

# Philadelphia Larus

the newsletter  
of the Delaware  
Valley  
Ornithological  
Club

Volume 25, Number 1 Spring 1998

## IT'S OFFICIAL

A new slate of officers was voted in at this year's business meeting. "In charge" for 1998 are:

**President: Don Jones**

**Vice President: Ron French**

**Secretary: Colin Campbell**

**Treasurer: Naomi Murphy**

**New Council Members: Adrian Binns & Ann Bacon**

Many thanks to those whose terms recently ended: retiring president Sandy Sherman and retiring council members Erica Brendel and Alan Brady...

## FOR THE SURFERS AMONG US

Club members Jack Siler and Emmerson Bowes report that the DVOC website is up and running. The site contains information about the club and includes the schedule of upcoming programs and field trips. To access the website, enter the address:

<http://www/acnatsci.org/dvoc>

Much thanks to Jack and Emmerson for all their hard work!



## "LOOK, IT'S A NELSON'S SHARP-TAILED SPARROW! NO, IT'S A SALTMARSH! NO, IT'S... HELP!!!"

*There you are, knee-deep in muck at the Tuckerton Marsh, when a sparrow pops up in front of you. Frozen in indecision? Not sure whether it's a Nelson's or a Saltmarsh? Wonder no more! Frank Windfelder, who last fall presented a stellar program on identifying these newly-split species, here distills out the finer points of his talk...*

In 1995, the AOU officially split the Sharp-tailed Sparrow into two species, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*), and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus nelsoni*).

*A.caudacutus* consists of two races, *A.a.caudacutus*, which nests coastally from southern Maine to Tuckerton, New Jersey, and *A.a.diversus*, which nests from southern New Jersey to North Carolina. *A.nelsoni* consists of three races, whose breeding ranges are not contiguous. *A.n.nelsoni* nests from the central Canadian prairie region south to North Dakota. *A.n.alterus* nests on the shores of Hudson and James Bays. *A.n.subvirgatus* nests coastally from the maritime provinces of Canada south to southern Maine.

This article will attempt to delineate the differences between Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows as they appear in the fall. No attempt will be made to separate *A.c.caudacutus* from *A.c.diversus*.

In our region, the best time to see all three races or Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow is on fall migration, particularly from late September through October. Fortunately, this is also the time when they are easiest to separate from Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow. At this time, all Nelson's should be in fresh plumage, since they have molted on the breeding grounds.

***A.caudacutus*.** Start by becoming familiar with this species. It is rather large, flat-headed and long-billed. The flank streaking is very heavy and distinct, with the streaks forming continuous broad dark lines. There is a triangle of rich orange on the face, framing dark gray cheeks. The deepest orange is usually in the loreal area. There are usually some dark markings around the eye, extending onto the orange superciliary. The ground color of the underparts is whitish, with an unmarked whitish throat. The breast is covered with broad, heavy streaks, which connect with the flank streaking previously mentioned. The breast streaking blends into the rest of the underparts, which are unmarked. The ground color of the upperparts is a rather dull brownish gray, with some whitish streaking. The wing coverts and tertials are a contrasting reddish-brown. The nape is medium gray.

***A.n.subvirgatus* (Acadian race of Nelson's).** This race is similar to *caudacutus* in overall size and shape. Its bill is only slightly shorter than *caudacutus*. However, it is easy to identify, because it's such a dull, washed-out bird. The breast and flank streaking is indistinct and blurry. There is a quite dull orangish triangle on the face, tending towards yellow in the loreal area. The rear supercilium is clouded. The cheek patch is not as distinct as on *caudacutus*. There are seldom dark markings around the eye. The ground color of the upperparts is grayer than on *caudacutus*. The wing coverts and tertials lack contrasting reddish-brown tones.

***A.n.nelsoni* (Prairie Race of Nelson's).** This is the most colorful bird in the Sharp-tailed complex. It looks like a "little ball of feathers", as opposed to the rangier appearance of *caudacutus*. Not only is it smaller in body size than *caudacutus*, but it has a much shorter bill and a rounder crown, imparting a gentler appearance. The flank streaking is heavy and distinct, but the individual streaks appear to be narrower than in *caudacutus*. The streaks look like elongated islands, and do not form continuous lines. The triangle of orange is present on the face, but the entire orange area is an even tone. It further differs from *caudacutus* in that the orange is not more intense in the loreal area, there is little black around the eye and the gray cheek patch is not as distinct. The ground color of the breast is orange, unlike typical *caudacutus*, and there is little contrast between the orange on the breast and the face. The breast also can contain many distinct but fine dark streaks. There is usually a clean demarcation between the orange, streaked breast area and the rest of the underparts, which are an unmarked whitish. The throat is often unmarked and whitish, but frequently has an orange tinge. The background color of the back is dark, overlaid with numerous fine white streaks. As in *caudacutus*, the wing coverts and tertials can be reddish brown.

