



Clay-colored Sparrow Over-wintering on Vancouver Island, British Columbia

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Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) is a highly migratory species that breeds in the dry uncultivated brush regions in the Great Plains of the interior of North America. Since the turn of the previous century, Clay-colored Sparrow has expanded its breeding range east and north in response to habitat changes affected by agricultural and logging activities (Knapton 1994). It winters from southern Texas south through Mexico.

In British Columbia, Clay-colored Sparrow breeds in suitable habitat from Richter Pass in the southern Okanagan valley, Creston in the Purcell Trench, and Canal Flats in the Southern Rocky Mountain Trench north through the eastern half of the province west of the Rocky Mountains to Kotcho Lake (Campbell and Meugens 1971, Campbell and McNall 1983, Campbell et al. 2001, Van Damme 2012). Through 2000, there were only two winter records for British Columbia: one at Ladner from 27 December 1982 to 5 March 1983 and one at Kamloops from 1 to 15 December 1987 (Campbell et al. 2001).

On 6 November 2010, a pale sparrow showed up below my bird feeder in Saanich, British Columbia. It was feeding on seeds on the ground beneath a tube feeder with a small, mixed flock of Dark-eyed "Oregon" Juncos (*Junco hyemalis oregonus*), Golden-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*), House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*), Fox Sparrows (*Passerella iliaca*), Spotted Towhees (*Pipilo maculatus*), and a White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*). The first impression was that the bird was smaller than the other species that were feeding, paler, and had

a long tail in proportion to its body. My wife Eileen and I made notes as shown in Figure 1. We identified it as an immature (first winter) Clay-colored Sparrow. It was last seen on 2 February 2011 having spent 89 days in my back yard.

The Clay-colored Sparrow fed on the ground on mixed commercial bird seed, usually in the morning and late afternoon. It was often seen perched in a dense ornamental Firethorn/Pyracantha (*Pyracantha* spp.) shrub beside a backyard pond with cascading water during the day (Figure 2). It was never seen at the tube feeder and usually fed at the periphery of the other feeding birds. There was little interaction with other species but twice (2 December 2010 and 9 January 2011) it behaved aggressively towards a nearby feeding Song Sparrow. Surprisingly, the Clay-colored Sparrow was not seen drinking or bathing despite the daily use of the ornamental pond by other species nor was it seen feeding on pomes (berries) of the Pyracantha shrub. The flank stripes, indicative of juvenile plumage, that showed faintly when it arrived on 6 November 2011 had disappeared by early January 2012. Pyle et al. (1987) mention that this plumage trait can be used to age a few birds in their first basic plumage through fall and (rarely) into the first spring.

Weather during the Clay-colored Sparrow's residence was cold with some snow present on the ground. The coldest month of 2010 was November with an average daily low temperature of 2°C. The coldest day was 23 November when a low temperature of -9°C was recorded. On 24 November, the snow depth was 24.9 cm. Temperatures in December

