

Clay-colored Sparrows successfully nest in DuPage County with comments on possible expansion as a breeding species in Illinois and Iowa

by Joe Suchecki and Sheryl De Vore



While walking through Springbrook Prairie Forest Preserve in Naperville, DuPage County 11 May 2003, I heard the characteristic buzz-buzz-buzz of a Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella palida*). Finding a Clay-colored Sparrow in northeastern Illinois in spring is not unusual since the species is a regular migrant through this region. However, as I approached the field where the sparrow was singing, I heard another, and another. In all, I detected seven males singing in this one field, which was certainly the largest number of Clay-colored Sparrows I had ever observed in Illinois in one day.

The Clay-colored were in one of the many old field habitats at Springbrook Prairie. The habitat is a mixture of non-native grasses with numerous shrubs (gray dogwood, multiflora rose) and small trees (< 10 ft) scattered over an area of about five acres and bordered by more mature tree rows. The field appeared to be suitable nesting habitat for this

Clay-colored Sparrow at DuPage County, June 2004. Photo by Joe Suchecki.

species, and I consistently found the birds at this same field throughout May. The singing males were remarkably faithful to their song perches and appeared to be defending territories.

As June approached, the number of singing males declined until only three were present. I searched for breeding evidence and nesting behavior and finally observed a copulating pair in late June and one adult feeding two fledglings on 12 July. This confirmed the first-known nesting record for this species in DuPage County.

Male Clay-colored Sparrows are known to be very faithful to their breeding territories, and Knapton (1994) reports that as many as 76% of males return to the same territory in succeeding years. Hoping for the best, I again checked the Springbrook field where the birds nested in 2003 and was pleased to find several males on territory in May 2004. At least three males were on territory and presumably nesting in the same shrubby field where the species nested the previous year. In addition, a fourth pair was located in a different shrubby field about 0.5 miles away from the first location. Successful nesting for a second year in a row was confirmed 26 June 2004, when I observed an adult carrying food and feeding a fledgling.

In 2004, Clay-colored Sparrows also were present at other locations in northeastern Illinois, and there were at least two other confirmed nestings. June sightings of territorial males (or pairs) included Timber Ridge Forest Preserve in northern DuPage County (personal observation); Orland Grassland, southern Cook County where Wes Serafin observed a Clay-colored Sparrow singing continuously on 26 June and chasing Field Sparrows

from his area; and Lakewood Forest Preserve, Lake County where Steve Bailey found two counter-singing males on 13 May and returned 19 June to find a male and a female. Later in July he discovered a used Clay-colored Sparrow nest at the base of a small sapling (S. Bailey pers. comm.). Judy Mellin confirmed nesting Clay-colored Sparrows at Poplar Creek Forest Preserve in northwestern Cook County in both 2003 and 2004. She observed Clay-colored Sparrows feeding young 26 June 2004 at Poplar Creek in about the same spot she had seen it nesting in 2003. The males each year had different songs, according to Mellin, with the 2003 male singing a two note buzz and the male from 2004 singing a one-note buzz. She posits that the 2004 male could have been an offspring of the 2003 male. Eastman (2000) wrote, "Each male possesses one or two distinct song types that remain consistent: differences between the types exist in the number of buzzes voiced and total song length. Thus individual males make life easier for researchers of this species by reliably identifying themselves in the field."

Jon Duerr confirmed an adult Clay-colored Sparrow with three juveniles in the north section of the Aurora West Forest Preserve, Kane County, in 2004. Scott Cohrs said he was birding the preserve 9 July 2004 when he heard two Clay-colored Sparrows singing along with a Bell's Vireo nearby. Scott contacted Jon, suspecting the sparrows might be breeding. Jon returned 11 July and observed a female Clay-colored Sparrow foraging with three juveniles within the branches of a young apple tree. The family moved around in other shrubs. In 2004, where the spar-