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***A.n.alterus* (James Bay race of Nelson's).** This is probably the most difficult of the three races of Nelson's to identify. Its plumage is intermediate between *A.n.subvirgatus* and *A.n.nelsoni*, but its overall appearance is more like *nelsoni* than *subvirgatus*. The bill is short, as in *nelsoni*. The rear supercilium can be clouded, as in *subvirgatus*. The streaking on the breast and flanks can be blurry, but is much more distinct than on

*(Continued on page 2)*

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subvirgatus. The breast pattern is reminiscent of nelsoni. However, the rest of the underparts are not an unmarked whitish, as in nelsoni or subvirgatus. In this area, the whitish background color is overlaid with blurry streaking throughout. Take a look at figure 16 in Sibley (1996). I have several other slides of definite alterus in plumage quite similar to this bird.

Some words of caution are in order. Some individuals show intermediate characteristics and may not be identifiable. Use all of the field marks, not just one, to confirm your sighting. As you gain experience, it will get easier.

An excellent place to look for sharp-tailed sparrows in the fall is the rank weedy area at the end of Great Bay Boulevard, which runs east from Tuckerton, New Jersey. All three races of A.nelsoni are possible there at that time. The area is described in Boyle's *Guide to Bird Finding in New Jersey* (1986). In Pennsylvania, the Conejohela Flats of the Susquehanna River could produce both nelsoni and alterus.

## UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Meetings are held the first and third Thursday of each month at 7:30 p.m., at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. For information on upcoming programs, contact Ron French at 215/997-1765.

Parking is available at the Logan Square Parking garage, 1815 Cherry Street, at a reduced rate. Get your parking stub validated at the Academy to get the reduced rate.

- **MARCH 5 - THE SNOW GEESE CRISIS.** Speaker Robert Rockwell talks about the destruction of tundra habitat caused by an exploding Snow Goose population.
- **MARCH 19 - BIRD BANDING.** The DVOC's own John Miller explains the art of bird banding.

- **APRIL 2 - THE BIRDS OF BERKS COUNTY.** Bill Urich, who recently finished updating a century-old text on the subject, introduces us to the birds of this nearby county.
- **APRIL 16 - TOUR OF ACADEMY OF NATURAL SCIENCE'S ORNITHOLOGY DEPARTMENT.** Come and take a behind-the-scenes look at the department and its various collections.
- **MAY 7 - AUSTRALIAN BIRD PROJECTS.** Speaker Leo Joseph takes a look at some of the projects currently in progress "Down Under".
- **MAY 21 - CRITIQUE OF VARIOUS WARBLER BOOKS.** The DVOC's Sandy Sherman (and others) take a closer look at some of the recently released books on warblers, letting us know what's good and what isn't.
- **JUNE 4 - MAY RUN REPORTS.** Come and learn about what was seen and heard on Big Day runs throughout the tri-state region.
- **JULY 2, AUGUST 6, SEPTEMBER 3, SEPTEMBER 17 - INFORMAL SUMMER MEETINGS.**

## UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

For information about these trips, contact the listed leader or call field trip chairman Bill Murphy at 215/885-2488.

- **March 21 - Pedricktown and Mannington Marsh** in southwest NJ with Frank Windfelder. Call Frank at 215/673-6240 for more information.
- **April 24, 25, 26 - Pocomoke and environs (Delaware and Maryland)** with Colin Campbell. Meet at Port Mahon Road in Delaware at 9:00 p.m. on April 24. Some folks camp while others get accommodations at nearby motels. Call Colin at 302/792-2508 for more information and map to Port Mahon Road.
- **May 10 - White Clay Creek, Delaware** with Andie Ednie. Meet at the Hot Shoppes Rest area on Rt. 95 south of Wilmington at 6:00 a.m. Nesting Cerulean Warblers are possible along with Hooded Warbler, Pileated Woodpecker and Willow Flycatcher. Call Andie at 302/792-9591 for more information.
- **May 16 - Pennypack Creek Park, Philadelphia** with Frank Windfelder. This will be an all day affair with warblers in the morning and a search for Bicknell's Thrush in the afternoon. Frank will be happy to help participants with the finer points of this bird's identification. Call Frank at 215/673-6240 for information.

- **May 22 & 23 - Barnegat pelagic trip.** The trip runs from 8:30 p.m. on Friday to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday. The cost of this Focus on Nature Tours trip is \$89 per person. Call Armas Hill at 302/529-1876 for more information.
- **June 6 - Pemberton and environs,** with Don Jones. Kentucky, Hooded, Worm-eating and Prothonotary Warblers are all possible. Meet at the Vincentown Diner on Rt. 206 at 6:30 a.m. Call Don At 609/859-0281 for more information.
- **June 7 - Pelagic out of Lewes, Delaware.** (4:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.). Cost \$95 per person. Call Armas Hill at 302/529-1876 if interested.
- **June 21 - Pelagic out of Lewes, Delaware.** (4:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.). Cost \$95 per person. Call Armas Hill at 302/529-1876 if interested.
- **July 12 - Bombay Hook NWR and environs (Delaware)** with Sandy Sherman, for shorebird migration. Call Sandy at 215/237-6814 for more information and a meeting place.
- **September 13 - Pelagic out of Lewes, Delaware** (4:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.). Cost \$95 per person. Call Armas Hill at 302/529-1876 if interested.
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Send information you would like considered for publication in the Philadelphia Larus to:

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