

MISSISSIPPI ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Compiled by: W. H. TURCOTTE

The Sprague's Pipit and Smith's Longspur in Mississippi

Presented at the First Annual Meeting, Community House, Jackson, Mississippi,  
April 28, 1956

Ben B. Coffey, Jr., 672 North Belvedere, Memphis, Tennessee

Two species of "short-grass" birds which winter in the Mid-south have recently been objects of special searches on airfields, pastures, and similar habitats. These are the Sprague's Pipit (Anthus spraguei) and Smith's Longspur (Calcarius pictus). The winter range of the former extends to the Gulf coast, including Texas, and central Mexico, with casuals to a Georgia coastal island, and there may be a tendency to withdraw somewhat from the northern part of the Mid-south. The longspur, which is a more Northern breeder (Arctic Zone), arrives here later and leaves earlier, and winters from Kansas to Texas (Houston and College Station) with recent extensions into our area. The winter ranges of the two species overlap in the Mid-south; my present belief is that the Sprague's is normally present north to Hot Springs, Jonesboro, Memphis, and the Smith's south to Shreveport, where Horace H. Jeter added it to the Louisiana list, December 13, 1952, and to Madison Station, Mississippi. The latter is apparently the farthest southeast locality for the Smith's Longspur, except for two collections in South Carolina, in 1880 and 1889, respectively. Extreme dates for Mississippi, all at Walls, are: Sprague's Pipit, October 23 - April 26; Smith's Longspur, November 29 - March 21, with only a few left from the small flocks after the first of March. Walls is on U. S. 61, a mile south of the Tennessee line.

The two species prefer the same habitats, - almost bare fields, with the Sprague's in very small numbers but more widely distributed, and the Smith's in small flocks (occasionally down to singles) in more restricted localities. Jeter pointed out (The Wilson Bulletin, 1953, 65 (3): 212) that his flock favored the part of the field where the grass Aristida (sp.) was present and this has been true for all our records - four localities in Mississippi and eleven others in the Mid-south. Many more fields with Aristida were worked unsuccessfully. The species apparently shuns the heavier stands, being found where the grass is sparse to moderate. At Walls, this grass was identified by Mrs. Coffey as Aristida ciliantha. At a distance it appears to be lighter in color and density than Bermuda. It has long needle-like, three-awned seeds which somehow give sustenance to this longspur; the stomach of our Mississippi specimen and of our Tennessee specimen each contained almost nothing but these seeds.

The Sprague's Pipit has usually been found on the same fields and, in addition, on fields without the Aristida. Occasionally I have found the species on a "green" field before any appreciable growth was made by the cover crop. Once at Memphis we had a few in crimson clover, but after the latter attained 4 to 6 inches growth, the pipits moved to a nearby pasture. They have been found as singles but usually in twos, with up to about four in the air at one time. However, on a large field, a total of up to 12, our highest, may be present. Any record of a "flock" should be seriously questioned and personally verified. Flocks of American (Water) Pipits pass thru the immediate Memphis area to winter, especially in south Mississippi. The streaked upper parts and yellowish legs distinguish the Sprague's from this latter and the thin bill, both pipits, from longspurs and other sparrows. Most of the time we will not be able to observe this bird at rest on the ground but we can easily recognize it by its notes, and, if we know well the Savannah Sparrow and other species of this habitat, by its actions. The Sprague's gives abrupt, hoarse-like, high-pitched notes, usually in twos, threes, or singles. It has a very bounding flight, usually high and sometimes moving almost out of sight, but generally returning, to drop like a Horned Lark, on the same field. It is necessary to wait out and watch this return, in order to get a reasonably accurate count of those present. The flight is sometimes low, especially in late season, late in the day, or when the wind is strong; on these occasions the bird may be silent. This low flight must be differentiated from that of the Savannahs usually present.

