

rows nested, Kentucky blue grass, smooth brome and quackgrass dominated the area, with lesser amounts of wild grape, Virginia creeper, hairy aster, rough avens, teucreum, Canada thistle, common milkweed, bindweed and dandelion. A shrub layer is forming where the plants are 1 to 3 m high and are spaced approximately 10 m apart. No species dominates and the highest shrubs are apple, American elm and black cherry. Clones of gray dogwood, multiflora rose and blue-fruited dogwood were one to two meters high. A few buckthorn and hawthorn were also present (J. Duerr pers. comm.) .

So in 2004, a minimum of four confirmed nestings of Clay-colored Sparrows occurred in Illinois, one each in DuPage, Lake, Cook and Kane Counties.

Knapton (1994) shows the normal breeding range of this species to be the northern tier of states from upstate New York west to Washington and northwest in Canada to the Northwest Territories. In the Midwest, the normal breeding distribution includes the northern two-thirds of Wisconsin and Minnesota. However, recent range expansions to the east and south are noted.

Bohlen lists isolated summer season records for northern Illinois including June and July records for Lake and Cook counties in the 1970s and 1980s. However, confirmed nesting was only reported at a Rockton area Christmas tree farm, Winnebago County, where two nests were found in 1983 (Pucelik & Pucelik 1984). A review of past breeding season reports in the *Meadowlark* provide evidence of periodic nesting of this species at this site until 1998 when no males were present at their traditional nesting locations.

An interesting question is whether the presence of Clay-colored Sparrows in several northeastern Illinois locations over the last two years represents a geographic expansion of the species' normal breeding range or simply an aberration. I speculate that the initial appearance of seven singing males in one field at Springbrook Prairie in 2003 was the result of unusual circumstances during migration that carried this small flock of

birds off course. Their appearance was preceded by very strong and consistent westerly winds of 40-50 mph a day or two before their arrival. Perhaps finding themselves blown by the strong westerly winds into unfamiliar territory but suitable habitat, and reinforced by their singing rivals, the males remained and were able to attract later migrating females through their persistent song.

However, the fact that there were several likely breeding pairs at other suitable habitat sites in northeastern Illinois in 2004 as well as confirmed breeding at Poplar Creek in 2003 and 2004, confirmed breeding in Kane County in 2004 and confirmed breeding in DuPage County in 2003 and 2004, and at least attempted breeding in Lake County in 2004 may suggest a more general and widespread cause for the species' appearance. A singing male, recorded on an Illinois Natural History Survey bird census in Winslow Township in Stephenson County on 3 July 2004 by Bill Reddinger (pers. comm S. Bailey), and apparently on territory, makes one wonder if this unusual breeding range expansion was even more widespread. Interestingly, Clay-colored Sparrows, relatively uncommon summer residents of Iowa's prairies, pastures and brushy fields, have also just been confirmed as breeders in contemporary history (Hall 2004). Most summer reports come from northwest Iowa. Nesting records are rare, and have been reported in Kossuth, Winnebago, Jackson and Emmet counties – in the early 1900s. Hall (2004) researched grassland bird productivity in northwest Iowa in 2003 and 2004; he and his field technicians found and monitored five Clay-colored Sparrow nests, two found in June 2003 and three in June 2004 – four of these were on a 160-acre prairie remnant in west-central Dickinson County, the other was on a 3,500-acre restored grassland complex in east-central Dickinson County.

These nests were built an average of 6.6 inches above the ground in plants including leadplant, wild bergamot, buckbrush and *Solidago sp.* In 2003, young fledged from both nests. In 2004, two of the three nests failed, possibly due to predation; none con-

tained Brown-headed Cowbird eggs. "Although it has been suspected for several years that Clay-colored Sparrows nest in Iowa, these nests finally document the presence of a small breeding population," wrote Hall.

Birders should continue monitoring known Illinois nesting locations as well as search other suitable habitats in northern Illinois to document whether this species is becoming a normal component of the state's breeding avifauna, or whether this is just a temporary, interesting phenomenon.

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