BC photo 4044

Clay-colored Sparrow
2511 Kilgary Place
Victoria, B. C.
Sketches: 8-19 Nov 2010

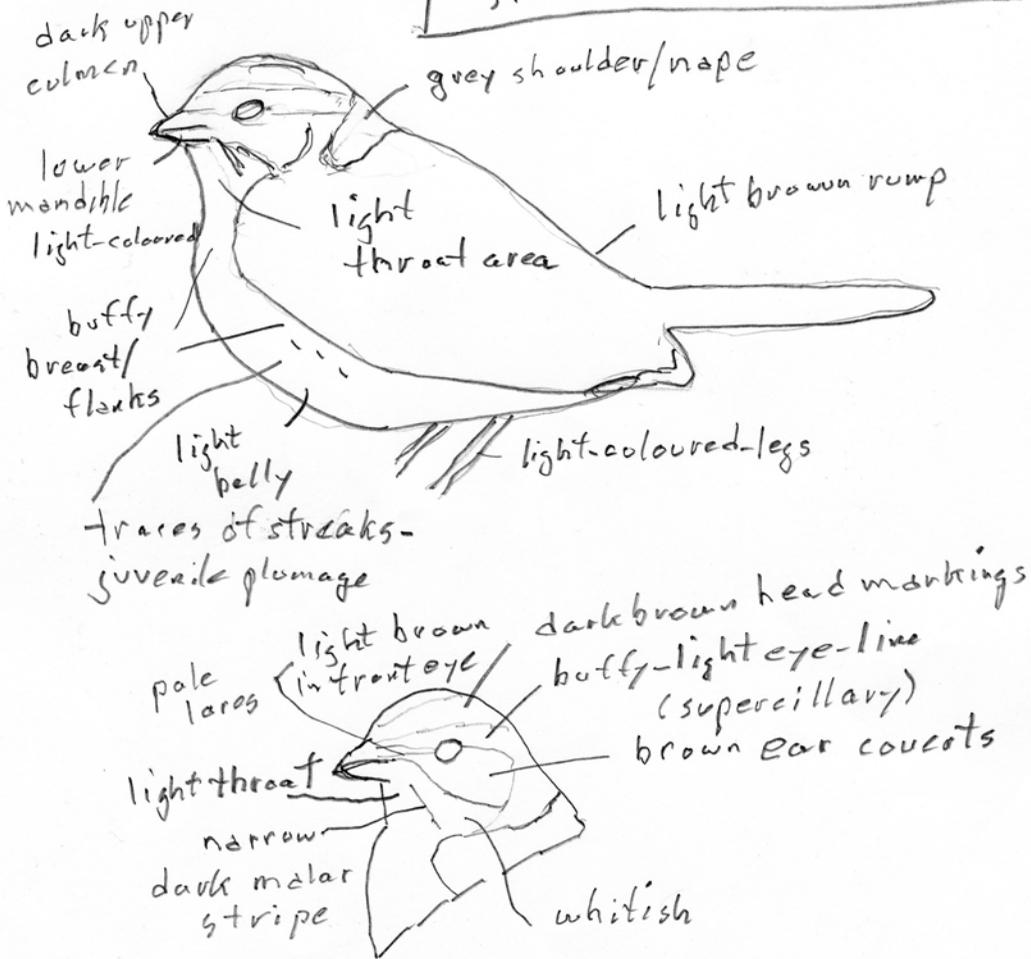


Figure 1. Sketch of plumage characteristics noted for the immature Clay-colored Sparrow that wintered in Saanich, BC, from 6 November 2010 to 2 February 2011. BC Photo 4044 (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).



Figure 2. During non-feeding times, the Clay-colored Sparrow frequently roosted in the centre of a dense ornamental *Pyracantha* shrub adjacent to a pond with cascading water. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell.*

2010 averaged (3°C) (WeatherSpark 2010). Low temperatures continued into early 2011, averaging between 1°C and 3°C in January (WeatherSpark 2011). On its normal wintering grounds in south Texas, temperatures average between a low of about 11°C (52°F) and a high of 22°C (71°F) from November through January (Bomar 1983).

Clay-colored Sparrow migrates to summer and winter ranges mainly through the Great Plains in central North America but in autumn small numbers may be found on the west coast (Knapton1994). On Vancouver Island, Clay-colored Sparrow is casual in spring (Cecile 2002, 2005, 2008) and a very rare migrant in autumn (Campbell et al. 2001, Shepard 2000, Cecile 2006, 2007, Charlesworth 2010a).

There are two published winter records, both single-day visits. A winter-plumaged bird was photographed in a residential yard at Parksville on 9 December 2009 (Charlesworth 2010b) and an immature was photographed at Ucluelet, on the west coast, on 3 December 2000 (Cecile 2001). In addition, a Clay-colored Sparrow was present for 19 days from 29 November to 17 December 2011 in the vicinity of Carmanah Point light station at the entrance to the

Strait of Juan de Fuca on southwestern Vancouver Island (J.K. Etzkorn pers. comm.; Figure 3). The latter record may have been a late autumn migrant that lingered. †



Figure 3. This Clay-colored Sparrow was present in the vicinity of the light station on Carmanah Point, BC, from 29 November to 17 December 2011. The pale lores (area in front of eye) can be a reliable identification mark. *Photo by Jerry K. Etzkorn, 16 December 2011. BC Photo 4043.*

Acknowledgments

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