The more common Lapland Longspur and the Smith's Longspur both have white outer tail feathers like the two pipits and the familiar Junco. Usually, during its stay with us, we do not notice this white on the Lapland as it flies up ahead of us, but only when it is over us. Looking down, as the Smith's flushes, we see the white, as conspicuous as that of the two pipits. In the air a short white arc is noted at the front of the wing on some; the underparts are buffy. The rattle of the Smith's is softer than that of the Lapland and has been compared to the winding of a cheap watch. It also gives a weak sparrow-like note but I haven't as yet heard any note resembling the "cheuu" of the Lapland. The two species do not associate together, the Lapland occurring in more varied fields, from the airstrip of the Smith's to old cottonfields, plowed ground, and levees. It is easy to stalk and study a flock of the common species; moreover, we often discover their presence on a field by seeing a flock in the air, moving restlessly about. You will never know if the Smith's and the Sprague's are present unless you walk the field. The latter may flush at 50 to 150 feet from you, but the Smith's only at 20 to 50 feet. If this is not taken into consideration, they may remain undetected. I have seen one on the ground only once and that in poor light; Mrs. Coffey, more fortunate, has had three good looks at a feeding bird. You know the flock is in the grass, a few get up twenty to thirty feet ahead of you and the remainder defy detection until they flush. Those in the air circle, sometimes widely; all assemble and eventually drop back into the grass elsewhere. At our Penal Farm they favored a certain small area and were usually found there only.

Andrew Allison, now of Ellisville, collected the first Mississippi record of the Sprague's Pipit, on January 1, 1902, near Bay St. Louis, and reported another one seen there February 11, 1902 (The Auk 1906: 232-233). Merritt G. Vaiden of Rosedale reported (The Migrant 1953: 9) taking two in Bolivar County, January 4, 1953, and a third on January 11; two others, partly eaten, were found. Later (Aud. Field Notes 1955 (1): 34), the Vaidens found the species at Perthshire, October 31, 1954. Meanwhile, R. Demett Smith, Jr. and I were on a special lookout for the species in our area, especially after Jeter found them at Shreveport.

Then, too, when I mentioned only five American Pipits, all singles, on the 1952 Moon Lake Count, Vaiden suggested the possibility that they might have been Sprague's instead, and, I must admit, one or two that departed hurriedly, might have been. (On last November 11 I checked a pasture where we had an American on a 1952 Vicksburg Count and found a Sprague's, but also one American!) However, when I first flushed one several times, January 24, 1953, at Sanders Field, Walls, I recognized the call notes as distinctively different from anything I knew. It was too dark then to identify the bird, but I returned February 15 after flushing two several times that morning on the Shelby County (Tennessee) Penal Farm without being able to see the bill of either bird. Here at Walls I found four then, and observed them adequately for identification. A week later they allowed a crowd of 19 T. O. S. members to get close looks. Demett and I, on a circuit of the field, had a count of twelve. On March 7, Luther F. Keeton and Lawrence Kent studied them, then found twelve more on a small pasture four miles west. Checking the two fields March 15, Orval Wood and I walked up three on another field near the second one, and on April 19 found one casual on the levee of that area. I checked the fields each week-end until May, and the last date observed was April 26 with 4 and 3 on two of the fields, respectively. This first season there has been out best for the state. Checking repeatedly for arrival the fall of 1953, I found ten on Sanders Field, October 31, with three to eight spotted through March 28. To the west, five arrived the same date but a low weedy growth there evidently caused them to move on. On October 23, 1954, Mrs. Coffey and I found one, with usually two to five recorded (eight, November 13) through December 18, when most of Sanders Field was being plowed for cotton, leaving a narrow airstrip. We have not recorded the species in the Walls area since.

Our other records for the state are intermittent because of the distances involved. Also much walking (and driving) was done without records to show for it. On my first visit to the Tupelo airport, December 6, 1953, I found two, but on November 25, 1954, none. On March 4, 1956, we found one. Between Moon Lake and Friars Point, one on March 15, 1953; north of Glendora, one on January 23, 1955; south of Canton, one on January 3, 1954; opposite Winona substation, one on January 1, 1954. On Bruce Campbell Field, Madison Station, two on January 3, 1954, and eleven on January 2, 1956; on Fletcher Field, eleven on March 7, 1954, six on January 23, 1955, and three November 11 and December 31, 1955. At the Vicksburg airport this past winter we found four on November 11 and two on December 31; at the Adams County airport nine on the first date and only two on the Count, January 1. Counting the Walls area as one, there are fourteen localities in the state where the species has now been found.

