

Recognizing Juvenile and Winter Clay-colored Sparrows

by David B. Johnson

During Lake County summers, I have listened in vain for the faint, insect-like territorial song of the Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*).

The only substantiated Illinois breeding confirmation for this species occurred on a small tree farm near Rockton in Winnebago County. A nest and three to four eggs were found at the Blackhawk Christmas Tree Farm in June, 1983. Male and female were observed incubating eggs (Pucelik and Pucelik, 1984).

Clay-colored Sparrows in alternate (breeding) plumage may be found in Illinois during spring migration in late April and May. The species is then heading for its more northerly breeding grounds of large bush-dotted fields and open pine and oak barrens.

Illinois birders often see a Clay-colored Sparrow mixed in with Field or Chipping Sparrows or even occasionally White-throated or White-crowned Sparrows.

ADULT ALTERNATE

An adult alternate plumaged Clay-colored Sparrow exhibits a black crown streaked with brown and divided by a pale

white median crown stripe. Observers will notice the chalky white supercilium (eyebrow), dark brown to black postocular eye stripe, and buffy unmarked lores. The buffy auricular feathers (ear patch) are clearly outlined in blackish brown.

Birders can also recognize a distinct dark malar (whisker) stripe and pale malar area between the ear patch and whisker.

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Notice, too, the gray neck and nape, buffy back with black streaking, white throat, and white underbody. In addition, the tan rump, long dark notched tail, two white wing bars, pink bill with a dark tip, and pink legs and feet are characteristic of this *Spizella*.

JUVENILE

Juvenile Clay-colored Spar-

rows (see Figure 1) are seldom encountered in our state, and debate exists as to whether the juvenile acquires its first basic (first winter) plumage before or after leaving breeding grounds. Migration begins in mid September and continues through mid October. At that time, immature Clay-colored Sparrows show varying degrees of retention of immature ventral streaking.

Adult Clay-colored Sparrows have completed their pre-basic molt at least by early October (Bent, 1968) and should be in fresh basic (winter) plumage by the time they migrate through Illinois.

An Illinois birder lucky enough to encounter a juvenile Clay-colored Sparrow, as I once suspected I did in Waukegan in September, has to look carefully at the detail to eliminate the possibility of a Chipping Sparrow.

Juvenile Clay-colored Sparrows sport a distinct buffy lore, with no trace of a line between the eye and the bill. The breast and sides are finely streaked with dark brown and black. The birder will notice a distinct malar area, fairly gray nape, and buffy breast and sides.