

First Ohio Nesting Attempt of the Clay-colored Sparrow, *Spizella pallida* (Swainson)

JOHN WATTS AND MAC ALBIN

Columbus and Franklin County Metropolitan Park District, P.O. Box 29169, Columbus, OH 43229

Introduction

The Clay-colored Sparrow's nesting range was described by Bent "as occurring mainly in the upper Plains and Canadian Prairie Provinces, east of the Rockies to northern Michigan and western Ontario" (Bent, 1968). This species expanded east into and became more numerous in Michigan during the early 1900s. Today its center of distribution in Michigan is in the western Upper Peninsula and north central Lower Peninsula, where it regularly associates with Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*). Breeding pairs are found as far south as the "Thumb Region," of Sanilac, St. Clair, and Genesee counties south and east of Saginaw (McPeck, 1994).

On June 6, 1996, at approximately 7:30 A.M., while conducting a breeding bird survey in a large grassland area at Battelle-Darby Creek Metro Park (Pleasant Township, Franklin County, Ohio), the senior author identified the 3-4 note repetitive "buzzy" song of the Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*). The bird was found in a small American elm (*Ulmus americanus*) in an adjacent old field. It flew in a territory of approximately one-quarter acre (0.10 ha) singing from several perches. The bird was observed for about two hours by up to four observers, during which time it was also photographed.

On or about June 26, two separate reports of a second bird were made to Metro Parks. On July 1, park naturalist Mac Albin also felt confident that he had observed a second Clay-colored Sparrow in the territory. On July 2, the site was visited approximately 7:00 A.M. and observed from two vantage points. Once again, the male was singing in the American elm.

At 8:05 A.M., the second bird was located and observed carrying nesting material. The bird, which was presumed to be the female, flew into a multiflora rose, then appeared a few moments later where she was joined by the male and was observed mating in a dead shrub.

The pair was observed at some distance for approximately 35 minutes, and the female was photographed carrying nesting material. As she made several trips to the adjacent grass field to collect nesting material, she was always accompanied by the male, who made no effort to collect any nesting material. As the female returned to the nest site, the male perched in a nearby tree and resumed singing. This "male guarding" habit was consistent during the entire time of observation, and the male accompanied her on every trip in several directions. This behavior was also recorded in Michigan by Walkinshaw (1944) in the 1940s.

Clay-colored Sparrow nest with eggs.
Photograph by Lawrence Igl, U.S. Geological Survey.



After these observations, the nest was located and appeared to be nearly complete. The nest was composed of grass with a lining of finer grassy material. The nest was woven into the center of the multiflora rose and supported by the larger stems.

The habitat was an old field with scattered small green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*), honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), hawthorns (*Craetagus* sp.), and American elms. Herbaceous species consisted of cool season grasses, black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*), and prairie coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*). The territory was estimated to be approximately one-quarter acre (0.10 ha) in a field of about 5 acres (2.0 ha). An adjacent 20-acres (8.0 ha) of grassland/old field were also used for the collection of nest material.

On July 10, the area was rechecked. No eggs were found in the nest and the female could not be located. The male however, was still present on the territory and singing. On July 24, the area was searched thoroughly in hopes of locating the female or a second nest. Neither the male nor female was present and the original nest was in the same condition. The following measurements of the nest were recorded: Outside diameter 2.875 inches (7.1875 cm), inside diameter 1.75 inches (4.375 cm), depth 1.75 inches (4.375 cm). The shrub chosen for the nest site was 44 inches (1.12 m) tall and the nest was placed 7.5 inches (18.75 cm) above the ground.

This is the first known nesting attempt of the Clay-colored Sparrow in Ohio. The details of this record were first published in *The Ohio Cardinal* (Watts and Albin, 1996), along with a photograph, thus documenting Ohio's first nesting attempt. The first Ohio specimen was collected by Charles F. Walker on South Bass Island on May 12, 1940 (Peterjohn, 1989). Peterjohn (1989) describes the Clay-colored Sparrow as a casual but fairly regular spring migrant along Lake Erie, mostly from Ottawa and Lucas counties and near Cleveland. Accidental records also exist for Franklin and Butler counties. Most Ohio records occur between April 25 and May 22. They have been recorded two of every three years since 1976.

Literature Cited

- McPeck, Gail A., editor. 1994.** Birds of Michigan. Indiana University Press. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana. xv + 358 p.
- Peterjohn, Bruce G. 1989.** Birds of Ohio. Indiana University Press. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana. xiii + 237 p.
- Root, Oscar M., contributor. 1968.** *Spizella pallida* (Swainson) Clay-colored Sparrow. Pages 1186-1208 in Life Histories of the North American Cardinals, Grosbeaks, Buntings, Towhees, Finches, Sparrows and Allies Part II by Arthur Cleveland Bent and collaborators. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington, D.C. v-xi + 603-1248 p. + Plates 33-67.
- Walkinshaw, Lawrence Harvey. 1944.** Clay-colored Sparrow Notes. Jack-Pine Warbler 22: 119-131.
- Watts, John and Mac Albin. 1996.** First documented Ohio nesting attempt of the Clay-colored Sparrow. The Ohio Cardinal 19(4): 104-105.