On the other hand, we have found the Smith's Longspur at only four localities in Mississippi. Mrs. Coffey, with George Peyton, Jr., Harry Landis, Jr., and the writer, found eleven, November 29, 1953, on Sanders Field, Walls, which we had covered so much the previous season (and occasionally before that). On the fourth visit of the winter, March 6, eight were present and one collected for the Museum of Zoology, Louisiana State University. The last were two on March 21. The next season I didn't find any until December 4; three, with six present December 18 while the field was being plowed; and two on the strip, February 20, 1955. At the Tupelo airport I found six, December 6, 1953, and Mrs. Coffey and Alice Smith found two March 4, 1956. On January 23, 1955, Mrs. Coffey found three at the airfield, near the Yocona River and south of Oxford. At Bruce Campbell Field, Madison Station, we found one on January 3, 1954, and thirteen on January 2, 1956. These flocks were small; we have had about 35 one season at Memphis and last fall had two flocks of 115 and 155, respectively on airports in western Arkansas. Such numbers have been reported from Houston, and, during April, in the North.

Three very dry summers were probably responsible for the presence of these two species in our area; possibly more favorable weather last summer caused a drop in numbers. However, because of the clearing of land and the increase in suitable habitat in the Mid-south, we should continue to find them each winter.

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A Boat Trip From Pascagoula Out the Mouth of the East Pascagoula River Into the Sound and the Vicinity of Horn Island. Sterling G. Clawson and Lovett E. Williams, February 12, 1961

Observations:

White Pelicans - Five seen at the mouth of the East Pascagoula River

Osprey - One seen flying low over Horn Island (Clawson)

Gannets - Several hundred seen flying and feeding in the area beginning about three miles south of Horn Island and southward and westward in the waters off Ship Island. Four specimens collected (Clawson and Williams)

Large numbers of Lesser Scaups, American Goldeneyes, Horned Grebes, Herring Gulls, Bonaparte's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls seen in the Sound and the waters south of Horn Island. Also a number of Laughing gulls.

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February 11, 1961 - One Duck Hawk seen on peninsula near Belle Fontaine Beach, Jackson County. Clawson and Williams

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February 10, 1961 - Three Mottled ducks seen in marshes at Clairborne, Hancock County, Mississippi

February 11, 1961 - One Spotted Sandpiper seen at small pond of Porter Chemical Plant, Bayou Casotte, Jackson County

January 22, 1961 - Four American Avocets were seen feeding on a mud flat along the L & N Railroad where it crosses the fill between the East and West Pascagoula River mouths. Two were collected for the museum. Sterling G. Clawson

Editor's Note: The record above is the first state collection record for the Gannet in Mississippi. The Avocet record constitutes the first collection record for the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

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Brewer's blackbird - Observed January 5, 1961, at two localities in south Mississippi. About 50 in pasture about 15 miles south of Columbia and well over 2000 in a flock mixed with some cowbirds feeding in a newly-plowed field about one mile north of the intersection of Highway 43 with Highway 26 west of Poplarville in Pearl River County. The Brewer's blackbirds were identified in strong sunlight at close range. The males showed the characteristic colors and females had brown eyes. This seemed to me to be an unusually large flock of Brewer's. WHT.

White Crowned Sparrows - During the period of almost a week of sub-freezing weather accompanied by freezing rain and flurries of snow and sleet, two white-crowned sparrows were seen by WHT near Raymond Airport on January 28, 1961. They were found along a weedy fence row by a roadside with field sparrows and juncos.  
WHT

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Some Observations of Interest:

The first flock of cedar waxwings of the winter seen feeding on pyracantha berries. Flock not as large as last year's - only 12.

Large flocks of golden crowned kinglets seen (in company with chickadees) in large wooded tracts east of Trenton, Mississippi, so busy feeding they were oblivious to observer - practically flying around his feet - February 1, 1961.

USFS timber marking crew reported two red-cockaded woodpecker trees found in Compartment A west of Road 507, February 13, 1961. Nelson W. Taylor, Raleigh, Mississippi.

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Membership Dues Payable For 1961

MOS Membership dues (\$2.00 active, \$2.00 corresponding - Non-resident, \$5.00 sustaining, \$1.00 Junior member) are now payable to the Treasurer, Mrs. Alton Ellick, 4326 Old Canton Road, Jackson, Mississippi.

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Bald Eagle Nesting Survey

The National Audubon Society has launched a continent-wide investigation of the Bald Eagle which will extend over a five-year period. The initial step in this investigation is the location of active nests. Nest locations will be kept confidential and only summarized information published. The State Game and Fish Commission is cooperating in the nesting survey and forms have been sent to field employees in about 50 counties where the Bald Eagle might possibly be found nesting.

