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CASSIN'S SPARROW IN GARDEN COUNTY

On 21 May 1986, while searching for evidence of breeding birds in atlas block 2G04 (T17N, R46W, Sections 1 through 3 and 10 through 15) near Lisco, Garden Co., Nebraska, I discovered a Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*). This sighting was at 5:20 PM Mountain Daylight Time, along the county road in the northeast corner of Section 11. I was driving slowly down the road and stopped to observe an odd sparrow. I nearly drove past, thinking it was another Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus saviarum*), which I had heard and seen all day. The sparrow, which appeared larger than a Grasshopper Sparrow, was perched on the low wire of a barbed wire fence along the road. In the few moments before the bird disappeared into the grass I observed that it was plain-breasted, had dark "whiskers" and tail, a grayish back, pinkish-yellow legs, and yellow at the bend of the wing. As it flew away into the grass it sang a short song. After I consulted my field guide I presumed this bird to be a Cassin's Sparrow, but wanted a second and better look. "Pishing", owl imitations, squeaking, etc., failed to return the bird to view. Remembering the short song, I played Peterson's field tapes in an attempt to match the

song. When I played the recording of a Cassin's Sparrow the bird flew overhead (about 10 feet high) and sang a matching song to the tape's. I did this several times and the Cassin's Sparrow sat on the wire fence between the tape-playings, scolding me with sharp, short, rapid, chipping notes. During these sittings I was able to see all field marks with a 22x spotting scope at a range of 30 to 40 feet: the lightly streaked crown, flat profile of the head, darkish line through the eye, with light above the eye. Because the bird was singing and behaving defensively to another song of the same species I presume this bird to have been a territorial male, which possibly bred this year.

This sighting was at the top of a hill. The pastures on either side of the road were short/mid-grass and moderately grazed, with a smattering of sage. No vegetation in the pastures was higher than about one foot, although some weeds in the road ditches were taller. In 1974 Sejkora (*NBR* 42:56-57) described the area in Perkins Co. where a Cassin's Sparrow was found as "ungrazed pasture with scattered sagebrush". This description is similar to the area in which I found this bird. Johnsgard (1980, *Occ. Papers NOU #6*, pp. 105-106) states that the only breeding records of Cassin's Sparrow for Nebraska are Sejkora's and one from Dundy Co. (by Cink, *NBR* 47:14). This possible breeding in western Garden Co. is certainly at what may be the northern extent of this species' breeding range. However, spring sightings at Crescent Lake NWR in northern Garden Co. (*Birds of Crescent Lake NWR*, a checklist, Oct. 1984), Sejkora 1974) and on 21 June 1986 at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument in central Sioux Co. (Thomas, *NBR* 54:64) cannot be discounted. Johnsgard (1980) describes this species as very rare and irregular in Nebraska and apparently irruptive. I urge any observers visiting these areas of western Nebraska to watch closely for Cassin's Sparrows.

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Doug Thomas expanded his report to say that he heard an unfamiliar song, and found it was from a biggish sparrow, singing from a power line in a prairie area. The song sounded to him as te-te'teeeuhtah, each phrase dropping at the end, and the second phrase starting lower than the start of the first. The bird would sing its song, stop, look around a bit, maybe preen a little, and then repeat the song. He observed this for about 20-30 minutes. He whistled the song as he went back to Alliance. When he got home he put on the tape for Peterson's western birds, and matched the song to the Cassin's Sparrow's. The bird was about 125 feet away, but respect for rattlesnakes kept him from trying to get closer to the bird.