Short Notes

A record of one of the pale, interior forms of Sage Sparrow for Butte County -- At approximately 1430 on 5 Oct 1997, Nancy Olson and I were birding at the Llano Seco Unit of the Sacramento Wildlife Area on Seven Mile Lane in Butte County. We were at the bridge which crosses the canal just before the second observation platform. On the gravel road to the north of the main road at the bridge, I spotted a sparrow-sized bird running back and forth across the road about 50 feet away. Upon observation, the bird appeared to have a grayish head w/ white markings set off by a faint "mustachial" stripe which set off the white throat coloration. The head showed a faint white stripe above and through the eye. A fairly clear white breast with a central spot was also noticed. When within 30 feet of the bird, we observed a distinct eyering. The grayish head blended into the brown back. The overall coloration was that of an "interior" bird, i.e., light brownish-gray overall with light streaking on the sides of the breast. The bird was displaying typical Sage Sparrow behavior by running back and forth across the road in short bursts and cocking its tail up in the air like a roadrunner. We observed it for about 3-4 minutes in good light with 10x binoculars. It was not particularly wary and was easily approached. Being very familiar with both the coastal (nominate *A. b. belli*) and interior (*A. b. nevadensis and A. b. canescens*) forms of Sage Sparrow, I was rather surprised to find an interior bird in the Central Valley. -- *Bradley M. Stovall, Post Office Box 4413, Chico, CA 95927.*

Note: There are few records of Sage Sparrow for the Central Valley floor north of Fresno County, where the form *A. b. canescens* breeds in the Panoche Hills, south on the west side of the valley to Kern County. *A. b. nevadensis* breeds east of the Sierra Nevada in the northern Great Basin. The possibility that the bird reported above was a vagrant *canescens* cannot be ruled out, as *canescens* and *nevadensis* are distinguishable only by measuring birds of known sex in the hand (*nevadensis* is larger than *canescens*). However, *canescens* is a short-range migrant and has no history of northern vagrancy, whereas *nevadensis* breeds to the north of Butte County and winters to the south (including records for the southern San Joaquin Valley). Two previous records for the valley floor in Butte County (at Chico, 31 December 1972 through 26 January 1973 [TM], and at Gray Lodge 18 September 1978 [B. Deuel pers comm.]) were of birds identified as nominate *belli*. Any Sage Sparrow seen in the Central Valley (other than breeding *canescens* in the south end of the valley) should be very carefully observed and described (ideally, in the hand) so that the regional status of the various forms, which may yet prove to be distinct species [Johnson and Marten, The Condor 94:1-19, 1992], might eventually be determined. -- *TM*

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