Members who may have knowledge about active eagle nests in Mississippi are urged to cooperate in this study. Individual forms for reporting each known nest may be obtained from W. H. Turcotte, Game and Fish Commission, or Alexander Sprunt IV, National Audubon Society, Box 231, Tavernier, Florida. Completed report forms should be returned to the latter address above.

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Vermillion Flycatchers at Lyman Fish Hatchery

Mrs. Ethel Floyd, Gulfport, reports two (2) female Vermillion flycatchers observed at the U. S. Fish Hatchery, Lyman, Mississippi (Harrison County) on February 11, 1961. One was also seen during the previous week. Mr. Frost, the hatchery superintendent, reported to Mrs. Floyd that several, both male and female, have been seen there this winter.

Mrs. Floyd also reports (February 18) that a wintering male dickcissel has been observed at her feeding station in Gulfport since February 1, 1961.

Letters to the Editor

Editor, MOS Newsletter

Dear Mr. Turcotte:

A letter by me appears in the January 23, 1961, issue of the Newsletter under Christmas Count, Bayou Caddy (Hancock County), December 25, 1960. I regret that it was published for it was not my intention.

The letter was written in an "off-hand" manner and style, and I cannot remember if it was even reread before mailing. For this reason, several details (unimportant in a letter, but not so for one for publication) were omitted. In addition to omissions, several corrections should be made.

First, I apologize for the frequent use of the first-person singular -- it occurs about fifteen times in the first paragraph. The "Cameron Count" (properly entitled "Sabine Refuge Count") was organized by John Gee and included a large number of observers. The writer was accompanied by other observers including Mr. Kent Myers, manager of the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, on the boat trip which was mentioned.

The Venice, Louisiana, count was mentioned. Sidney Gauthreaux (last name misspelled in the Newsletter) was compiler. In addition to Mr. Gauthreaux and myself, Miss Mary Lewis (of New Orleans, on the shore party) and Mr. Jack Weiss (also on shore) played important roles. One hundred thirty-one species were recorded.

Zeros appear after certain species as recorded in the Newsletter in the Bayou Caddy count compilation. This was not intended for publication. This information was sent for the general information of the editor.

/s/ Lovett E. Williams, Jr.  
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Dear Mr. Turcotte:

I am in receipt of your Newsletter. I note with much regret that you took it upon yourself to republish our paper in the MOS Newsletter.

It is our wish that you do not publish any more of our Occasional Papers in your Newsletter without first asking permission from either the editor of the article or from the president of our club. Common editorial courtesy should have prompted you to ask permission prior to your publication.

Sincerely yours,  
/s/ Alan Feduccia  
President, M. D. N. C.  
Cleveland, Mississippi

Editor's Note:

The letters published above are self-explanatory. The editor is glad to publish the letter above of Mr. Lovett E. Williams, Jr. concerning

publication of part of his correspondence in the last issue of the MOS Newsletter. The articles by Mr. M. G. Vaiden and Mr. Alan Feduccia were contributed to the editor by Mr. Feduccia in the form of a printed publication for which full credit was given in the last issue.

To prevent further embarrassment, the editor will publish in the Newsletter only signed articles or correspondence which is plainly indicated for publication.

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#### Annual Meeting at Hattiesburg - April 28 - 29, 1961

The Mississippi Ornithological Society will hold its annual meeting at Mississippi Southern College, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in conjunction with the Mississippi Academy of Science. Details of the MOS meeting plans will be forthcoming from John Phares, President, MOS.

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#### Wintering Dickcissels

Mrs. W. G. Wills, Jr., and Miss Christine Berry observed 3 dickcissels with about 20 white-crowned sparrows west of Flora, Madison County, on January 21, 1961.

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#### First Martin Arrivals - Jackson Area

Mrs. W. G. Wills, Jr., reports 2 purple martins observed February 19, 1961, at Cook's Lake just west of the Jackson, Mississippi, city limits. Two martins and one tree swallow were observed February 22 by Mrs. Wills at the same location.

Two purple martins arrived the morning of February 23 at the editor's martin house west of Jackson.

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#### Canvasbacks

Mrs. W. G. Wills, Jr. and Miss Christine Berry observed 7 canvasbacks with 8 ring-necks and 5 ruddies at Cook's Lake (location above).

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Mrs. Wills, John Phares, and WHT observed large numbers of robins above Old Canton Road and the Natchez Trace on February 23. They were feeding in pasture areas following the heavy rains of the past week-end. Their appearance in numbers indicates their northward movement as few had been seen in this area the week before.