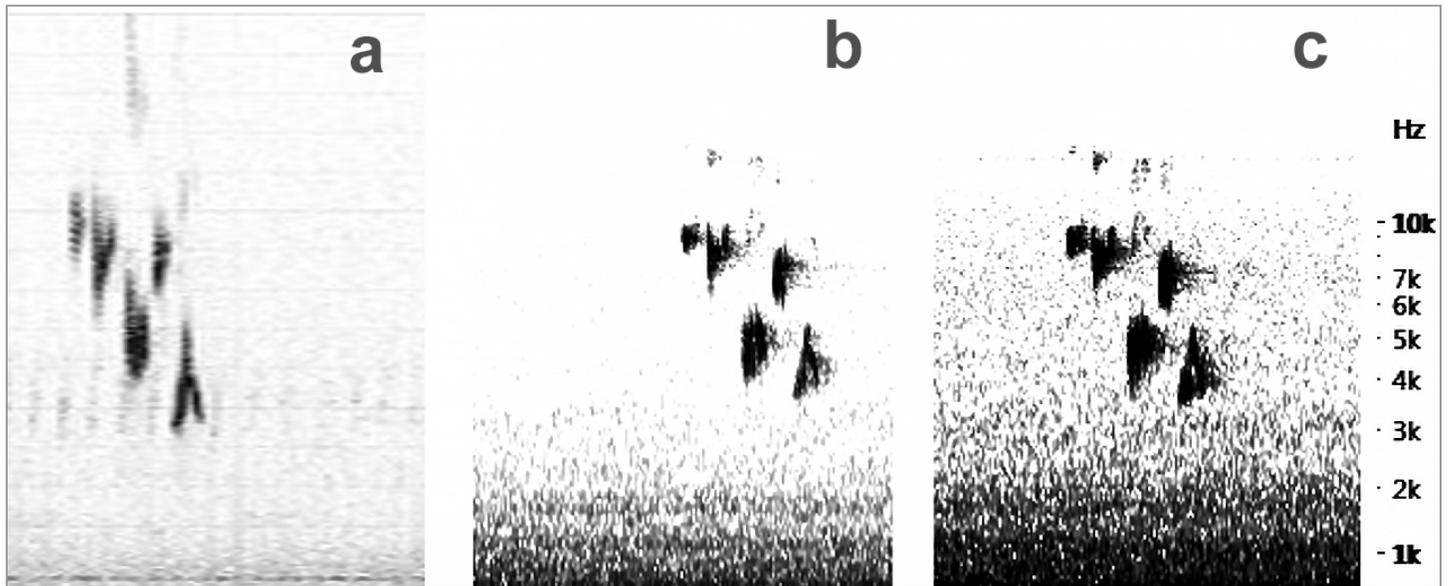


FIGURE 1. Sonograms of Henslow's Sparrow songs: (a) reference sonogram adapted from Ref. 12; (b) and (c) recorded at Enniskillen, Saskatchewan, 8 July 2014. Note that the frequency scales for (b) and (c) are logarithmic, while that for (a) is linear. This makes (b) and (c) vertically compressed as compared with (a). The two scales are aligned at a frequency of 10 kHz, and the duration of each clip is 1 second.

source, suspected of being a seep or spring. The ground in this area was uneven with scattered tussock features. The remainder of the core habitat (90 per cent) was the level grass underlain with pools, as described above. Similar habitat was likely present ~200 m beyond the western and eastern limits of the core habitat although it was not visited. On the northern edge, dry level prairie extended several hundred meters beyond a slight treed ridge. To the south, dry short-grass prairie hills containing the target species of Dakota Skipper, purple coneflower and porcupine grass stretched for ~100 m before levelling off over a broad floodplain. Measuring all immediate prairie habitats yields an area of 30 ha, with an extended area of 150 ha before prairie or grassland habitats are no longer the dominant vegetation community. Due to the nature of the observation, an inventory of plant species was not completed. Four photographs were taken, facing N, E, S and W from the centre of the core habitat; the southward view is shown in Figure 2.

Discussion

The northwestern limit of the Henslow's Sparrow's breeding range is commonly mapped within Minnesota, where it is classified as an endangered species.⁵ Igl discusses the historical and recent status of the Henslow's Sparrow



FIGURE 2. View from the centre of the core habitat, looking south.

in South Dakota; where it is classified as a rare breeder.⁶ Nest records exist for North Dakota, but the species is generally considered irregular in the state.⁷ These records extend as far northwest as J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, about 130 km southeast of Enniskillen, SK.⁷ An endangered species in Canada, most records of migrants or territorial individuals have occurred in southern Ontario.⁸ Sporadic breeding has occurred in extreme southern Quebec, and wayward migrants have been recorded in Nova Scotia.⁸ This singing male at Enniskillen, responding to playback in damp, tall prairie grasses, likely represented a territorial individual. The Canadian recovery strategy suggests

that wetter sites may be the historical preferred breeding habitat as it would be "the most stable vegetation structure from year to year", and it has been reported that Henslow's Sparrows are more abundant at specific sites in Illinois during years with increased moisture conditions.⁹ Due to the nature of the Enniskillen observation, there are many questions left unanswered surrounding potential breeding or site fidelity. A singing male in seemingly suitable habitat at Paskwachi Point in the Hudson Bay Lowlands of Ontario from 27-29 July 2009 sets precedent for a vagrant yet territorial individual of this species.¹⁰

This observation from Enniskillen on 8 July 2014 represents the first documented

Henslow's Sparrow for Saskatchewan and the Canadian Prairies. Cryptic and highly secretive, the species is known for running through the grass rather than flushing, and for singing its short, insect-like song more regularly at night than during the morning.¹¹ It is hoped that the details in this account will help those hoping to identify additional occurrences of the inconspicuous Henslow's Sparrow.

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Editorial note from the late C. Stuart Houston after seeing an early draft of this article back in 2021:

John James Audubon was not only world-famous as a bird and mammal artist, but showed brilliant potential as a taxonomist. He described "Henslow's Bunting" as a brand-new species, based on its plumage and its pitifully weak song in 1829 — amazingly early for such a difficult identification. This was based on his observations in Kentucky in 1820, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Audubon had befriended John Stevens Henslow during his extended visit to Great Britain between 1826 and 1829. On March 9, 1828, Henslow presented in Audubon's words "an impressive sermon on Hope" at Great St. Mary's church in Cambridge. In 1831, dissuaded from accepting the post of naturalist on HMS Beagle for a two-

year voyage to South America (including the Galapagos Islands), Henslow instead successfully proposed his protégé Charles Darwin for the position. Further, Henslow's eldest daughter Frances Harriet married Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, a world-famous botanist, who succeeded his father William Jackson Hooker as director of Kew Gardens, and was a close friend of Darwin. Among the many plants named in honour of the Hookers are several species native to the Prairie Provinces.

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