

APPARENT HYBRID LINCOLN'S X SONG SPARROW AT BOUNDARY LAKE

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Abstract -- Accompanied by a second observer, I found an apparent Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolnii*) X Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) hybrid at Boundary Lake, east of Fort St. John in the Peace River Region of British Columbia. The bird was seen on June 27, 2003, along a gravel oil exploration road on the west side of Boundary Lake. No mention of such a hybrid was found in the literature.

Key words: hybrid, sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrow, *Melospiza lincolnii*, Song Sparrow, *Melospiza melodia*, size, plumage.

While birding along a gravel road on the west side of Boundary Lake, east of Fort St. John, Ryan Tomlinson (Kelowna, B.C.) and I were studying sparrows, present in good numbers alongside the road. We had recorded over 6 sparrow species when one bird caught my eye. The bird appeared to be a hybrid Lincoln's X Song sparrow. It was intermediate in size between the two species and showed plumage traits of both. The facial pattern resembled a Lincoln's Sparrow more closely than Song, and I noted a buffy malar stripe, gray supercilium and rusty crown. The bird had the "surprised" facial expression associated with Lincoln's. The breast was similar to that of a typical Song Sparrow, but it was buffier than normal. The bird's upper parts, including back and wings, were closely matched to that of Song Sparrow. The bird did not vocalize.

Following observation of the sparrow for about 5 minutes at close range both Ryan and I came to the conclusion that it was a hybrid Lincoln's X Song Sparrow. According to the literature, hybridization of these two species has never been recorded (Beadle & Rising, 2002).

In North America, 31 subspecies of Song Sparrow have been recorded. The subspecies present in northeast British Columbia is *M. m. juddi*. Two of the three known subspecies of Lincoln's Sparrow are present in British Columbia, with *M. l. lincolnii* occurring in the Peace River Region, where they are common breeding birds in shrubby habitats near the forest edge. The Song Sparrow is more of a generalist and will nest in a wide variety of habitats, however it is usually found near water.

Unfortunately, we did not have a camera to record this bird. Although Lincoln's Sparrows have not been recorded hybridizing with any other species, Song Sparrows have hybridized with White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) (Pale, 1997). It is not unexpected that these two similar species (Lincoln's and Song Sparrows) should occasionally hybridize, given that they are closely related and that they nest in similar habitats throughout British Columbia and much of their range. Similarities in plumage between Song and Lincoln's sparrows makes identification of a hybrid quite difficult. Capturing, documenting and photographing such a bird would be extremely useful in determining the lineage of a hybrid of this type. Perhaps if observers are aware of the possibility of these two species interbreeding there will be further discoveries and the proper documentation can be provided.

LITERATURE CITED

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