

SONG SPARROW AT FAIR ISLE: A BIRD NEW TO EUROPE

By PETER DAVIS and ROY H. DENNIS

ON THE EVENING of 27th April 1959, R.H.D. found an unfamiliar small bird—"like a cross between a Hedge Sparrow and a bunting"—skulking in a tangle of rusty barbed-wire near the derelict radar-station on Ward Hill, Fair Isle. He came down to the Observatory to report this find, and it was still present when we returned to the hill an hour later. It proved difficult to get an adequate view of the stranger, since it was very shy and kept closely to the cover, but we saw it well enough to know that it was one of the North American "sparrows" (Emberizidae). The size, generally drab coloration and skulking habit were reminiscent of a Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*), but the bill and head-pattern suggested a bunting. At 10-15 yards, in indifferent light, we made out a chestnut crown with a greyish central streak, grey superciliary, a brown stripe through the eye, and pale grey and black moustachials. The under-parts were seen to be whitish, with heavy dark streaking on the flanks and on the breast, coalescing into a conspicuous dark smudge in the centre. The upper-parts were mottled grey-brown, the wings sandier brown, the tail apparently uniform mouse-brown. The bird hopped when moving slowly, but broke into a rapid run when disturbed outside the cover; when flushed, it flew rapidly into cover, but sometimes emerged near the top to watch us.

Within half an hour it was caught in a single-panel mist-net and was then identified in the laboratory as a Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), with the aid of Peterson (1947) and Forbush and May (1939); being distinguished from Lincoln's Sparrow (*M. lincolni*) by the broad, not fine, streaking below, and the lack of a buff band across the breast. The following description was made:

Head: crown chestnut with narrow grey central streak; superciliary pale grey; eye-stripe (obvious only behind eye) chestnut; ear-coverts and lores greyish brown; moustachial pale grey, bounded above with a narrow chestnut stripe and below with a narrow brown-black one. *Upper-parts*: all feathers blackish-centred with a varying amount of chestnut outside the black, and with more or less pale grey edgings. *Wing*: Coverts similar to upper-parts, but more foxy in general colour due to smaller black centres and paler red-brown webs; tips of median and greater coverts whitish, forming two rather indistinct wing-bars; flight-feathers dark brown with sandy-brown edgings; axillaries and under wing-coverts washed greyish-brown. *Tail*: grey-brown, rather warmer towards the base; slightly rounded in shape. *Under-parts*: white basically; feathers of breast and flanks (not chin or belly) with blackish centres bordered by slight chestnut streaks; the black breast-spot so obvious in the field was not very apparent in the hand; under tail-coverts washed buffish, with grey-brown centres. *Soft parts*: eye dark brown; legs brownish-pink; bill dark grey on upper mandible, pale grey on lower.

The measurements taken (apart from wing-formula) were: wing

(maximum) 65.5 mm.; bill (from skull) 14; tarsus 24; and tail 69. The tips of the primaries were rather abraded, the tail less so. The weight was 24.5 gm. at 19.45 G.M.T.; this had fallen to 22.9 at 06.30 on the following day, when the bird was photographed by Angela Davis (see plate 70), and released at the Observatory, bearing ring K81690.

Kenneth Williamson kindly despatched to us a copy of Mrs. Nice's celebrated study of this species (Nice, 1937), which includes a long series of weights and measurements. In a sample of 137 males and 123 females Mrs. Nice found only four females with wings as long as 65-66 mm., and only twelve males with wings shorter than 65 mm. In the same sample no female had a tail more than 66 mm. long, whereas males ranged up to 72 mm. It would therefore have been fairly certain that the Fair Isle bird was a male, had not this already been shown in a more striking way; for early on 1st May the Song Sparrow was heard singing from a low wall outside the hostel kitchen, and on most early mornings until 7th May (also on two occasions in the evening) this performance was repeated. The song—a sweet note repeated three times and followed by a short jingle—was tape-recorded by David Bradley on the 7th, and one sequence is now in the B.B.C. Record Library (DBS 14826). No other note or call was heard at any time.

The Song Sparrow lived near the Observatory until 8th May, apart from a brief half-mile excursion to the Gully trap early on the 6th, whence it was quickly retrieved (weight 24.0 at 06.30). On 9th and 10th May it was by the stream at Vatstrass, a few hundred yards away, and after that it was not seen again. During its stay the bird was usually shy and often difficult to locate; when found, it would elevate the crown feathers, and then vanish in a singularly accomplished manner. The usual refuge was a cliff in South Haven, where it was occasionally seen feeding in the short turf at the cliff-edge. On 7th May, however, when the island's human population was swollen to about five times its normal size by the arrival of the National Trust for Scotland's "Islands Cruise" and also an excursion-steamer from Shetland, the Song Sparrow unaccountably lost its shyness and showed itself throughout the day to scores of visitors, including such well-known names as those of Irene Waterston, Kenneth Williamson, W. J. Eggeling, Seton Gordon and Jeffrey Boswall, with our "resident" bird-watchers, William Crawford, David Bradley, Barrie Juniper and Terry Brown acting as guides and controlling the crowds!

