

Clay-colored Sparrow *Spizella pallida*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Brushy habitat, overgrown fields, woodland edge

The Clay-colored Sparrow is historically a sparrow of our Midwestern prairie grasslands. During the twentieth century, it slowly expanded its breeding range eastward, east and north of the Great Lakes, into New England and eastern Canada. Breeding birds migrate south each year to spend the winter in southern Texas and Mexico.

This bird was first confirmed in South Carolina by a specimen collected in the fall of 1929. By 1980, there were a total of six reports from that state. Birds were found there during the fall, winter, and spring.

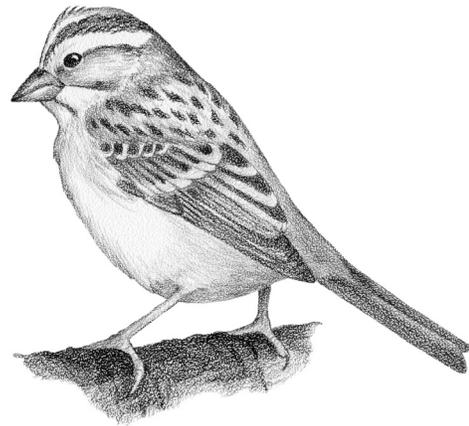
The Clay-colored Sparrow was first confirmed in North Carolina on September 19, 1963, at a banding station in the town of Duck. By 1981, there were over 30 reports of Clay-colored Sparrow in that state. Almost 90% of these were seen in the fall with the rest reported from December through February. Voucher specimens were collected.

Over the past three decades, the Clay-colored Sparrow has remained a regular but rare bird along the coast during migration and in winter. Numbers of birds reported in the Carolinas can fluctuate from year to year. This sparrow is a very rare find inland in either state.

We only have four reports of this sparrow around the Central Carolina region from the late twentieth century. David Wright and three other birders discovered



Clay-colored Sparrow at Mallard Creek Greenway on September 18, 2006. (Jeff Lemons)



an immature Clay-colored Sparrow skulking in the brush behind a small chapel off Beatties Ford Road in Huntersville on December 10, 1989. This bird was observed for a lengthy period of time and field notes were recorded. It was still present the following day. Judy Walker and others reported one at Pee Dee NWR during the Christmas Bird Count conducted on January 4, 1998. Tim Kalbach reported two at the Broad River Wildlife Management Area in Fairfield County on October 10, 1998. Marek Smith and the author sighted a Clay-colored Sparrow in a hedgerow on the edge of a farm field at the Stephen's Road Nature Preserve in northern Mecklenburg County on December 17, 2000.

This bird has been reported in this region 10 times since the turn of the twenty-first century. Rob Van Epps and Taylor Piephoff found a Clay-colored Sparrow singing on May 5, 2001, at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge, just 5 months and 1 ½ air miles from the Stephen's Road site described above. Jeff Lemons photographed a Clay-colored Sparrow at Clarks Creek Greenway in Mecklenburg County on September 28, 2006. Monroe Pannell reported two present in Iredell County on January 17, 2010, tying our high count for the region. Kevin Metcalf reported one at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve in Huntersville on September 21, 2010.

Dwayne Martin reported a Clay-colored Sparrow associating with a Chipping Sparrow in Catawba County on October 27, 2012. Martina Nordstrand obtained an excellent photograph of one in Union County, NC, on October 15, 2015. Monroe Pannell sighted one near Newton on December 30, 2015. Pannell wrote:

This bird popped up when spishing for sparrows alongside Rocky Ford Road at the new bridge over the South Fork River. ...This bird had distinctive

gray nape of the neck and brown or off brown rump. I have seen this species on two other occasions both other times with flocks of Chipping Sparrows. ... Cheek patch bordered above and below by dark streaking. I tried to get this bird to respond to tape but it did not.

Louis Warren reported a Clay-colored Sparrow at the Carolina Sandhills NWR on November 11, 2016. Birders helping with the Pee Dee NWR Christmas Bird Count sighted a Clay-colored Sparrow there on December 31, 2016.

Judy Walker provided these details:

Seen late morning with relatively good light from about 25 yards through 10X42s; bird was associating with field sparrows in tall (5 ft.) grassy field along a gravel road; about the same size as field sparrow; bill was not pink; face pattern very distinct

reminded me of lark sparrow but not as dramatic and the bird was much smaller than a lark; white medial head stripe with dark stripes on either side; buff eyebrow but eye line not very strong; dark mustache with small, white malar and white under the throat; cheek lighter colors; the bird had some streaking on the breast and sides; it looked like it might be transitioning from juvenile to adult plumage; song sparrows were also in the area but bird did not exhibit any song sparrow behavior such as flicking tail; it also sat perched for a while unlike wintering song sparrows I have encountered; I did check song subspecies to see if anything came close to what was seen.

Lastly, a cooperative Clay-colored Sparrow was photographed by a number of observers at Clark's Creek Nature Preserve in Charlotte from September 30, 2017, through 4 October.