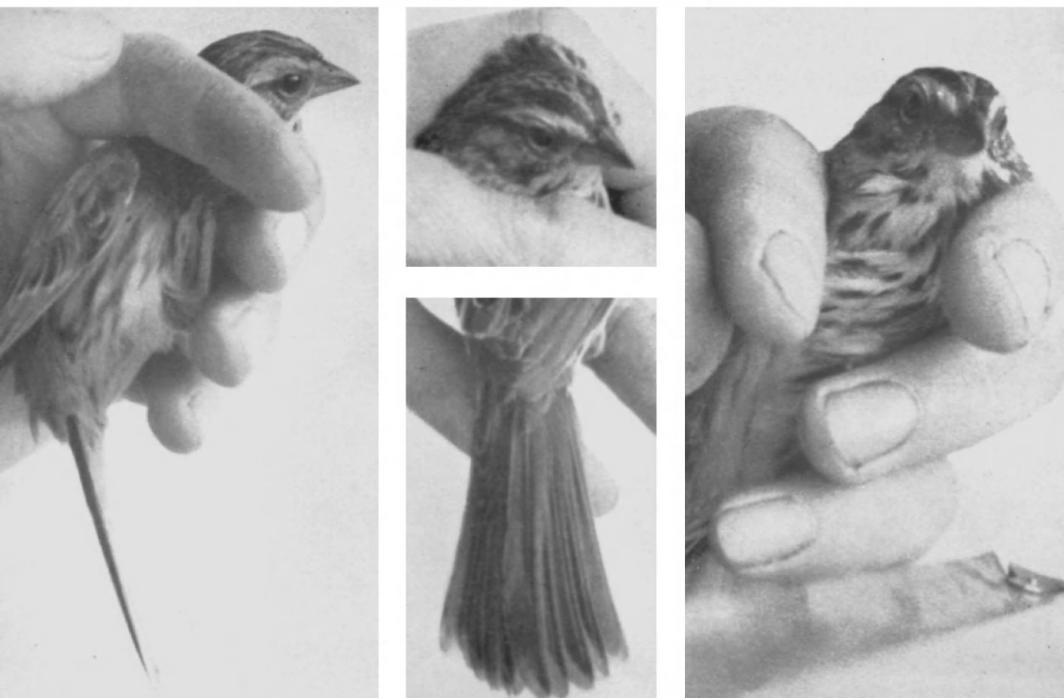
To several American bird-watchers on the cruise, this attention was a source of restrained amusement, for in eastern North America the species is numerous and widespread. On the east coast the breeding area extends as far north as the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Newfoundland, and the bird occurs sparsely in southern Labrador (Harper, 1958). The northern population is migratory, but the spring return appears to be very early (by March in New England, according to Forbush and May), and it is unlikely that the Fair

Isle bird was freshly arrived on 27th April. This is supported by the high weight of the specimen; Mrs. Nice gives the mean weight of 63 males in April as 22.4 gm. (19.6-25.8).

Kenneth Williamson and I. J. Ferguson-Lees investigated the possibility of escape from captivity in Europe, but were informed by leading aviculturalists that the species is not imported as a cage-bird, and is not known to be kept alive on this side of the Atlantic. There appears to be no previous record of *M. melodia* in Europe, though the closely allied *M. lincolni* has been found once, in Germany.

REFERENCES

- FORBUSH, E. H., and MAY, J. B. (1939): *A Natural History of American Birds*, Boston.
- HARPER, F. (1958): *Birds of the Ungava Peninsula*. Lawrence, Kansas.
- NICE, M. M. (1937): *A Population Study of the Song Sparrow*. New York.
- PETERSON, R. T. (1947): *A Field Guide to the Birds*. Boston.



Angela Davis

MALE SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*): FAIR ISLE, APRIL/MAY 1959

This North American bunting, recorded in Europe for the first time, was reminiscent of a thick-billed Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) in size, coloration and skulking habits. The chestnut crown has a greyish central streak and is bordered by paler grey superciliaries, brown eye-stripes and grey and blackish moustachials. The slightly rounded tail is grey-brown. Heavy streakings on the whitish under-parts join on the breast as a dark smudge (see pages 419-421).